

Chapter 1

It was a bright and cloudless day. The sun shown down warm and glittered off the gently rolling waves. The Atlantis opts deck was completely quiet as if everyone was holding their breath. In fact they may have been doing just that, the last line had been cast off and the main propulsion engines were filling with water. Captain Marshal glanced over to tactical for clearance. Lt. Avis checks the feeds from the sentinel drones, checks to see that the feed is simulcasting to the Ops control deck on MU. All showing green and ready to go, so he nods silently to the captains unasked question. Captain Marshal, heaves a small sigh of relief and announces loudly, "Engineering, ease us away from the docks at one quarter speed."

The whole island gives a small shudder and momentum builds. Officially they are underway. Time mark, August 3, 2025 0741hours. From this point there was a new nation in the world, whether the world was ready for it or not. "Steady as she goes Engineering. When we clear the last of the shallows on the port side you may slowly bring her up to speed." Captain Marshal says as he monitors the multitude of views flashing in his AR glasses. "Lt. Avis, widen out the aquatic drones, and give us a little broader view, please." The captain swivels in his chair to face his XO's duty station, "Commander Vaughn, coordinate with the escorts Trident, and Artshi. I want an orderly formation not a gaggle of islands trailing behind us like ducklings."

The XO's weathered face cracks with a slight grin, "Aye, aye, Captain. No ducklings today Sir."

Captain Marshal shakes his head realizing that he's got good people and what they need most is for him to get out of their way and let them do their jobs. "XO, you have the conn. I need to go brief the council that we are underway." As if the whole island shuddering softly below them wasn't enough of a hint.

Commander Vaughn, just nods, "Aye, Aye, I have the conn. Good luck with the Council, Sir." Better him than me Vaughn thinks to himself. Oh I suppose if you have to have politicians, these aren't the worst of the lot you could get stuck with, but as long as the Captain was willing to deal with them Vaughn was just has happy to let him.

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The halls are all empty as Captain Marshal makes his way to the Council Chambers. It's just a skeleton crew on board until they reach the Atlantic. Then comes the insane job of onboarding one point six million new citizens, bringing everything they own, starting over again in a new nation. He involuntarily shudders, glad that part isn't in his department. "Debbie, let the Council know I am on my

way." he says quietly.

The little dark haired mermaid swims through the air, a few feet in front of him her almond eyes twinkling and her long golden tail flashes to flip her in a tight looping spiral. "Of course Andrew. Anticipate our arrival in the chamber in four and a half minutes."

The Captain shakes his head, he'll be glad when he's had more than just a few weeks with this assistant. Debbie is supposed to be even more advanced than the Ullies of MU, but until her personality matrix grows in, she's only one step above the automated customer service bots that are all the rage with every corporate website lately. Unlike those website assistants though, Debbie should grow into a very helpful personal assistant over the next two years. Unfortunately these things can't really be rushed unless you want to implant from another assistant and then they aren't really personalized to your needs. I suppose this is just one of those necessary delays, he thinks as he approaches the large engraved doors to the Council chamber.

The doors silently open at his arrival, revealing the cavernous Council Chamber. Walking down the mock flag stone isle, past the rows of empty stadium style seats, his boots ring out loud in the nearly empty chamber. At the far end is a raised dais with nine stone chairs arranged in a shallow semi circle. In each of the over-sized chairs sat a council member, old gray beards one and all. Halting in front of the dais, and coming to a sharp attention. Captain Marshal sounds off in a booming voice, "Captain Marshal reporting as commanded." Giving them just a moment to nod in acknowledgment of his presence he continues, "Atlantis is underway. Seas are calm, and barring any unforeseen misadventures, we will round the horn of South America, arriving in the Atlantic ocean six days hence."

Councilman Florez smiles, waves a hand casually. "At ease Captain. You've done an excellent job. I think I can speak for us all when I say well done." He waives his hand again and says something very quietly and looks up again with a much more casual air about him. "Official records are off now, come on up and give us a full assessment of the situation." So saying he pops up out of the chair himself and walks to the edge of the dais and takes a seat on the ledge.

The other council members follow his example though in a few cases, it is accompanied by pained looks and low grumbling. Still once they are all seated and the Captain had closed the distance making casual conversation more reasonable Marshal began again, "Gentlemen, let's hope that the congratulations are not premature. We'll be passing MU's current position in two days. We'll leave them two of the smaller islands that we've outfitted as defensive outposts, as planned, and the two reclamation Islands that will be heading out to the Pacific Garbage Patch, and the Island taking on Mr. Berg and his associates. That will leave us with only our two defensive islands and a full complement of both aerial and aquatic drones. Still it halves our defensive ring which means that once out of the range of MU, that will be the first time we're more vulnerable to attack. If they're going to hit

us, it will most likely be, before we take on our citizenry." He stopped met each of their gaze in turn, and waited patiently for comment.

Florez shook his head, "Surely if they were going to hit us doing it while we were in port would have been more likely. I think we'll be ok at this point." A mutter of general agreement arose from the other council members. Well all except for Councilman Northman, he just shook his head and grunted noncommittally. Of course Northman was a little more experienced than the rest of the council. He was a retired colonial in the US Army, and former two term congressman from a very red southern state. As a history buff and graduate of the US War College he was less likely to rely to heavily on the good graces of nation states. Florez looked over at him, "Ah the Honorable Councilman Northman disagrees with my assessment?" He says it softly and with a wry grin to take some of the sting out of it.

Northman snorts, "Look they didn't free my people without a fight back in the middle of the nineteenth century, and I see no reason to believe they are going to let their tax plantation just get up and walk away without a fight either." He shrugs and the gray streaks shown in his tight cropped hair and beard as he did. "The powers that be know this spells the end for their way of life. Oh maybe not immediately but what Shultzinger and the rest of his folks did a few years back will have as much ramifications as the signing of the Magna Carta." He paused and looked around daring the others to dispute his assessment. Captain Marshal just laughed to himself behind an impassive face, they would have to be fools to argue with Northman, he's known for tearing up journalists who tried to challenge him on his historical knowledge. "So you can bet, whether it is right after we leave MU," then he nods to the Captain, "or I suspect, more likely was we round the bottom of South America?" He paused waiting for the nod from Marshal, that that was his assessment as well, before he continued, "So the question becomes, how is it going to come? Small boats, have been ineffective, as has an air attack, as has a sub... So what does that leave?" He looked back to Marshal.

Marshal took a moment to wipe his brow and collect his thoughts, "I'm not really sure, Oh with a carrier group, and in open warfare, we'd be pretty screwed. I covered that with Commodore Whetherby before I accepted this job. Something like that would have a large international outcry though. See no one wants us to succeed but anyone who openly attacks us will open himself up to criticism from the rival nations who, aren't our friends but have old grudges against each other. That means this will probably be another covert operation." He hesitated, but shrugged and continued. "If you want my worst case scenario, biggest likely fear, it is a nuclear mine." He waited for the gasps of disbelief to settle down. "A US, Chinese, or Russian sub could easily have prepositioned a warhead on a fast moving underwater drone. It lies on the bottom until we're nearly over it, and then comes at us faster than we can react. The goal would be to flip us not destroy us out right. The carbon composites that Atlantis is made up make destroying us outright a very difficult job, but if they could capsize us and make it look dangerous to live on an island like this..." He raises an eyebrow and looks about the small group of men. Most of them look shocked, well, except Northman who just looks

grim.

"How on earth can you protect us from that!!" someone on the far end blurts out. Marshal didn't quite catch who said it as he was looking the other way at Northman at that moment but the question was plain in the faces of most of the council.

Marshal let out a sigh, "What part of this could be very dangerous, did you not get the memo on? Look, if ol' King George, could have gOTTen a hold of Washington, he would never have made it to the governing stage. You're in Washington's position now and don't doubt that King George's of the modern world, would like very much to get us before you ever get a chance to try your hand at governing. My job is to give you the best chance to show what you can do with these new fangled political ideas of yours. We're going to do sweeps with drones and use a few electronic tricks to make us appear several places at once but all of that is to give us a chance, there is no guarantee in any of this. If you want the illusion of safety, sell out your shares and head back for the mainland. They would probably welcome you with open arms the way defectors were treated back during the cold war. It would be a real propaganda coup! If you want to try to make a new nation though, get right with your Maker and soldier on." He looked each of them in the eye and saw that while they were scared, they were determined to do this. He nodded, "So the tip of South America is a dangerous area, so is on boarding our citizens. Lots of small boats, and real easy for a terrorist style attack. My people will be on our toes, but make sure you get us all the cooperation you can from the civilian side." Again he looked around and saw confidence returning to them, and he nodded. "All we can do, is make it hard for them. There is no such animal as safe, this side of the grave. The most we can hope for is freedom to protect ourselves as best we can."

The meeting broke up shortly after that, each going back to handle what they can of the "Grand Plan" to give everyone the best chance for a full and prosperous life.

Chapter 2

Michael Shultzinger couldn't sleep. Atlantis would be launching in just two hours. Moving

carefully so as not to wake Tattianna, he puts on the AR glasses to check the time, 0400 hours, twenty minutes later than the last time he checked. Suppressing a sigh he slides quietly out of bed and makes his way into his study. He pulls up the file on the children. Four years ago, he and Tattianna had fertilized two eggs and had them frozen. He knew one was a boy and the other a girl. He and Tattianna had already picked out names for them. For four years they had been a shadow in their home, a promise that when it was reasonably safe, they would start their family. In just a few hours the big event that had put so much of his life on hold would happen. He would know, one way or the other if they could make this work. The ghostly images of the two zygotes floated in front of him in the virtual environment. So much depended on this launch going right.

He was so lost in his own thoughts that he didn't hear Tattianna slip into his study. When she softly touched his shoulder he jumped. "Sorry love, didn't mean to startle you. Can't sleep?" she asks with knowing smile.

He grinned sheepishly. "You know, you know me too well. I was just thinking of the future." He shrugged.

Tattianna takes his hand, "Come on back to bed."

"I can't sleep and I'll just keep you from sleeping." he said with a sigh.

"I hope so." she said with an impish grin, "Who said anything about sleeping."

He laughed and lunged to his feet, gathering her about the waist and pulling her in toward himself. "How could I refuse an offer like that."

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Marcus threaded his way through the crowd. He had never seen the public spaces this crowded, not this early in the morning. He supposed he could have watched the whole thing from his AR glasses without ever having to get out of bed, but just like everyone else packing the

square, the ability to share the experience like this was just more appropriate for the occasion.

The screen showed Atlantis shining in the early morning light, still at the construction dock but fully completed, just awaiting the order that will start her new life upon the waves.

The count down clock in the lower right hand corner of the screen showed twelve minutes until launch. He tension was thick enough you could cut it with a knife as everyone held their breath waiting.

Soon they wouldn't be alone anymore. Soon new nations could be born as fast as they could be printed. Soon it wasn't just a fluke but a new way of life for all of humanity. Marcus realized he was holding his breath, he laughed at himself, it really wasn't like him to get caught up in things this way but this really was the most momentous event since the launch of MU four years ago.

The clock ticked down. The crowd counting down from twenty seconds. The clock struck zero, but nothing appeared to be happening. A murmur grew and then broke into a deafening cheer as Atlantis could now be seen to pull back from the launch, and slowly edge her way out into the main navigational channel. The crowd was going wild, the closest thing Marcus could compare it too was the pictures of the WWII victory celebrations in Time Square. No sooner had the thought occurred to him when he noticed a young brunette girl jostling her way through the crowd toward him. Millie jumped into his arms and wrapped both legs around his waist and kissed him. "It's real!" she squealed. "It's real, and we saw it!"

Marcus chuckled to himself, and kissed Millie again. "Yes it's real. I take it this means we're on for breakfast?" he asked. Millie had been flirting with him for two weeks now, but refusing any offer of a date. Caught up in the emotion of the moment, he figured he'd take his chances.

She looked at him approvingly, but still hadn't unwrapped herself from around him. "Hmm... In the spirit of the day, maybe just this once."

He laughed, and swatted her backside with both hands, "Hop down then and lets see what we

can find to eat. I'm hungry."

She jumped, but put her feet back on the ground. Took his arm and they made their way through the slowly dispersing crowd.

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Elaine was sipping her first cup of coffee, wondering what genius decided to launch something like this at seven in the morning. The her minded drifted to a vision of Mr. Hobb standing in the middle of the command deck and she smiled. It hadn't been easy to find a live cast of the launch online. All the search engines were burying the news on the fourth page. Still after a couple of minutes of poking around on some message boards used by the seasteading community she found the link she needed. Sure enough, big as life, there was the Atlantis at the dock, and with minimal fanfare, there was the Atlantis gliding majestically through the calm waters of the Gulf of California. She was happy for the people who had been working so hard for this moment. On a whim, she composed two quick emails, one for Tattianna, and one for Michael. Tattianna's was easy to write, at lunch they had discussed all of the plans that had been put on hold while waiting for the Atlantis to launch. The email to Michael was harder, she wasn't sure how to say what she really wanted to say. Elaine still couldn't figure out how she felt about the man. He was, all at once, caring and compassionate, and arrogant and stubborn, and gentle and kind, but also condescending and way too sure of himself. She could understand what Tattianna saw in him, but wasn't sure how she could stand him for more than a few minutes at a time. She realized she was spending just way too much time thinking about this so, took refuge behind formal phrases, completed the email quickly and sent it. Today will be busy enough on it's own with out letting the Shultzingers add wrinkles. Still she couldn't help a small smile thinking of them, as she minimized her email and pulled up her blog to write up the story of the launch.

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Douglas Berg was watching the launch through his AR glasses. He sat alone among the carefully labeled boxes crowding the conference room. All the labs were packed and ready for transfer to their own island. His face was as impassive and unemotional as ever but inside his emotions roiled. By this time next week they should be unpacked on the new island and taking their first tentative steps into the unexplored realm of collective human consciousness. This could be the next evolutionary leap that connected all mankind. All the people who laughed at his work, or shunned him because of it... He let that line of thinking fade away as he watched the Atlantis make her way majestically through the blue gray waters of the Gulf of California. Soon he thought to himself again for the hundredth time, soon. Lost alone in his thoughts, it never occurred to Mr. Berg, that should he succeed in his goals, he would never have the luxury of such private thoughts again.

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Commodore Nigel Whetherby wiped the last of the depilatory cream from his smooth pate. He looked in the mirror and realized, he was no longer a young man, and he was tired. He knew when he took the job as head of the MU security forces he knew it would be a challenging opportunity but eighteen months of ten and twelve hour days have taken it's toll. Still this morning was a great start toward making the job easier. Atlantis, according to the latest reports had cleared the Gulf of California and entered the Pacific proper. Two more days and she would rendezvous with MU and he would finally have the secondary defensive islands he had been demanding since the close call with the Iranian sub.

With a deep breath he steps into the shower, no time to linger, though it takes an extraordinary force of will to force himself out of the warm soothing water. A few minutes later he is adjusting his insignia and sealing up the formal class a uniform. "Ulli," he says in a deep voice with a

thicker than usual Jamaican accent, "Let the board know I am on my way."

Ulli pops up in wall screen, the Tiki god mask looking overly large on the small female frame, wearing a cut off CCR T-shirt barely covering the over sized chest and the tiniest pair of Daisy Dukes. "Nah Shugga, you know ah always take care of those things fer you. You jess worry about straightening out that trident, it's still crooked, an not worry your purty lil head about the Board." she said with a bounce and a jiggle.

Nigel couldn't resist a small smile. Ulli might not be a real person but she was the most competent and best looking assistant he ever had. One of the privileges of getting to design your assistant is they can always be easy on the eyes. He straightened the trident, and put on his AR glasses and headed toward the door. Ulli appeared before him to lead the way. Either she was putting a little extra swing on the back porch, or it had been a little too long since his last visit to Candy's.

He entered the 'Boardroom' where the Gang of Eight were assembled already. For all the power and wealth represented by these men, the room itself was simple and functional. Not too different in many ways than the hundreds of debriefing rooms he had worked in while still serving as a Captain in the US Navy. The men around the table all greeted him with a friendly nod, and Michael called the meeting to order, as he was seating himself at the only chair left open at the table. Nigel found his thoughts wandering while the men went through the formality of role call for the record and the general business of opening a formal board meeting. His attention snapped back as he heard Michael mention his name. "Gentlemen I've asked Commodore Whetherby here today to give us his assessment of threat level now that Atlantis has been launched. Commodore, could you please proceed?"

With that Nigel cleared his throat, "Well gentlemen, for the next few days I don't expect any issues. I strongly doubt that anything will try to hit them while they have a double

compliment of the defensive ships, and certainly don't expect any trouble once they rendezvous with MU." The shoulders of the gathered men all relaxed, it was almost imperceptible, but Nigel had been working with them closely for the last few years and he could tell that any respite was warmly received. "Where I expect some trouble will be has they cross down by the Straights of Magellan. It's a relatively narrow patch of ocean that they must cross, and it will be the best spot for mayhem if that is the plan. They will be vulnerable for about thirty hours as they pass that location. Once past that point, assuming they make it without issue, they will probably be fine again until they reach the Caribbean and begin unloading their citizens."

David Rosen spoke up at this point, "Sorry to interrupt you Commodore but I wanted to make sure I understand. You expect once they make it to the Atlantic for the danger to be past?"

Nigel nodded, "Once they have room to maneuver properly, it will be more difficult to arrange a trap. The danger from the tip of South America comes from the limited area they have. It'll be easier to arrange a pre-positioned attack and just wait for the Atlantis to come to them. I've discussed this with Captain Marshal, and they will be taking all possible precautions. Then again when they reach the Caribbean, they will be vulnerable for a time as they will be mostly tied down loading on three quarters of a million people. They should be fine again until they reach the area around the Straits of Gibraltar. Again it will be a bit touch and go there as they will be having another half million or so former European Union citizens loading at that time." he shrugged. "If they can get their citizens all loaded and make it back out to deep water further from the coast, they should be safer in general than we've been for the last few years."

The meeting went on for a bit but Nigel really wasn't involved at this point. He had given his testimony and mostly let his thoughts roam, considering deployment and implementation questions surrounding the arrival of his new defensive escort islands. He started to

rise as
Michael closed out the formal session, but the men stopped him. Michael began,
"We just
wanted to take this opportunity to recognize all of your efforts Nigel. Every man here
owes his life
to your vigilance and dedication."

Nigel shook his head, "It was just my duty..."

MacAllan interrupted him, "Stop, you bloody Yanks don't know how to just accept
praise." He
grinned widely at Nigel. "You say that the Brits have a problem with a stiff upper
lip." and he
snorted. That brought a general chuckle from around the table.

Michael started again, "As I was saying, thank you Nigel but we've discussed it and
while it was
all contingent upon your assessment, I think we agree now. You're officially off duty
for the next
fifty eight hours. No, no arguments. You've been working hard and you've earned a
break. If
things get intense in a few days I want you refreshed. So peel out of that uniform
after our
meeting, and I don't want you back in it until right before the Atlantis leaves our
sphere of
protection. I assume you'll want a meeting with Captain Marshal at that point. The
Mara, has
been informed that she is to await your pleasure. If you want to get away for a
while, feel free. If
you want to hang around on MU and enjoy some of the local flair feel free. I don't
care if you
decide to just sleep the whole time," again the chuckles around the table as
everyone
contemplated the tempting thought, "but you WILL get some time off. Think of it as
Mandatory
Fun."

That made Nigel laugh too. "Mandatory Fun usually has a different connotation
where I come
from. Thank you, thank you all. I think I might just take you up on the offer of the
Mara. Deep
sea fishing might be just what the doctor ordered."

Chapter 3

Ariel Rosen woke up before the alarm. The nice thing about working for a bank, is they don't open too early in the morning. He smiled to himself at the thought and stretched, all that could change in the blink of an eye at today's family meeting. Ever since Uncle David boggled everybody's mind by throwing in with Shultzinger and his Gang of Eight, things in the banking world just haven't been the same. Privately he thought that traditional banking was dead, when all the new FinTech allowed money and banking to be geared towards the needs of the customer rather than the needs of the State, who will want to hold fast to a system that doesn't serve their interests once there is a real alternative. Sure the tech isn't mature yet, and the more fiscally conservative elements won't make that move right away, but five years from now... seven? Really it made him want to run off to Uncle David and beg for a job.

Ah well his time was coming. He really only graduated last fall, he still has plenty of time to make his mark. The family has been in the financial industry since you had to worry about a King borrowing too much money from you, and deciding it was easier to have a pogrom, than to pay his debts. The family would still be in the financial services industry long after one Ariel Rosen, is old, gray, and toothless.

Still it would be nice to be on the innovative side for a change.

BEEP...BEEP....BEEP...

Damn alarm, his hand slammed down on the button. "Alright, enough daydreaming. You've got work to do and a family meeting in the evening, to deal with." he grumbled to himself aloud as he rolled out of bed and to his feet.

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David Rosen was on a secured video conference with his own father in London, and his Uncle Hiram in New York. "I need someone, young enough to recover from any embarrassing failures, yet competent enough to think outside of the box and take the risks. No one really knows if this is going to work or not, but if it does, and we're not involved... That could prove disastrous for a generation." David said soberly.

David's father, the slightly infamous Hershhal Rosen stroked idly at his beard, David noticed with some sadness, that in recent years it had gone completely white. "Do you have a candidate in mind?"

David shrugged, "I don't know the younger set so much. He shouldn't have a wife, or children, yet to concern himself with. I know that means he'll likely lack experience, but I don't know that experience is going to matter as this will mostly all be learn as you go. The big thing will be dabbling in a bit of everything, and once something takes off, having the resources to capitalize on it."

Hiram cleared his throat, "I've got a grandson who just graduated from King's College, his mother was fretting just the other day during Shabbot Dinner that he wasn't married. His performance at the bank has been ok, but he seems to lack interest in it. I think he's bored."

Hershhal grunted, "This is a big opportunity, are you certain we should send someone so young, and who doesn't show a talent for the business?"

David sighed, "Dad that is kind of the point. We don't know if this is going to go anywhere. If the new innovations fail, better it be someone young, who can recover. If he doesn't like traditional banking, well this won't be traditional banking. Remember these people are experimenting with the Universal Basic Income, and continually variable monetary base. No one knows what will be needed to make this work."

Hiram spoke up, "We're not setting him up to fail are we?"

Hershhal shook his head, "No Hiram, we'd never do that. We'll be his safety net should he fall. The family needs to expand though. Just look at the work David has done on MU. Without that, we'd be like everyone else, trying to figure out how to

stop the future rather than learning how to live in it. No, this is something we must do if we intend to protect the family going into the new century."

David felt really good hearing his father speak of him this way, especially considering how opposed he was to the plan in the beginning. "Do we expect any complaints from Uncle Nathan in Tel Aviv or Uncle Jacob in Singapore?"

Hiram snorted, "Nathan would complain he wanted water if you offered him wine, but with it being one of the youngest members going, and the minimal investment involved, he should give grudging assent."

Hershal chuckled, "True enough but Jacob should be supportive, after all, much like young David here, he moved to the wilderness to establish a foothold in Singapore decades ago. He'll be all for it."

David nodded, mostly to himself, this seems like it can work. "So who is our sacrificial lamb?"

Hiram grinned at the choice of phrase, "Ariel Rosen, he's twenty two or twenty three I can't recall. A bright young man but lacks the traditional temperament that one in our profession usually cultivates. He's more likely to try some currency trading scheme if left to his own devices. Guidance will be necessary."

David spoke up at that, "No it certainly will not be necessary. Sorry Uncle Hiram, you know I respect your wisdom, but in this you're wrong. He's going to need to forge a new path. No one is equipped to be his guide, as these are all untested technologies and uncharted territory. We can't be a back seat driver on this. He needs to be independent enough to take advantage of the opportunities as they present themselves. Is your grandson up for the task?"

Shock drained from Hiram's face as the explanation for David's harsh words started to soften the blow, "I see. As to if he's ready," he shrugs, "That we shall see. After all that is why we're sending a man with few responsibilities and time to recover from youthful follies."

The three men sat looking at each other in the little windows on the screen. No one said anything, it seemed all that was needed was said. Uncle Hiram, being the eldest of the three, began the Aaronic Benediction and when he had finished closed the video conference.

David sat looking at the darkened screen for several moments. Then at just above a whisper, "Mozel tov Ariel, the future is coming at us all fast."

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Ariel took the cab home from the family meeting in a fog. They wanted him to set up a new branch on Atlantis. Atlantis!! I mean sure after David's adventures on MU someone would have to be sent but he never expected they would trust him with anything this important for another two or three decades. This is huge. He unlocked the door and his flat mates were all up playing the latest VR game. They stopped as Ariel came in and they all looked concerned. "Hey you ok, mate?" Don asked with concern in his voice.

"What, oh yeah. I just got some news. Glad you're all still up, I guess it kind of concerns you as well." Ariel said giving his head a little shake to clear some of the fog.

"Dude, you look like you've seen a ghost, you sure you're alright?" Mike asked.

"Oh I'm fine, and it's all good news. Um, I'm not sure how to say this but I will be moving out at the end of next month." He held his hand up at the chorus of questions. "I kind of got a big promotion in the family."

Mike piped up at this point, "Ah so you moved up in the evil cabal, and us poor goyiem will just have to figure out how to make rent without you. Bwahahah bwahahaha." He made the evil villain laugh complete with the grasping hand gestures.

Ariel threw the keys he still had in his hand at Mike, "See, and this is why you'll never get anywhere" Ariel chuckled. "You don't understand generational planning."

Don grinned, "Don't mind the ignorant savage here, I like serving the evil cabal overlords. Where's my reward, now that you've become big and important?"

Ariel just shook his head. "You two are just too much. Still if you ever do want to crawl out of your self indulgent stupor, you too should think about generational planning. Where too many people see conspiracy, it really is just better planning."

"Ah come on Ari, you know we're just teasing with you." Mike sighed and tossed him back his keys.

"I do know it, which is why we're still friends." and they had been since University days. All working in the financial services industry didn't hurt to keep their interests aligned. "All the same, you guys know what the difference is between rich and wealthy?" he cocked an eyebrow waiting for an answer. When he saw they weren't going to answer he continued, "Rich is what someone who is hard working or lucky becomes. They do well for their lifetime. Wealthy is what families accomplish over generations of careful planning. Well, and hard work. You are looking at the head of the newest branch of the Rosen Family, Atlantis branch."

Bedlam broke out, as his flatmates hit him with a thousand questions. For all their badgering him about his family connections, they really did admire that he

reminded a normal guy despite what really was a large and well connected family.

"Well, that was what I was told this evening. Next month I will fly out to Jamaica, and from there to Atlantis a couple of weeks later. I am supposed to set up a financial services company with no legal ties back to the family bank."

"Why no ties to the bank? Why not just open a new branch on Atlantis?" Don asked.

Ariel grinned at him, "That is why you will always be serving the cabal overlords." Don made a face at him but both men were struggling to keep back the laughs. "I know this is going to hurt, but try thinking your way through this. If the governments of the world are going to keep treating these new island nations as an enemy, they will try to put on sanctions and cut off economic ties. All of that can be bad for a bank based in any of the countries. There are huge opportunities though. This is almost completely unregulated banking. This is the chance to develop the tools that will power the economy of the next century." He paused thinking about it for a moment, "You clowns want a job?"

Now it was time for the other two to fall silent and think about things. Ariel could tell that the joking was over, they really were considering what he said. "Can we have a couple of days?" Don asked.

Ariel just nodded, "It is a big decision. Let me know soon though, as the arrangements are not easy to make."

Chapter 5

Captain Marshal stood on the command deck watching the crew at their stations at full alert. Engineering had all three shifts active at this point. "Ok people, time to put thoughts of shore leave on MU aside, here's where we earn our pay. Everyone get your game face on, you can do this. If you couldn't I wouldn't be here. Mr. Savo, send in the sonic decoys." He stood watching the squawk drones moving ahead at Atlantis's top speed. Next he nodded to communications and the order went out. The two defensive island started toward the straits plying on at a reasonable pace.

All ballast tanks are filled to maximum, to make it more difficult to capsize the island. The EMP shielded secondary systems were tested last night. EMP from an underwater detonation shouldn't be an issue but why take chances. They might try something besides the obvious mode of attack. Captain Marshal checked the display again, the decoys are out and with a decent spread, "Ok folks. All a head full. Keep those drones out, we'll need as much warning as we can get.

Midshipman John Davies, had just settled into his station on the third crew rotation. John knew why they were rotating so often, it was more than just Captain Marshal was nervous, maintaining alertness beyond forty five minutes to an hour is difficult. If you rotate the crews in and out of duty stations it makes it less likely for the mind to wander and something to get missed. They've been heading through the narrow pass for two hours now, so if they were going to get hit, it was likely any minute now. No sooner had he thought that, than a light pinged up on the display from Drone 72. "Captain! Drone showing launch fourteen clicks to starboard!" He no sooner finished than Drone 51 pinged as well, "Confirmation, thirteen clicks and closing fast. They seem to be targeting primary decoy, Sir!"

Captain Marshal calls out, "Full stop! All Drones to Stop as well! Condition Alpha on all vessels! Now!"

A quick flurry of movement as they struggled to stop and silence the entire fleet. The last to go quiet, is the decoy they already have a lock on. It wasn't a bad attempt, for a completely automated one. It just couldn't distinguish the decoys from the real deal. Then there was an intense explosion, and a wave of water hit thirty seconds later that shook the whole island. Captain Marshal knew that was the worst one but certainly not the last one. They really needed to get moving again. "Ok, people that might not be their last shot. Look alive we've got six more hours of this!"

No audible groans met his announcement. Faces turned back toward their duty station with determination. Men and women who knew their job and were doing it. Marshal grinned inwardly, THAT is what he loved about being at sea. He settled in for what was likely to be a long duty shift.

Not quite an hour later, another voice rings out, "Captain! Drone showing launch eight clicks to starboard!" Captain Marshal, pulled up the drone feed again and sure enough it was something big. "Uh, Sir, Drone 31 is reporting it as well but moving way too slow to be a conventional torpedo."

"Alright people, get me a decoy between us and it, and damn it get me some eyes on it!" The Captain pulled up the limited video feed from each of the drones in the vicinity. Drone 21, suddenly stops reporting in.

Midshipmen Davies fresh into this rotation is the one who finally gets a clear picture. "Got it captain! Just a Great White, and it looks like it's got Drone 21 in it's teeth. False alarm, Sir."

Everyone breathed a bit of a sigh of relief, but Captain Marshal wasn't one to take chances. "Keep an eye on the damn thing and pull those decoys in a bit closer. It's going to be a long night folks, shift change in five minutes. I know we just did one, but I want fresh eyes on this before your adrenalin crashes."

* * *

Captain Marshal sighed an inward sigh of relief as they finally made it to an area where their possible courses branched enough to make planning for any one of them difficult. He gave orders for the most unlikely of courses. It would mean an extra day to their travels but it was time that could be used washing down the surface of Atlantis and the smaller islands. The Geiger counter wasn't screaming at them the way it would have been had this been an air burst instead of sheltered by the water, still they all needed a good decontamination. He shook his head, all that could wait until after they had a mandatory four hours of down time. "Coms, give me the island wide address system."

Seaman's Apprentice Abigail Adams was on the coms this shift. Relief was washing over her as she patched the island wide address system into military communications grid. It had been a long night but the only reason the Captain would ask for this is to give the all clear. "Ready Captain!"

"Attention Atlantis. It is my pleasure to report that we are now officially in the Atlantic Ocean where we belong. The long night is completed successfully. Congratulations one and all on a job well done. The surface of Atlantis is contaminated so no one above decks, so to speak, until we have her washed down. On the bright side, we will not be missing our first sunrise over the Atlantic. I've given orders for it to be broadcast on every public screen. We've made it through the dark night and the morning is here. Make it a glorious day people. That is all." and he motioned for SA Adams to cut the line.

Applause went up, not just through the island but on the command deck as well. Captain Marshal, tried to remain impassive but he just couldn't help it and the most heart felt grin of his life broke out across his face. They had done their best to kill them quietly, and they had missed. Now if they wanted to fight they were going to have to do it in the open with all the world watching. Now they couldn't kill like an assassin in the night but would have to be held accountable by the world and by history for any misdeeds. It wasn't quite a victory, but it sure felt good. "XO!"

"Aye Sir?"

"Lets get the watches set, four hour shifts. Get everyone as much rest as you can, they've earned it, and they'll need it. Twelve hours from now I expect decon process to be well underway, understood?"

"Aye aye, Sir. I'm on it."

"The conn is yours Commander Vaughn." Captain Marshal said as he stood on shaky legs and headed toward the lift that would take him to his quarters. Only easy day was yesterday, he thought sarcastically to himself as he felt the adrenaline draining from him as if it were washing away in the waves.

* * *

Commander Vaughn began detailing off the current duty shift and cutting the other shifts loose to grab what sleep they might before decon procedures begin in earnest. He was completely preoccupied by setting up the duty roster for the next seventy two hours, making sure everyone got the necessary down time, but that all shifts were covered including decon, and repair of any damage to their islands, when the public screens of the command deck went dark. When they came back

up, all at once, all showing a bright orange and golden sky as the smallest crescent of the morning sun peeked up over the waves. The whole crew stood motionless just watching. Their first sunrise in their new home. The Captain was right this was a sight worth seeing. The sun had managed to climb nearly a hand's breadth above the horizon before anyone spoke, and to everyone's surprise including young SA Adams it was she who in a high clear voice began to sing softly, it was truly beautiful, but the Commander and most of the crew couldn't understand the words as they were all in Hebrew. As she finished the song and her face flushed as she realized all eyes were on her the Commander asked her, "Adams, that was beautiful, what was it?"

Now Adams really felt stupid as she doesn't speak Hebrew but learned the song phonetically for her church choir. "Well Sir, I know it is Psalm 19, but I don't speak Hebrew. I learned it that way for my church choir back home, but I'd have to look it up to tell you what it means."

From the back of the room a deep voice rumbled, "The heavens declare the glory of God, the dome of the sky speaks the work of his hands. Every day it utters speech, every night it reveals knowledge. Without speech, without a word, without their voices being heard, their line goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world. In them he places a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom from the bridal chamber, with delight like an athlete to run his race. It rises at one side of the sky, circles around to the other side, and nothing escapes its heat." When everyone turned to see who had spoken, a young Ensign Lewis was just smiling slightly. "My Hebrew isn't great either, but it was one of my Rabbi's favorite psalms, so he made me learn it, as part of my Bar Mitzva ceremony." He grinned lopsidedly, "I'm amazed it still came back to me after all these years, but I didn't sing it as well as Adams just did." He nodded to her and started clapping.

It built around the bridge until Commander Vaughn decided they had moved too far from proper discipline, "Alright people. You've had your moment. Adams, it was beautiful." he nodded and she blushed again. "But we've all got work to do, so get back to it or I'll find something extra to occupy your time."

To a chorus of "Aye Commander," and half hidden smiles, it was back to work. Still the day did seem to be brighter and the challenges a bit more manageable than they had an hour ago.

* * *

Three days after the crossing to the Atlantic, the Atlantis was just off the coast of Rio, and it was time to take on the first ten thousand new citizens. The island's vegetation was almost completely destroyed. Between the radiation and the salt water washing the contamination all away, the plants of the island didn't look likely to make it. Captain Marshal was glad this part wasn't his responsibility. Truth be told all he needed to do at this point is monitor for anyone trying to take advantage

of the confusion to do some damage. He really didn't expect trouble here, that would likely come later. Still he was grateful for this small test run of ten thousand before they try loading seven hundred and eighty thousand in the Caribbean. He shook his head, yup, just glad it isn't me having to heard those cats, he thought to himself as he turned back to the screen showing deployment of the recon drones.

Chapter 5

Ariel Rosen and his young associates, were a little the worse for wear after a four day layover in Rio. The city was an amazing place for a young man with the means to support himself well. So it was, just a bit hung over, that he found himself on a boat, in choppy seas, heading toward an island that appeared to have weathered a hurricane. Not the most auspicious of starts. The first issue as he arrived was to in process, get his citizenship papers, medical exams, and secure housing.

Housing on Atlantis was a bit of a grab bag, everything from small cabin style staterooms to what would be a sprawling penthouse in any major city on the mainland. So a choice of where to reside wasn't nearly as difficult as convincing the Council to approve a ninety nine year lease. The anticipated wild fluctuations in an individual's available wealth meant that the Council wanted to keep leases to one year or less. Still at a cost of three times the normal value per square foot, it was possible to bring them around. The Council obviously hadn't thought through the wild inflation that would occur over the next decade on Atlantis, as their monetary experiment ramps up fully. Oh he knew Uncle David had spelled it all out for them, but intellectually knowing, and understanding well enough to project what that means in to the future are two different things. By year twelve, assuming Atlantis could last that long, the value of this contract should be phenomenal. By year thirty five, he should be able to transfer the lease at a real profit and possibly use the proceeds to fund his own island home.

All of these dreams were for the future though, and for now he needed to figure out who to hire to install the massive computer system that would end up being the backbone of the Atlantean financial system. "Clara," he called, waiting for the lovely red haired vision to swim into view. Her waist length red locks floated around her head as if she were under water, the emerald green eyes nearly glowed in contrast to her alabaster completion, gem toned green scales of her tail and fins caused the light to sparkle magician like as she swam into his AR assisted view.

" 'ello Ariel, 'ow can I 'elp you t'day?" she said in a lilting accent. She looked just like a crush Ariel had at University, Catherine McIntosh would never give him the time of day. They just ran in opposite social circles. Clara on the other hand was happy to spend time with him.

"Ah there you are. Clara I need to know if there are any enterprise grade, IT

infrastructure companies already on board and if not when we can expect one. Payment will be made in British Pounds, if that is acceptable." He waited while she checked who was already here, and who was due at the big rush of immigration next week. Until the citizenry was loaded on the island there wasn't enough Atlantean currency to buy much of anything. Truth be told he had exchanged almost all of his Atlantean Sovereigns for BullionCoin the gold backed Cryptocurrency. Uncle David was right again, people just heard they were Sovereigns from a new island city state and didn't bother to learn the difference between them and the MU Sovereigns. Ah well, a fool and his money and all that.

"Ariel, I've found Quantum Cloud, who won the bid for Atlantis's main computer, though they don't want paid in Pounds, but would prefer US Dollars or MU Sovereigns. There is another company Distributed Quantum Networks, that will be on the island next week, and should be 'appy for the contract. Though they may take longer, as they'll 'ave to come aboard and get set up." she flicked her tail punctuating her frustration as the delay. Even though her personality matrix was new and mostly unformed, she had picked up enough from him that she knew a delay wouldn't be welcome.

"Thank you Clara. Please see if you can get me a meeting with Quantum Cloud, this afternoon if possible." Ariel wished again, for about the thousandth time since customizing his Digital Assistant, that VR had advanced to touch. Her hair looked as if it were the softest pure scarlet silk.

"Meeting is on for 1530 'ours. Their offices are near the core, on the tirty tird floor." She swam in a long slow loop and looked back to him waiting for his next command.

"Works for me. Please begin printing my grey suit. I'm going to try to get a little shut eye before we have to go." The bed looked odd in the large completely empty room, but it would work for sleep. Besides there was plenty of time over the next couple of weeks to print out what I'll need for furniture or who knows maybe Clara can find me a good designer.

* * *

Ariel was sitting at his starkly utilitarian desk in an empty office, trying out different options the designer sent over on his AR glasses. All of this could give a man a headache, he thought, I don't care about this. I just want a place that looks professional for my clients. So I can get back to the real work of designing a way to help those clients get around the continually devaluing Atlantean Sovereign. Still without the right look, it is hard to get taken seriously. He was just about to switch to the fifth option when the door to the office swung open unexpectedly and Don stormed in looking more than a little frazzled.

"Ari! I just got word that the three largest international banks have all sent people to open branches. These are deep pocket guys! I mean I know your family is backing you but how are we going to compete with the kind of money these guys can throw around?" Don started without preamble.

Ariel snorted, "Come on in Don, good morning to you too."

Don was shaken, he didn't really even catch the sarcasm. "Man I thought this sounded great. Sure it was a bit scary leaving the security of London, but man I didn't think we were going to be out gunned from the start. Didn't all of this kind of hinge on no one else wanting to take the official risks?"

Ariel sighed. "Sit down before you fall down Don." he gestured toward the plain plastic chair on the other side of the desk. "Clara, can you please ask Mike to join us? If I'm going to need to go through this it's better to only have to do it once."

"Mike says 'e'll be 'ere in a minute, 'e's on the other side of the 'ouse at the moment." Clara's voice said through the wall speakers.

Don just looked at Ariel in a bit of shock, "You seem to be taking this pretty relaxed."

Ariel smirked, "Oh I'm not happy about it, but not really worried either. By the time we're done with our little confab neither will you be, or at least shouldn't be." he shrugs. "There's more to banking than deep pockets, especially here."

Don looked dubious, but before he pressed the issue Mike came into the office. He looked at Don and an eyebrow shot up. "What's up?"

Ariel grinned, "Have a seat. Don just learned that we won't be the only bankers on Atlantis."

Mike grinned back, "Oh hell there goes the neighborhood."

They all laughed but Don spoke up, "We can laugh all we want but these are some big names, some real deep pockets guys."

Mike just nodded, so Ariel figured this was as good an opening as he was going to get. "Guys, relax. Yeah they've got deep pockets, but they also have some rather rigid habits of thought. The banks they represent didn't really even start to utilize blockchain until a couple of years ago." He watched as Mike became thoughtful and Don's brow furrowed as if he were looking at things from a new perspective and not sure what he was seeing. "These are traditional banks. They will try to set up checking and saving's accounts and will try to make consumer and business loans, just like they've done all along." He gave it another second while that sunk in for them. "Atlantis, isn't the US or Europe or even the Orient. Money works differently

here. The rules are different here. What do you want to bet they sent guys in their fifties, with twenty plus years of experience in banking?" They both nodded, that's how things were usually done. "When was the last time one of them had an original thought? Assuming that they are capable of thinking outside of the box, what is the chance that they can get approval from home office fast enough to implement those ideas before we're already doing something better?"

Don frowned, "So you think we'll just be smarter? Doesn't sound like something to bet the farm on."

Ariel laughed, "Oh we'd better be smarter, but more importantly, we'll be nimbler and more innovative. Look at it this way, these guys still think in terms of interest rates..." He raised an eyebrow waiting for them to catch up.

Mike grinned, "Yeah, imagine a traditional loan where you need to add a ten percent devaluation on top of a six percent prime rate."

Ariel nodded back smiling, "You've got it. Who's going to fall into that trap more than once? Not to mention if they try traditional banking here, they get hit by a ten percent devaluation every year. Banking is profitable, but not that profitable. Think they've found a way around that?"

Don looked thoughtful, "Won't take them long, once they realize it."

Mike laughed again, "Sure but by then they've got to convince the guys in the home office that they didn't just lose the money. Then they've got to convince them to try a new concept, something never done before, just to make the same amount of money that they are used to getting with the tried and tested methods. As conservative as bankers are notorious for being..."

Ariel grinned wickedly, "Not to mention the political blame game and passing the buck. By then we'd better already be off and running and be the solution for the new economy, or it won't matter anyway."

Don visibly relaxed, "So what you're saying is that the game hasn't changed. We just have to reinvent economics, just like we had to before?"

Mike laughed, "Oh not quite reinvent economics, that doesn't work anymore than reinventing gravity. We just need to invent the tools that work in this new environment. Speaking of which Ari, when are they projecting the hardware to be in place? Oh and any news on the app?"

Ariel nodded, "That is actually good news for a change. Hardware will be set up day after tomorrow, before we ever reach the Caribbean. The app will be available for testing by the end of the week. If I am judging it right, we should be ready for full scale roll out the week after the next big influx of citizens arrive."

Don nodded, "Good, it will take them probably a month or two to realize that regular banking is losing them money anyway. First quarterly reports before they get their first clue."

Ariel gave an agreeable shrug, "Well hopefully we can set up some 'Welcome to Atlantis' classes to move them along a little faster. Mike how's it going with the commercial finance side?"

Mike grinned widely, "That is going far better than I expected. The transition in a business owners mind from IPO to ICO has been fairly smooth. Six of the cornerstone industries of Atlantis have already agreed to fund their expansion that way. Two of the international customers have agreed to fund their Atlantean subsidiary that way. Their biggest concern is how they are going to find ready buyers when there aren't that many Atlantean Sovereigns in existence yet."

Ariel shrugged again, "That should take care of itself with the next citizen flood, that is what next week?"

The impromptu meeting drug on for another half hour but by then it was time for lunch.

Chapter 6

Pirates of the Caribbean

Captain Marshal took a deep breath. They had arrived in the Caribbean. Just one hundred and eighty nautical miles off of the southern coast of the Bahamas, it was time to start loading the new citizens from the US and Canada. Ships were making arrangements for docking when the communications officer suddenly spoke up over the steady hum of the command deck. "Captain Marshal you need to hear this."

Marshal always hated it when they used that particular tone, it always meant his day was about to go pear shaped. "Put it on the main line." The resignation and irritation clear in his voice.

"Unidentified craft, this is the US Coast Guard. Provide your registration information including country of origin or prepare to be boarded and searched." The slightly nasal voice said in a New England accent.

Marshal shook his head, so they were going to try this angle. "Where is that cutter at Nav?"

Ensign D'Vaugh high soprano voice rang out above the murmur of frustration that ran around the command deck, "Twenty one miles north west of our position, looks like two Coast Guard Cutters, squawking US military designations."

"Any other US Military presence in the area?" Marshal asked with a calm voice that belied the sinking feeling in his gut.

"No other Naval assets that are making themselves known, but our drones have picked up flickers of what could be a sub, and there are twelve US military aircraft in the immediate area of operations." Ensign D'Vaugh tried to keep her voice steady but the fear still leaked through.

Marshal grunted. This was something that was likely as not going to be resolved by lawyers not force of arms, but he wasn't about to let his new nation just be invaded without so much as a shot fired. He shuddered inwardly as he realized exactly how bad shots being fired would get. "XO, order the Trident and the Artshi to intercept our new friends. Maintain a five mile distance but do not let them bring vessels in for boarding." he nodded. "Comms, put me through to that cutter." The comms officer patched in for the command deck mic, and nodded that the Captain was live. "US Coast Guard Cutter, This is Captain Andrew Marshal of the Atlantis. I suspect however, that even Coast Guard ship identification training isn't lax enough that you don't already know that. So you will not be boarding her today, though when you're off duty, the resorts are wonderful, you really should come by and bring the wife." Marshal grinned as he waited for the response. Looking around the command deck he could see the smirks on the faces of his nervous crew. They would meet this

challenge but they sure weren't eager for it. Hell for that matter neither was he.

"Atlantis, you are a rogue craft bearing no international registry. In accordance with the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea, you are designated a rogue vessel and subject to search and possible seizure. There is no reason for you to make this more difficult than necessary Captain, submit now to a search of your vessel and no one need get hurt." That nasal voice was dripping with sarcasm and self assurance.

Marshal had really about had it with this overbearing twit. "All Atlantean forces, this is Captain Marshal. You now have permission to bring all weapons systems online. Do not fire unless they are attempting to board. Any vessel,not previously cleared that approaches within three miles is to be considered hostile and met with appropriate force. Unnamed Captain of the Coast Guard force, you've heard the order given. Stand down, and no one needs to get hurt." the last part dripped sarcasm like venom. The captain made a sharp chop motion across his throat toward the comms officer.

"Mic is closed sir." The comms officer said clearly but obviously he was nervous.

"Commander Vaughn, I need to get the Council involved in this ASAP. You have the Conn, don't let those arrogant pricks get anywhere near Atlantis" as he turned and started toward the hatch, he could hear Vaughn behind him.

"Lt. Avis, drop another fifty drones and increase the search pattern. Lets not let a sub take us by surprise."

As the hatch snicked shut behind him, he felt a wolfish grin cross his face, no he didn't want this fight and it was going to hurt if it came to it, but they were going to know they had been in one if it came to that. "Debbie, let the Council know that I am coming to them."

* * *

The Council members had enough powerful friends that this action wasn't going unnoticed in the world media. Three small skirmishes had all gone badly for the US. Not because the US Navy couldn't take out Atlantis, but because they were wanting to brand them as pirates, and narco traffickers, even tried to brand the new citizens as human traffickers because they brought their children with them. By trying to work this as a police action rather than a military action the US had unintentionally set the level of conflict low enough that the Atlantis was more than capable of repulsing their efforts. Everyone on Atlantis and the rest of the world knew that this

couldn't continue indefinitely. Emergency meetings were being held in the UN, and the US was finding that as much as the other nations didn't want to see MU and Atlantis succeed, they also wanted to see the US with egg on its face. All of those old jealousies, petty disputes, and grievous old wounds not forgotten, roiled and boiled under the surface, and Councilman Northman hammered on them for all he was worth. Oh each member of the council did his part, but Northman knew where many of the bodies were buried so to speak. He and young Rosen, were proving to be a remarkable team in the diplomatic arena.

Northman smiled to Rosen as the door closed behind the ambassador from Havana. "I think he's hit on the solution." Northman grinned, "That idea you had of providing special banking for senior Party officials on Atlantis is probably what did the trick."

Rosen shrugged, "He's just behind the times technologically. With these crypto currencies, anyone with the ability to set up false identification has the ability to turn any memory stick into a numbered account. I really wasn't offering him anything more than any reasonably adept criminal organization can accomplish. I'm glad it worked."

Northman smiled again, "You're being modest. That doesn't forward your career."

Rosen's face wrinkled up in distaste, "I thought that there were elements of banking that were unseemly, but it can't hold a candle to politicians. No offense, but especially with our revamping of the whole economic system here on Atlantis, I think I'll be happy not to advance a political career."

Northman barked a laugh. "An honest banker with moral scruples, the world never ceases to amaze."

Rosen's face contorted again with a wry grin, "All right enough with the sarcasm. Yes in a traditional world bankers shouldn't throw stones. Fiat money combined with fractional reserve lending has gutted much of the old world we're leaving. Part of that is because of or in response to politicians, and part of it really was pure greed." he conceded. "We're getting a chance to start fresh here. If I had my choice would I rather have had a money system more like MU? Sure, that would be the ideal, but I think this can be made to work also. It has the built in advantage that even if it is a fiat currency, at least everyone has a base floor of poverty that they cannot fall below."

Northman shook his head, "Careful son, you're starting to sound like those crazy socialists. You'll give bankers a bad name."

Rosen's turn to bark a laugh, "Oh I'm far from a socialist. Truth be told most modern bankers are at least mildly socialist. They like to think they can run an economy. So they manipulate an interest rate here, or advocate a tax rate change or deduction there, all to try to control the economy. That's a form of socialism.

You're just using monetary policy and tax policy rather than nationalization of the businesses. Bankers control money, so they can buy politicians. In the end they can indirectly pull strings to manipulate things in their favor." His face set in a grim line, "My family has been living in this world for generations, trying to make the best of it. We didn't always like it, or think it right, but we didn't make the rules. It wasn't until Uncle David pulled off his minor miracle on MU that we ever dreamed that things could be set right again. Now it is my chance. That is the real reason we have ships threatening us." he looked up at Northman. "You realize that right? The people who buy the politicians and pull the strings, realize it could be different now too, and that terrifies them."

Northman sighed, "I don't know if you are right or not. Many ills in this world, people bring upon themselves. It's part of the human condition. Still I agree when we let those flawed men have power over others, it magnifies the flaws." They sat in silence for a few moments. "When this is all over, we're going to have to grab a scotch and talk history and politics." he waved his hand around as if grasping for the next words. "Maybe try to find a way forward that isn't soiled by the mistakes of the past."

* * *

Commander Vaughn is handling the mid watch when Petty Officer McDonald suddenly barks out a laugh from the tactical station. "Something amuses you McDonald?" It came out gruffer than he intended but it had been a long couple of days. Repelling several attempts by the Coast Guard to board while trying not to injure anyone was starting to strain his calm.

McDonald looked up realizing the laugh had been out loud, "Uh, Yes Sir, Commander. We just triangulated the drone data and found not one but two nuclear submarines."

Vaughn came to full alert at this point, "I fail to see how that is good news..."

A measure of how good of news it was, McDonald cut him off, "Sir, only one is from the US." He grinned wolfish grin. "While they've been busy with us, what I assume to be a Russian sub has made it's way into their back pocket and they don't know it."

Vaughn thought for a second and started to grin as well, "How do you know they don't know?"

McDonald's eyes were glittering with excitement. "Because sir they are almost right on top of each other."

Vaughn heaved a sigh of relief, "Yeah never would have let that happen intentionally." His mind was racing. How best to use this information... "Ping them both on active sonar so that they can see each other. Lets add a little more stress and confusion among our enemies." He grinned.

McDonald grinned back, "Aye, aye Sir. One spot light coming right up." he bent to tactical and had twelve of the drones send out their pings at once giving him and anyone else listening a full three dimensional picture of that section of the sea. "It worked Sir. Both subs taking evasive maneuvers and paying a lot more attention to each other."

Vaughn chuckled, "That should keep their crews entertained for the next few hours. Prepare all supporting logs and forward them to Councilman Northman with my compliments."

McDonald coughed, "Oh Sir, that's just not nice." he grinned from ear to ear.

Vaughn nodded rather pleased with himself, "If Councilman Northman doesn't know how to spin that in the media, I'll eat my hat."

* * *

John Northman grinned when the data came in. This was worth getting woken up for, he chuckled. Between this and the diplomatic bombshell Havana was about to drop, this nonsense of treating them like pirates or smugglers was about to end. He just hoped that they would back off rather than try to double down.

"Poseidon!" he called out rather louder than was needed.

"Yes Sir?" The gray bearded merman swam into view.

"Forward this packet of information on to the various news organizations, press release style and start the shower. Looks like today is starting early." He was chuckling to himself as he headed for the bathroom.

"Right away Sir." Came the crisp deep voice. "Your new suit is already in the printer waiting for you."

"Thank you Poseidon. Can you put in an order with that little pancake outfit, for a delivery to the Council Chambers. I'll not have time to stop off as normal."

"Consider it done Sir."

* * *

Captain Marshal walked on to a command deck filled with tired but smiling sailors. "XO, what's got everyone in such a chipper mood this morning?"

Vaughn grinned, "Oh I was waiting for the briefing to let you know, it seems as if our American friends have pulled back beyond the twenty mile line, and making no new attempts at communication."

Marshal's eyebrows went up in surprise. "Any idea why the sudden change of heart?"

"Might have had something to do with the late night news story that Cuba was going to offer to recognize us in the UN. That was a level of legitimacy that the US was hesitant to allow. Especially when it became known that many of the other smaller nations were willing to follow suit, just to put the Americans in a bind." He grinned even wider, "Or it may have been Petty Officer McDonald over there finding not just the US sub we suspected in the area, but a Russian sub right in it's back pocket that we're fairly certain neither side knew the other was there."

"Oh ho, that might just have put them in a tizzy." Marshal said with a gloating smile.

Vaughn continued, "Especially because the logs of the event are on the internet now, via WikiLeaks."

Marshal started laughing until it broke out in a choked cough. "Might have had something to do with it."

"Either way Captain, I don't think they want anymore attention drawn to us this close to their back yard. We might have some issues as we near Europe in a few weeks but for now..." He trailed off.

Marshal nodded, "Good job Commander Vaughn. You and your shift deserve a little extra downtime. Report to your next watch two hours late. Each watch will hold an extra hour today to give your team the reward they have certainly earned. Enjoy the rest. I have the Comm."

"Aye, Aye, Sir. I stand relieved, you have the Comm." a sharp nod, and he turned to address his people. "You heard what the Captain said. Soon as you're relived, enjoy your well earned reward." Smiles greeted him all around.

Chapter 7

Elaine was glued to the media coverage of the showdown in the Carribean. Her readers would want to know the details but she was frozen out. The media, both cable and network had been hammering the Atlanteans for two days, for bringing nuclear powered warships off the US coast. Then news leaks out that Russian nuclear subs are lingering well inside of missile range off the eastern seaboard. The near cold war levels of distrust between the US and Russia over the last decade or better had put ever warning flag up at that point. Were the Russians in league with the Atlanteans? Rumor has it that long time Russian client state of Cuba weighed in on the Atlanteans side diplomatically. The UN is scrambling to issue condemnation of Atlantis and MU for the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The media is failing to explain the difference between a ship powered by a thorium liquid salt reactor and atomic bombs.

They say that truth is the first casualty of war, but it keeps getting harder and harder to get any real facts to even present. Major internet companies have all but cut off any access by MU or Atlantis to popular search engines or social platforms. Even pundits and bloggers state side that are seen to be favorable to the cause of the independent islands are finding it more and more difficult to get their work published. Even when self published it is burried in the every growing morass of media content. If the search engines want you silenced, they simply ignore you and your voice is by default shouted down. There are even threats to take it the next step and cut off any non-state licensed entity from having access to the internet. It's as if a great iron curtain were falling between the rest of the world and these small island nations. Elaine desperately needed more information. It was time to call in favors.

She tried a VoIP call to Tattianna. There were technical difficulties. So she tried a regular landline call. Just got a busy signal. Sent an email, it came back undeliverable. This was starting to get a bit much for coincidence. Finally out of desperation she fired up her Tor browser, logged into an IRC site and was able to access a line that was monitored by Stutsman AI's Ulli network. A few moments later there is a request for a DCC from Tattianna.

A smiling blonde face appears on the screen, "Elaine! I am so happy to hear from you. I've sent you a couple of emails but when I hadn't heard from you..." she trails off.

Elaine went from annoyed to furious, "I suspect they are trying to isolate MU and Atlantis online. I couldn't reach you over any of the popular systems. I had to resort to a back door, obsolete communications platform to contact your Ulli." The anger on her face was clear. "I'm trying to get some real information but it seems like the avenues for investigation are being restricted."

Tattianna smiled and shrugged, "Out of sight out of mind? If they can't scare people enough to prevent them from choosing a life of liberty at sea, they will try to keep them ignorant of the option. I have some good news for you, but first let's find out what I can do to help. I assume this wasn't a social call?"

Elaine felt bad, she really did like Tattianna and should have contacted her before now, but no matter how much Tattianna encouraged her, she couldn't help but feeling like she was imposing. "No, I'm sorry but it isn't. I also can't get any real information out of Atlantis. If you watch the media here in the US, you would think they eat babies for lunch." she made a face. "Fortunately most people no longer trust the information they get from the networks. Unfortunately in the absence of any reliable information from the blogisphere, what are people expected to think?"

Tattianna frowned in thought, "This is a problem. Can you make it to the Bahamas?"

Elaine nodded, "I'll find the money. Why?"

Tattianna nodded more to herself than to Elaine, "You will have transportation arranged from there to Atlantis. Worry for nothing just get there and get your answers. No strings, just tell the truth to any who will listen."

Elaine smiled, "Thank you Tattianna, you really make me feel better every time I talk to you. Now, what is your news?"

Tattianna was looking a bit fierce at this point, "Oh that news is what makes my helping you self interested. I'm pregnant."

Elaine squeed like a school girl, "That's great! I know you were both waiting for Atlantis to lauch but I wasn't sure with all the drama..." she kind of drifted off.

Tattianna smiled a wolfish grin, "Yes, the drama as you say... Just so. Go. Get your answers. Tell those who will listen the truth as you did for us before. I need to go talk to Michael. He needs to know how bad it is getting. Thank you Elaine. You'll always have a home here. What you do for us by getting the truth out is more important than you know."

Elaine waved at the screen and shut down the connection. It's time to get to work.

* * *

Tattianna is pushing her way through the crowds heading to Michael's office when she bumps into Commodore Whetherby. "Hello Nigel."

His eyebrow rose, "Tattianna, what's wrong? You look upset."

"I talked to Elaine on the mainland. She says things are pretty bleak."

"Ah, then you might as well join me. I'm going to deliver some bad news to Mike. Mexico finally caved to the US pressure. Shultzinger Enterprises' facilities have been nationalized by the Mexican government. Two employees critically wounded, fifteen Mexican troops are injured. All equipment that can be has been loaded on to the vessels at hand, and are making their way this direction." He said quietly as they move through the halls.

"What!? There was a shooting war with Mexico?" she asked in panic.

"Well we're hoping to keep it from escalating. Assuming they don't try to chase our people, it should end there." Commodore Whetherby shrugged. "All still pretty fresh news. Thought I should deliver news like this personally."

* * *

The door to Michael Shultzinger's executive office swings open, Ulli has been given orders to always admit Tattianna and Nigel as either of them were not likely to waste Michael's time or interrupt casually. When both show up demanding to see Michael immediately the Ulli just cautions them he's on a call that is not going so well at the moment and ushers them in. Tattianna winced as she entered office, Michael was pounding on his desk punctuating each word. "What in the hell am I paying you people for Doug?! If you can't give me warning on an announcement like this!"

"I'm sorry Mr. Shultzinger, the president just signed the executive order last night. No one knew that he was going to do this. We're trying to get it ruled unconstitutional but with the current public opinion against you..." Dougs deep cultured voice trailed off. "There really is only so much I can do." he finished lamely.

Mike looked up and saw both Tattianna and Nigel standing there waiting for him and had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Doug, do something about this or I will. You can let them know they don't want to force me to act."

"I don't think they will take being threatend well, Mi...." Doug began but it was too

late Mike had already severed the call.

He looks up at his wife and his most loyal employee, "Ok you two here together, it can't be good news. Out with it."

Nigel started first. "Sorry boss, but yeah you're not going to like this. Mexico just made a move to nationalize Shultzinger Industries manufacturing facilities in the Gulf of California." Nigel held up his hand to forstall Mike's outraged outburst, "Later, facts now, planning session next." He met Mikes eye and waited for the logic to reassert itself. Mike nodded and he continued. "Two of our employees are critically injured, what reports we could get say a dozen Mexican troops were injured as well. Thus far no fatalities. All equipment that could be hastily loaded on to ships is currently making it's way here. No signs of pursuit so far." Nigel concluded and then waited for the explosion.

Mike disapointed he just took a deep breath and blew it out, "Well looks like the Mexicans have better intelligence operatives than our lobbieists. Seems like the President just signed an executive order that any patent not registered by a citizen of a World Trade Organization recognized nation is invalid. They are coming after all of our tech. The Mexicans must have wanted the whole operation, not just the plans to work from." His shoulders slumped. It was quiet for a second, and then he felt Tattianna's arms around him. He looks up, "So love what is your good news to brighten the day, he asked with a sickly smile."

Tattianna just kissed the top of his head, "Oh nothing like that, and we're not completely without allies. I spoke to Elaine today."

Mike shook his head, "Never would have pegged her as an ally when we first met, but she has done us good turn after good turn since. What was Elaine's news?"

Tattianna groaned just a bit as she settled into his lap. "Well seems like there is a full scale demonization campaign going on in the US press. Mostly focused on Atlantis but painting with as broad a brush as they can." she shrugged, "Elaine needs us to make arrangements for her to visit Atlantis and just try to interject some truth into mix." Michael nodded, she had known he wouldn't be stubborn on this, "We also realized that communications between her and I have been blocked. Emails 'non-deliverable', phone calls are always busy or technical difficulties connecting. EVERYTHING," she emphasized. "She had to go on to IRC and hit the old Stutsman AI chat board where an Ulli happened to pick it up and put us in communication. I don't know if it is just her, and they are suspicious over the whole Halvarson Incident, or if it's part of a bigger plan to cut us off from the web."

Michael tapped her leg and she popped up out of his lap. Standing he leans over the desk, "Of course she'll have whatever we can give her. We need all the allies we can get." He smiles a bit sardonically to himself, ally would not have been how he would have described her after their first meeting. Yet real and true, that is what she had become. "Nigel," he looked up to catch the big security chief's eyes, "Full

war council. I want the full Gang of Eight as soon as they can be assembled, yourself and Captain Marshal, and the Atlantis Council. Yes I know things are chaos for them but they'll want in on this. Share all information from this meeting, via Ulli. Uh, except about Elaine, we'll handle that off the records. No reason to make it obvious to any one doing monitoring of our communications that we expect help from that corner."

Tattianna smiled, he was back. G-d help the rest of the world, the temporary slump and the danger that it could consume him was over. Michael was back and the rest world should look out.

Chapter 8

Elaine was cranky after the trip. As all other Americans, she had become used to the routine indignities that public travel had come to require. She'd been poked, and prodded, and x-rayed, and had her belongings rifled through, and been interrogated, and paid handsomely for the 'privilege'. Finally though, she was on a fishing boat in the Bahamas. The Atlantean craft pulled along side, and with no ceremony what so ever, she found herself cruising in a comfortable air conditioned cabin on her way to Atlantis. In some ways it made her think back to her trip to MU. Was that really less than a full year ago? So much had changed in that time, she thought in dismay. Shultzinger was right about one thing, he sure has upturned things. She smiled and corrected herself, Mike was right. it was a bit odd to think of him so informally but Tattianna was right, they aren't enemies. He's doing good things, even if it is causing a lot of trouble for the world. Maybe the world deserves it. After all what he wants, is what America claimed to represent. The right of the individual to be free. She actually giggled out loud at herself and was glad she was alone in the cabin. She wouldn't have seen things that way before meeting him. What the media was doing to all those people on MU and Atlantis was just not right, she wasn't sure what she could do about it with her little blog but damn it she was going to try.

Little over an hour later, she found herself entering the familiar docking cavern. It looked like MU's except this was all decorated with an odd mix of Greek and Egyptian decor. Standing on the dock to greet her was a young woman in a crisp blue and gold uniform. "Elaine Winters?" A clear soprano voice asked. Elaine smiled and nodded. The young woman blonde woman with the musical voice and crisp uniform, extended her hand. "I am Seaman's Apprentice Adams, I am your liaison for this visit." She motioned to a small door off to one side, "If you'll please follow me, ma'am, we can expedite your guest visa paperwork."

The paperwork when much faster than it had when she arrived on MU. It didn't seem to be any less through but maybe she just knew what to expect this time.

Maybe it was SA Adams and her efficient way of moving everyone along, politely, professionally, implacably. Elaine fought down the smile that tried to break out on her face at these thoughts. She decided she liked SA Adams, oh she was a bit brusque, but every interaction she had ever had with military personnel had seemed that way. She used to find it abrasive, but maybe both she and the military member she was speaking with, were seeing only what they chose to see. She wasn't sure how comfortable she was with this new way of looking at the world, but she couldn't deny that it made more sense in the long run. Maybe once she knew Adams a little better, she could ask her. Elaine just shrugged inwardly, another time, for now there were bigger issues afoot. Time to get to work.

* * *

Elaine fires up her virtual assistant, and the mer-creature appeared in front of her. She blinked twice, it was a beautiful child but at that indeterminate age that could have either been a late blooming girl of about twelve or a pretty long haired boy of about eight. "Hello Elaine. Customization and personalization options are available. Would you like to do set up now?" It patiently floated in the air before her waiting for instructions. It had a rather blank look on its face, its personality matrix being brand new and impressionable. She blinked for a second and tried to think what she would want. This was probably only going to be for a couple of week stay so best not to leave it looking like a child or it would be difficult to leave.

"Um, yeah. Male. About twenty five," she hesitated. Oh why not it wouldn't hurt to have it easy on the eyes, feeling a bit foolish but rushing before she lost her nerve, "Muscles, dark hair, and a beard." she finished all in a rush. Slowly the creature grew and morphed before her eyes. "Black scales and fins." she said almost as an after thought, then giggled, "and a bow tie" As the creature finished taking on shape, she couldn't get over the nagging feeling that it looked familiar. Still the computer did guess her type pretty easy.

The still high pitched child's voice said, "Is this what you want?"

She shuddered a bit at the incongruity of the face and the voice. "Um deeper male voice please."

A pleasant baritone asked, "And what shall be my name?"

She really wanted her Ulli back. This creature for all that it was supposed to have improved hardware, had dull eyes. It was completely missing the snappy come backs and inappropriate humor of Ulli. It would cheapen him to give this creature that name. "Let's just call you Bob." He really didn't look like a Bob but she didn't really know what to call him. He had an almost eerie familiar look about him but with that blank staring expression she couldn't really say who.

"So Bob, first things first. These new islands. The 'nuclear warships' that I keep

hearing about what can you tell me about them." she asked and settled in while Bob mostly droned on about Thorium reactors, and their safety features. The rail guns that armed the island and how they really did have much more fire power than a traditional war ship, if you didn't count the cruise missile cargo most modern Navies wouldn't send a ship out without. While considerable craft they didn't seem to have much armament designed for aggression as they did to ruin anyone's day who tried to menace Atlantis. Bob continued to drone on and on about the slow moving islands and the aquatic and aerial unmanned craft that the ships computer could operate up to a distance of more than two hundred kilometers. The communications were conducted with point to point laser communication for security reasons. It really seemed like these were truly advanced combat ships but to call them war ships when they could almost be out run by a row boat seemed a little bit of a stretch. Great floating weapons platforms, sure, but a war ship? Maybe she just didn't have the tactical expertise to understand their purpose.

"OK Bob, that's enough of that." She shook her head, she thought to herself I'm going to need to teach him to get rid of that lecturing monotone. He could give that actor turned investment guy my dad loved so much a run for his money. She thought for a moment and then smiled, "Bob there is an old movie I want you to analyze. I want you to study the Batman movies of the early teens. Pay particular attention to the character Lucius Fox. Try to emulate that speech pattern when reading to me or giving me a report. Can you do that?"

The virtual image nodded, and a moment later began again, not in the voice of the character but perfectly mimicking the pattern. "Is this better, Elaine?"

Elaine actually grinned, "That's much better Bob. Quick too. Did you analyze that all in the few seconds since I made the request?"

"Yes, those and the other works by the same actor. Actors tend to change their cadence somewhat depending on the part so I gave preferential treatment to the Fox character. I..."

Elaine cut him off, "That is awfully quick. I know you are supposed to be run on the latest hardware, but that still seems impressive."

Bob actually smiled for the first time since she started him, and it hit her who he resembled and she almost changed his appearance. That smile made him look a little too much like Michael Shultzinger for her comfort. She shook her head to clear away that thought. "Bob are you running on something besides just the latest faster chip?"

Bob swam through the air as if working off nervous energy, "Part of the server farm that runs my software is made up of new quantum processors. Normally it is not needed for daily routines but it is available when analyzing large data sets such as a fifty year acting career. Once the quantum internet comes fully online, we'll be able to move larger packets of data more securely and that should greatly speed up the

process as well."

Bob was about to continue but Elaine interrupted again. "Quantum Internet?"

Bob nodded again and began swimming through the air almost like a man pacing and thinking would, "Quantum Internet has been a term used for many technologies. The Chinese have admitted to using a form of it since the late teens but most suspect that the Western nations had it well before but weren't making the technology public, until the Chinese announcement sort of forced it more into the open in the early twenties. In our case, the technology is referring to passing information via quantum entanglement more than the use of quantum processors to analyze it, however if current projections hold that too will be available before the next decade. At least for those with the financial incentive, for privacy and massive data analysts."

"Bob they have the Quantum Internet now? You said 'when it comes fully online.' so how far along are they?" Elaine asked. This could be huge.

"The first trials should begin later this week. Prototype level equipment arrived today and is currently being installed."

"Bingo! Bob, get me a meeting with someone who can tell me something. This could be the next big disruption." What she left unsaid was the deep concern that this could be off of Dr. Halvarson's work and she had no desire to vanish as he did.

* * *

Bob managed to get an appointment with a spokesperson for Stutsman AI. Elaine was just about to leave the comfortable, though not nearly as luxurious as the MU, hotel room, when Bob informs her that SA Adams will be joining them if that is alright. Elaine isn't sure she likes having a babysitter but Adams seems to mostly be helpful. Bob seemed to have mastered Ulli's trick of managing traffic because no sooner had the door closed behind her, than SA Adams rounded the corner at the end of the corridor. Adams smiled brightly, "Hope you don't mind me tagging along."

Elaine smiled pleasantly back, "Oh not at all, though if you have work to do, I really don't need a babysitter."

Adams grinned, "Ah so I'm busted eh?" Elaine managed to keep it to a bit of a smirk, "Oh don't think of me as a babysitter, think of me more as your personal bulldozer." Adams said with a grin as she fell in step beside Elaine. "My job is to make sure no one gives you the run around and that you get access to absolutely as much as you have clearance for, and to explain why you don't have, and can't have clearance if need be. For the duration of your stay, this is my job. You may not realize how important your job is here but my boss does. For example, you were

supposed to meet with the Stutsman AI PR guy, that won't do. You are now going to meet with the lead engineer, and while yes he is busy, he WILL carve out twenty minutes to meet with you. Then if you want to talk to the PR guy, we'll arrange that too."

Elaine giggled, "My own personal bulldozer eh? I think I could grow used to that. Though if we're going to spend that much time together, I need something to call you besides Adams."

Adams smiled, "I forget civilians don't adjust to last names, as easily as those of us who've had it trained in to us from the start. My mother named me Abigail, yes after the first lady, but my friends all call me Abby."

"Well Abby, lets not keep this engineer of yours waiting." Elaine smiles, yes this Abby is going to be much better than a babysitter.

* * *

Abby and Elaine walk to the lift and Elaine can't help but wonder what this new "Quantum Internet" will really mean. The lift starts to descend and as she and Abby ride in companionable silence. Her thoughts wander to Bob. If the Quantum Internet is powerful enough could she get Ulli back? Bob is nice, and could grow into a great help, but he's just not Ulli. The door opens and she finds herself in a non-nondescript corridor with doors widely spaced, each door labeled with a very simple brass placard. Finally as they approach the fifth door on the left it snicks open and she finds herself in a small lobby, being greeted by an attractive, young woman in casual business attire. "Welcome Ms. Winters, SA Adams," with a smile that is standard issue for all corporate greeters, she extends her hand. "Dr. Helm is expecting you, right this way." She leads them off a small hallway to a large set of double doors that swing open at her approach. "Is there anything I can get you before the meeting, Coffee? Tea?"

Elaine looks over at Abby, then returns the smile. "We're fine thanks." As she says so, the smaller door to the back to the conference room opens and a balding man in a white lab coat and thick glasses comes in.

"Ah, excellent! I see you've made it." he smiles at the group of young women. He nods to the receptionist, "Thank you Susan. I think we can take it from here." He pulls out a chair for himself at the large utilitarian table as Susan leaves the room. "Please have a seat and make yourself comfortable. I'm sure you have many questions."

Elaine puts on what she now considers her 'Tattianna' smile, "Thank you for making time for us today. I know you're very busy getting things ready." then takes

her seat.

"Oh yes quite busy, but when Councilman Northman calls and says this meeting is important, then it's important." he grins a bit wryly.

Elaine glances at Abby, who just looks a bit smug. "Oh, I didn't realize Mr. Northman had personally intervened on my behalf. I'll have to thank him." then she grinned a bit wolfishly, "maybe interrupt his busy day."

Dr. Helm coughed trying to hold back the bark of laughter. "So how can I help."

Elaine leaned forward resting her arms on the table. "Well my first question is a bit self serving and safety oriented. Is this based on the late Dr. Halvarson's work?"

Dr. Helm grinned, "Well, yes and no. We're not going to transmute into a jungle if that's what you're asking. However the concepts we are working with are much similar to what Dr. Halvarson was working on. He was not alone however and many other teams of physicists have been working on the same or similar issues. For one thing the atoms in our device are already entangled. Assuming of course that they didn't lose entanglement during the trip," he shrugged. "Of course that is a large part of what we're testing."

Elaine smirked a bit self consciously at her concern about getting too close to the same work Halvarson was working on. "Well that's good to hear. I must admit it was a concern. I saw the aftermath the Denver Event up close and wouldn't have wanted to be any closer to it than that."

Dr. Helm chuckled. "Understandable. I assure you this is quite safe. If it works though you could find yourself with a front row seat to a whole new means of communication, on par with the internet, radio, the printing press or even writing itself."

Elaine cocked an eyebrow, that seemed like a pretty big boast. "That big?"

Dr. Helm just nodded. "Assuming it works. You're talking about faster than light communication, which on a planetary scale doesn't mean much but if someone does succeed in starting a colony on Mars, then real time communications would be possible. Possibly farther, depending on how far we can make this entanglement effect work." Again the shrug, "While this initial distance is relatively small in the grand scheme of things, it will be a good test. Not to mention that while our relatively small number of entangled atoms at the moment limits bandwidth, it could allow for transmission of an immense amount of data, if it can be scaled up."

Elaine's eyes widened as she started to grasp a bit of the potential. "Can you define the term 'immense' a little better for me?"

Dr. Helm just showed a ghost of a smile. "Well conservatively we're talking about

being able to transmit all current global internet traffic each second, in real time."

He let that information bomb sink in before continuing. "At least theoretically. In reality we have a lot of constraints at the moment." he sighed. "The entanglement process, and preparing the basic hardware, is very manual process. The equipment that allows us to read and write the information is rather large and bulky at the moment. One of the biggest challenges we have is that all information must be sent five times, so that correction can be made for errors."

Elaine's brow wrinkled, "Correction for errors?"

Dr. Helm nodded. "Quantum entanglement involves a lot of probability. Probability isn't the same as certainty. So bits here and there are lost in the sending, by comparing five copies of each transmission, we can catch those lost bits and have a coherent transmission."

The lights came on for Elaine, "So, when you said all current communication in real time, you were meaning if you didn't have to error correct?"

Dr. Helm grinned. "No that is with error correction, once it is scaled up properly. Unfortunately for the time being, it will be a lot like going back to dial up internet."

Elaine sagged in the chair. "A bit before my time, but my grandfather used to talk about it."

Dr. Helm smiled at her, "Would you like to drop by for the first test?"

Elaine smiled at him, "Thank you for the invitation, I think I'd like that very much."

Dr. Helm nods and starts to stand, "Well I don't mean to run off, but if we're going to be ready on time, I really do need to get back to it. I've enjoyed meeting you very much Elaine. Please don't tell Mr. Northman I said so, but I am glad he rearranged my day for this."

Elaine stood and smiled, she still had a thousand questions, but she could see she really did need to let him get back to work. "Thank you Dr. Helm. My lips are sealed." She gave him a bit of a wink. "I look forward to watching your success soon."

Chapter 9

Milo looked over his little restaurant. It was just a cubby hole but it was packed. Athenian style pizza by the slice and it is selling as fast as he can make it. Times are great, but he's run ragged. No one wants to work. His help wanted sign has

been in the window for two weeks now and not a single interview. He knows he is losing business because he can't make pizza and wait on customers. Lunch rush is about four hours long and by the end of it, he can barely get prepped for the dinner rush before his small restaurant is over flowing with people again. This Universal Basic Income thing is great for business but it is killing him one rush crowd at a time, if he can't find some help soon, he just shakes his head.

Santo owned the little brew pub across from Milo. He had had the same problems the first week or so, but now no one was coming in. Oh it gave him plenty of time to start catching up on the beer making but where as the first week he was in business he was often sold out of his beer by 2300hrs, now he was not only not selling it as fast, he was having trouble finding empty kegs to store the excess. He had tried to hire in servers last week when it was busy, but now he's just happy he doesn't have to pay them to sit around and do nothing.

Libby looked at her calendar, it had been filled the first four days this month but she'd had only two customers in the last week, not three a day as earlier. This week, her only customer is Mike Reynolds the banker. No she wasn't going to starve but what happened? She looked in the mirror wondering if she was getting fat? Maybe she should try to get Mike to give her some advice. She never dreamed work in a brothel would dry up but who knows, with the new VR options available... no men still wanted the real thing and she wasn't getting fat. She WASN'T, she assured herself.

* * *

Mike walks into the office, "Morning Don, morning Ari, what's on the agenda for today."

Ariel looks up and grins at Mike, "Well our first companies went live with their 'coins' last week as you know. Everything is working just as we tested, so now we're going to meet with the advertising people to try to get the word out. You've got a meeting in two hours with Raul Ramos. He's the CEO for the newly formed Eden Seed Company. You just need to explain our process to him and secure a summery of his test data and financials for review and rating."

Mike nods, "How soon before we roll out our PR campaign for the general public?"

Ariel sighs, "Well that's what MY meetings for today will determine, why?"

Mike grins a little shyly, "Well I had a date with Libby last night..."

Don pipes up, "Oh, so that's why you're looking so tired."

Mike shoots him a look, "Yeah well you'd be dead."

Ariel shakes his head, sometimes working with his former college flatmates was more like running a preschool than a financial institution. "Can we get to the point? I'm due in my first meeting in less than an hour."

"Sorry Ari, before I was so rudely interrupted," he shoots another meaningful look at Don who just rolls his eyes in response, "Libby was saying that she and her other friends are having very open calendars after the first week of the month."

Ariel nodded, "That's to be expected. You know, you could just hire her exclusively. Your UBI would probably cover the cost, and you make more than enough here to live comfortably on."

Mike shuddered, "That's ok. Libby is a nice girl, but I don't think I want to ever use the term exclusive in her presence. Her lack of cash wasn't my concern, but rather the lack of cash for all of them. You said it was to be expected, what do you mean?"

Ariel rubbed his eyes. These guys had been through all the same classes he'd had, why on earth couldn't they see the most obvious things. "Ok. Leaving aside my very reasonable suggestion about Libby." Mike cringed a bit. "The UBI is paid out all at once at the first of the month. So feeling flush with cash, and lacking long term planning habits, people will tend to spend the 'free money' right away." Mike and Don both nodded, the light bulb finally coming on. "Then as the money gets tight, the girls will find fewer suitors, bars will find fewer patrons, and finally people will start eating at home more. The UBI is great if you're frugal, but it really isn't designed to provide a very lavish lifestyle, especially as the money is constantly eroding and inflation starts to kick in as more, and more money is introduced to the system."

Mike scratched his head, "That all makes sense and I guess I knew that was part of the problem but I sort of didn't expect it to be so pronounced early on."

Ariel snorted, "Early on is when it will be the worst. The next few years are going to be a real wild ride for Atlanteans, as they adjust to the way this new economy works. You're right about needing to roll out the ability to invest in these companies through. The coin exchange is needing to roll out as early as possible. Those who learn how to work the system will be able to really benefit from the fluctuations."

Don grinned, "Yeah Mike, teach her how to use the money she makes early in the month to make her money at the end of the month and she might not have to take dates with losers like you anymore."

Before Mike could reply to that, Ariel broke in, "Time is short, Don if you don't have enough to keep you occupied, you can always hit those cold calls to the businesses we've targeted."

Don held up both hands in surrender, "I'm on it. Plenty to do." as he stood up and made his way back into his office.

Mike ran his hand through his mop of hair, "Thanks Ari, I think it even gives me an idea on how to pitch our plan better to Eden Seed." With that he was off to his office to revamp his proposal.

Ariel wondered again if he shouldn't have gone with a more experienced crew, but these guys really were sharp, at least when they weren't acting like children, and he would need a certain flexibility of thought if he were to make a go of this.

* * *

Mike arrives a couple of minutes early for the meeting with Raul Ramos. Instead of the usual attractive young female corporate receptionist found in nearly every company's main lobby, Mike finds himself face to face with a seven foot tall, anthropomorphic, plant. "Good morning, Mr. Reynolds. I'm Sprout, Eden Seed Company's spokesplant. I'd like to welcome you to our facilities. Mr. Ramos is running just a couple of minutes late this morning, would you like me to take you on a quick tour of the facilities while you wait?"

Mike blinked twice, "Uh, sure that would be fine."

Sprout turns and starts off toward large double doors in the right hand wall, "Would you like anything to drink before we continue? We'll be passing the employee cafeteria in just a few moments."

"Uh no, I'm fine." Mike manages to say as he moves to catch up to the construct. Sprout's muscles react slower than human leg muscles by about thirty percent, even though they are about twice as strong. However because they are also about thirty percent longer than human legs as well, Mike found himself keeping a comfortable pace.

The tour was brisk and as promised short. He saw labs where, according to Sprout, men were splicing the genes from sea weed into common food crops. Sprout continues with the running commentary, "Once the modifications are made they will breed true across the generations. In fifty years the oceans will provide more cropland than the land provides now." As he finished that statement he pushed through the doors and into a large cavernous room with shallow pools where the floor should be. On those pools was floating a mat of plastic, the plants growing very densely packed on small hydroponic grow beds. "Yes, those pools are simple untreated sea water. If you'll follow me through here Mr. Ramos is ready for you now. I hoped you enjoyed your tour."

The door on the far wall snicked open and Mike stepped through from the hot and

humid grow chamber into a cool and comfortable small board room. Standing behind the long table was an olive skinned man in his middle years. His dark hair just slightly graying at the temples and at the point of his neatly trimmed beard. His casual suit left open at the neck with no tie, in the style that had become popularized on MU and was quickly spreading across the world. His mild Brazilian accent just noticeable, gave his baritone voice a rich warm feel to it. "Ah, Mr. Reynolds. Welcome to the Eden Seed Company. I hope Sprout was an acceptable host on your tour?"

Mike smiled, "He's, um, quite the mascot. It's quite an operation you've got here."

Raul smiled back pleasantly. "Thank you. Sprout represents my indulgence of my grandchildren. My eldest grandson created Sprout as his senior project, also using it to secure his scholarship to MIT."

Mike raised both eyebrows impressed, "Well my compliments to your grandson then."

Raul motions to the chair, "Please have a seat, shall we get started."

"Of course." Mike pulls back the heavy leather and chrome chair and takes his seat across from Raul. "I've recently redone my presentation a bit, due to recent experiences, which have convinced me that this will play even a larger part in Atlantis's future than I had originally suspected. Yes I know, sounds awfully big, after all revamping business finance with completely new models should be ambitious enough for one endeavor, but I think by the time we're done you will agree with me. This changes EVERYTHING. Almost as much as growing food in salt water changes things." Mike raised an eyebrow waiting for acknowledgment.

Raul nodded face very serious. "That is a big boast, but I suppose just like with our plans, it is no longer a boast if you can actually do it." He gave a soft smile.

"Exactly. Obviously since you are here on Atlantis, you understand the concept of cryptocurrencies. Well just as a 'coin' can represent a monetary unit, it can represent anything of value. A share of stock, a share of a crop, a new line of seeds, or even a new acre of floating space to plant new crops." He looked at Raul who nodded thoughtfully. "Anyone wanting to invest simply 'buys' as many coins/shares as he wishes. Then may sell them on the open market afterward. They can be voting or non voting shares. They can represent the value of an entire company, or maybe of just a single project." Raul scratched absently at his beard but Mike could see the wheels turning.

"So you're not just suggesting a stock market, but rather a way to fund an individual project as well?" Raul asked.

"Precisely. Let us work from an example, and to be fair to both of us, this is where the new part comes in. I've a friend who owns a small business here on Atlantis.

She notices business is very busy early in the month but as people spend their UBI, fewer and fewer can afford the services she provides. Every merchant on Atlantis is experiencing this trend, perhaps you've even seen indications of it in your business model?" Raul nods thoughtfully. Mike continues, "Well as you know the Atlantean Sovereign devalues as time goes by so not only are you getting less income in the latter weeks of the month, your Sovereigns themselves have also lost value." Raul nods again. "This means that it makes sense to spend those Sovereigns as fast as you get them, but that doesn't leave a 'rainy day fund' as my grandmother used to call it." Again another thoughtful nod. "So if when people earn their Atlantean Sovereigns, or get their UBI, if they would spend that to buy project coins or company share coins, they could hopefully protect themselves from devaluation and preserve their buying power, for the proverbial rainy day."

"So you've given me a good case as to why people would want to buy the coins from me, but why would I want to accept their Atlantean Sovereigns when they are just going to devalue?" Raul asked, but Mike could see it was mostly a test Raul had already grasped at least the big picture.

"Well because you're going to spend them almost immediately before they devalue. You're going to buy equipment, or supplies, or possibly make payroll." Mike shrugged casually. "Then it will be up to those who you spent them with to find a good place to park their capital that will help them reach their investment goals. Frankly, that is where I come in. We not only create a coin for your project, but we evaluate the business case for that project, and provide hard data and analysis for people to be able to chose from the vast numbers of projects available, where best to place their trust." Mike's face was serious and he drove the last words home for his close.

The silence stretched out for what seemed like an eternity. Finally Raul nodded, "We have a contract to provide two, automated three acre islands for strawberry production to the government of the Bahamas. It is a six million dollar project to be paid out over five years. My mermaid will get yours the details you require. Please get back to me with your proposal by the end of the week. Should this project go well, we will be expanding our offers. Assuming you can do what we just talked about, you weren't boasting earlier."

Raul stood up and extended his hand. "To much future mutual business."

Chapter 10

Captain Marshal began to swear. Midshipman Davies having just read the report

cringed inwardly. On the surface he was calm and professional but inside he wanted to swear right alongside the Captain. This was the last thing Atlantis needed. "Media blackout! Let's try to keep this from getting out of hand at least." Ordered the Captain.

This time the wince did show on Davies face, "Sorry Sir, that is unlikely. The improvised boat they were using was floundering badly and attracted quite a bit of attention. No one official took them ashore but no one wanted to risk not allowing them to land. The boat, and Sir I use that term very loosely, wouldn't have remained afloat another hour." That at least should prevent anyone from bearing the brunt of 'Official Anger'. No one would be happy about twenty one Cuban refugees washing ashore on Atlantis during these tense times, but no one wanted to watch women and children drown either. "Sir, they are being held in quarantine, under guard. They won't be making speeches at least, but it isn't possible that word hasn't already gotten out."

Marshal grunted. "Call Vaughn in. I don't really want to leave the command deck in the middle of all this traffic, but the Council will need to be convened." he shook his head. "Someone tell me they have at least been informed?"

Seaman Alvarez looked up from the communications station, "Um, they know Sir. I've politely informed three members of the Council that you will be giving them your report as soon as Commander Vaughn arrives."

Marshal shook his head. "Well, I suppose what will be will be." he sighed. "Good work Alvarez. You too Davies, but you'll forgive me if I don't thank you for the news." The Captain gave him a wry grin.

Midshipman Davies let out the breath he just realized he had been holding and gave his Captain a grateful return grin. "Duty Sir, you of all people know it isn't always pleasant."

The Captain chuckled harshly. "No son it isn't." Looking up at that moment, he just catches sight of Commander Vaughn making his way through the hatch. "Sorry to pull you back on duty so soon after relieving you, but I assume your Mer filled you in?"

Vaughn shook his head in weary dismay, "Not much they don't know is there Sir? I'm as up to speed as I need to be for this. Sir you are relieved. I have the Conn."

The Captain just nodded. "I stand relieved. The Conn is yours. Take good care of her for me while I sort all this out XO."

"Aye, aye Sir."

* * *

Debbie was staying out of sight on this trip to the Council Chambers. Oh every once in a while Marshal would catch a glimpse of her long dark hair or her tail fin, just to let him know she was available, but sensing his mood she had already learned that there were times to be subtle. Marshal had a moment's grim amusement at that, then wondered if, despite what the programmers said, it was possible to hurt a Mer's feelings. Debbie was just too good to him to ever want to cause her distress. This time he actually snorted out loud, maybe if he'd thought like that of his ex wife she wouldn't be an ex wife. Then again if the real Debbie had ever been half as thoughtful and helpful as the virtual Debbie he probably would have. Those unbid thoughts occupied him right up until he arrived at the Council Chambers. Damn, he thought to himself. Those poor bastards are earning their pay today, he thought as he saw the young Marines who drew council duty haggardly trying to maintain a semblance of order at the doors to the Chamber. "ENOUGH!" he roared. The immediate silence following it was deafening. "Citizens of Atlantis, these men are here to make sure that the business of your city gets done. Show them the proper respect or I, by all that is unholy, will damn well have you swimming back to where ever you came from." The glare from the captain caused all but the youngest and most foolhardy to pull back immediately. Even the foolish didn't stand their ground long as he marched his way up to the doors. The Marines snapped to attention and opened the doors for him. "Thank you men." he said in a kind voice. Then with another glare out over the crowd, and loudly enough to be heard over the hushed whispers around him, "I was serious about making them swim back to the mainland. Any more trouble like before and you call for back up and put them in quarantine right next to the refugees."

The ranking Marine managed not to smile, "Aye, aye Sir." he sounded off in a voice that carried all the way to the back of the small crowd. The quiet didn't quite extend until the doors had shut behind him, but the crowd was just that a crowd, and not a burgeoning mob now. The doors shut behind him and he looked forward toward the small gathering of men, who would be a lot harder to bully into acting civilized.

He raised an eyebrow in surprise as he looked over the assembled Council. Northman was missing. Councilman Florez was already talking informally to the group and making noises about turning over the whole lot to Havana as soon as a Cuban diplomat could be contacted. He was busy reminding everyone that it was the Cubans who backed off the Coat Guard Cutters earlier. Marshal bristled a bit, after all it was his men who stood toe to toe with them for nearly three days, and Florez was making it sound like the Cubans did this out of the goodness of their heart. Still what did one expect, Councilman Florez always was a bit naive when it came to these things.

Captain Marshal had just found an out of the way spot to sit and wait to be called before the Council when the doors boomed open again and in came Councilman Northman looking like he was ready to chew through a battleship and spit it back as bullets. Trailing behind him was one nearly equally angry Elaine Winters, and one worried looking Seaman's Apprentice Adams. "Why are those people locked up like

caged animals!" he boomed. "They brave shark infested waters, in a boat that barely deserves the name, just to get away from that communist hell hole, and we lock them up like animals!?"

Florez looked up at the bellowing Northman and his face went crimson. "Councilman Northman! They are locked away because they violated our laws and stormed on our shore without so much as a by your leave! Not only that but that 'Communist Hell Hole' as you put it, is Cuba. You know the same Cuba who recently when to bat for us against the United States who had their war ships threatening us?"

Northman exploded, and Florez exploded back. The others seemed mostly to back Florez's position which meant Northman went hyperbolic in his rhetoric to even the odds. He shook his head, this was almost as bad as the crowd outside, only here he couldn't just shout them down and chide them for acting like children. It was then that he noticed Adams carefully guiding the reporter over his way. Who ever let her have access to this needed his head examined. Still what was done was done, kicking her out now would look worse. Adams drew near, "Sir." she greeted him. "Elaine, I would like you to meet Captain Marshal. Captain, Elaine Winters." Marshal almost laughed at how quickly Adams beat her retreat now that duty was done.

"Ms. Winters." Marshal greeted her quietly and waited for the normal, anti military bias that reporters usually have to come bearing condescendingly down on him.

Instead, she tried for a smile, but the anger in her eyes still flashed. "Captain. I was hoping to talk to you but I would have rather it been in other circumstances." She said speaking louder than she normally would have in a room like this but if she wanted to be heard she had little choice. Councilman Northman was making full use of the room's acoustics and both his own military experience and maybe just a bit of his Baptist Preacher's Kid upbringing as well. The Captain just raised an eyebrow in agreement over the less than ideal circumstances. "So, you're not going to turn those poor people back over to Cuba are you? You know what they will do to them there?"

Captain Marshal was tired, and very frustrated with this whole scene, and maybe that was why his answer was a bit more honest and a bit more blunt than he would have otherwise given a reporter. "Miss, I understand you're not familiar with these things, but I am an officer of Atlantis, and duty bound to carry out the orders I've been given by the Council. If they order me to make those 'poor people' as you call them SWIM back to Cuba then that is what I will do. I just wish they were actually trying to solve a problem and not just acting like a bunch of children fighting over who's turn it is." His eyes flashed and nostrils flared, and in his own way he gave Northman's show of anger a run for it's money, Elaine thought it was all the scarier for the quiet near calm tone it was said in.

Elaine wanted to be angry with him for his 'Just following orders.' approach but

something he said struck her. "What do you mean, you wish they were trying to solve the problem? Either the people get to stay or they have to go and Cuba kills them, what else is there?"

Captain Marshal, took a deep breath. "Well for now, they have been arrested for coming here illegally, which means they are entitled to a hearing and a trial. Those things take time." He released the rest of his deep breath, then continued. "Once their trial is up, we could be on the other side of the ocean. I wonder if Cuba would be so interested in picking them up in the eastern Atlantic? Not to mention it gives them time to find opportunities for asylum." He shrugged, "Buy time, get our full citizenry on board, then decide if we want to tangle with Cuba or not."

Elaine's eyes went wide, "So that's why those children are cuffed?"

Marshal gave a small grin, "Well it's procedure but yes it is procedure because then everyone gets treated the same and everyone gets their day in court. They are in QUARANTINE rather than the BRIG because there are plenty of women and children with them and sick people are given better accommodations on Atlantis than criminal miscreants."

Elaine started to dash off but stopped herself and came back, "Thank you Captain. I think I need to go speak with Councilman Northman right now."

Marshal almost chuckled as he watched her nearly trip over Adams in her haste to get to Northman. Northman was comical as well, watching him move from righteous indignation through confusion, and finally to dumb struck realization, would have sent Marshal in to gales of laughter, had the circumstances been different. He just shook his head, Florez was a slimy, spineless, self server, but Northman was a decent guy, once you got him to put his emotions in check and listen. By the looks of it Elaine had him listening at last. Northman looked over and met Marshal's eyes and the look of relief on his face was tangible. Florez was still going on, and on, and on, about staying in the good graces of the Cubans and didn't notice the shift in Northman's attitude. So he was taken completely aback when Northman moved to call the Council Meeting to Order and start interviewing witnesses.

This was Marshal's cue. Northman, now cued in, could ask him the right leading questions to get the rough plan out there. It was one of Florez's rivals in the spineless club who actually proposed that a decision be put off pending the trial. Marshal let out a long sigh, chaos averted once again. He didn't even wait for the meeting to end. Once his part was over, he headed right back to the Command Deck. After all Commander Vaughn deserved his sleep rotation too.

Chapter 11

Alan Northman sat on the overstuffed leather couch in his small darkened office, glass of scotch in one hand, watching C Span on the wall screen. Northman, he thought to himself, (even in his internal dialog, that nagging voice in the back of his mind sounded exactly like Drill Instructor Hartman from his earliest days in uniform) you were a complete ass this morning, but even on your worst day you couldn't manage to top this ass hat. He grimaced as the image of Representative Flanders was going through a barely coherent tirade, calling for the sealing of America's borders. No not from immigration but from emigration. Never had the United States of America had an emigration problem. From his earliest boyhood he could remember everyone saying, "If you don't like it leave, but where are you going to go that is any better?" Now suddenly there was an answer to that challenge. All of a sudden being the most gilded of cages, wasn't enough anymore. The 'Honorable Gentleman from Vermont', Northman almost spat with distaste even at the thought, really planned to put up an iron curtain style emigration system in America rather than just try to fix the problems. Silently he shook his head, he knew what it was like in the heart of the swamp. After two terms in that 'august body' known as the US House of Representatives he could attest to the clinging, slimy, corruption that seeks to poison any man, especially seeking out those with the most noble of intentions. Atlantis was no boys Choir but even on his worst day Alvarez Florez was only vain, petty, and cowardly. Northman snorted, made him almost virtuous when compared to the denizens of Sodom on the Potomac.

He was still brooding, and watching Flanders make a complete fool of himself when Poseidon piped up. "Sir, Captain Marshal is on his way. Requests to meet with you. Says he has an update."

Northman sighed. Ah well better to make amends now, than to put it off any longer. "Send him right in, when he gets here."

Northman stands, and downs the last of the scotch in his glass. He starts to drop the glass back in the side board but then thinks better of it. Be a good host, offer a drink to Andrew. Besides, it'll make the apology for this morning slide out a bit smoother. Damn, but he hated being in the wrong. The door swished open and in came one Captain Andrew Marshal, stiff and formal. "Hello Andrew, I was just pouring myself a second scotch, want one?"

Seeing C Span on the view screen and Congressman Flanders on it, Captain Marshal snorted, "No wonder you're needing a drink if you have to watch that blowhard...Sir"

Northman snorted, and just poured two glasses. "You never had to work with him. Please have a seat Andy, and before we start, let me apologize for my behavior this

morning. I should have spoken to you before I made assumptions."

Marshal got a wicked grin, he knew how hard that had been to say, still he couldn't help himself, "Yes sir you should have." He held up his hand as he saw the storm clouds gathering behind Northman's eyes. "Sorry, apology accepted, and without reservations. I understand what you saw and who you thought was making that call. Still I know from personal experience how difficult it is to make the kind of apology you just did. I couldn't resist rubbing some salt in the wound." With a shrug and a bigger grin, "I'm certain before this is all over, you'll be able to return the favor at some point."

Northman barked a laugh. "OK, so if you're done roasting me for the moment, what's the update?"

Captain Marshal nodded, "Well nothing is set in stone yet, but I think we can safely wash our hands of the Refugees, without doing them any real harm." Marshal looked up to be certain he wouldn't get challenged on this, but Northman just seemed calm and interested. Huh, must have burned out all his anger this morning. "I sent in a medical team, and they have been listed as dehydrated, and suffering from exposure. That should buy us about two weeks before we start scheduling their trials. I spoke with Councilman Florez, and he agrees, we can simply convict them of trespass and order them put off the island." Northman started to say something but bit it back, Marshal smiled knowingly.

"Don't worry. I've spoken to Ariel Rosen. It seems, that one very busy Ms. Winters, had already called his uncle David over on MU." Northman smirked. That girl was always putting her nose in places, it wasn't any of her business to put it in, but what do you expect from a reporter. Ah well, at least it was a very cute little nose. This time at least, the Captain seems to think it's done some good.

Marshal continued, "The Rosen's made some calls to the Cuban expat community in the US. Seems that David Rosen has established a micro-funding account, and sold shares for a new boat to them, using some new type of smart contract. Seems there is a firm that is leasing Shultzinger's printing technology here on Atlantis. They will be printing up their new ride."

The Captain shook his head, "Any way, all of the details kinda went over my head, but basically it boils down to the charities will buy the refugees a nice modern fishing boat, printed out by our local shipyards. Then the refugees make payments back to the 'coin' holders. If they pay it off, then they keep the boat free and clear, and the charities get the money back, and treat the interest on the loan as a donation. If they don't get paid back, it's written off as giving the charity. Kind of a new take on it, but I thought it sounded like a cool way to give hand ups rather than hand outs."

Northman grunted, "Sounds really good, much better than a hand out, but is it even legal for them to do that in the US? Sounds like it would run afoul of a dozen

different regulations."

Marshal grinned, "That's why it is all the financial side is being run through MU. I guess David Rosen already had something like this set up and Ariel Rosen is going to be getting something similar set up here, he just hasn't had time to do so yet. Either way, the refugees are going to be put back off our island, but in a nice new boat. I even heard one of the guys was a fisherman before they left, so maybe he can ply the same trade in the Med, and pay off their loan and apply for immigrant status somewhere. Boat will be registered in Denmark, so even though the people have no legal status they at least won't be mistaken for pirates."

Northman heaved a deep sigh, "Well sounds like we dodged that bullet. Don't slap Cuba in the face after their assistance earlier, and don't have to sell our soul to stay on their good side."

Marshal took a first drink of the scotch Northman had poured him, "Ooh, you get the good stuff." Marshal says admiringly.

Northman chuckled a bit, "RHIP Andrew, you know how that works."

Marshal just nodded amused. The two men sat quietly watching the hearings on C Span continue to deteriorate. "Do you think they'll really try to do this?" Marshal finally asked.

Northman just shrugged, "I don't think so, but then I never thought they would pull that stunt with the patent office either. Oh news on that front. I have word from MU that Michael has made arrangements for an expanded construction facility, in Bangkok. According to what I'm hearing filter in, the new production facilities should allow for two large islands to be built at the same time, as well as couple dozen of the smaller defensive islands, that can be produced about every six months."

Marshal whistled. "That wasn't what they hoped to accomplish when the US put the squeeze on Mexico."

Northman grinned wickedly, "Nope. Lot of men in the world that I would cross without a second thought, but that Michael Shultzinger isn't one of them." He chuckled a bit more. "You've got the clearance for this but it goes no further," he waited to see Marshal nod, and the look on his face was intense, "Word is that the Halvarson Effect has been successfully weaponized, and it was a very controlled demonstration that put the steel in Thailand's spine." Northman grinned wolfishly, "Yeah I really want to hear the full story behind that sometime." Marshall just snorted, imagining how it must have gone over with the observers. Northman continued, "Still, seems that it was all the confidence they needed, to offer Shultziner work space, without the fear of being bullied by either the US, or over there, more likely China."

Marshal shook his head, "That's a dangerous game to play, still I suppose there is not much choice at this point. When the other side is willing to use nukes even covertly..." again he just shook his head and looked concerned.

Northman downed the last of his Scotch. "Yup, interesting times for sure."

Chapter 12

Elaine woke up slowly. Yeah it was a weekday and she was supposed to be on a story but it just felt so good to sleep in. Bob had tried to waken her twice already but the bed was really comfortable and the last few days had been crazy. Bob's voice breaks the silence again, "Elaine, I was contacted by Ariel Rosen. I tentatively accepted a meeting for you at 10:00hrs. That is only an hour away. Should I reschedule?"

Elaine groaned, Rosen is one of those people you don't screw up meetings with or you may not get another. "No Bob. Start the shower, hot" Rolling out of the bed she feels her knees hit the soft carpet, and almost lays back down on the floor. Forcing herself to her feet she heads off to the shower. She could hear the music from the other room over the sound of the shower. Man these feel great, got to figure out how to get them back home. The warm water just mists out of the ceiling and the soft warm lotion feel of the suds just makes the muscles loosen up. Still can't stay in here all day or I'll blow the Rosen interview she thinks to herself as she forces her way out of the warm water and out onto the soft bath mat. The warm air kicks up and the moisture seems to just fall away from her, not even a full minute under the blower and even her thick long hair is nearly dry. Yeah this is tech I really need at home she thinks again as she stumbles into the bedroom. I just have to wake up, she thinks as she's pulling the clothes out of the printer.

As she's getting dressed, she hears Bob's voice coming from the other room, "Permission to contact medical?"

Buttoning the last two buttons as she stumbles into the kitchen area, "You need permission? Last time Ulli just did it."

Bob appeared on the vid wall, "I can alter my settings to allow me to do so as well if you choose."

She shook her head, "No, I think I like having the choice. Why do you want to contact medical?"

Bob's face showed concern, "Your readings are off this morning. I want to be certain it isn't anything serious. Before I can release your file to medical, I need your authorization."

"I'm just tired, I don't really need to have you contact a doctor." Elaine grumbled as she pulled a breakfast of toast and coffee from the release tray. "I'll be better after I've had my coffee."

Bob didn't say anything, but the concerned look never left his face.

"So Ariel Rosen contacted me? I was planning to try for an interview with him before I left but I expected I'd have to try to talk him into it." she said to no one in particular. Bob not being able to parse a question, just remained silent. She really did miss Ulli, though she had to admit Bob was easier on the eyes. Elaine, she scolded herself, quit acting like a brainless school girl and get your game face on. She snorted at the mental image that brought to mind and finished off the last of her coffee and headed for the door.

* * *

Elaine found herself a bit out of breath just for the short walk over to Rosen's offices. She was in for a bigger shock as she opened the door expecting to see a receptionist and instead was greeted by a tidy young man in casual dress who just smiled and put his hand out, "Ms. Winters, good to meet you."

Elaine felt a little over dressed for the meeting and was a bit taken aback by how young the man appeared. "Ah, I'm here to meet with Ariel Rosen?" she said almost as a question. She was pretty sure she was in the right place, but this really wasn't what she had expected. The office didn't really look like a bank, or really much like an office at all. It resembled an odd cross between a sports bar, and an university library. There were screens up all around the central "bar" area that were flashing numbers, she assumed they were prices but it could just as easily have been fantasy football stats.

The young man grinned from ear to ear at her hesitation, "I am Ariel Rosen." he said in a crisp British accent. "Normally I'd invite you in to my office, but you are just a couple of minutes early and my employee is running just a couple of minutes late, so there is no one else here to watch the shop at the moment. Please have a seat, would you care for something to drink before we get started?"

Elaine felt her face flush, but still this young man could just as easily be a bartender by his appearance and demeanor. He gave off nothing of the cultured, casual arrogance, or stuffiness of David Rosen. "I'm fine thank you. Nice to meet you. I just was expecting..." she hesitated not sure how to continue without being insulting.

Ariel grinned at her, looking much more like Dennis the Menace than a financial tycoon, "Someone older? Maybe someone a little stodgier?" Again that grin just didn't go away.

Elaine heard Tattianna's voice in the back of her mind, 'He wasn't Michael Shultzinger bazillionair back then, he was just a man, granted with a somewhat successful business' too bad this Rosen just really wasn't her type.

He waved his hand as if to dismiss it all. "Don't feel bad, so does everyone else. The thing is, this isn't your grandfathers bank, nor even your older brother's" he winked conspiratorially at her. "What we're building here is financial services that actually serve the needs of tomorrow's generation. Sure you wouldn't like an espresso? I'm going to have one?"

She couldn't help it she giggled as much at his teasing tone as the absolute incongruity of the situation. "Oh ok, you talked me in to it." She smiled broadly at him.

Ariel had to busy himself making that espresso, that smile of hers almost caused him to start stammering. Now he sees why Uncle David was so fond of her, he thought to himself. The machine made enough noise that conversation became impossible for a few seconds. He turned and sat her double shot espresso on the bar in front of her while he quickly drained his. "We do things a little differently here. I try to demystify the whole investment process." he shrugged. "I'm trying to make the format a little less intimidating. If taking care of your money is no harder than, say selecting a music play list, or choosing what restaurant you want to go to..." he trailed off and smiled, "Well I think more people will pay better attention to it."

Elaine raised an eyebrow, "But aren't the consequences a bit more dire?"

Ariel nodded, "Sure, but traditionally what happens is that everyone thinks it is too complicated. That they CAN'T understand it, so they do nothing." He sighed, "That is even more dire." He thought for a second, "Or they pay someone else to manage their money, and don't really know what that person is doing. That is a scary level of trust to put in someone you don't really know that well."

Elaine took a sip of her espresso. Ariel made a bit of a face. "What?" she asked him.

He smiled, "Oh we just got talking and let it sit too long. I should make you a fresh one."

Elaine looked at him a little funny, "It's only been a few seconds it's fine."

Again with the shrug, "Up to you. They just really taste so much better if you can drink them before the froth settles. Maybe for your next one then, then you've got something to compare."

Elaine chuckled, "I'd not be able to sleep for a week. Back to what you said about trusting a professional investor, isn't it better to trust someone who knows what he's doing rather than guessing for yourself?"

Ariel put his cup in the sink and wiped down the counter with his towel, "It all is a

bit of guess work. The professional investor understands the jargon, he can read the secret code that the investment community uses. That secret code is there, at least in part, because it is a way to be very specific about aspects of the investment, but also in large part to make it a place few will take the time to learn about. The more confusing they make it the fewer people that intrude on their little club." Elaine made a face when he said this and it he couldn't help but laugh, "No, I'm serious. Haven't you ever had someone say something in very flowery or complicated language and then when they explained to you what they just said, you asked 'well why didn't you just say so in the first place?' I mean you've been on a boat and everyone is talking port and starboard instead of left and right?"

Elaine couldn't help but grin right along with him, "Ok but there is a reason for it. I had someone explain it one time, and it sort of made sense."

Ariel nodded, "Yes, there usually is a reason, but you pile all of those terms used for express clarity on top of each other and you end up with 'the secret code', and clarity goes out the window." He casually tosses the bar towel over one shoulder, "We are trying to bring back clarity with less jargon. Yes the legal contracts will have to have these terms because they each mean something, but the extracts and perspectives that most people base their investment decisions on don't need to have the jargon in them. If they are investing a large sum, then they can hire someone who speaks investment lawyer to look it all over." He shakes his head, "On Atlantis most people will be investing small sums of money on a short term basis. As long as the risks are accurately disclosed, and the holdings are properly diversified, few will ever need that in depth of an investigation. Certainly not for daily use, to keep your money from devaluing. Besides standardization of block chain 'smart contracts' should mean that knowing what risks you are taking should be easier."

Before she could ask more about that the door flew open and a dark haired man swung in nearly at a run, "Sorry Ari, just couldn't get away. Good news is two more tokens to be offered by the end of the week..." He ground to a halt as he saw Elaine sitting there. "Oh sorry didn't mean to interrupt."

Ariel laughed, it was an uncomplicated, relaxed laugh as if he didn't have a care in the world, rather than showing the immense amount of strain he must be under. "Don, glad you're here. As usual Mike will be late to his own funeral. I'm supposed to be doing this interview but no one was here to watch the bar."

Don nodded, "Oh no problem. I'll take care of it until Mike gets back in. A little good piece of news though, I think we want to bump the risk level from 'C' to 'B' on the Eden Seed project. They just got their first sprouts from the new strawberry transplants."

Ariel tossed him the bar towel, "We'll talk about it after I'm done here. Hold down the fort, we're going back to the employee lounge." He came around the bar and extended his hand to Elaine. Who took it, and then soon as she stood up got dizzy

and would have fallen had Ariel not had good reflexes.

The room swam just a little bit and she could feel cramping in her legs as everything came back in to focus. Ariel Rosen was supporting her and leading her toward a chair. This was just so embarrassing, I'll be fine she thought even as things got just a little fuzzy around the edges. She could make out Ariel's concerned face, his lips were moving but she couldn't really make out what he was saying. Finally it understanding dawned, "I'm ok. I just got a little light headed. Probably just jet lag." She said trying to get control over her body again.

Bob was there now, swimming in wide circles around her. "Please let me contact medical. If you collapse again, the emergency over rides will kick in, please let me check with them now."

Ariel was kneeling next to her chair a concerned look on his face. "I'm assuming your Mer has already contacted medical? What should we do?"

Elaine shook her head to clear the cobwebs, "I don't need a doctor. I'll be fine."

Ariel's concerned look was replaced by a stubborn irritation. "Look just authorize the Mer to contact medical. It won't take but a second and we'll make sure you're alright. I'll end the interview right now, rather than risk your health."

Anger flooded Elaine's mind, he'll end the interview, he asked for this interview damn him. Then common sense kicked in, this wasn't like a trip to the emergency room back in the States. Ariel was right, Bob could send over information to the robodoc, and have an answer back in a minute and probably cost less than a cup of coffee. "Ok Bob, lets see what the Doc has to say." She said out loud so Ariel could hear and quit giving her that look.

It wasn't even ten seconds, Bob says, "Anemia. Vitamin B and Iron."

Elaine laughed, "See no big deal, just a bit anemic."

Ariel nodded, "Got just the thing. Feeling up to a short walk back to the employee lounge?"

* * *

The employee lounge looked even more out of place in a banking institution than the lobby area. There were low tables all around and over sized suede bean bags

around them. Ariel helped her lower herself on to one and she was amazed again at how comfortable it felt. These weren't the little vinyl and Styrofoam staples of every college dorm room. These were filled with some kind of memory gel that seemed to be heated. Elaine couldn't help it as tired as she was it just made her think of taking a nap, espresso or no espresso.

Ariel came back from the food counter with a small coffee cup filled with what looked like chicken soup. Elaine smiled when she saw it. "It's Jewish penicillin, matzoball soup." He smiled at her. "Or actually it's the robodoc's remedy hidden in matzoball soup. Bottoms up and by the time we're done talking you'll probably be feeling a lot better. While you're doing that I'm going to go get myself something as well." With that he turned back toward the little kitchen area. Elaine had to admit it was the best tasting medicine she had had in a while.

Ariel suddenly appeared again, but he had a hookah in his hand. Elaine was surprised but then she supposed nothing should surprise her after seeing the lobby to this place. He settled in, opened one plastic bag and pulled out a hose he attached to the base. Then set the other in front of Elaine still in it's bag. He carefully loaded the bowl and put the top on it. Then twisted the top dial, and Elaine was surprised to find it was an electric lighter of sorts, that just applied fresh spark every time he drew on the hose. She wasn't sure what she expected, smoking in the US was generally so stigmatized now, but this gave off a sweet rose like aroma, as he drew in a full breath, and blew out a giant smoke ring. "I absolutely love these things." He grinned at her. "Finish your soup, then you can join me with the second hose if you like." He sat casually back in the big form fitting bag and took another big draw on his hose.

Elaine finished her soup as ordered, and only rankled a little bit that it was an order, even if it was for her own good. "So Mike said something about risk grades or something?"

Ariel smiled and nodded, "Don, yeah Don was talking about lowering our risk report on a company that passed an important benchmark in production. For obvious reasons I don't want to discuss a specific customer, but in general we give a risk rating, sort of think of it like a credit score. Where a credit score tells a bank if you are a good risk or a bad one, this tells our investors if a company is a good risk or a bad one. Things like track record, likelihood of success of a project, funding goals reached, all can change a risk rating."

"So people buy stock in a company based upon your ratings?" Elaine asked.

Ariel shrugged, "Sort of. This is a little different than what you think of as buying stock. They aren't always buying ownership of a company, but in this case partial ownership of a project. Company X gets an order to make ten thousand widgets, for example. Well they've got to raise money to buy the raw materials. Often this would mean taking out an operating loan, and paying a bank interest. In our case, they are going to have us make them a 'coin' using the block chain technology.

They are then going to sell these coins. When the widgets are all sold the company agrees to buy back the coins at say one percent over the offering price. People who bought the coins can then sell them back for a profit. Or trade them off, if they need the funds back sooner than the maturity time. The value of the coins changes based upon the risk rating as well as the promised pay out. So in the case where we think, maybe we can give the company a better risk rating, we'll make it easier for them to sell off any remaining shares they have but also make it a little better for anyone who bought the shares to be able to resell them if they need to go back into cash. Helps them become more liquid."

Elaine shook her head, "Sounds complicated."

Ariel smiled, "Oh it can get there, but few really are. So you tell your Mer, 'I want ready cash invested in only 'B' rated offers, and only for companies who are paying at least one percent. Private fund raising without the public risk, and all easy enough everyone can play" He blows more smoke rings, "Also, if you buy small amounts of many projects, you offset the chance that one or the other won't pay up. Or if you really want to gamble that a new idea will pay off maybe you have your Mer only choose, high paying new companies. Yeah you'll lose most of the money you put into a scam like that, but the one or two that pay off can make you a fortune."

Elaine smirked, "Seems interesting, but isn't this kind of thing already illegal elsewhere?"

"Oh yeah, but only for the 'poor'. See an 'accredited investor' can invest in anything. It's only illegal for the poor to do. Big Brother will protect you, from yourself." He snorts derisively, "Even if it means preventing you from having the opportunity to buy the next Apple Computers, or Microsoft, or any other company that started out as a dream in someone's garage. Not to mention depriving the world of what those companies could make if they could only get the funding." He actually looked angry, "Oh there were a few good tries at alternative financing with companies like Kickstarter, and the like, but even there the opportunity to invest in a meaningful way was limited. It leaves companies vulnerable to so called 'angel investors', who are borderline extortionists in what they demand in exchange for their help, and it leaves the average person shut out of the ability to invest in his society at a level he can afford." He shook his head to clear away the edge that was creeping into his tone, took a long draw on the hookah hose, then continued. "Yes it has been made illegal many places, and then they claim to be capitalists." He sat brooding for a moment and then laughs, "Uncle David always says that people water down a free market with tons of socialist regulations, until it is no longer capitalism. Then when it fails blame, capitalism for it. Then, irony of ironies, try to implement the same socialist ideas that caused the problem." He took on a serious look, "Have you ever noticed that anytime someone offers an, 'alternative economic' idea, it is just some rehash of socialism? Well if we can keep that impulse at bay for a while out here in the independent city states, maybe we can develop some functioning alternatives that aren't just more of the same failed

systems."

Elaine was watching him closely, he'd finally gotten serious and had passion when he spoke. It wasn't often that you could get people to this level of honesty but when you did, you got to see the real person. Ariel Rosen might put off the spoiled frat boy vibe, and he may lack his uncle's polish, but he was no less an idealistic revolutionary. It would sure be interesting to find out what he could make of it. The Rosen family had chosen well for this unconventional post. "So what's the answer?" She asked softly.

Ariel shrugged aggressively and then smirked a bit embarrassed at himself for letting so much slip a moment ago, "Freedom. Freedom is always the answer. The freedom to try. The freedom to fail. The freedom to succeed and not be punished for it." He smiled a little weakly, "Before MU, tell me where you could have found that?" He raised an eyebrow and looked at her. Elaine just nodded. "MU is trying it one way, Atlantis, we are trying the same thing a slightly different way. Rumor has it the Avalon had a completely different plan, if they'll ever find a place to get it built now. Nothing can compete with freedom, which is why you'll always see powerful forces trying to regulate it away, or criminalize it, or simply squashing it in the cradle. What they won't do is just ignore it, because the one thing history shows, is when freedom is allowed to flourish, very little can compete with it."

Elaine couldn't help but reflect on that. America was the land of the free and home of the brave, until it wasn't. He was right, you could do very little without obtaining government permission in one form or the other in America anymore. It had been that way all of her life, and truth told, most of her parents' lives. She really didn't think about it as stifled freedom, anymore than a fish thinks about water stifling its choices. Until her time on MU and now here on Atlantis, she really didn't know what freedom looked like. To be honest she probably still doesn't but she was sure of one thing, the 'old world' of land-based nation states wasn't likely to survive alongside the new free island nations. She really wanted to talk to an historian. Someone who could take the long view. Maybe she should try to get some more of Mr. Northman's time.

The meeting took a lighter tone. Ariel had let too much show in his passion and had now firmly strapped back down the frat boy image. Still it was enjoyable. She couldn't help but think he might be on to something. If managing your money was 'fun' like a hobby or playing a game, maybe more people would be inclined to do it and be better off for it. She knew one thing, robodoc spiked matzo ball soup, sure had her feeling better and according to Bob, all for about a dollar seventy five US, you couldn't even get an espresso for that back home.

Chapter 13

Northman Lunch Date

When Bob told her that Mr. Northman had agreed to meet with her this afternoon over lunch she was ecstatic. Northman really was an old school history buff. Maybe that was because he always seemed to be in the middle of it. First as a soldier, then a politician, he just always seemed to be where events were happening. Elaine got dressed a little more casually than she normally would for such an interview, Bob had said Mr. Northman was expecting a casual lunch companion. As Bob put it, "Ol' Poseidon said he would schedule it if you promised to leave the reporter back at the hotel." Elaine giggled, she could hear Northman telling his mer that almost in those exact words. So with one last look around to be certain she wasn't forgetting anything important, she slipped out the door, and allowed Bob to swim ahead leading her through the twisting corridors and columned galleries until at last they popped out top side in what had to have been a wonderfully shady spot before all the trees died. Even so, it wasn't too bad on this warm sunny day because there was a cool breeze coming in off the water. There were literally hundreds of small boats coming and going around the island, seems that onboarding procedures were progressing nicely. She was also just as sure it only looked like that from this safe distance and down on the docks was pure chaos. Finally Bob led her around a small 'rock' outcropping to a little nook much like she had shared on MU with Marcus. She smiled at the memory and wondered how he was doing. Her thoughts were abruptly interrupted by the smell of a charcoal grill.

Northman looked up and grinned, "Ah company. How do you like your steak?"

Alan Northman was one of those people who just looked right behind a grill. Elaine smiled back, "Steaks? What's the occasion?"

Northman laughed and there shown a twinkle in his eye, "Young lady, when you get my age, every day above ground is an occasion. Besides a good steak, and a cold beer, are an occasion all their own." He grinned and waved the tongs at her, "And you missy, didn't answer the question." Northman tried to give her a stern look but couldn't help but grin. Damn it he thought to himself seeing her there shining with youth and beauty, it really is too bad I've gotten old.

Elaine shook her head and smiled, "Medium."

"Blasphemy! Burn a good steak!" he grinned impishly. "How about we go for medium rare, these really are the good ones."

Elaine chuckled, "Ok, I'll try it but I really don't want it bloody."

Northman snorted. Opened the cooler and fished out a bag with three steaks in it. He muttered something to himself about putting his on in a few minutes, and

smiled as the meat juices sizzled on the hot grill. "Be ready in just a couple of minutes." he said, and handed her a bottle of beer.

Elaine wrinkled her nose just a bit, "Mine will take more than that I think."

Northman shook his head, "Young lady, who is in charge of this here grill?" Now the stern look lasted a couple of seconds longer than before. "The steaks are already cooked to rare." he pointed toward the cooler. "Sous vide. Technically we could eat them just as they are now. I've got mine done as much as I like it already. The grill is just for flavor and to burn yours a bit." he winked.

"Oh a connoisseur? I am truly impressed." She smiled, and started to twist off the bottle cap and realized it was an actual wired in ceramic stopper. She fumbles for a second with the unfamiliar catch and then takes a swig. There is an explosion in her mouth. "Oh wow! This isn't beer, this is amazing."

Northman grinned from ear to ear, "Yeah, new micro-brewery opened up last week. They use some special barley and some exotic specially modified yeast. I've always loved real beer, but this is better than anything I've gotten in Germany or Ireland." He took a second to look at her steak and flipped it over. "Have a seat. We'll be ready to eat soon." He pulled a small flask from his hip pocket and poured just a small amount on the hot coals and a cloud of sweet smelling steam arose. Then he went back to the bag and tossed on two more steaks. "Fresh bread in the bag there and some garlic butter with it, help yourself."

Elaine couldn't help but smile, he really had put together a fantastic meal. Her stomach grumbled just a bit as the smell of the grilling meat reached her nose. "So I was hoping I could ask you a couple of questions?" she started.

"Damn it! I could have sworn I told Poseidon to make sure you left that reporter back at the hotel." Northman grumbled but you could tell his heart just wasn't in it.

Elaine giggled. "I got the message. This isn't so much for a story. I just really need someone with more knowledge of history than I have, to help put some things in perspective."

Northman's eyebrow rose, and he gave her a mock suspicious look. "Hrmm... Well I suppose a couple of friends talking about history can't be a bad way to spend a fine meal." His tone drops to normal with none of the teasing severity of before, "I do mean it though. Nothing gets quoted, or attributed back to me that is said here. You want to use some insight, you claim it. I don't want to be on my guard the whole time and have to pick my words carefully. I just want to have a great steak with a pretty lady young enough to be my daughter and enjoy an old widower's fantasy of what it might have been like if I were a younger man." He winked and smiled.

Elaine got all serious as well. "Nothing you tell me will get out attributed to you. I

really just need to understand things better." Then with an impish grin of her own, "I seek the wisdom of my elders"

Northman howled a long full belly laugh. "Oh you know just how to kill an old man's fantasy." He pulled the steaks off. Two on his plate and one on hers. "Deal. One sec and I'll grab the potatoes" and with that dipped into the water for another bag with two precooked baked potatoes that had been kept warm and dry waiting for the steaks to be done. "Meat and potatoes, fresh bread, amazing beer, a beautiful young woman who wants to talk history with me.... This could be a really nice afternoon."

* * *

They paused while Northman said grace silently. The meal really was amazing. The steak was a little rarer than she would normally have asked for but it was very tender and juicy though she tried not to think about the color. Northman's steaks looked like a good vet could get them back up and mooing. She shivered slightly and broke the silence. "My compliments to the chef."

"Sorry to burn yours, but you asked for it." Northman said with a teasing smile.

Elaine just shook her head. Men, all of them thought they knew everything about everything, but at least with Northman, he'd been there and done that to the point you couldn't discount his knowledge and experience. "So I was talking to Ariel Rosen yesterday..."

Northman grinned, "Ah so my competition has a name! Blast him for a young fool!"

Elaine giggled again, "You're incorrigible! Besides if it was like that, his Uncle David is more attractive, once you get him to stop talking down to you that is."

Northman winced, "Tried that with you I take it?"

Elaine smiles blandly, "Once." She let the pause linger as Northman's chuckling died down. "No, I'm serious. I was talking to Rosen, and made some comments that got me to thinking." she stopped and looked up at him and grinned. "It hurt so I stopped, and came to you instead." Northman's turn to just smile and shake his head. "He's talking about freedom winning out whenever it is tried. He's talking about it from an economic perspective but I think it applies deeper, but my historic perspective is limited. Do you think man was MEANT to be free?"

Allen Northman just looked at the young woman across from him, and the simple honest straightforward question left him feeling every one of his sixty two years on

this earth. "That's a deep question." he said with total sincerity. "Let me ask you one in return." Elaine nodded. "Are you a religious person?"

Now it was Elaine's turn to feel a bit stunned. This was not the question she had expected. "I don't know. I believe in right and wrong, if that's what you mean. I don't know that I really believe in a religion as such." Oh here it comes now the bible thumping begins.

Northman just nodded, "I asked because that question is as much a religious one as a political one. America's founding fathers, despite the revisionist history that is taught now, thought the questions tied together too. Freedom of religion was one of the primary freedoms they sought. I'm going to do something a good Baptist should never be caught doing," he grinned at her. "I'm going to quote the Pope." he winked and continued 'Freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.' So said Pope John Paul II. The founders said much the same thing by saying, 'What is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself." He took this opportunity to take another bite of the steak and closed his eyes savoring the flavor. After a moment, "So you see, freedom in and of itself is just chaos. Freedom, guided by a just moral code, is what all good men strive for. The freedom to do that which is right and just. It is what separates us from the tyranny of anarchy which is just tyranny of whoever is strongest at the moment." He paused to take a long pull on his beer.

Elaine was feeling her brain melt. Conditional freedom seemed a contradiction, but at the same time, she had been living with that contradiction her whole life in America. "So you're only free to do what a religion or a society says?"

Northman grinned, "No, down that path lies the greatest evils man has ever done to other men. There lies pogroms, and inquisitions, and thought police, and Political Correctness," he grinned mischievously and then the grin faded as a memory clouded his eyes, "and jihad." He shook his head, "I have to be free to do what I think is right, so long as it doesn't get in the way of your right, and vice versa. I like to call it the right to be wrong." He finished off that bottle with a final swig, and fished around for a new bottle. "See where the liberal left got it wrong, they wanted . to do 'I'm ok, you're ok.' but maybe I'm not or you're not." He shrugged as he opened the new bottle. "My point is, it is your God given RIGHT to be wrong. To make the wrong choice, as long as you don't take away anyone's right to make the right choice. See God gave all of us free will. Who are we to take away a gift from God?" He looked meaningfully at her. "That doesn't make what you want to do, or believe, right. Only that you have the right to do it or believe it. I don't have to respect what you do, only your right to do so, so long as you return the same favor to me."

"OK, I can see that, still feels a little judgmental, but I can see the difference. Though how does it change for those who don't believe in a god?" Elaine asked.

Northman smiled confidently and leaned back, "Laws of gravity don't change just because you don't believe in them." He laughed when Elaine made a face at him. "Seriously. Let's say, just for the sake of argument, that there is no God." He caught her eye. "Does that make it any more right for one man to force another to do something he doesn't want to do just because he has the power to force him?"

"Of course not, but if you start talking all this God stuff, people are going to not believe it. This is the twenty first century, we have science now. Wasn't religion just man's way of explaining what he couldn't understand before he had the tools to understand?" Elaine said then stopped realizing what she had just said.

Northman shook his head sadly, "Yeah, God isn't too popular with the younger set. Part of that is how they've been taught, and part of it, is due to people trying to use religion as a justification for taking away people's right to be wrong. Even at the time of the founding of America they had to use, "Nature's God", and "Natural Law", as terms to make it not a religious doctrine. Religion and science need never be at odds." he shrugged. "When both are trying to understand truth, then truth should be enough for either. I tend to think when real science, not politicized science, finds something that seems to contradict God, we just need to ask ourselves if we really understood what God was saying? Or did we project on to Him what we wanted to believe? Conversely are we perverting science, and projecting, on to the results our own biases, just because we don't want to believe in God?" He took a long pull from the fresh bottle. "All these things must surely come to pass," he shook his head. "See if you were a religious person, you would understand that Ol' Nick will have his day. One day he will convince the majority of the world to abandon what is right, and to do what seems right in their own eyes. Freedom demands that we have the freedom to allow ourselves to be deceived and many will be."

"You know that I appreciate you being honest with me about all of this, but I got to tell you, you're starting to sound like that loony radio preacher, Rev. Ned." Elaine said.

Northman barked a laugh, "I suppose to secular eyes we must look similar." he rubbed his hands over his face. "Ned, well Ned is an example of mixing just enough of the truth in among your guesses and lies, to really sully the truth. Ned is like the neighbor kid who tracks mud on your clean floors. Bad enough when your own kid does it, but at least he's YOUR kid and belongs in the home. Ned doesn't really belong, but he comes in dragging his filth in with him."

Elaine giggled at the mental picture, "Ok, I understand how that is. I can't help but think we've gotten off the subject though..."

Northman nodded, "Not really, but I see you're going to want a different

explanation. Fortunately for you that exists too." He smiled. "If everyone is free to do what they want, so long as they don't hurt anyone else. Then I can live like I want, and you don't have to, nor are you harmed because I do. Right and wrong are cultural concepts, and might get twisted over the centuries, but so far at least that much seems right to most people."

Elaine nodded, "So why can't the other nations just leave Atlantis and MU to do their own thing?"

Northman grinned, "Because their citizens won't stick around to be bullied, if there is a better option. If they persist in this, you'll see what has traditionally been known as 'the free world', put up walls and gates every bit as totalitarian as the Berlin Wall to keep their people inside. Given the choice, people vote with their feet. When you govern against the will of the people, you have to lock them into a police state, or they will go somewhere else if they have that choice." Northman looked old and tired as he said, "I think that they almost had us before America gave the people a choice, and Kings all over the world were felled. They almost had us again with the corrupting of America. Where else could people go? We were in the shiniest of the gilded cages. Hell we needed walls and gates just to keep the rest of the world from flooding us, in their rush to escape the hell holes they were living in. I think the powers that be have learned the lesson of America though. They won't let the free islands become the next 'New World' if they can help it."

Elaine reached over for his hand, "Then why did you come here? Why are you trying to do this if you think it's doomed?"

Northman looked up and a smile broke out and fire came back to his eyes, "Oh young lady. I never said it was doomed. Just that they wouldn't let us go without a fight. To me, this is just sticking a thumb in Ol' Nick's eye one more time. We may yet breathe free for a few more generations." He waved his hand around, "Oh even this will eventually become corrupted. The tree of liberty needing watered with the blood of tyrants and patriots, and all that." he waved the bottle around, "Still if I can ruin Ol' Nick's plans and help keep mankind free for another hundred years? That's a fight worth fighting." Elaine thought he might be crazy, but it was certainly a good kind of crazy. He certainly wasn't talking out of ignorance, Northman had a well known reputation for a sound knowledge of history and human nature. Northman looked up and squinted. "Ah ha! This is what we've been waiting on!" He pointed to the western sky.

Sure enough way out above the horizon was a large bird, or maybe an airplane. "Ok, I give what is it?"

Northman grinned and stood up dusting himself off, "That my dear, is the first lighter than air cruise liner in almost a hundred years. The 'Zeplin' has made its return. I was half expecting it two hours ago. Come on, lets go greet them when they dock."

"Ok, here let me help you clean up."

Northman waved her off, "Bah, just leave it. I've had Ol' Poseidon here contract me a clean up crew. Seems some enterprising young folks realized that they couldn't make it on the UBI alone, and have started doing odd jobs for really reasonable rates. It's good for the economy, and I can afford it. Leave the mess, we'll call it a jobs program." he laughed only a touch cynically and headed off toward the up slope path, humming a soft tune as he went. Elaine only hesitated for a moment before she too hurried to catch up.

Chapter 14

Age of Airships Returns

Northman was a bit winded by the time he reached the small platform at the top of the island. It really didn't look like much, just a clearing about fifty yards across. Grassy rather than paved, it looked more like a sports field than an airport, still the small ring of spotlights and the large double doors at the far end gave it an official feel. A small crowd was gathered to watch as the airship grew in slowly in size as it approached closer and closer. Elaine had been unusually quiet on their long march up the side of the island, but maybe that was due to the pace he had set. He smiled, it's good for the youth to occasionally have to struggle to keep up with their elders.

"You knew about this," Elaine asked a bit out of breath.

"Been in the works for months. Sort of expected them yesterday, according to the original plan, but from what I was told they took a longer route for security reasons. I guess they had some VIPs dumped on the manifest at the last minute." Northman shrugged his shoulders. "Still she is a beautiful sight. Would you like me to introduce you to the head of the Atlantean office for Cloud Nine Cruise Lines?" He gave her a crooked grin.

"Thank you." Elaine beamed at him, turning on the full 'Tattianna charm' as she thought of it, then giggled. "So Cloud Nine eh?" Northman just nodded, "I guess I can see that. Bet it feels like you're drifting among the clouds."

Northman led her over to a small knot of people gathering by the double doors that lead back to the interior of the island. A young brunette woman, with a light chocolate complexion, not much older than Elaine was in the middle of the crowd. She was the obvious center of attention of what could only be a flock of reporters. Elaine felt the urge to join them, but at the same time she could help but notice the similarity of the group to a flock of seagulls fighting over a dropped sandwich. "That's Margaret Olsen. Her older brother founded Cloud Nine. He is an engineer from MIT that immigrated to MU early on. Started working on this project a couple of years ago from what I understand." Northman explained.

Elaine scanned the small crowd. A couple other Council Members were in evidence and standing quietly off to one side behind the young woman was another familiar face. Looks like Ariel Rosen is trying to drum up some business, Elaine thought to herself with a smile. Ariel met her eye and just smiled, and nodded. This seemed like a pretty big deal not to have had more fanfare. "Allen? Why wasn't this event advertised? I mean there's a lot of 'big shots' here for it but I hadn't heard anything about it for the last couple of days."

Northman grinned a bit, "I won't call it a media black out, but we really wanted to

present it as a *fait accompli*." The grin faded, "Can't ever be too careful these days. You can't really hide something like these air ships, they are three foot ball fields from wingtip to wingtip and move pretty slow for an aircraft. While we have used a stealth coating that absorbs radar, it still is a lot of hydrogen floating around out there. No reason to give the powers that be advanced warning when and where one will be."

"Helium, not hydrogen." Elaine said absently while trying to wrap her mind around something that size flying.

"No, I meant what I said. They are using hydrogen." Northman corrected her.

"What?" Elaine looked startled. "You can't be serious. Uh, Hindenburg much?"

Northman grinned smugly at her, "Oh we've come a long way from those days." He just shakes his head, "Sure big bags of hydrogen are explosive. A spongy material that is generally nonflammable filled with hydrogen, isn't explosive. Oh it will burn, but it doesn't explode. Shultzinger's printers even put in, built in fire extinguishers every dozen feet or so." Northman shrugs again more casually this time. "Oh it is very unlikely even an air to air missile could bring down one of these new airships before all of the passengers could unload safely. Still with all the bad press of the ill fated Hindenburg, I mean we're still talking about it a hundred years later after all, it just seemed wise not to let our adversaries have advanced information on the maiden voyage." Northman couldn't help but chuckle at the look on Elaine's face. She was obviously having difficulty wrapping her pretty little head around this concept.

Noticing that the reporters had been mostly pushed back for the moment, Northman gently takes Elaine's arm and guides her through the throng. "Ms. Olsen, looks like all the work is paying off." Northman says with a smile.

"You made it!" She smiled and waved off his offered hand, as she came in for a friendly hug. Northman grunted, amused. "And since when is it 'Ms. Olsen' to you? It's not like you weren't there when John and I were struggling to keep that little hot air balloon shop a going concern." She shook her head and smiled.

Northman got a shy aw shucks look that Elaine was surprised he could pull off, "Maggie this is your big day and I didn't want anyone to think I was treating you with less respect than you deserve. You and John have really done it. This is impressive. Though we're going to have to work something out about docking time. The thing is big enough to cut off light to a third of the island's solar panels. You'll send us back to the dark ages every time you drop off passengers and cargo."

Maggie just shook her head and laughed, "You'd find a dark cloud in any silver lining."

Northman just smiled back, "Always expect the worst, and you'll rarely be

disappointed. Maggie let me introduce you to my new friend, Elaine Winters."

Maggie raised an eyebrow and shook Elaine's hand. "You must be someone impressive. I've heard of you. You're a reporter, and Uncle Allen has never said anything nice about a reporter, much less calling one friend. That means you must be very special indeed."

Elaine blushed. "I try to be fair. From what I am learning from those who are often the focus of the news, that is not as common as I had once assumed it to be." she shrugs. "Ms. Olsen, it is very nice to meet you."

Maggie turned a mock outraged look toward Northman, "See what you've done. Now you've got her doing it." Turning back to Elaine she smiled, "Ms. Olsen is my Grandmother. Anyone Uncle Allen calls friend, can call me Maggie any day."

Elaine smiled, "Well Maggie," she put extra emphasis on the name, "Allen tells me you're flying using hydrogen. Um, how can that safe?"

Maggie shakes her head a bit. "A hundred years pass and man has just convinced himself that hydrogen still can't be made safe. A traditional airliner can crash and kill everyone on board, or worse be flown into a building killing many more, and we still hear how flying is the safest way to travel." She smiles a bit shyly, "Sorry about that. New technology encapsulates the hydrogen in smaller cells. The walls of the cells resist fire, so it prevents the fire from spreading from cell to cell rapidly enough for an explosion. The fire fighting systems on board are automatic and respond almost instantly to the first sign of a problem. It is actually safer than a traditional fixed wing airliner." She shrugs, "Oh we won't be replacing them any time soon as they are still far faster than our eighty mile per hour cruising speed, but our food is better and can be eaten at a real table, and most guests can retire to their actual state rooms after dinner for a real night's rest."

Northman grinned mischievously, "It's also a lot easier, not to mention more comfortable, to join the mile high club." Both women gave him a withering look, but all that did was intensify his amusement.

"My Uncle's juvenile and crass comments aside, it is a more comfortable way to travel." she shrugs, "A bit slower, sure, but not horribly so. The craft are about comparable in price to a modern jet airliner, but carry far more cargo and need less in the way of ground support. You may have noticed," she waves around at the open platform, "just about any clearing at sufficient altitude can become a port. Sky scraper observation decks, or a nice piece of mountain side. In a pinch just a large field. The solar powered turbo fan engines mean that our fuel costs are much less than a jet liners as well. While we do require maintenance also, typically our time between maintenance calls should be measured in months not hours."

Elaine was impressed. This really did look like it was going to be a viable option. "So what are your, um ports of call I guess would be the best term?"

Maggie smiled, "Well the Henri Giffard left MU just seventy two hours ago, she will make port here on Atlantis, then her next port of call will be Iceland, then off to Tangier. Finally she will stop off in Nepal and then Singapore, before returning to MU." Maggie smiled as Elaine's eyes widened. "Eventually we will of course add Avalon and the Eden International Nature Preserve." she shrugged, "Hopefully many more cities as we have more airships, and of course as the political situation changes. Don't think we'll be flying in to New York, London, Moscow, or Beijing any time soon."

Elaine was just about to ask her next question when a large shadow advanced slowly across the clearing. Maggie grinned wildly, "Looks like I'm on. It was great meeting you Elaine, and if you can keep Uncle Allen out of trouble for a few minutes while I go oversee the Giffard's first docking, I'd appreciate it."

Northman snorted. Elaine just grinned back, "That may be a bigger job than I can handle but I'll give it a try."

Northman looked about to burst with pride, "Maggie and John have been working on this for a long time. It's good to see them succeed."

Elaine asked, "So Uncle Allen, I thought you were an only child."

Northman nodded, "Yeah they are the children of one of my squad mates back during my days in Iraq. He didn't make it home. I've sort of been looking after his family best as I can ever since. He would have done it for me if I had been the unlucky one to be in the forward hummer instead of the following one." Elaine watched the dark memories cloud his expression. On pure instinct she hugged him and was rewarded with a long shuddering sigh from a man she was quite sure was made of solid granite.

* * *

Elaine sat off to one side with Maggie and Northman, just discussing the trials of bringing a machine like this to life. The passengers had been unloaded, and even most of the cargo when a flash of blonde hair caught Elaine's eye. Couldn't be she wouldn't leave MU. Still there she was, as elegant as ever. Approaching with her small security detail, Tattianna was coming toward them. "Allen Northman, don't tell me you didn't know she was coming."

Northman grunted, "Need to know. You didn't. She requested we have you hear to meet her when she got in," he grinned at her. "I drew the short straw."

Maggie giggled, "Short straw my dimpled ass, you old goat. Dad told mom that keeping you away from the ladies was a full time job."

Northman grinned, "Sure, that's what he told your mom." he winked at her. "If you keep talking about your 'dimpled bottom' in public like that I'll tan it myself and your mom would thank me for it."

Maggie sighed the sigh of the long suffering, but truth was she had really missed Uncle Allen while they were off on MU getting this up and running.

All of this was lost on Elaine, as she was already making her way toward Tattianna. The security detail moved to stop her but Tattianna got him called off in time. "You're here!"

Tattianna smiled and hugged Elaine, "yeah, well it wasn't my idea. I'll tell you more about it tonight if you'll join me for dinner?"

"Of course!" Elaine grinned. "It's great to see you again." she couldn't help it her eyes went right to Tattianna's mid section but it really was way too early to be showing yet.

Tattianna laughed as she noticed Elaine's glance, "You know you're almost as bad as Michael. It is like the whole world is just waiting for me to blow up like a cow."

Elaine giggled, "I'm just excited for you. I know you've wanted this for a while now."

Tattianna hugged her again. "I've got a few surprises for you. Unfortunately I am tired from the trip and so they will have to wait until dinner tonight. I'll let your Ulli have the details." She stopped, realized what she said, "Oh I guess I mean your mer."

Elaine nodded, "Yeah my mer, Bob. He's no Ulli but he is helpful. Get some rest, we can catch up this evening."

Chapter 15

Tattianna was tired. It was supposed to be too soon for the baby to be draining her this much but with all the stress of Mexico trying to nationalize their production facilities and the negotiations with Thailand, not to mention the endless parade of screaming inventors and innovators all upset because the United States just decided to invalidate their patents, she really did need the rest. She had tried to adjust her sleep schedule on the air ship but even with the longer route they took, it made little difference. She really liked Elaine but after the conversation with Michael before she left, Elaine was really the last person she wanted to deal with until she had had more than a little rest. This was too big of a step to blunder because of a foggy mind.

Tattianna ditched her security detail in the main room of the suite and practically dove into the shower. The warm water and soft lotion of the mist just made all the muscles loosen up. The latest news from Michael was that his meeting with the Security Council went about as well as could be expected, considering. The next few days should tell exactly how serious this will all end up being. Damn the man for sending her away, but even as she thought the thought she felt guilty. It was smart to send her and the baby off. Maybe not how she would have wanted it but it was the smart move. She just hoped that the others could play the voice of reason, Michael and Nigel were certainly not going to provide much in the way of a delicate touch in this. Nothing she could do about it now, she thought as she stepped out of the shower and felt the warm air swirl around her. At this point it's just a waiting game and she can wait just as easily asleep as awake, assuming she could get to sleep, that is.

Crawling in to bed she was worried that she wouldn't be able to get to sleep. Worried about it for all of about three minutes.

* * *

Tattianna felt like she was walking through a fog. She couldn't be sure why she felt like something was after her but she just knew it was. She picked up her pace a bit but with all this damn fog she couldn't see anything. Oh to hell with it she thought, and kicked off her heels and started moving faster. The blood rushing through her ears, she could hear her own heart beat. She focused on it for a second willing it to slow, when she heard a second fainter beat beside her own. It wasn't the normal thump thump thump of her heart, this was more like a light puff puff puff, it was smaller, fainter and much faster but it was there. She kept picking her way through the fog almost breaking out into a run when she found Michael.

She heard him before she saw him, he was speaking in Hebrew again. He had gotten so Jewish in the weeks since they had become pregnant. Ever since he met that new rabbi. Now he just keeps talking about the 'restoration of all things', like I'm supposed to understand what that means. , You'd think they were magic words

though by the way he talks. She couldn't help it, she thought religion in general was a good thing for people, and Judaism and Michael seemed to go well together. It even fit her better than the atheism of her youth or the Christian followers she knew. Good people but still, they always seemed to be worrying about the oddest things. Lately though Michael was doing more studying, she sometimes got the feeling he was, well not making things up, but certainly looking for the loop holes to make it say what he wanted it to say. He certainly came up with ideas that most rabbis would disagree with. Still when you try to call him on it, he would have a reasonable and rational explanation for his 'understanding' of the text. Frustrated she yelled at him, "Michael something is chasing me!" He just went on reading or praying or what ever he was doing, but he was now doing it with a gun in his hand.

Tattianna wasn't against guns, but Michael looked out of place with one. She heard a noise in the fog and turned, still there was nothing she could see. She turned back to Michael only he wasn't alone, Nigel was with him, and he too had a rifle in his hand. Out of the fog more came, and they were all armed too. She felt a tugging at her hand and looked down, to her surprise there was a beautiful child about four years old. He had curly dark hair like Michael's, and dimples like hers, and in his tiny hand there was a small rifle just his size. Tattianna screamed and her eyes flew open.

The room was dark but she could see just a trace of light coming from under the door. Her heart was pounding and she was breathing like she had just run an hundred miles. She jumped again when there was a soft tap from the other side of the door, "Mrs Shultzinger? Is everything ok in there?" Came a deep concerned voice.

Somehow she found her voice again, "Yes Jason, I am ok." she hesitated a second to collect her wits, "Um, what time is it?"

Jason's voice sounded much calmer as he replied, "Just after fifteen hundred, Ma'am. You've been asleep for about two hours. Are you feeling more rested?"

Tattianna, was certain she was more awake now after that dream, she just didn't know how much more rested she was. "Yes, Jason thank you. I'll be ready to head out for dinner in about an hour."

"Yes Ma'am." she could hear his feet on the carpet as he moved away from the door to join the other body guard. Rested or not she couldn't sleep anymore now, and it was probably just as well. This gave her a little time to figure out what she was going to say before her meeting with Elaine this evening.

* * *

Tattianna had made reservations for the restaurant in the under island observation pod. On Atlantis it was called "The Captain's Table". The Mer she had been loaned for the duration of her stay led her small party down through the corridors. She had mostly become accustomed to having a security detail, but before things got so heated, they were usually more discrete. Now she felt like a Bond villain with henchmen. She smiled at the thought, 'no Mr. Bond, I expect you do die.' somehow just didn't seem like her style.

As she approached the entrance she was rescued from her wandering thoughts by Elaine arriving from the other direction. She smiled, Elaine could always make things seem a bit better somehow. Maybe it was the awe with which she saw the world, and maybe it was just nice to have another woman who wasn't politicking for some advantage from her or her husband. "Glad you could make it" she said, realizing exactly how much she actually was looking forward to a visit with Elaine despite how difficult the topic was likely to be.

Elaine smiled back and accepted the brief hug, "How could I resist? We haven't really had a chance of gossip for what months now?"

Tattianna chuckled a bit, "Oh I wish this was just a chance to gossip," she said very quietly. "I'm on a mission." She winked at Elaine to take some of the ominous tone out of the words.

Elaine's eyebrows rose in surprise, "Really? Well then lets see if we can grab a table."

The maitre d' whisked them away to a private table near the bottom of the pod, and the two body guards took up positions on either side of the little alcove. Tattianna pulled a small device from her clutch and as she turned it on and laid it out on the table a small hum filled the air. "Sorry, can't be too careful these days. This just makes sure what we say remains private." She spoke a word and a small Mer child appeared in Elaine's sight. "If you can make your Mer visible to both of us, it helps remind us that they still hear." Elaine actually flushed.

"Are you certain you wouldn't rather just dismiss them?" Elaine asked, her voice not nearly as calm and casual as she tried to make it.

Tattianna wondered why she was hesitant but grinned, "You don't have to do it. I just find it helpful, and besides if you tell them to go away, well they are supposed to listen, but who can tell for sure?"

Elaine's face got redder and her shoulders sagged, "Bob, show yourself to Tattianna." Curiously she said it with resignation as if she expected the worst.

Tattianna was in a bit of shock as Bob became visible to her. Then it was everything she could do not to howl with laughter. "Um, quite the looker there, your Bob."

Elaine looked like she wanted the world to swallow her up, "Well he was very frustrating early on and so I just thought of the most frustrating person I know, and used his face."

Tattianna made a poor attempt to hide her smile, "Uh, right." then she just couldn't hold it in anymore, she let out with giggles that wouldn't stop. All the tension of the last few weeks caught up with her and bubbled out. She was feeling bad for Elaine sitting there not knowing how to react but the look on her face made it even funnier. The only thing that finally let her regain her composure was the guilty grin that crossed Elaine's face.

"I didn't even realize who he looked like until he smiled for the first time. I just picked out some sort of neutral attractive features. I almost changed it when I realized but I figured who would see it anyway. Never expected to run in to you here or for you to see Bob." Elaine shrugged helplessly. "Sorry? It doesn't mean anything? I should shut up now before I make it worse."

That put Tattianna off into another giggling fit. "Oh Elaine it is completely ok." Tattianna was wiping her eyes and trying to make sure her makeup wasn't running. "Oh the look on your face..." She took a deep breath, "Oh after all the stress of these last few weeks... I so needed that." Fighting back the urge to fall into another giggle fit, Tattianna reached across the table and took Elaine's hand. "I am sorry I made you uncomfortable. This really isn't a problem. You always seem to make things better, though you never seem to realize that you're doing it."

Elaine let out a very big sigh as the tension flooded out of her. "I just could only imagine what it must have looked like, and the last thing I want is to hurt you. I value our friendship way too much for that."

"Michael is not going to come between us." she said with a very serious look. "Oh ok maybe once in a while if he's a very good boy." and she winked at Elaine who broke down into giggles herself at the mental image of Mike promising he would be a good boy forever if only he could.

"Well after that embarrassing opening," Elaine said with a rueful smile. "What's this mission you're on?"

Tattianna shook her head, "Well it's going to sound all sorts of bad now... Michael and I want you to consider moving to MU."

"What?!" Elaine blurted out, louder than she intended. Then a bit more measured, "Why?"

Tattianna actually flushed a bit at this, "Well I want you there because I consider you a friend and would like to see more of you."

"Ok that I buy," Elaine shook her head, "though I'm still not sure what you see in me." Tattianna started to protest but Elaine waved her down as she finished her thought. "It's ok, it is enough for me that you genuinely do like me. What has me stumped is you said Mike is wanting that and I can't really see that unless there is something going on that I don't know about."

Tattianna sighed, "Oh he gave me all kinds of logical, reasonable, business reasons, why you would do well in the MU public relations department. He was going on and on, about our debt to you and your efforts. That leaving you in the US and vulnerable should they ever find out," she looked at the two Mer floating near by, "anything they shouldn't." she finished after barely a hesitation. She smiled at Elaine, "I know my husband. I know him better than he is willing to admit to himself. He's going into protection mode. He sent me and the baby away while he dealt with the UN security council because there was an immediate threat. Now that it appears that the immediate threat has lifted he is wanting anyone and everyone he cares about gathered in close where he thinks he can protect them." Tattianna felt weary, "He respects you, and maybe more. But the real reason he wants you close is because he cares about you, he sees it as a vulnerability that can be used against him. He doesn't want to have to worry about men in dark suits, hauling you off to some remote hell hole."

Elaine sat a little dumbfounded. She could tell that Tattianna believed what she was saying. More amazingly, she didn't seem to be jealous about it. "Are things really getting that bad?"

Tattianna smiled weakly, "Our Michael, he didn't take the nuclear attack on Atlantis, at all well. The coordinated attempt to seize his facilities in Mexico, and the open nationalizing of all the patents held by citizens of MU and Atlantis, they pushed him too far. He pushed back. You know that he offered to turn their capitals into copies of Denver AFTER the event." Elaine's eyes went wide. She couldn't help but feel partially responsible, considering her role in that whole mess. "Then he proved to them it wasn't a bluff." Elaine's eyes nearly popped out of her head. "So for now, there seems to be a truce. He just never wanted to be the kind of monster who could even threaten such things. He's playing on the level of psychopaths who would kill millions of people to remain in power, and he just found that they managed to drag him to their level in a remarkably short order." Tattianna shrugged, "Is it that bad? For now, no. For ten minutes from now?" She just trailed off letting Elaine digest what was said.

Elaine looked seriously torn, "I can't make a big decision like that without thinking it over. I mean I know I'd have a job, but once I make that move, I'm not even sure they would let me back in to see my parents. Or that they would let my parents come visit me."

Tattianna had a sad smile, "That was something I didn't have to worry about. I'm not sure what to tell you. Your parents are welcome too, if they want. I can see to it they would get citizenship."

Elaine shook her head, "That might be an answer but my parents could never afford to live on MU. Without my Dad's retirement pension from the state, they would spend through their meager savings in no time."

Tattianna laughed, and Elaine looked at her a bit sharply, "You haven't accessed your account on MU have you?"

Elaine shook her head, "I'm sure you and Mike were more than generous for the work that was done but we're talking about starting over for two families."

Tattianna shook her head this time, "Well, I don't know the exacts, but based upon what Michael had deposited initially and the royalties that have accrued, not to mention the appreciation of the Sovereign over the last year, you're actually a wealthy woman by American middle class standards, and quite well off by MU standards. I would estimate somewhere in the neighborhood of ten million US dollars?"

Elaine couldn't breathe. "That's just crazy!"

Tattianna shrugged, "You earned it. David Rosen has been managing it for you in a blind trust. I'm surprised he didn't mention it."

Elaine looked a little green, "He tried to talk to me about it once. I stopped him because I wasn't sure how secure the line we were talking on was and I was afraid the IRS would come after me for taxes on money I couldn't even access."

Tattianna giggled, "Oh I'm sure they would love to if they could figure out how. David isn't likely to be sharing information with them though."

Elaine smiled a little sickly smile, "It's all a bit much to take in."

Tattianna squeezed her hand reassuringly. "It's ok. It's an offer and only an offer. We would all just feel better if you and your loved ones were as safe as we can make them."

"Thank you. You really have been an amazing friend and role model for me." Elaine started to get just a little misty. "I don't know what to say except that I need time, to figure some things out."

Tattianna smiled, "That's fine. Take all the time you need. After dinner we can go back to my rooms and just spend some time with idle gossip."

Elaine giggled. "Do you think we'll ever go back to just plain ol' idle gossip ever again?"

Tattianna got an odd look, "Probably not." then she put on an impressive fake

pout, "And it's all Michael's fault!"

Elaine tried her best not to giggle as she huffed a reply, "Men!"

Chapter 16

Bob's deep voice calmly broke through the pounding in her head, though it was too much effort to make sense of his words just just. She opened one eye, the room was dark enough that she couldn't tell that she had, until she noticed the faint glow of an LED indicator on the far wall mount. "Bob, whatever it is, can't it wait?"

Finally his words began to make sense, "Of course I can tell Mr. Rosen that you're indisposed if you like, but he said he thought this would be important for you."

It all came crashing back to her, David Rosen managing her ten million dollars that she couldn't really access in the US without stirring up all sorts of issues. "OK put him through, voice only."

Instead of the older cultured voice of David Rosen, what she was treated to instead of the young, and way too awake, Ariel Rosen. "Hey Elaine. I know it's a bit early but I scored you a ticket to the Telemedicine conference that is being held on MU today."

Her mind slowly switched gears. Not David Rosen calling about life altering decisions. Just Ariel Rosen calling about a conference. She managed to get control of her voice enough to croak, "Telemedicine?"

Ariel just laughed a bit, "Yeah you know, the doc phoning it in? The virtual house call? The affordable access to doctors for the third world... Thought it might make a great article for you."

That young man was just way too bubbly in the morning. "Ariel what time is it?"

"Oh it's 0730hrs and the conference hall doesn't even open until 0900hrs but I wanted to give you time to get ready and see if you wanted to grab a bite to eat first?" The last part was kind of tacked on in a hurry. She would never have guessed Ariel Rosen as the type to be shy about asking a girl out but, oh hell but, it was too damn early to sift through that. She'd only gotten to sleep three hours ago, and had way too long of a day before that. She was just getting ready to tell him to go away and talk to her again at a reasonable hour when he said, "We don't have to grab breakfast if you don't want to but you really will want to check out this conference it will likely become the norm not the exception over the next few years."

She couldn't help it, just because she was tired and cranky was no reason to treat Ariel Rosen badly. He had been good to her so far and the family had been very generous with their time and talents in the past. "Sorry Ariel, I had a late night last night. I know you probably want to be there at 0900hrs, but if you want to grab a bite first, we'll either need to get it to go or make it quick. It's going to take me at least an hour to be ready to face the world again."

Ariel laughed, "Ok, I'll meet you there at 0900hrs. I'll stop and grab the doughnuts."

Elaine stretched and rolled over on her side, "Ariel?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for thinking of me." she said as the fog of sleep took her again.

* * *

Ariel smiled as Elaine came around the corner. She might have been feeling rough this morning when he called but she sure was looking just fine now. He felt a little guilty for ogling, but she had to know what that little green gauze sundress looked like. Probably picked it out for just that reason. He held the coffee cup up for her as she approached the hem of her dress tantalizingly threatening to blow away and expose more, but never quite making good on the threat.

Elaine was feeling better now after Bob got her a bit of the same pick me up that Ulli had hit her with on MU. Still coffee smelled great. "Oh thank you Ariel, you bring me the best gifts."

Ariel laughed and tried hard not to let it turn into a giggle like a little kid. "Oh then wait until you see this..." He reached around to the little ledge behind him and pulled down a small brown bag, with just the hint of dark stains soaking through to the outside of the bag.

Elaine took it from him and raised an eyebrow. He seemed awfully pleased with this offering. She sits her coffee on the little ledge and opens the bag, the smell of warm freshly baked cinnamon rolls wafts up and grabs her by the nose. The smell alone is a feast, looking at the sticky, gooey, caramel goodness trying to work its way out of the bag just was too much. She snaked one finger in to take a taste. The flavor explosion blasted into every primordial pleasure center of her brain and did the happy dance there. "Ohh! These are amazing."

Ariel just grinned, "I know, most countries would make something this good illegal."

"You've ruined me, I'll be nine hundred pounds and not care just shoveling rolls in my mouth with both hands." Elaine said fighting to keep her eyes from involuntarily closing while she savored the gooey goodness.

Ariel just grinned, "I'm pretty hooked on them myself. I found the shop that makes these just last night. I think I'm going to see if they will deliver them to the bank. Imagine one of these with an espresso, while you check the morning markets?"

Elaine shook her head in amazement. "Would certainly help make you a popular spot." She tried to not get completely covered in the frosting, then gave up and just tried not to look too uncouth licking her fingers clean.

Ariel started to say something else but completely lost his train of thought as she licked the icing from her fingers. The speech centers of his brain were completely overloaded and all that managed to come out was "Ah I ahh uh ahh"

Elaine distracted by the roll just tried to get the last of it, "mrumm Yeah I know right."

Ariel snapped himself out of it, just in time not to be caught drooling as she looked up at him. He wasn't sure what the hell was wrong with him, he's seen attractive women before. His brain doesn't usually just go on hiatus like that. Maybe things have been a bit more busy at work than I've been allowing myself to believe. I need a day off.

Elaine smiled at him, "Thanks for sharing that secret! I've got someone I can't wait to surprise with it."

Ariel for a moment wanted to demand who, then realized he was acting completely out of normal character and firmly told himself he needed to get back to business.

* * *

Elaine had expected him to lead her into a big exhibition hall but it really was a rather small room with fifty or so five foot wide cubicles. "Set your AR settings to 'Local Area Pick Up' and we'll join the conference" Ariel said.

Elaine looked at him a little odd but did as he asked. "I expected it to be bigger."

He just grinned, "Let's approach the first booth."

They walked over and as they got within the space in front of the little booth, her AR switched to VR and she was suddenly in an elaborately designed display that appeared to be the size of a mid sized office. "See telemedicine works a lot of the premise of telepresence. So what better way to show off how personal it can be

than to have a virtual conference?" Ariel explained.

Sure enough a man in a white lab coat approached them, "Welcome to MRS Imaging Ms. Winters, Mr. Rosen. I'm Doctor Steven Sawyers. Are you here to see our new imaging technology?"

Elaine was stunned, Ariel was just grinning. "This is Ms. Winter's first time using Stutsman AI's virtual conference software. She is a reporter who covers the technology sector. I thought she might like to see some of the latest advancements."

Doctor Sawyers just smiled widely, "Amazing technology isn't it? Not quite the same as being there but very close and with our new imaging technology it means that even the remotest village has access to medical care that was reserved only for the best hospitals even ten years ago. Take a look at the new ultrasound technology." He picked up a small wand the size of a large cigar. "This is the US120 wand. It wirelessly interfaces with all models of AR glasses giving a doctor any where in the world the ability to examine injuries or organs, non invasively, from anywhere in the world." He let that sink in as he beamed proudly. The VR faded to about forty percent visible so that she could see the wand sitting on the little table in front of them. "Please, apply some gel from the bottle on the left and then put the tip of the wand in contact with your left wrist."

Elaine did as she was asked, wondering what something that small could possibly do. The gel was cold but the wand gave off no sound or vibration that she could detect but as soon as it was in contact with her skin the VR environment came back up to full and there floating between her and Doctor Sawyers was a three dimensional image of her wrist, including the small neatly healed fracture in the ulna, that she had picked up while hiking her senior year in high school. Elaine was speechless. Fortunately the good Doctor was having no such issues. He was manipulating the image as it hung in the air between them. "So as you can see we can check the bones. Also the muscles and ligaments." Part of the underside wasn't showing well but Doctor Sawyer simply said "move the wand around your wrist please." Like magic as soon as she did the computer filled in what the underside of her wrist looked like as well.

"That's Amazing!" Elaine exclaimed.

Doctor Sawyer chuckled, "Oh that's not much we've been able to do something similar to this with larger machines since back in the middle of the last century, it just took expensive equipment. Then in the teens, we could do it for a couple of thousand dollars of equipment and a smart phone. Then came the VR glasses in the late teens or early twenties that really made it easy to read the results. Now with the ability to print out the wands in a smaller foot print, every doctor's office, or EMT can have one of these for about the same price as a dorm room microwave oven." He really looked smug, "Even better, you're on Atlantis but I am still sitting comfortably in my office in Toronto."

Elaine blinked. "I want one. How soon can I buy it?"

Doctor Sawyer just smiled, "Write me up an article, and I'll send it to your printer at the hotel room."

Elaine just laughed amazed, "Deal!" She couldn't help but think, if Tattianna didn't already know about this, they could look at the baby tonight.

Doctor Sawyer just grinned, "I'll send your Mer all the appropriate information. I look forward to reading the article."

* * *

Ariel was smiling as he watched Elaine work her way from booth to booth. Each of the new inventions more amazing than the last. The instant fertility monitor, helping to take the joke out of the rhythm method. The full exam check list and tool suite. Every test your doctor does at your annual check up all on one small medical device the size of a thick credit card, and results back in minutes not days. Cancer screenings that happen while you wait, from the privacy of your own home. STD test temporary Tattoos, Ariel made a mental note to buy into that one. Put the stylish temporary tattoo on your body and if it doesn't turn from its default blue color, then ten common STDs that it scans for, aren't present in a prospective partner.

Elaine was basically in shock. Encapsulated scanners that you swallow and they wirelessly report to the doctor the whole trip through your digestive track. She knew that they had them before but with the new 3D printing technology, single use pills that can affordably be taken three times a day, and analyzed by the medical AI for less cost than taking an aspirin. If any of this gets through the regulators back home... She just imagined how her parents would react. They would swear this was cheating after all of their worried nights when she was little and sick.

The most expensive item was Omni Care's ten thousand test battery. A small box the size of a pack of cigarettes, that has more than ten thousand labs on chips inside. For just a dollar per test, it will test you for ten thousand medical conditions, including three thousand genetic abnormalities, as well as two thousand potential allergens and potential drug interactions. Sure it was a lot of money, but to have yourself tested for all of it at once. Quick, convenient, and private.

Finally with her head whirling and having spent more money than she had in a long time Elaine found her way to the last booth. To her surprise it was Stutsman AI's booth. Standing there in the virtual flesh was one John Stutsman Sr. He smiled at her, "Hello again Elaine."

"John! I'm surprised do see you manning the fort in person. I figured that's what you had minions for." Elaine smiled broadly at him.

John just shrugged. "This really is a growing segment of the business. If I can replace a large number of the existing technicians with more accurate computers. Saves lives, costs less, and because it costs less, it is more likely to get them all over the world." He grinned, "True ubiquitous health care treatment rather than just unaffordable coverage, that no one can use anyway. Here take a look at what is possible. When your assistant logs and documents all the pertinent information and all of that information is uploaded safely to the cloud where it is available for anyone with the proper codes. We're talking true life saving devices here.

Elaine mulled over what she had seen. Stutsman was right, this level of information couldn't help but improve life for everyone, but for now she had to say good bye to Ariel. It was sweet of him to bring her along for this. She needed to get back. She thought about her new portable ultrasound. There were baby pictures to take!!

Chapter 17

Elaine couldn't sleep. Ultrasound baby pictures this early on weren't much to see but there was the little heart beat. That alone was enough to give her a restless night's sleep. What kind of world will that baby know?

I mean, at the little medical conference yesterday, they were selling high end medical equipment that used to take up most of a room and cost tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars, for just a couple of hundred bucks and she was able to carry it all out in a medium sized bag. There was a DNA service that registered your genome while you waited for less cost than dinner for two at a nice restaurant, no she hadn't availed herself of it, playing with genetics still gives her the willies, but still it's available. Then there were the three bridges to immortality. Bridge one, living healthy, to make it to bridge two. Bridge two, where the presenter claimed that places like Atlantis and MU are now and most of the world would arrive in the next five years, of personalized medicine so inexpensive that everyone uses it to remain as healthy as possible. Bridge three, he said was nano-robots actually in your body, continually repairing the ravages of aging. Living essentially forever. Mind blowing.

She rolled out of bed and stumbled to the shower. After the technical problems, they finally are ready to send messages to MU on their 'quantum internet'. What will that mean for the world? Perfectly secure communications. Faster than light communications. If we ever do spread out from Earth, that will be huge. Probably most importantly if bandwidth ever scales up, it means an internet that can't have it's wires cut. Internet relays hidden on the moon, out of reach of governments

ability to control the flow of information. Ohh, I wonder if Michael has thought of that! Oh who am I kidding of course that's probably why he poured the funding into it in the first place.

Thinking of Michael made her smile, but once she realized that fact she was even more disturbed. She didn't want him to make her smile. That was a scary road she didn't want to tread. So instead she focused her energies in getting ready, she was meeting Tattianna for breakfast before they met up with Dr. Helm.

* * *

Elaine and Abby met up with Tattianna at the little cafe on the edge of the little park. Abby looked as nervous as a long tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Elaine remembered meeting Tattianna for the first time and smiled, she probably had much the same look as Abby had now. Tattianna's security detail seemed to loom over the three young women but Elaine was glad of them. With Atlantis just getting settled, who knew who was in the new batch of neighbors. She almost laughed out loud at her thoughts, when did she become a paranoid?

Tattianna smiled disarmingly at Abby, "Seaman's Apprentice Addams, Elaine has told me so much about you. How helpful you've been with showing her around Atlantis. Thank you. It really is important for all of the islands that Elaine's honest portrayal gets out there in the world to counter act some of the propaganda." Her nose wrinkled slightly as if the last word had a foul taste to it.

"It's a pleasure to meet you ma'am. I appreciate your thanks, but it is not necessary. Nothing more than my duty to counter act the propaganda as you call it. Certainly a more classy term than the more colorful terms, Councilman Northman usually uses." Hiding behind stiff military formality, her eyes still gleam as she watches the amusement from the other women.

Tattianna turns to Elaine, "Oh I DO like this one."

Elaine laughs softly, "Abby is a treasure. Don't know how I would have gotten along without her help."

Tattianna does her best faux innocent look, "Must not poach talent from the other islands," she says almost absently to herself, "but if you're ever looking to make a change. I'll put in a good word with Nigel Wetherby for you."

"Thank you, Ma'am. I'm happy here."

Elaine grins, "Come on ladies lets see what the good Dr. Helm has cooked up for us this morning."

* * *

Elaine walked into the lobby and smiled at the receptionist, "Good morning Susan, we're here for the test?"

Susan's eyes got wide as she recognized Tattianna and the small security detail with her, "Um... Good morning. Is there anything I can get for you." She made it seem as if she were addressing them all but her eyes never left Tattianna.

"I think we're fine. If you could just let Dr. Helm know we've arrived." Elaine said in her most calming tone. When was it exactly, when she quit reacting to Tattianna like that? Maybe it was as they were giggling like school girls over the ultrasound picture floating in the air before them.

"Of course right this way." She led them through to the lab where a harried looking bald man with thick glasses was watching intently over the shoulders of two techs replacing some rather delicate looking circuit boards. "Uh... Dr. Helm your observers have arrived." Helm held up a hand to forestall her for a moment while he continued to confer with the techs. "Uh... Dr. Helm," Susan started again.

Frustrated at being interrupted, Dr. Helm's head snapped up, he recognized the three women, and at just the last moment he managed to bite back something he had been planning to say. "Thank you Susan. Mrs. Shultzinger, Ms. Winters, SA Addams," he nodded. Still looking harried but obviously his mind was switching gears. "Please come in. I really must beg your indulgence for another couple of minutes, while we prepare."

Tattianna put on her most reassuring smile, "Dr. Helm, take your time. Is there a place where we will be out of the way while you work?"

The good doctor sighed a relieved sigh, "Yes please make yourselves comfortable in those chairs over there," he pointed toward an observation area already set up for them with three chairs. "I promise it shouldn't be long."

Elaine couldn't help but grin as Tattianna replied, "Thank you for being so thoughtful. We'll just be over here until you are ready to show us your brilliance." She wasn't completely certain but she thought she saw Dr. Helm blush slightly. Seems men of every age and distraction level couldn't help but be affected by Tattianna.

The ladies took their seats and the security detail took up a post behind them by the wall. Elaine whispered to Abby, "If this works, they can make an internet that can't be shut down. All of the shenanigans that have been played with Atlantis's communications with the rest of the world could be over, as soon as it's rolled out."

Abby nodded, "So that's why Councilman Northman was unusually chipper when he contacted me this morning."

Elaine raised an eyebrow, "Chipper? I had thought I'd seen everything." Abby just blushed slightly.

"OK so maybe just a lot less dour." she said with a mischievous smirk.

* * *

Dr. Helm approached them. "We're ready. It'll be a few tense moments while we transmit, and then another couple while we see if we're received. Sorry but it's not going to look like much at first." He smiled apologetically.

"We're fine Dr. Helm. If you need to be more hands on, please don't let us distract you. The work is too important for that." Tattianna said in a reassuring tone.

It must have worked because Dr. Helm viably relaxed, "Thank you, but other than hitting the connection key, we're pretty much as ready as we're going to get."

The tension in the air could be cut with a knife. This really was a new chapter in human history. True faster than light communications. Abby actually looked a bit bored. Elaine didn't know how she could be so calm. "What do you think the first transmission will be?" she asked Abby quietly.

Abby smirked, "I heard there was some debate over this. Everything suggested from 'Watson come here I need you.' to rehashing, 'One small step for man.' I still don't know if they've actually decided." Then almost despite herself she grinned wickedly, "Perhaps it should be 'Uh Houston, we have a problem'"

Elaine rolled her eyes, and in a stern voice, " Abby you're horrible!" then she giggled and ruined the whole effect.

Then all of a sudden the room burst into noise and excitement. Connection was made. The first email ever sent over the new Quantum Internet took nearly a full minute to download, and read as follows.

Attention Atlantis:

Much thought and debate was given to the contents of this first message. Some profound, some profane, others simply amusing. What we finally decided on was to just be grateful. Thank you to everyone who made this possible. From the first mud brick maker who scratched his mark in the clay, to Gutenberg, to Alexander Gram Bell and Guglielmo Marconi. From scratches in clay bricks to messages written on the fundamental building blocks of the universe, let us be thankful for all those who came before. We truly stand on the shoulders of giants.

Welcome to Tomorrow Atlantis,

MU

The message was read aloud and the room erupted in excitement. Elaine just uploaded the uncut video and smiled. This was what it was like to watch history be made

A few seconds later, the reply came back slowly scrawling across the screen.

"Thank you Dr. Helm, transmission received. Welcome to the history books."

As the cheer erupted in the little room. Dr. Helm looked as if he wanted to pass out. Tattianna reached over and took Elaine's hand and squeezed it. This was real. Oh it was only the first tottering steps, reminiscent of a toddler finally realizing he could let go of the table and walk on his own, but in a few years. Yes in a few years, when it has reached it's maturity...

Tattianna smiled, "Congratulations. Can I be your first commercial customer?" she asked.

Dr. Helm's brows rose, "Uh, ok. What do you have in mind?"

"How much, and how long to send a small ten second video clip?" She asked and Elaine broke out in a grin from ear to ear.

"Michael will LOVE it!" she exclaimed and then tried unsuccessfully to regain her appearance of objective interest.

Tattianna grinned, "Won't he just? So Dr. Helm what do you say? Ready to give it a test on some video?"

Dr. Helm thought, "So how big is the file?"

Tattianna said something to her Mer, and then aloud, "Five megabytes."

Dr. Helm shrugged, "Should take about a half an hour."

Elaine, "For how much?"

Dr. Helm shrugged, "Oh one Atlantean Sovereign for Mrs. Shultzinger."

Elaine shook her head, "No I mean standard rates."

Dr. Helm shrugged, "Not my area of the business, but I'd say a tenth of a pip per kb, maybe? MU Sovereigns that is."

Elaine asked Bob to translate that to US dollars for her readers. "Well each MU Sovereign is worth approximately \$10,000 this morning. So a tenth of a pip, would be about one dollar US. Five thousand kb, in the file, means about five thousand dollars." He said.

Elaine was dumbstruck. That was an insane amount of money to spend to send a movie file over the internet. Just as she was about to object to the price, Tattianna said, "Well worth it. Do it!"

Just like that, Tattianna's ultrasound became the first baby pictures to be sent to the father over the quantum internet. Also the first commercial transaction via the quantum internet. She had a sneaking suspicion it wouldn't be the last.

* * *

Dr. Helm was sitting with them in the conference room just off of the lab as the video was transmitting. Elaine couldn't get over the price. "Dr. Helm, at that kind of cost, won't it severely limit who uses your quantum internet?"

Dr. Helm shrugged, "Well as with any new technology the price always starts off expensive. These data rates are roughly analogous to the cost of early long distance phone calls, and early adopter cell phones." He chuckled, "Back when they used to be called car phones because they needed the car battery to run them." He shook his head. "I suspect this will follow a similar trajectory. Over the next few years we will build more and more nodes, and refine our algorithms for reading the quantum changes. Get more atoms entangled to increase the band width, etc., etc." he rolled his hand out showing a progression of steps. "Eventually, you'll get to the point where you can securely send and receive nearly unlimited data, at faster than light speeds for a low monthly rate, similar to today's internet." He smiled, "At that point, we've just massively updated the backbone of the internet, improving security and fundamentally speeding up delivery times."

"So you're saying it's just expensive because it's new?" Elaine was a bit confused.

"Well yes and no. Yes that's the case but it isn't just because it is new. It is because we haven't found the best way to do it yet." He looked at her seriously to make sure he was getting through. "You are too young to remember the early days of computing before the internet. When I was a kid, my first computer cost me nearly three thousand dollars, and it could do less than just the video processor in those AR glasses you're wearing." He laughed remembering those days, "The thing

was the size of microwave, and heavy, and by today's standards useless. Still, to the twelve year old me, it was magic from the future." He rubbed one hand over his face bringing himself back to the present. "In the more than forty plus years of making computers, since that time, we've gotten much better at it. So now they are cheap and everywhere, back then there were probably less than a hundred thousand computers in the entire country. If you want a more recent example, take the 3D printers." He looked over at Tattianna. "When they first came out, they could only print a cheap brittle plastic. They were used for outrageously expensive models, for architects and engineers to use to get their projects funded. Even ten years ago, back in the mid teens, the thought of using them to print out electronics, was crazy. Printing houses was only a little less crazy. Printing an entire floating island, that was more than even most fiction writers would dare to postulate for fear that it would seem unbelievable to their readers. Yet, here we are a short decade later and your clothes were printed fresh for you this morning. Your AI glasses, with more computing power than my three thousand dollar computer of my youth, were printed out for you in a couple of hours time for very little money. Above all, we're having this conversation on a floating island, that is home to over a million people." He smiled broadly, then concluded, "Yes as we get better at making the components of the quantum internet, it will get cheaper, and then it will fade into the background, much as the regular internet has, and you'll take it for granted that for a modest monthly fee, you'll be able to instantly speak securely to anyone nearly anywhere without fear of it being intercepted or used against you."

Elaine blinked. She had realized that things were moving fast. Didn't get much sleep last night because of it, but she had never put it quite that perspective before. She wondered if David Rosen had had that particular insight dropped on him yet. "Thank you Dr. Helm. That is a way of looking at things that I had not considered before." Even Tattianna looked as if she were chewing over this concept. Abby was looking a bit stunned.

Before Elaine could dig any further, Susan popped her head into the conference room, "Mrs. Shultziner, your message has been sent and acknowledged from MU. The reply message just said, 'Please come on home. I've missed you.'"

Tattianna smiled, "Thank you Susan. You don't know what good news that is for me." She turned back toward the balding man in the glasses. "Dr. Helm. You have a great accomplishment here. I wish I could spend more time with you on it, but I just received the all clear, and I haven't seen my husband in over a week. I'm going home."

Dr. Helm chuckled. "Here let me show you ladies out."

Chapter 18

Yesterday was a whirl wind. Grabbing lunch with Tattianna and Councilman Northman to discuss the new quantum internet potential let her head swimming. Abby had taken pity on her and decided to have a night out after Tattianna left. It was fun, but this late in the month most of the clubs were practically empty.

This morning she was going to spend some time catching up on what had been happening in the outside world. Bob was playing her news clip after news clip from America and frankly it was mostly depressing. How was she supposed to counter the well funded and almost ubiquitous negative coverage from all major news outlets? They were so unfair to Michael, she cringed when she remembered her own first interview with him, but not just him. They were unfair to men like Northman for whom she had developed a great deal of respect. It wasn't right, but even RT was echoing the US press. The only good news is whatever Michael had done with the private meeting with the UN Security Council, it looked like open warfare was off the table for the time being.

She still cringed when they played that clip of Michael right after the Mexico fiasco over and over again. She could see the hurt and the anger in his face, but she really wished he had been better able to control his tongue. The quote, "If the world thinks it can out innovate me, good luck." was being used to show the public that Michael Shultzinger was only in it for himself. Never mind that the US and Mexico had just conspired to steal his life's work, and injured several of his people. She thought back to the night of the now infamous, in her mind anyway, dinner party. She thought of the determined look in his eyes as he spoke about people being free.

"Bob, stop. I can't take any more right now."

Dutifully the visuals stopped. She missed Ulli. Ulli would have said something outrageous to make her laugh, Bob just floated there.

Elaine decided she needed some air. All this time in the tropics and she hadn't spent more than a couple of hours on the outside of the island. She selected a light, casual sun dress from her file, and went off for a shower as the printer started to hum.

* * *

Elaine was walking along the tiled pathways, enjoying the warm sun and cool breeze. Yeah the plants were still by no means recovered from the harrowing trip around the point of South America but she could see green shoots trying to fill their

space. As she passed a little area right near the water line she heard voices and stopped. Two men one young and one about the same age as her father were sitting on the ledge fishing.

She smiled, "So are they biting?"

The young man looked up and stammered out a greeting. The older man just smiled, "Hope so or it will be a hungry night."

The younger man growled, "Yeah but fish for the third night in a row? Might be better to go a little hungry."

The older man shook his head, "Darren you just complain too much. Just because you need to learn to manage your money better is no reason to be like that."

Darren's face twisted up, "You got no room to talk, you're here fishing just like me."

Elaine wasn't sure exactly what was going on but there was certainly a story here. "Bob, can you order us up a couple of sampler platters from the Captain's Table and have it delivered to us?" She sub vocalized. Then louder to the two men, "Mind if I join you for a bit?"

The younger man smiled, "Sure" and gestured to a spot beside him.

The older man smirked at her, "Depends on how you feel about cleaning fish?"

Elaine grinned back, "Yuck! I always made Dad do that part."

The older man chuckled, "Yeah I figured. Still suppose it does no harm, you don't chatter any more than Darren here and we're high enough up that the fish couldn't be scared off by you anyway."

Elaine did take a spot on the far side of the older man and looked down from where his feet were dangling off the edge. It was a good ten feet down to the water. "Any luck?"

The older man sighed, "Oh I'm sure we'll find something. When you're hungry you're not picky, well unless you're Darren here. He wants to put in his line and pull out a pizza."

Darren's face got red, "John one of these days your smart mouth is going to get you in trouble."

Elaine smiled at Darren trying to take some of the sting out of John's words, "Fishing for pizza might be fun."

Darren snorted, "Only if we could catch one."

Elaine shrugged, "Why not just have your Mer order one up for you?"

John chuckled, "Oh same reason we're here for fish. It's the end of the month blues. More month than money. Just like back home in Tennessee."

Darren grumbled, "Back home in Tennessee we didn't have to eat fish every night for a week!"

John shook his head, "No you spoiled boy, we didn't because I worked damn hard, for a lot of years to make sure you and your mother had what you needed. Until they automated the plant, anyway. This is the best option. The UBI may not be enough to live on but it beats the hell out of standing in line at the welfare office!"

Elaine could tell she had stumbled in to something here. Darren called him John, not dad, so maybe a step father? She hadn't really gotten a firm handle on it when Darren's temper flared. "David's mom was on welfare and they didn't have it so bad!"

Tension was building in John and Elaine could tell this was a long term issue that had been boiling between them for a long time now. "You are 18 now Darren. No one made you come with us. You heard of the UBI and thought you would be able to live for free just like you have done all of your life. It wasn't free kid, I was paying for it. I was happy to provide for you and your mother, but that doesn't change the fact that someone had to pay. Once the plant automated, we had to move. If you had moved with us somewhere in the US, we would still be struggling only without a basic income to help. This is what it means to be an adult damn it, you've got to provide for yourself."

Darren stood up, "Well if you want me out of the house why don't you just say so, instead of always telling me how you've paid for me my entire life." He stormed off, fishing forgotten.

John sighed, "That boy just didn't know how good he had it, and the good times, well they just don't last forever. I'm sorry Miss. Didn't mean to put you in the middle of family squabbles." He shrugged but you could tell the tension was still there.

Elaine shook her head, "It's ok. Family will drive you crazy but what would you do without them." she smiled and was relieved that he just snorted agreement. "So is the UBI too small, you think?"

John shrugged, "This month it was, but I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that we had some moving expenses and of course Sue and young Darren there haven't adjusted to the fact that I'm no longer making big money at the auto plant." John's shoulders slumped, "I feel guilty even admitting this but when I heard about the UBI, I thought it was the solution to all of my woes as well. I mean, yeah I made

good money making cars, but we also spent a ton of money. Had a mortgage and credit cards and all the rest, just like everyone else, and when the job was gone, so were all of the things, that we had thought of as ours. One by one, the bank came and took them all away. I feel as if I have been running on a treadmill my whole life, and when I had to stop running for a minute, it threw me off." He rubbed his hand over his face, "That last recession, turned my 401K in to a 101K, and then they automated my job before I could manage to get back on top of things. I had really hoped that Atlantis would be different. I am grateful that it allows me to have a roof over my head and most days food in my belly, but I really didn't want to have to get back on that treadmill. I really really do need a chance to catch my breath. Maybe I'm just getting too old." The last came out more forlorn sounding than Elaine could handle.

She leaned over and gave him a friendly hug. "Call Darren back over. My Mer just told me that lunch is almost here. Then I think I have someone you really need to meet." She smiled at him. "I think it's all going to work out just fine."

* * *

Elaine met John out side of Rosen's bank disguised as a coffee house. She smiled as she saw him through the crowd, only man in the plaza wearing a jacket and tie. "My but you do clean up nice." She smiled warmly at him.

"Thank you. I don't know how to thank you enough for setting all of this up. I don't know anything about banking though, are you sure you want to vouch for me?" John said looking a little worried.

Elaine just smiled, "I think it is your life experience, not your banking knowledge that will make you valuable to Ariel. Let's go on in and see if he agrees with me. What do you say?" John just nodded and followed her through the door.

Ariel was behind the bar again, talking shop with two customers when he saw Elaine and John approaching. "Ah, this must be my 4:30. Excuse me guys, I've got to get back to work." Ariel threw his bar towel at Don, who got up from his desk to go man the bar.

Elaine smiled at Ariel, she just couldn't shake the thought, that he really just didn't look like a banker. "Ariel, thank you for meeting with us. I'd like to introduce you to John Hall, formerly of Tennessee and now a new resident of Atlantis."

John shook his hand and nervously said, "Nice to meet you."

Ariel looked a bit uncertain, but shook his hand, "Nice to meet you as well. Anytime Elaine says someone is worth meeting, she's usually right. Let's just not tell her I said so." He winked at Elaine who just shook her head. John looked even more stiff and just nodded. "Let's grab this table in the corner here, either of you want a coffee?"

"No thank you." John said looking uncomfortable. Elaine just shook her head and smiled at them both.

They took a seat and Ariel looked over at the nervous John and then to Elaine. "So what can I do for you?"

Elaine smiled, "I've found you the perfect liaison to the newly settled citizens of Atlantis."

Ariel's eyebrow rose, "Oh? John were you a banker before the move?"

John looked very nervous, "Uh no sir. I worked in the auto industry."

Elaine smiled, "Relax John. Ariel needs to hear the story you told me while we were fishing. The whole story just as you told me. If he can't see what I see after that I'll eat my hat."

Ariel grinned, "You're not wearing a hat."

Elaine rolled her eyes at him, "Well that would make it a light meal wouldn't it. Now quiet you, you really want to hear this."

Ariel was surprised at the passion in her tone, "Ok, John, I'm all ears."

John gave a cleaned up account of their first meeting. His nervousness lessened as he spoke but the stiffness remained.

Ariel listened but Elaine could tell that John's careful editing was about to blow this opportunity for him. "John tell him about the treadmill."

John cringed, "I don't mean to complain mind you, but I told Elaine it felt like I was on one of those automated treadmills. I had to just keep running and running, and the one time I had to stop, even for just a little bit, it threw me off. I nearly lost everything." You could tell John was uncomfortable saying this, but Elaine saw the light turn on in Ariel's eyes.

Ariel smiled, "Elaine you've done it again. You're right, he understands this better than I ever could. He KNOWS what they need, because he needs it too. He can connect because he's been there."

John looked confused. He was certain things were going poorly in this interview

and then all of a sudden they weren't.

Elaine just smiled, "See hat's are safe."

Ariel snorted. "John, how would you like to start learning about helping people to not get tossed off a treadmill?"

John was a bit flustered but still managed to smile, "That would be great, if you think I can learn?"

Ariel nodded, "Just one thing. It is a condition of employment."

John looked a bit wary, "What's that?"

"Loose the tie. You keep that up and they'll end up expecting me to wear one." He grinned at John and Elaine.

Chapter 19

Elaine arrives at the shopping plaza cafe for a late breakfast with Tattianna the next morning. Tattianna is making arrangements for a table when she arrives. "I'm glad we had the time for one more little visit before I have to get back to the Bahamas for my trip back to Seattle."

Tattianna smiled, "I'm going to miss you. You really should think about what we talked about the other night."

Elaine sighed, "I will. I promise. I just don't know how it would work."

Tattianna giggled a bit, "We never do until we are already doing it. I'm sure young Mr. Rosen also offered you a position?"

Elaine blushed, "No, but I thought Allan Northman was going to."

Tattianna smiled, "Oh, a woman could do worse. Yeah he's old enough to be your grandfather but with the new medical advances I keep hearing about, that might not matter so much before long."

Elaine tilted her head, "Well that's true and I thought I would like Atlantis better

than MU but I don't. Maybe I've changed or maybe I just understand things better than I did... " she sighed. "Either way, it will be MU or America. It is just a big step and I want some time home to think about it all."

Tattianna smiled reassuringly. "Of course you do. As you should. Just know that MU is also home with people who love you too."

The rest of brunch went by with idle chit chat about babies and shopping. Elaine was excited about going home again, but she was going to miss these casual meetings with all of these interesting people. As she left the little cafe heading toward Abby's office, she couldn't help but wonder, if this really could be her life. Not just a story or a vacation but every day to wake up and help the most amazing minds build the most amazing future?

* * *

Abby was walking Elaine to the docks, she couldn't help but think this was probably the most interesting special duty assignment she had pulled in a while. Through Elaine she was able to meet and have small talk with Tattianna Shultzinger and Allan Northman and even Ariel Rosen was surprisingly approachable. Good advice he had given her too, in just the last two weeks the investments he had helped her find were up two percent. It wasn't just the contacts she had made either, Elaine herself was fun. It was more like visiting with a friend rather than being a liaison between quarreling factions she had originally thought it would be. "Elaine..." she trailed off not sure how to continue.

Elaine just smiled, "Yeah, I've had fun too. Doesn't really seem like work when it is interesting and exciting, and you meet people who are also interesting and excited about what they are doing, does it?"

Abby laughed, "Yeah that's what I wanted to say. I mean, in the service we all have purpose and passion for what we do. Most of the people I've worked with over the last few weeks with you, they take it to a whole different level."

Elaine smiled, "I don't know that you'd want the likes of Ariel Rosen defending you against the US Navy," she couldn't help but smile at the thought. Then felt like she might be selling Ariel short, "but then again, he is defending you against the corrupt monetary and banking cartels of the world."

Abby's eyes glittered. "That's it!" she gasped. "That is why..." She rubbed her hands and straightened her uniform to regain composure. "That is it Elaine. In their own ways they are doing what we in the service have tried to do, they are making the world safe for us all. Oh they aren't manning guns but the people you've introduced me to have all been on their own crusade to make the world just a bit

better than what they've inherited. It's exciting, and I'm going to miss it almost as much as I'll miss you."

Elaine couldn't help it she was misting up. "Your mer, has my contact information. Don't be a stranger." Despite all protocol she hugged Abby good bye and with more effort than she would have thought, boarded her boat for the trip back to her old world.

* * *

Tattianna didn't have the same reservations. Oh, she wished she knew if Elaine would join them eventually or not but she was all too excited to climb aboard the air ship for the ride home. Michael's gamble must have worked. She was afraid it wouldn't and she and their son would be washed away in the chaos that followed. She knew that it had cost him, to do what needed to be done had taken something from him. She just wanted to get back and try to undo whatever damage had been done. The world was a scary place without Michael in it. He always made everything better and now, he was going to be in a pretty dark place. She just hoped that events hadn't broken something in him that she couldn't fix.

On the third day of her trip home, the captain's voice came over the intercom letting all passengers know that out the port window was the newly forming Eden International Park. Tattianna smiled, it was only a small grayish spec floating in the vast blue from this altitude but it was the seed of promise. The hope of a cleaner future for all of their children. "Oh Michael, hold on love, you're not fighting this alone, no matter what it feels like at the moment." she whispered and then returned to her cabin to rest up. If they kept to the schedule she should be with him tonight in time for a late dinner.

* * *

Northman sat in his office wading through the daily messages when Elaine's email arrived. He smiled as he read it:

Hello Mr. Northman,

I've left the reporter in the hotel and just wanted to pass along a tip to my fantastic lunch date. My Liaison officer for my time in Atlantis, SA Abigail Adams, might be an amazing fit for your office staff should you decide you need help. She doesn't know that I am putting her forward to you, but from our last conversation on the docks before I left... Well you might just find her insights valuable and her skills in demand. Oh and I'm betting she will learn to like her steaks rare with enough practice ;-)

Thank you for all of the time you spared for me in your busy day. I will be following your exploits with great interest.

Elaine

Northman chuckled. Then he thought about it. He'd always been impressed with SA Adams work, the few times their paths had crossed. Maybe Elaine was on to something. Of course Marshal would squawk about poaching his best people. Ah well that's just an add bonus. He grinned. "Poseidon!"

"You know, you don't have to shout." The gray bearded mer swam into view.

"That's not shouting. I was just speaking..."

"In a loud clear voice, that makes sure you are not misunderstood, missquoted, or ignored." Poseidon finished for him in a tone of complete boardom.

"You just keep it up, and I'll serve you as sushi yet." Northman grumbled. "Make a note to pull Seaman's Apprentices Adams file for me to review this evening. She at least knows how to treat a superior officer."

Poseidon just nodded and then with a flick of his tail swam out of line of sight and disappeared.

* * *

Captain Marshall breathed a sigh of relief as they made their way out into the deep water of the Atlantic. Two weeks to transit, and then all the chaos begins again. This time unloading off the coast of Spain and North Africa. He didn't expect that the Europeans would try to interfere like the Americans had. Not that they were any less prone to interventionist policy regarding Atlantis but mostly because without the American military backing them, they wouldn't want to risk the expense. Losing population would hurt, but that could be replaced through immigration from the middle east. Having their budgets strained with a war of this nature could unravel their welfare state, and few in Brussels had the stomach for that. Oh the Russians would have stirred up trouble, and could probably still be counted on to put in an appearance, but for them the weakening of the rest of Europe was a generally positive situation. Especially with their own economic woes from the implosion of the oil market.

Adams called out from the communications station that they were free of land based tracking and transmissions. He settled in to the Captain's chair and relaxed tension he hadn't realized he was carrying. "Well people, that is the first leg of the mission complete. Job well done everyone. We have a couple of weeks easy travel before the next big test. So let's spend this time well. I want reports by Thursday

morning briefing, on how the onloading went. What went wrong, what went right, and area's for improvement. As they say, the only easy day was yesterday." With that he smiled a satisfied smile, and watched the sun sparkle on the waves.

Chapter 20

John walked into the little bar area about a half hour early. Always good to make a good first impression on the boss by being early. The smell of coffee was pervasive. There was also a smell fo cinimen in the air, and it made John's stomach rumble. There was plenty of time to eat after he'd done some work he told himself.

Ariel and Tom came out of the back room arguing over something. John didn't want to draw attention to himself just yet in case he wasn't supposed to see that.

Tom shakes his head, "I know Ari, but if we explain the risks appropriately."

Ariel cuts him off, "If we explain the risks appropriately then no one will want in on the ponzi scheme in the first place. Better that we not get drawn into such recklessness."

Tom throws up his hands, "This from the man who moved us all out here to Atlantis."

Ariel grunted, "You can go home any time you like Tom."

"That's not what I meant and you know it. This has worked out good for us, but it sure sounded like a crack pot idea when you first brought it up. Maybe gold filtering will work out the same way." Tom wasn't letting it go.

Ariel looked up and saw John standing there by the bar trying to pretend he wasn't paying attention but failing. Ariel shook his head, "Late Tom. I want you to meet John. He's our newest member of the team."

Tom shook John's hand, "Glad to meet you. So where do you come from?"

John shook his hand, "Nice to meet you as well. I'm from Tennessee."

Tom nodded, "Cool, but I meant what firm were you with?"

Ariel cut in smoothly, "John is here for his outside perspective. John's history isn't

finance. John's history, and the perspective he brings is that of the working man. The very market we're trying to target."

Tom's face showed his confusion for just a moment but then nodded. "If the boss says you've got something to contribute then he is usually right. Except that he doesn't have a proper appetite for risk." He grinned big and looked pointedly at Ariel.

Ariel snorted. Then thought for a second. "John grab yourself one of those cinomen rolls and a cup of coffee if you like and come help Tom and I sort this all out."

John couldn't help but panic, he didn't know what they wanted of him but at least he was going to get some breakfast other than cold fish this morning. He took a moment gathering up roll and some strong black coffee and joined the other two at the end of the bar. "Uh, how can I help?" he asked nervously.

Ariel shook his head, "Relax John. There is no wrong answer here." Then he grinned over at Tom, "Well except Tom's that is."

The all chuckled a bit at that. John more nervously than he would have liked. "Seriously John," Ariel continued, "You're here for the outside perspective that you bring. We're not asking you to evaluate the economic feasibility of this project only if you think it is something that people should give a chance to work."

John wrinkled his nose, "Ok? So what do you want me to do?"

Ariel smiled, "Just tell us what you think of this as an investment."

Tom started. "The company is called Golden Age Biotech. They have genetically engineered microbes to eat gold particles dissolved in ocean water. There are tons of gold in seawater, but it's not been economical to pull it out because of the energy involved. If you can pump the water though and let these microbes eat it, die and then settle to the bottom of the tank. It becomes more concentrated and costs less to recover."

Ariel chimed in, "The problem is this is a very thin margin business. Yes it's gold but we're really talking about very small quantities a month. Yes in time it could be scaled up, but the problem is if you ever did manage to get it running, you would just end up driving down the cost of gold with an over supply. I just don't see the win in it."

Tom picked back up, "This is a highly speculative venture, and it might never pay off or it might become a bit part player in the world commodities market. The point is, I want to give them a shot to see what they can make of it. Ariel thinks it is so risky that it's better not to do it than to let people invest in it and have it not work out."

John scratched his chin for a minute. "It doesn't sound like a very good plan to me, if by getting it to do what you want you just drive the price down to where it doesn't pay to do it anymore."

Ariel nodded, "What if it doesn't work? Then people who invested in it would lose their money."

Tom spoke up, "I'm not saying to give people a false impression on it's ability to work, only that we offer it to people with all the proper warnings and let them decide for themselves."

John said, "That doesn't seem bad. Maybe it would make for cheaper jewelry." He shrugged. "My wife would like that... Ok so no don't do it." He said with a smile.

Both of the single guys chuckled but it just wasn't as funny to them as John knew it would have been to a couple of married men. That's when it hit him. This is what he was here for. These young men were damn smart. Well educated. Well spoken. They had never had to feed a family. They had never had to decide on paying the power bill or buying diapers. Yeah he could help them. "If you want my honest opinion?" he hesitated waiting for their nod. "Tell folks about it. Let people make up their own minds. Elaine said that was kind of what you were doing here was helping people learn how to take care of themselves. I'm all for that. That doesn't happen if you prejudge what you will let them invest in. Just be honest that it isn't likely to succeed and even success isn't likely to mean never ending wealth. Besides maybe someone will buy it as a long shot gag gift and it miraculously pays out." he shrugged.

Tom looked smug. Ariel was looking at John considering, "That really was what I was trying to do, wasn't it?"

John was confused, "What?"

"I was being paternalistic and elitist, and thinking that people weren't smart enough to make decisions for themselves." He looked glum.

John felt a little bad. "You were just trying to protect people from making a bad investment. I wish my brokers had been more worried about that back before the crash."

Ariel smiled, "No, no you don't. You wish he had given you the tools and the help you needed to make better decisions for yourself. That is what we're supposed to be doing here, as you just reminded me. I might need to get Elaine to do all my hiring."

John nodded, "Well if you can teach us that, it would be better. Still people should be told the truth about what they are investing in, and in English not lawyerese."

Tom grinned, "Well that's your job now John. Talk to the people in English, and let us handle the lawyerese."

John was starting to think that this was going to be more than just a job to put food on the table. These people were really making the world better where they could, and what was more important than that?

Plus, the cinnamon rolls and coffee are very good.

* * *

John was exhausted. He had never done less actual physical work but had never been more drained at the end of the day. The world was all different. So many things that he had thought his whole life, was, well, not wrong, but was horribly incomplete. This was just the first day. Crazy as it sounds, he couldn't wait to come back tomorrow.

John stopped off and picked up enough groceries to last them the rest of the week, just off of his tips while tending the bar. He couldn't believe he was fishing just to eat, just two days ago. He was in a fog, stumbling through the corridors with a thousand new ideas and possibilities running through his mind.

"Uh John, you've walked past your door." a slim blonde mermaid said with a giggle. Her golden fins flashing as she swam through the air around him.

John stopped looked around, shook his head and backed up three doors. The door slid open to reveal his wife Kristen sitting at the small table. Her eyes went wide at the grocery bag in his hand.

"Paid on the first day?" She asked in surprise.

John grinned, "Oh they offered, but no this is just from my tips tending bar."

Kristen's nose wrinkled, "Tending bar? I thought it was a bank."

John's grin widened. "Yeah but not like anything you've ever seen before. Tom said it was Ari's idea to make taking care of your finances like playing fantasy football. So the 'bank' is set up like a sports bar, that serves coffee and snacks, while everyone sits around picking out the best opportunities. He's even set up a 'scoring mechanism' to rate performance of your 'team'. He says it encourages people to learn the 'stats' or investment risks, and then select a diverse portfolio or 'team'."

Kristen looked concerned. "Are you sure this is legal? Sounds a lot like bookies running the numbers?"

John laughed, tried to recover and started laughing again, "Thank you love. I can't wait to share that with the guys. Don will crack up."

Kristen gave him that meaningful look. "I'm serious John. How much do you know about these people?"

John grinned again and then fought to wipe the smile from his face, "Honey, these guys are sharp. Scary kinds of sharp, but they are still just kids really. Ariel Rosen the guy in charge is only twenty four years old. Recent graduate of Oxford," he nodded, "yeah that Oxford." he set the groceries on the table and took a seat across from her. "Anyway, they are rethinking the way a stock or bond market works. Trying to make it more accessible to the average Joe, or John as the case may be." he said with his smile returning. "Tom and Don were his room mates back in college. This is kind of like getting a start at Apple while it was still in Job's garage. Only in this case Ariel's uncle is the one who designed MU's money. His family has been in the banking business since the middle ages."

Kristen sighed, she had to admit she had never seen him this excited coming home from the auto plant. "I just don't know."

John just grinned and pointed at the groceries. "What's to know? We have something to eat besides fish. I'll bring in a small hourly wage, plus there is a bonus structure based upon getting new people started, and even some bar tips for pocket money." His face grew more serious, "I don't know if this is going to work out long term or not. What I do know is, I am learning a lot, and useful things too. Besides as crazy as it may sound, it feels good to be working on something that can help other people get out of the mess we were just in."

Kristen reached for his hand, "I'm sorry, you know how I am about change."

John smiled at his wife, "Who can blame you when so much of it for so long has been bad? I think this time though we might have caught a break. I don't want to say it too loud, but even if this doesn't work out long term, I think it will teach me new skills to help make our UBI go further."

Kristen stood up with a bit of a groan, "Well you did your part and brought home the bacon." she said with a smile. "Let me see what can be done about turning it into a good dinner."

* * *

Darren walked back to the apartment with a small mahi mahi. Oh it would be enough for tonight but tomorrow would mean fishing again. As the door slid back he was surprised to see his parents enjoying a large plate of spaghetti and even a bottle of wine.

"You got real food?!" He asked in surprise. They both laughed at him.

"Clean up your catch, after all waste not want not, and grab a plate. Your father has had an exciting day." Kristen was happy to see her family recovering. A solid roof over your head, and a good meal on the table, and the hope of better times to come. It was like before John lost his job. Maybe things wouldn't stay bad forever.

Chapter 21

Elaine was tired of traveling. The flight back had been everything wrong with travel in the modern era, and she still had a long trip ahead of her back to the eastern side of Washington state. The only good thing about this trip was that at least she could catch up on her writing.

She had published two articles since she got back to the Bahamas. One on the Atlantis situation and one fluff piece on a local band in the Bahamas. She felt like she just phoned that one in. Her heart just wasn't in it. Oh sure the band was good and using new mixing tools to self publish some fantastic music but she just couldn't bring herself to care about that after seeing all the new medical advances at the conference on Atlantis. Not to mention thinking of the new quantum internet and its implications for the future. Even Ariel Rosen and his game theory of bringing personal finance to the masses seemed to be more life altering than a new band no matter how cool the music. She wondered if she was getting old or if she was just waking up from a culture induced sleep. Pop culture was losing its allure for her. It kept seeming to slip more and more into cheap tricks, click bait for the real world.

She shook her head and pulled up the latest version of the travel app. Selected her travel times and destination. She thought about getting an Uber with an actual driver but the cost associated stopped her. She might have money on MU and Atlantis but she couldn't bring it back to use here without raising all sorts of questions it was much better weren't asked. In the here and now she was a poor self employed blogger with student loan debt and rent that was past due. So she sighed and selected the self driving model.

She looked around the apartment one more time, she couldn't help but think it was going to take her a week to decide what she was keeping and what she was going to just leave behind. She grabbed a few essentials, and locked up again as she left.

* * *

As the little car pulled up in her parents drive way, she looked at the old farm house and felt pangs of nostalgia. If she did this, she wouldn't be back here again. The place looked smaller to her than it had growing up. Oh it was still every bit as big old and drafty as it had always been, but her world had just gotten bigger in the last two years than she could ever have imagined. She took a deep breath and opened the car door.

Mom would still be at school for another half an hour. Dad would be in his office as usual. She smiled, remembering, Dad was a structural engineer who worked free

lance for several firms. It was Dad's example that had given her the confidence to try to make a go of the blogging thing. She tried the front door, as the car just pulled away and started its long winding way back to Seattle. Who knew how many small hop passengers it would take on before it made it all the way back to the city.

The door was unlocked. Even in this age, out here the door was almost never locked. She smiled and went in to the quiet house. It smelled familiar, the humid air, not quite hot enough to make Dad spring for air conditioning. Oh sure there were a few days each summer, that even at this altitude, air conditioning would be nice but really it was less than two weeks out of the year.

She hesitated outside of Dad's office door. Ever since she was a little girl, interrupting him while he was 'at work' was a big taboo. She hesitated only a moment longer and then tapped on the door. She could hear the shuffle on the other side as her Dad got up from his old fashioned drafting table, and made his way around the big roll top desk against the wall near the door. The door opened and she stopped stunned.

There was her Dad, the man who had insisted on drawing up everything by hand for her entire life, wearing a pair of AR glasses. He'd thrown such a fit when they wanted him to learn autocad. Refused to give in to the demands to modernize his whole life. He just grinned really wide and swept toward her for a hug.

Hugging her father made Elaine feel like she was twelve again with some problem at schools. "Daddy, I'm home. I've missed you."

As Bjorn Winters pulled back from the embrace he bumped the corner of the glasses on the side of her face and seemed to remember for the first time he was wearing them. He pulled them off, "Damn things are always getting in the way. If they weren't so damn useful..."

Elaine giggled, "Never thought I'd see it." she smiled impishly at him.

Bjorn shrugged, "Well they are useful. With these things I use my own hands, I don't have to remember a bunch of commands or what goofy little icons do. I want a tool, I pick up that tool. I use it like I always have but when I am done, the computer will run simulations and we can see where it might need to be worked with." He shrugged, "Don't mind technology, if it works. I just hate it when everyone rushes off to use some gadget just because it is new. Usually takes longer to learn how to use the damn gadget than it would have just to have done the work."

Elaine hugged him again. It was a familiar argument, she had heard many times over the years. Her father was looking a little grayer than he had when she was last home around new years. His hair was a little thinner. He'd never been a large man but he seemed to have shrunk a bit. He was younger than Mr. Northman but not by so much. Not as indestructible as she had once thought. Maybe being away had

made him seem older, or maybe the years were catching up with him. He would be sixty five this fall. Suddenly she really wanted to get him an Ulli. Something that could monitor his health and make sure she never lost him.

"Daddy, I didn't want to interrupt your work but I didn't want you to hear me moving around out here and think that the house had been broken in to, either."

Bjorn waved his hand at her, "Nonsense. Who would break into a house way out here. Besides now that you're here, I'd rather spend time with you. Just let me go shut things down for the evening. Your mom should be back soon, and maybe we'll run off to the VFW hall for some dinner. Tonight is their salmon fry and I know how much you used to love that."

Elaine smiled as her father tucked back in his office for a few minutes and shuffled around for a bit. When he came back out he was grinning. "I just remembered. Mary made some lemonade before she left this morning. What say we grab a couple of glasses and wait for her out on the porch in the shade?"

Elaine just shook her head, "Daddy you come up with any excuse to sit on your porch and drink lemonade."

"Secret of a long life there child, take pleasure in the simple things. The bigger things tend to take care of themselves in time." He said from the other room. She could hear him opening the fridge for the lemonade. She thought before this visit was over he was probably going to need something a bit stronger than lemonade.

* * *

The VFW was crowded, it was a Friday night. Salmon night was always popular in the small town and everyone knew Betty made the best salmon for four counties. The band was setting up and Earl was already three sheets in the wind, swapping Falujah stories with Dave at the bar. Elaine had so many memories flooding back. She got her first kiss out in the little clearing behind this very bar. Robbie Mitchell, wow, now that was someone she hadn't thought of in years. They found a table in the back where it would be quiet enough to talk even once the band got started.

Dad ordered three salmon specials for them, as he grabbed a beer at the bar for himself and a glass of white wine for mom. Mom, was still beautiful after all these years. A full day at work and she could still pass for Elaine's older sister if no one was paying too close of attention. Twenty five years separated her mother and father, but Elaine only wished she could find a love like they had. Oh they argued plenty, but when the chips were down, when it counted, she knew that they would always be there for each other. It was probably rare at any time, but in recent years with so few people even bothering to get married any more it was the talk of all of

their friends. The envy of many of her friends if truth be told, well her old friends from school anyway. She doubted her friends from the city would understand, though she bet Tattianna and even Abby would. She smiled as she thought of them and then choked back a small laugh as she thought of her mom meeting Councilman Northman, or even Commodore Whetherby for that matter.

Finally, settled in around the table, it was Mary who broke the silence, "So tell me, what was it really like on those big floating islands?"

Elaine couldn't help it, she could see the picture in her mom's head of the ground bobbing in the waves. "Well first of all, unless you're in one of the under island restaurants, you can't really tell you aren't on land." Her mom looked dubious. Elaine laughed, "Seriously. They have miles and miles of corridors that if you didn't know better, you would think were normal city streets or maybe big shopping malls. You can't really even feel it at all unless they are moving and even then you usually only feel anything when they start or stop. As long as they are moving, you don't really even notice."

Bjorn scratched his chin, where just a little shadow of beard was appearing. "So you say it's just like being here then?"

"Oh no. It's completely different. There is so much to do, so much going on. Imagine the cleanest, most advanced city you can think of, then add in artists and vendors, and of course the augmented reality signs." She stopped and took a deep breath. "It really is striking. So much happening and all of it so fast. The people too, imagine a city where everyone wants to be there. Worked hard to get there. Working hard to make it the best place in the world to be."

Bjorn shook his head, "Honey, I'm sure it was a wonderful place to visit but no place is like that. There's always good and bad everywhere you go." Mary was just nodding her agreement.

"Oh there's plenty of dark side." Elaine agreed. "Most of it comes from the outside though. Remember that the people who made it to the islands are the people who sacrificed a lot to be there. They all have a vested interest in making it work. No one is there who was just born there by an accident of fate." She stopped for a moment while the waitress brought them their food. "Can I get a wine cooler please, miss."

"Sure, I just need to see some ID." the waitress replied.

Elaine's face got red. She'd left this evening without her purse. She was so used to Bob or Ulli taking care of these things. Mary saved the day though, "She's my daughter and she's old enough. Let Dave or Betty know and I'm sure it will be all right."

"Thanks mom. I've gotten so spoiled with the virtual assistants on the islands

handling all of that kind of thing. I didn't even remember to bring my purse."

Bjorn grinned real big, "Well looks like you'll be doing some dishes to pay for your dinner then."

Both women just rolled their eyes. Elaine had dealt with her father's perverse since of humor her whole life, groaners like this weren't even the worst. She had to figure out a way to get them to come with her, she would miss them too much if they didn't. She picked up where she had left off, as she cut a flaky bite of fish free, "Like I was saying, there is plenty of challenges. I met a man named John while I was there, even with the UBI, he and his son had run out of money and were fishing to survive the last week until they got paid again."

Mary just nodded, "The poor shall be with you always." she said as if that explained everything. This time Bjorn was just nodding agreement.

Elaine shook her head, trying to swallow that bite of fish so she could reply. "Oh it doesn't have to be that way. Or well... I suppose someone will always be poorer than someone else but even being technically poor they still had everything that they needed, they just didn't budget for a few things that ran them short that first month." Elaine proceeded to tell them the story about finding John the job and of course that brought up Ariel Rosen's scheme to make financial literacy more accessible. Then of course the conversation she had had last year with David Rosen and the article she'd written from that. She continued on like this for almost two hours. Telling them of the wonders she had seen over the last couple of years.

Mary says, "You sound like you've met some very interesting people. I'm surprised I'm not hearing about a future son in law in the mix. That idealistic Rosen boy perhaps?"

Elaine laughed, "No mom. Not so far. Ariel is a great guy but he's not really my type."

Mary smiled, "Rich was always my type until I met your father that is."

Bjorn snorted, and Elaine rolled her eyes. "Mom, I'm as rich as I will ever need to be." Her parents looked at her as if she had lost her mind. "Ah but it's true. Tell you what. I'm going to need something a bit stronger than this wine cooler before I get too far into that story and we really should do that at home. So, I'll tell you what. If Dad will loan me ten bucks until I can get my purse, I'll grab a shot and meet you out at the car and we can talk about my vast riches once we're home." She winked at them and held her hand out to her dad.

Bjorn snorted, "If I didn't have to drive home, I'd join you. Better yet, lets grab a bottle at the little corner store and we can share it at home." Elaine just nodded and held her hand out to help her mother to stand.

* * *

Bjorn poured each of them a small glass of brandy. He'd sprung for the good stuff. Elaine wasn't the type to be coy. If she wanted to have this conversation at home, it had to be something big. He was pretty confident she wasn't going to tell them she was pregnant, or she wouldn't have been going for the alcohol. This was on that level though he thought.

They each took up their usual spots around the kitchen table. They had eaten dinner here so many times while she was growing up. Nostalgia hit him and he was afraid that what ever she was about to share would make that world go away forever. She had been so quiet the whole ride home. Like she was steeling herself for the big announcement.

"Ok honey, you've got our attention. What's the big news that you couldn't share with us in public?" he asked almost wishing he could put it off a little longer. Even Mary was starting to look a bit nervous and she always seemed to know ahead of time when these big announcements were coming.

Elaine took a deep breath and downed her brandy all at once. She found her purse and pulled out a small electronic gadget and turned it on. She looked at it for a few seconds and then sat it on the table. She reached for the bottle to pour another brandy as she began.

"Well Daddy," then she looked over to her mother, "Mom, I've got a bit of a problem." she shrugged, "Well a problem and an opportunity." She took another deep breath and a sip from the newly filled brandy snifter. "I've been offered a job on MU." she said all in a rush. Then before they could say anything she held her hand up, "I'm taking it. I pretty much have to. The problem is when I leave the US probably won't let me back in or if they do may not let me back out again." She waited to see their response.

Bjorn was speechless. Mary had no such problems. "You most certainly will not! I forbid it! Get this idea right out of your head. It's not safe to be out there bobbing all over the ocean with no protection. They don't even have a real army. What happens if some third world dictator decides to just take them over? Or a hurricane or typhoon or what ever they call them? Those little island can't stand up to that. Real islands are wiped out all the time and they're solid ground beneath your feet not some little Styrofoam raft!"

Bjorn knew this was the wrong way to persuade Elaine, but it was too late. It was said, and now the fight had started. Elaine started to defend her decision and her mother was quickly working her way toward hysterical. Bjorn knew he should step in here but for the moment he just couldn't figure out the why. If there had been a

boy at the other end of this then it would have made sense, or if there had been an amazing job opportunity, but he couldn't see Elaine wanting to give up the independence of her little blog for that. "Honey, your mother and I are just worried about you. You keep saying you have to do this, help us to understand why?"

Mary settled back, now that Bjorn was going to help talk her out of this craziness she could just relax and let him do it.

Elaine fiddled with that gadget she had brought with her, "Daddy, do you remember that event in Denver last year? The one where a half a mile ring of that industrial park turned in to a forest?"

Bjorn was even more confused, "Uh sure honey but what does that have to do with any of this?"

"I said it was a mystery in my article on it. It wasn't a mystery. It was an industrial accident. A computer science researcher was working on quantum entanglement theory and accidentally entangled more than he should have and accidentally invented quantum teleportation." She was looking at the shocked disbelief on her parents faces. "It's true. I tracked down the man's adult son, who had a copy of his research. I then helped that family evade the government agents sent for them, and helped them relocate on MU." She gave them a minute to process that while she took another gulp of the brandy.

"I don't believe any of it," Mary started.

Which as you can imagine set Elaine off.

Bjorn raised his hand between them, "Enough! Both of you." It was his turn to down his brandy in one gulp. Into the shocked silence he said, "Mary, just stop. She isn't going to lie about something like this." He turned from his wife and looked at Elaine, "Why? Why throw everything away like that?"

Elaine bowed her head, and the words were very softly spoken. "Daddy, they were looking for a terrorist and his contacts. Not an innocent family that just happened to have an unlucky scientist in the family." She looked up to her father's eyes, "Dad, MU needed the technology and were willing to keep a young family safe. The US government, at least recently, hasn't exactly been the most trustworthy institution." She rubbed her eyes, "I couldn't do nothing while they packed that family off to indefinite detention at some black site. At least I knew Michael would see them as people and do as right by them as the circumstances would permit."

Mary's brow wrinkled, "Michael? You mean that Michael Shultzinger guy you interviewed a while back? That guy is a real jerk. I read your article and while you seemed a bit over sympathetic to that megalomaniac, I never thought you would betray your country for him?"

Elaine shook her head, "I betrayed no one. I protected a family, and put them in the care of a man I trust!"

Bjorn almost laughed, as he watched the reaction on her own face as she said the words and felt the impact of them. He never would have thought his daughter susceptible to hero worship, especially of a guy like Shultzinger, but there it was. She couldn't possibly know him that well after one interview but she did trust him. Maybe even had a bit of a crush on him, so there is a boy mixed in to all of this too. One thing is for certain, there will be no answer to this tonight and no way to think over the noise, as Mary and Elaine both say things they really will regret in the morning.

Bjorn just stood up, without a word to either of them. He kissed Mary on the top of the head. Walked around and kissed Elaine the same way and headed toward his office. Hesitated for a second, grabbed the brandy bottle and took it with him. Closed the door and finally got some space to think. Elaine and Mary would keep each other busy for a while and neither of them were in the mood to be reasonable. What mattered here wasn't who was right or who was wrong or if it was a smart decision or a stupid one. What mattered is how was he going to keep his family together and bring them through this newest crisis whole?

Bjorn did what Bjorn always does, he pulled out a blank sheet of paper, sharpened up his pencils and began to design a solution.

* * *

Elaine woke up in her bed in her childhood room. Sunlight was streaming through the window, it must be after ten. She was feeling bad about arguing with her mom, but the woman just couldn't see that she had grown up and was making good decisions. She knew she would need to make up with her mom this morning. If this really was their last visit she didn't want to spend it fighting.

Down stairs she could hear someone shuffling around. She pulled on the ratty old sweat shirt she always kept on her chair, over her head and stumbled down the stairs. As she came out of the bathroom she couldn't help but think, at least Dad had taken the bottle, so she wasn't hung over on top of it all. She rounded the corner and could smell the coffee on. Mom was in the kitchen, her eyes all red rimmed. "Morning. Daddy not up yet?"

Mary shook her head, "He never made it to bed last night. I gave up on him about four when I finally drifted off. Coffee is fresh if you want some."

Elaine poured herself a cup. "Should I take one in to Dad?"

"I knocked on the door earlier, but all I got was a grunt and something mumbled

about a couple more hours." She snorted. "At least he got the hang over, I don't think I could have dealt with that on top of everything else."

Elaine took a sip of the hot coffee and felt it work its way down her throat. "I love you Mom."

Her mom, sighed. "I love you too."

They sat in silence and enjoyed their coffee. Giving themselves time to wake up, before they confronted things all over again. Elaine couldn't help but have the nagging feeling that hours of stewing on it was going to improve things. She just really wanted to get through it without starting to fight again.

Coffee was almost gone, when the office door banged open. Elaine almost giggled very inappropriately, Daddy wasn't hung over Daddy was still drunk. The look in his red rimmed eyes though stole any humor out of the situation.

"Alright!" he said, or really slightly slurred. "I've got the answer!" He dropped a roll of sketches on the kitchen table. "You two can look it over, and give me any ideas you have for improvements, but not until I've managed to get some sleep. Not as young as I used to be, damn it." with no more preamble, he stumbled toward the stairs.

As Elaine watched him go, her mom started to unroll the plans. Elaine was startled to see quite modern plans for an impressive small yacht.

Mary sighed, "I love your father. It's a good idea. We just go live on a boat. Not your crazy island. We keep our citizenship, but in a place where you can visit us without fear. The problem is we can never afford a boat like this. Even if we sold the house and raided all of our retirement funds..."

Elaine grinned widely at her mother, "Um, Mom, don't you remember the part about I am rich there?"

Her mom looked at her a bit patronizingly, "Honey a boat like this is probably over a million dollars."

Elaine grinned even bigger, "So I can only afford ten of them?" For her whole life, Elaine doubted she would ever see a more amusing sight than that of her mother's face as she finally internalized what Elaine meant by "rich".

