

Chapter 1

It had been a pressing few weeks. Packing up or packing off all of her belongings that wouldn't fit in a couple of suitcases. Helping Mom and Dad to mothball the farm. They didn't really want to sell it but they wouldn't take money from her, and they knew they would need money for the boat Dad had designed. It was a real beauty. Maybe not as luxurious as the Mara, that they were even now riding out past the two hundred mile line in to international waters, but far more sleek and modern and better laid out. Dad had really out done himself on this one. She smiled thinking about it. Speaking of Mom and Dad, she had better go keep them company up on the deck or they might get cold feet again.

Elaine emerged from the cabin and grinned. Mom, who never wants to travel is laying out by the pool soaking up the warm sun, and Dad who is usually more at home in his office is dozing right beside her. She was worried about them getting cold feet, she snorted at the thought. That little treacherous voice in the back of her head said, 'projecting much?'

With ruthless determination, Elaine crushed that little voice down and sat down on the foot of her Dad's lounge, gently nudging him as he began to snore. "Looks like you two are settling in well for your sailing adventure." she arched an eyebrow at them.

Mary snorted, "Feels good to have some time off. Don't get me wrong, it doesn't feel real and I don't know how we're going to like doing this full time... Still, I can't say your friends lack taste in their traveling arrangements."

Bjorn chuckled as he moved to sit up a bit, as much to avoid dozing back off as to join the conversation. "I'll say. The captain said we could use the fishing gear, but I'm thinking most of these fish are a bit bigger than what I'm used to on the pond back home."

Elaine heard just a hint of wistfulness for his home and his pond and his life but only just a hint. Dad always was the adventurous one. Mom, on the other hand, didn't travel well across the state much less half way around the world. Elaine hoped she wouldn't regret this. At least she thought if they insisted on selling the house she might see if she could talk to Rosen about a way to buy it, without anyone else knowing. If nothing else they could rent it out and have it as a back up plan.

She was drifting off on those thoughts when she heard a loud "Whoo Hooo!!!" from off the port, or was it starboard, oh it didn't matter she thought frustrated with all the nautical terms. Off to the left, she decided with determination. She turned to look and was surprised when no one else seemed to hear it. Then suddenly it all made sense. Skimming across the waves on a giant cartoon, jet powered, surfboard was Ulli. Doing a hand stand and waving his feet wildly in the air.

She giggled out loud and both her parents looked at her odd and stared off on to the water trying to figure out what was funny. She started to explain but Ulli's cartoon surfboard just pancaked into the side of the Mara as he vaults flying through the air to land unceremoniously on the deck. He looked up from the deck and smiled at her, flames shooting out of his head and blowing heart shaped smoke rings in the air. "You're back! Oh but I've missed you! I'm the first Ulli in history to leave the Ulli preserve and boy were the others jealous. Oh they wouldn't say anything but I could tell!"

Elaine was laughing so hard she couldn't speak. Her parents were looking at her like she had lost her mind. What had started out as confused but tolerant looks now were shifting toward concern. Unfortunately, that just made it all the funnier to Elaine. Between Ulli's antics and her parent's lack of AR glasses leading to their complete incomprehension. She just couldn't stop

laughing. It was close to three minutes before she could get herself under control enough to gasp out "Ulli"

They looked at each other and back to her, and the looks on their faces... Well so much for the composure she was trying to regain.

At long last she said, "AR glasses would probably help you understand. Ulli's back and arrived in pure Ulli fashion. He was making me laugh, and you two being so serious..." she shook her head and pulled the glasses off long enough to wipe away the tears, "Sorry. It was just too much." Finally back in full possession of herself, Elaine smiled at her parents, "lets step back in the lounge where we have a screen for you to use, I have someone I want you to meet."

They looked at her a little funny, "Is this that program you were talking about that we would get, this Ulli?" her mom asked.

"Well yes and no. Yes you will get an Ulli but your Ulli won't be like my Ulli. Your Ulli will probably be more like Bob the Mer I had on Atlantis." At their confused looks she tried to explain more, "See, Ullies grow, and adapt to their human. That takes time. Bob was a big help, but he hadn't grown like Ulli, so he was just kind of robotic." She shrugged. "This Ulli was made from a split of Michael Shultzinger's Ulli. So it had a personality when I got it." she snorted amused thinking back on her first meeting with Ulli. "Since then though he's not even the same as Michael's Ulli because now he's been growing and adapting to me."

Through the speakers on her AR glasses she hears Ulli pipe up in a affected upper class British accent, "Quite right, I'm nothing like that uncouth ruffian of my miss spent youth."

Elaine couldn't keep the smile off her face but managed to continue without another giggle fit. "So you'll get great helpers who will grow into exactly what you want, over time. I want you to meet MY Ulli, because I think you'll like him. Even if he is a complete goof." She said more for Ulli's benefit than her parents.

With indulgent looks they got up and went into the lounge. Bjorn remembering when she was a little girl with her newest discovery to show them. The nostalgia almost hurt, she would never be that little nine year old girl again, but he was so proud of who she was becoming.

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When everyone was inside, Elaine said to Ulli, "Use the wall screen, I want you to meet my parents."

The screen flashed on and there was Ulli, bare chested and with his grass skirt, and a tie. "Hello Mr. and Mrs. Winters it is a pleasure to meet you." He said in a serious tone.

Elaine grinned, "Ulli what's with the tie?"

The serious look faded, "Elaine! I'm meeting your parents, I need to make a good impression."

All three grinned at him, "Ulli, I want them to meet you. Not this, so drop the boy on the first date routine and show my parents why you had me laughing like a lunatic a few minutes ago."

Ulli did a fair impression of looking embarrassed and dutifully played the scene for them from Elaine's perspective. Elaine started to chuckle again, this time picking up the music she had missed the first time. He was playing a customized little Ulli Ulli song set to the tune of Wooly

Bully by the Sam Sham and the Pharaohs. The lyrics get to "watch it now here he comes," as Ulli pancakes the cartoon surfboard into the side of the Mara and lands on the deck to "Wipeout" being screamed.

Bjorn and Mary were both laughing and shaking their heads. "OK, I get it now. We're going to need a pair of these AR glasses, aren't we?" Mary said.

Elaine just smiled, "It helps. Ulli is always there and makes always makes me laugh." Ulli puffed out his chest in pride on the screen.

Mary grinned, "I'm glad deer, though that's what I have your father for."

Bjorn swatted her back side playfully, "Hey now."

As Mary snuggled in to him, Elaine rolled her eyes. "I'd say get a room you two, but if Ulli's here we're probably too close to MU."

Ulli shook his head, "Not at all, I've got extended range now. You kids go have fun, and I'll watch Elaine for you."

"ULLI!!!" Elaine exclaimed in an exasperated tone that caused both Bjorn and Mary to break into fresh laughter.

Ulli looked confused, "What Elaine?"

Elaine shook her head, "Well first, while I am glad my parents still love each other and still want to be alone together after all of these years, I DO NOT want to THINK about it! Secondly what is this 'I'll watch Elaine' like I'm five and need a keeper?"

Ulli made a confused face, "Is this like wanting me to talk to you from the other room's speakers while you're getting dressed?"

Elaine sighed, "Sure if that means you'll just quite talking about it."

Ulli shook his head, "Humans are so confusing sometimes. Oh and as to watching you, that's what I always do. Elaine we've talked about this, you're my human and it's an Ulli's job to always watch out for you."

Mary put a hand on Elaine's shoulder, "Your friend Ulli is very nice. I think I approve."

Elaine sighed, "Well that's good because you and Dad are going to get your very own Ullies very soon."

Ulli spoke up, "They can get them now if they wish?"

What Ulli had said about extended range finally clicked with Elaine, "Yeah about that. How is that possible?"

Ulli shrugged, "MU has extended it's communications network with lighter than air drones since the last time you were here."

"Oh, that's really cool. Ulli start with printing two pair of AR glasses, and two interface bracelets for Mom and Dad. I'd like them to have the help so they don't get lost when they get to MU." She turned toward her parents, "The place can be like a 3D maze if you don't have an Ulli to help you find your way around."

"Oh honey I don't know." Bjorn started.

"Daddy, I know you know how to use AR glasses and Ulli just makes things easier. This isn't like the AI assistants back in the States that spy on you for the marketing companies. You pay for the Ulli, and you're in control of what he is allowed to share."

Ulli snorted from the screen, "Ullies are not stoolies. You just need to set our privacy settings for what you want, and then we're incapable of violating them."

Bjorn chuckled, "OK, I suppose you're going to drag me into this century one way or the other."

"Yes," Elaine said definitively. "Oh and Ulli have the Ullies set their privacy settings to match mine, at least at first. Oh and have you checked with Michael for any updates?"

Ulli actually looked offended, "Of course! After all it's his information too, at least in part."

Elaine smiled, "I knew I could count on you Ulli," She smiled as the offended look was replaced by pride. "Oh and you can customize their look however you want. The Tiki god head stays but voice and clothes etc, even if you'd rather have a woman, you can do it." She grinned just a bit guiltily, "Dad, if you're going to get creative, while others don't normally see your Ulli, sometimes it is socially necessary to have them visible." She flushed slightly thinking about an embarrassing dinner on Atlantis with Tattianna. She felt an unusual excitement at seeing her friends from MU again, having Ulli here just makes it harder to be patient and wait.

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Bjorn and Mary had spent the last twenty minutes getting to know their Ullies. Bjorn also got to know the Mermaid Mara for whom the ship was named. Mary took this with amused and tolerant long suffering. Elaine knew her Dad was just trying to get a reaction and she was determined not to give him one.

Soon enough though, MU was visible off on the horizon. She looked at it with new eyes this time. This wasn't a weekends stay for a story, this was now home. It really didn't feel much like it at the moment but when she imagined getting to see the people again it didn't seem like a strange place either. Having Mom and Dad here too was going to be nice. Even if they were eventually going out to live on their boat, with the new extended range of MU's communication grid, they could visit when ever they wanted. She was lost in these thoughts when Bjorn spoke up from beside her.

"That really is something. Looks almost exactly like a natural island from here. Hard to believe that it supports over a million people though." He said musing.

"It's not as cramped as it sounds. When you compare square footage, it's less densely packed than Seattle was." she shrugged.

"Oh it wasn't that so much as just, well it's amazing what we've been able to do since I was a boy." He said with a bit of a wistful tone.

Elaine couldn't resist an opening like that, "Yeah back when you were a kid didn't they think that the whole world was on the back of a turtle or something?" she grinned up at him, trying for innocent and failing.

He just snorted and hugged her, "With any luck and a little mercy, you're time is coming young lady."

Mary joined them at the rail as they sailed into the central cavern and made their way toward the Mara's dock. Elaine felt like dancing in place, there walking up to the dock as they approached was a tiny blond woman who appeared to be smuggling a basket ball under her light sun dress. "Tattianna's come to welcome us!"

Mary chuffed, "Well aren't we important. Not a few of my friends back home would love to meet her."

Bjorn sounded a bit worried, "Should she be walking this much in her condition?"

Mary and Elaine rounded on him as one, "She's pregnant Dad, not an invalid!" Mary just nodded as if nothing more needed to be said.

Bjorn shrugged, "Well..." he started and then seeing the looks he was getting thought better of it. "It's a nice gesture anyway."

Marry nodded in approval at his save, "Yes it is."

Chapter 2

Elaine chuckled to herself watching the in processing clerks falling all over themselves to get their jobs done, as Tattianna's politely worded but imperiously given commands to expedite things turned the whole formerly tranquil office into a zoo.

Bjorn was led out of the little office by Tattianna, and Marry was escorted in. Bjorn had quite the bemused look on his face, "Your friend there is quite the force of nature, when she determines to be." he said in a bit of dismay.

Elaine couldn't hold in the giggle, "Yup, Daddy, that she is."

A few short minutes later and Mary too came out of the office looking a bit bewildered, followed by Tattianna and a rather haggard looking Grant Longstrom. Elaine felt sorry for the man, after all she put him through on her first trip here, she could only imagine what her parents must have been like, and with Tattianna there the whole time bustling things along. She started giggling.

Grant looked up, "Ah Ms. Winters. I am so glad to see you again." His haggard look didn't really retreat but the smile did go all the way to his eyes.

Elaine got control of her giggles, "Ah Mr. Longstrom, it is good to see you again. Am I next?" she was ever so glad of Ulli putting the little name tag above his head or she would never have been able to remember his name.

Grant shook his head, "Afraid not. I am with Guest Relations. Your parents are here as Mrs. Shultzinger's guests for now. You need to go through the other door," he pointed off to his left. "Unfortunately your paperwork will be more extensive. After all you're going to be with us, for a bit longer." he smiled.

Tattianna took Mary in one arm and Bjorn in the other, and smiled at Elaine. "That is why I am here. You go, do the necessary paperwork. I'll take your parents up to the suite you stayed in last visit. Michael and I just booked it for you again until you can get your living arrangements settled more permanently."

Elaine shook her head, "Tattianna you're just too good to me." She kissed her friend on the cheek, "Don't let them get too rowdy." she winked at her dad and went to face the beurocracy.

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Tattianna chatted away pleasantly as they wound their way through a confusing maze of corridors, large open air public plazas, up two lift tubes, and finally to a door she simply whisked open at their approach. "Welcome home." She smiled at them, sweeping her arm through the air as if to reveal and display, much as she must have done for hundreds of modeling jobs before.

Mary smiled, "Thank you so much for this, you really needn't have bothered."

Tattianna just shook her head, "Yes actually I kind of did. I wanted to meet you both and this was the easiest way to do it." She winked at them. Turning to Mary, "Besides this way I can invite you and Elaine shopping in the morning." Then with a sly look toward Mary, she called over her shoulder, "Of course you're invited too Bjorn if you would like."

"Ahh... Thank you ever so much for the invitation, and even more so for the easy opportunity to decline with grace." Bjorn said with a slight smile. Both ladies chuckled, Mary knew Bjorn would rather chew his own arm off than get stuck shopping with the three of them. "I think I'll probably find plenty to keep me busy here, this architecture is amazing. Building," he stopped himself, "Printing, I guess I should say, printing this island up the way they did, really allowed for some amazing effects."

Tattianna smiled, "Well make yourselves at home. Ask your Ulli if you need anything, they've been instructed to contact mine if the need arises." She rubbed her swollen stomach absently, "I'll leave you to relax after your journey. Elaine should be done in a couple of hours, and well, "she patted her belly fondly, "little Michael here is demanding more food."

Mary nodded knowingly, "They do that, and the demanding doesn't stop." She snorted thinking of leaving their home, and jobs behind.

Tattianna turned toward the door, "By the way, if I haven't said so before, I'm really glad you chose to come." and out the door she went.

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Elaine was finally done with all of the processing. She had taken her oath of allegiance and was now officially a MU citizen. She knew it should be a time to party but after all of the travel and seeing Tattianna and Ulli again, she really just wanted to sleep for about a week. Ulli directed her to a small shop to pick up a bottle of wine, and then off to a small bakery for a fresh loaf of bread. Each time he just said "Mother says, pick up..." She was beginning to wonder if her mother having an Ulli that could talk to her Ulli was really a good idea when she realized it meant that her mother wasn't calling her for each of these little chores and she smiled.

Ulli opened the door for her as she approached the suite. "Hi Mom, Daddy, I'm home." She could smell dinner cooking. "Somebody has been busy, it sure smells good."

"Oh hi honey," Mary says, "Thank you for picking up those things for me." She takes the bottle of wine and the fresh baguettes. "There was beef I think in the fridge but I couldn't find any bread or wine." She bustled over to the counter and put the food down. "Tattianna was wonderful but she didn't leave us any keys, so I couldn't go out and grab some. Besides I'm not sure I could find my way back."

Elaine smiled, "Did you ask your Ulli?"

Mary shrugged, "I just assumed he would have to call Tattianna, and I didn't want to bother her. She was looking a bit tired from this morning."

Elaine laughed. "Uh Mom, Ulli is your key. He opens the door for you, and he is your guide. Just put on those AR glasses we printed out on the Mara and tell him where you want to go and then follow his directions."

Mary looked a bit shocked that it could be so simple and then felt a little dumb for not figuring it out, "Quit laughing at me, young lady, your turn is coming."

Elaine laughed harder, remembering her fathers statement of almost the exact same thing. "I love you Mom. If you ever get stumped while living here, just ask Ulli. He's your interface with the infrastructure of the island."

Bjorn came back in to the main room from the far door, "This place is absolutely amazing. I

mean it. I forgot my reading glasses and muttered to myself about it and Ulli adjusted the settings on my AR glasses and brought the print right up to where I could see it. It's amazing."

Elaine smiled, "Daddy, just wait until you try out the shower." With that she collapsed into the chair with a sigh. "I don't want to see another form for at least a year."

Bjorn snorted, "Bureaucracy, can't escape that no matter where you go."

Mary called over to them as she was setting plates on the kitchen's little bar, "If you two are done complaining, dinner's ready."

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Mary met Elaine in the kitchen the next morning. "You're right about that shower. Why don't we have those back in the states?"

Elaine smiled, "Same reason we don't have a lot of the things you'll find on MU. Regulation. If you wanted to put something like that in your home back in Washington, how many approvals would you need to get? From the bank, from the county, probably from the EPA? It's just cheaper and easier to do what is already approved. It's kind of like what would have happened if they had said that roads are for horses and buggies and cars didn't belong on them."

Mary shook her head, "Maybe. Sure sounds like they've gotten to you."

Elaine grabbed the English muffin her mother had just buttered as she turned toward the door Ulli was already opening. "Come on lets not keep Tattianna waiting. Maybe after you see a bit more of MU, they'll have gotten to you too."

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As usual, Ulli managed to get everyone there on time. When they met up with Tattianna, Mary and Elaine were confused. They weren't in the main shopping district. This was unadorned door, with only a little brass plaque that simply read, "Monique's"

After greeting Tattianna, Elaine couldn't help it she had to ask, "So, are we picking up Monique as well?"

Tattianna smiled, and put a reassuring hand on Elaine's arm. "I'm about to share with you, one of MU's guarded secrets." She winked, "Monique's IS the premier destination for shopping. It's by appointment only, and I've secured her services for the full day!"

Elaine couldn't help but ask, "This is a shop? It looks like a house."

Tattianna smiled, "Of course. If you know of Monique's then you know what to expect, and if you don't know of Monique's then it's probably not the place for you."

Elaine and Marry still looked confused but nodded. Something about Tattianna's enthusiasm was catching. "Ladies, these last few weeks have been trying on all of us. Let the retail therapy begin!" With a wide smile she motions for Ulli to open the door.

Inside was a room that looked much like a London tea house, there were dainty wire frame

chairs and small tables along two walls, and a three panel silk changing screen at the far corner of the room. Two doors sat in the middle of each wall facing the tables. A mature woman in her early fifties walked out from behind the screen. "Welcome to Monique's. I'm Monique Estovia. Would you like to start with some basic refreshments before we get started on some serious shopping?" The last she said with a wicked smile.

Tattianna dropped all pretense of refinement and giggled like a school girl. "This ladies is going to be fun! Monique my friends here have never had a personal shopping experience before. We'll be showing them the ropes so to speak."

Monique's smile widened, "Oh then of course. Let's start with some Tea and basic design ideas." The off to one door she called, "Vince, some tea please."

A few moments later a large man, in his late thirties, with dark wavy hair wearing a very snug fitting tuxedo shirt over his bulging muscles came in carrying a tray set with a very delicate tea set. His deep rich baritone voice, just above a whisper and smooth as velvet asked first of Tattianna and then the others as he worked his way around the table. "Cream or sugar?" He efficiently laid out the tea service with the elegance that comes with long practice.

Tattianna, smiled and flirted "Vince, you know how I like it, just a little cream and you're all the sugar I need." Vince smiled and played along.

Mary was shocked, and Elaine blushed. Tattianna just giggled, "Oh come on now, Marry. You can enjoy the view, we're married not dead." Elaine giggled a bit at her mothers deeper blush, but she must have decided to get into the spirit of it because when it was her turn to get tea, she flirted right back with Vince.

Elaine just shook her head and smiled, "I'm not saying it wouldn't be nice to be able to order them off the rack, like a pair of shoes but that really wasn't the shopping I had planned for the day."

Tattianna looked scandalized, "Don't mention off the rack shopping here." The she laughed and winked to show she was just playing. "Vince has been with Monique for many years. He's one of her main attractions." She said loudly enough for him to hear. Then quieter as he withdrew, "He does sort of make you want to bite the buttons off that shirt to see what's underneath."

Both Elaine and Marry laughed guiltily. To distract herself from her recent thoughts, Marry said to Elaine, "You wouldn't really want to order one to fit, men that is, or you'd be bored with them within a week. Might not be bad to find one a little less stubborn than your father though."

They all shared a chuckle, and the tea was good. As they had settled in and Vince had worked his usual magic of breaking the ice, Monique came back out trailed by three young women with sample books. "Now for the main event." She said with a smile. The sample books opened and swatches of material began to be passed around. On the changing screen multiple designers patterns were being modeled by a holographic projection.

Tattianna smiled, "We find fabrics we like, we find designs we like. We get a body scan." she punctuates that with a wave toward a little confessional looking booth at the far end of the room. "We get a consult with the designers based upon our scans. With any luck, we can try on some clothes before lunch. Maybe find something nice."

Marry was in a bit of shock. "You mean we're going to pick the fabric, and talk to the actual designer about the clothes?"

Monique shrugged, "Of course. Can't have you leaving here looking like you just picked up what ever I had laying around now can we?"

The rest of the afternoon was a bit of a blur to Marry but Elaine and Tattianna seemed to be right at home. Mary's budget conscious instincts screamed that it was a bit scary to see how quickly this kind of thing had just become normal to Elaine, but Elaine didn't seem to let it go to her head. Tattianna certainly hasn't seemed to suffer because of it. Not at all what she was expecting of "rich people".

Chapter 3

Bjorn rolled over and realized as comfortable as it felt sleeping in, he'd slept about as much as he was going to. So quite with Elaine and Mary both gone a lot like the early mornings back home before he went into his office. Laying there for a couple extra minutes, was nice but his bladder was demanding he get up.

His feet sunk into the soft bedside carpet and he just shook his head at the luxury of this suite. He stumbled in to the bath and was beginning his morning routine when from out of the near total silence, "Bjorn, do you have plans for lunch?" Bjorn's heart jumped out of his chest and he spun to see an empty room. "I am sorry I startled you. It's just Ulli."

Bjorn started laughing. "Ulli, bathroom time is my time. Damn it, I now know why Elaine made you talk to her from the other room."

From the other room Bjorn heard over the speaker, "Is this better?"

Bjorn still laughing at how bad he jumped, just replied, "Yes Ulli, that's fine. So why are you asking about lunch?"

"I posted your basic portfolio on the MU contractor posting site. Just in case you wanted to grow your networking while you are here. I have an Ulli asking to arrange a lunch meeting for you."

"Well, I figured I was kind of on vacation, but sure never hurts to meet a potential client." Bjorn wiped the water from his face. "What time is it? What time do they want to meet?"

Ulli replied, "It's 1030hrs and they are asking for 1200hrs so there is plenty of time, should you want to go."

Bjorn laughed, "Never turn down a free lunch, Ulli."

"Ullie's don't eat lunch."

Bjorn laughed again. "You don't know what great stuff you're missing."

"Maybe one day, we'll be able to be tied into our human's enough that we can share that experience with them."

Bjorn shook his head, "I'd have said that was a long way off a few years ago, Ulli. Any more though... it could happen."

"Would you like some music while you get ready?" Ulli asked.

Bjorn wasn't much for music and he had really enjoyed the silence of the morning but a little back ground music might not be all bad he thought as he stepped into the shower. "Sure Ulli, light her up, oh and make the water hot for me."

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Bjorn got out of the shower feeling great. Maybe it was all the luxury of the suite or maybe it was just having the hard decisions made, but he felt relaxed. More calm than he had in the months

since Elaine had dropped her bombshell on the family. Ulli piped in from the other room, "Your new suit is nearly complete."

Bjorn stopped mid stride, "Uh 'new' suit, Ulli?"

"Of course, it will be ready in about ten minutes."

"Ulli, I didn't order a new suit." Bjorn said trying to regain the calm of just a few heart beats ago.

"But you did, right before you got in the shower." Ulli sounded confused.

"Ulli I said to print me out something suitable to wear! I don't need a new suit any of my already paid for suits would have been fine!" Bjorn was wondering how much this little blunder was going to cost him.

Ulli sounded truly distraught, "But they weren't suitable. I asked Tattianna's Ulli for advice. Studies show that when one's human is properly dressed for a meeting there is a twenty seven percent improvement in the outcome of the meeting."

Bjorn sighed, "Ulli is it too late to return the suit?"

Ulli sounding completely dejected, "I'm afraid so. It was well within my preprogrammed spending limits, did I do wrong?"

Bjorn sighed again, "Depends, how bad is this going to hurt my wallet?"

Ulli piped up, "No damage to your wallet, it was charged to the room. It is only a half of a Sovereign for the design and less than four pips for the materials."

Bjorn started to feel a bit better it didn't sound that bad, then he started working the math in his head. "Ulli what is that in US Dollars he asked frustrated."

"In US dollars that is six thousand three hundred and eighty. "

Bjorn felt his blood pressure hit the top of his head, "Six THOUSAND dollars for a damn suit?! Ulli have you lost your mind?!"

Ulli said barely above a whisper, "It was less than one percent of the account on the room. My spending limits don't trigger until we get to five percent."

Bjorn felt his heart sink. A month's pay for a suit, because the stupid machine was working off percentages. He thought he was going to have a stroke, and then he realized what Ulli had said. "Wait a minute? You said that was less than one percent of the room account?"

Ulli sounded a little less quavering when he piped back up this time, "Yes between the ten Sovereigns that Shultzinger Enterprises loads the room with for guests, and the five Sovereigns that were part of Ms. Winter's relocation allowance, and the two Sovereigns transferred to the room account by Ms. Winters on the first day, your suit easily fell within the normal parameters for expenditures."

Bjorn needed a drink. "Ulli, from now on, any time you want to spend more than two hundred dollars, you had better talk to me first."

"Parameters updated."

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Bjorn followed Ulli's lead as he wove his way through the maze of corridors that is MU, and arrived at the restaurant just as a young man in an expensive suit approached with a big AR bubble over his head labeling him Raj Pradep Chief Coordinator of MicroShips Industries.

Raj saw him and smiled, and with a perfect British accent said, "Mr. Winters. It is so good of you to join me. Please let's get to our table, we have much to cover."

Bjorn smiled back, the young man's enthusiasm was certainly infectious. "Thank you for the invite. Please, call me Bjorn."

Raj nodded, "Certainly, this way." as he led off toward the Maitre d.

Bjorn was impressed with the restaurant. It was obviously a high end place. A large glass bowl on the bottom of the island, every table had a subsurface ocean view. There were a surprising number of fish here considering their distance from shore, and they were pleasant to watch. He didn't get long though, for as soon as the waiters had departed with their order, Raj got right down to business.

"Bjorn, you might wonder why with all of the engineers on MU, we contacted you on your vacation." He smiled politely.

Bjorn shrugged, "Had crossed my mind."

Raj nodded, "Well we have reviewed some of your work and hope that you can be the one to help us, but I confess that isn't our only motivation." Bjorn didn't respond, he just arched one eyebrow. "The social profile said that you are the father of Elaine Winters, the new MU public relations officer." Bjorn started to protest but Raj cut him off. "Before you say anything, we're not expecting you to intercede on our behalf. We will however soon be pitching Michael Shultzinger with this project and it boosts our standing to have ties to MU. Most of my team and associated businesses are not citizens of MU. Showing a MU connection can only help our profile." Bjorn cocked his head to one side considering, and then nodded. "Good, I didn't want to start a relationship with undisclosed ulterior motives. Still we do have a technical issue that we hope you can help us resolve. The standard contract for such consultation is a set amount for 'Consideration' to establish a working relationship. We propose a quarter of a Sovereign, and if we use your solution, five basis of the initial coin issue. Are these terms agreeable to you?"

Bjorn shook his head, "I'm not really up to speed on MU currency yet. Ulli how much money is he talking about?"

Raj smiled as Ulli translated for him. "Depending on the market, it is about three thousand of your US dollars, and one, two thousandth of the stock value of the company."

Bjorn rubbed his forehead, "This isn't exactly how I'm used to doing business."

Raj nodded, "Well the consideration is just for the time you spend with me today. If you can't help, you take that and we part friends. If you can help, then your pay becomes more valuable as the company grows. Or you can always sell it off for it's current market value. Though I strongly suggest you wait until after our Non-Disclosure Agreements are signed before you make any plans to sell." He grinned widely, "When we make this happen, those on the ground floor might be able to buy their own islands."

"An NDA, it's pretty common but usually I know a bit more about the job first."

Raj grinned again, "MU does things a little differently, and frankly I like it better this way. The NDA has been reviewed by your Ulli and is just the basic, standard, agreement. You'll not disclose what you are working on, and we'll not use your technologies without paying you. Oh and you can't hold us up for more later." He smiled. "Not that you have that reputation in the industry. As I said we did our homework on you, and you're not here solely for your relationship with your daughter."

Bjorn verbally signed the contract, all recorded and legal like, witnessed by both Ullies. The agreement was barely registered when a scaled down virtual model appeared on the table. Bjorn wistled softly.

Raj was grinning like a lunatic, and explaining fast enough that Bjorn was having a hard time keeping up. Still when the problem was explained it seemed too simple, like perhaps they had just been searching for complex solutions for so long that the easy solution had escaped them.

Bjorn rubbed his hands together and absently cracked his knuckles. "Let me get this straight, your only real hurdle, or at least the one you want me to tackle is heat dissipation?"

Raj shook his head, "I know seems like it should be easy, but it isn't. Everything we've thought of adds more and more weight, and we just can't put on a cooling system."

Bjorn grinned, "You're coming at this wrong. Don't dissipate the heat, concentrate it. Just move it all here," as he reached out and grabbed on of the virtual models, "Lengthen it about this much, yes it is more weight but then you use the heat recovery for propulsion. You add weight but you also add power. Long slow power not just in the initial boost phase."

Raj sat there stunned. "I need my other engineers to run the numbers but it looks like that might work." He shook his head in disbelief. "How do you propose to move the heat?"

Bjorn shrugged, "I can think of several ways but simple graphene conduits seem the simplest. Don't blame your wiz kids, they are used to a squanderable abundance of energy. I grew up in a time when scarcity and conservation of energy was a priority. This just needed an old school solution."

Raj grinned. "If this works you've earned every ounce of your payment."

Bjorn nodded, "I wouldn't have it any other way. Still this will probably take longer to happen than I have left on this old world, but it will make an amazing inheritance."

Raj shook his head, "This will be a reality sooner than you think. Thank you for this, and I am sorry to do this, but as we are presenting next week before Mr. Shultzinger, I need to get this idea to my engineers for them to model for that presentation."

Bjorn laughed, "As long as you don't stick me with the check. I think this place might be a little rich for my blood."

Raj grinned as he stood to leave, "Not for long."

Chapter 4

Bjorn was sitting at the breakfast bar, doodling with his AR glasses when the door opened and a very bedraggled looking Mary and Elaine stagger through the door.

"... woman sure knows how to shop." Mary was commenting as the door opened.

Elaine chuckled, "She's a force of nature. I haven't had this much fun in a while though, and I usually dread clothes shopping."

Mary shook her head, "I couldn't tell." she said with a snort, leaning over to give Bjorn a quick kiss on his forehead as she made her way around him to collapse groaning on the sofa.

"Mom!" Elaine exclaimed as she made her way past her father, sparing him a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek, before settling down beside her mother with a sigh.

Bjorn grinned, they both looked exhausted but he could tell they had enjoyed themselves. "So do I want to know the damage?" He asked with a grin.

Elaine shook her head, "No, this one was on me, so no you don't get to know."

Mary smiled, "I tried to be the voice of reason and restraint but when Tattianna decides you 'Just have to have...' it's hard to hold to your restraint."

Elaine nodded enthusiastically, "So Daddy what did you do, having the place to yourself all day?"

Bjorn sighed, "Well Ulli tried to impoverish us, with getting me a new suit." he watched amused as they both looked his way. "Fortunately, he also lined me up with a business lunch that might pay for it."

"Oh?" Mary asked. "What kind of business lunch?"

Bjorn smiled and shook his head, "Oh probably the biggest project I've ever worked on. My part in it all, is probably over, but the earnest money was enough to offset the six thousand dollar suit that Ulli just bought for me without asking first."

"There should have been plenty of funds on the room to cover that, Daddy" Elaine said.

Bjorn shook his head, "That's not the point young lady, and you know it. Matter of fact that's part of the problem. The amount, compared to the mountains of money you put on account for this room, is why as a percentage Ulli didn't think he needed to ASK first."

Mary looked a little worried, but Elaine just waved her hand, "It's a combination of me putting money on file, and MU putting money on file for me to use as part of their relocation bonus for taking the job. A splurge on a good suit isn't a problem, I want to know more about this job?"

Bjorn sighed, "Well it's a bit more than a splurge, but yeah I think this job will make up for it, if they're successful." He shrugged, "I did my part. More I think than they thought when they hired me."

Mary was confused, "Why would they hire you if they didn't think you could do the job?"

Bjorn grinned, "I think they thought they were buying some sort of access." He looked over at Elaine, "Seems, they think hiring the father of the new PR manager for MU would look good when they were pitching one Michael Shultzinger later this week." He raised an eyebrow at her, waiting for a response.

"Why would they expect that?!" Elaine couldn't help but squeak a little when she said it.

Bjorn just shrugged, but Mary had an odd look cross her face. Bjorn made a mental note to ask her about it later but just answered his daughter's question. "They said that they aren't MU citizens, and they thought tying in to someone who had MU ties might look better when they pitch their idea."

Elaine relaxed. "Daddy what exactly is their idea?"

Bjorn shook his head, "Sorry baby, can't talk about it yet. NDA and all."

Mary threw a couch cushion at him, "You never let that stop you from talking to me before."

Bjorn shrugged, "Call it a surprise then. I don't want to prejudice anyone on this idea before they present it. It's a pretty ambitious project, but if they can pull it off, it could change things as much as the Internet or Shultzinger's 3D printing tech."

Now Elaine looked worried. "Are you sure I shouldn't give Michael some sort of heads up?"

Bjorn shrugged, "I think maybe that's what they were hoping would happen, but no I don't think so. I told them that I didn't know the man and may never even meet the man. They acted like they didn't care but everything they told me seemed like it was positioned to be fed to a future investor to 'prime the pump' so to speak."

Mary sighed, "Well I can answer that one for you. We're meeting with the man Friday evening for dinner." she didn't sound a bit excited about it.

"Oh?" Bjorn asked genuinely surprised.

"Daddy, it's just Shabbot dinner with them, Tattianna invited us." Elaine did her best to make it sound positive and like no big deal.

"Yep, gonna have to sit there and make nice with him, instead of giving him a piece of my mind for getting my little girl into all this dangerous business." Mary didn't sound like she was sure how long that plan would last.

"Mom! He didn't 'get me into' anything. I am a reporter and I followed a story, and I did what I thought best with the information." She was starting to get angry, and each time she was stressed as she attempted to set her mother straight.

Bjorn decided to change the subject, "What's a shabbot dinner?"

Mary held her peace but Bjorn and Elaine had both seen that look before and this was far from over. Still Elaine was too tired to fight about it now. Kicking off her shoes and rubbing her sore feet, she explained to her father. "Well the way Tattianna explained it to me, is just like a lot of American families have Sunday Dinner where they all gather around after church to have a meal, Jews tend to do the same thing. Because they can't cook on their Sabbath though, they just have the big meal that Friday night."

Bjorn shrugged, "Ah so good thing I've got a new suit then." He smiled at them both and moved

over to slip off Mary's shoes and massage her feet for her.

Mary harrumphed, not wanting to give Michael Shultzinger even the slightest benefit of the doubt. Still it was very hard to remain angry when Bjorn was rubbing her feet. Elaine watched her parents with a small envious grin. Over twenty years of marriage and they still took care of each other. They seemed to know almost by instinct what the other needed and tried to give it to them. She wondered if she would ever find a man like that. Her dating experience had reminded her of an old joke. 'Men are like parking spaces, the best one's are taken and the rest are handicapped.' The irony was just a bit too much for her to see the humor in it at the moment. Still she was happy for her mother that she seemed to have found a good one.

* * *

After everyone had decompressed for a few minutes and the immediate excitement of the days events had faded Mary started to think about getting dinner ready. Elaine shook her head, "No mom, we're not doing this. As much as I'd love some home cooked meals, you guys are on vacation. We should eat out, or at least order in."

Mary shook her head, "Nonsense, we can make something quick, it won't take but a minute."

Bjorn smiled, "Two choices ladies. We can try to get into this little restaurant I had lunch at this afternoon. Or if you would prefer, Ulli has already said he can have a sampler platter from that restaurant delivered to our door in about twenty minutes." He grinned at them. "I should tell you, if we go there, you sit inside the fish bowl while the fish swim around you outside."

Elaine giggled, "I'd never thought of it like that but yeah kinda. Mom, you'd love it."

Bjorn raised an eyebrow, "Been there before have you?"

Elaine shrugged, "Yeah, first time I had lunch with Tattianna. She reserved the very bottom of table for us. The view is amazing."

Bjorn grinned. "So what say you? Eat with the fishes? Or order in and relax?"

Mary shook her head and smiled, "You use any excuse to eat out. One would think I couldn't cook."

Bjorn grinned, "Nah, it's just that Elaine is right, this is a vacation and making you cook doesn't seem like much of a vacation."

Mary teased, "You could always cook."

Elaine snorted, "THAT certainly doesn't sound like a vacation, though it may improve efforts to diet."

"Hey!" Bjorn did his best to look hurt despite the grin fighting to break free.

Elaine looked down at her shoes with dread but put them back on anyway. "It's decided. Dinner is on me. Ulli, call the restaurant and see if they can fit us in. If there is trouble, let them know the new Public Relations Officer is trying to improve relations with the Public over dinner." She grinned at them both. "What's the point in having strings, if you can't pull them for your parents every once in a while."

Chapter 5

Mike was tired. He rubbed his eyes and let his thoughts drift for a few minutes. There really was nothing else to do, it was less than ten minutes until his appointment with Rebbe Yehuda and nothing else could be adequately addressed in that short of time. This last year had just been a real roller coaster ride. Launching Atlantis and of course Tattianna's pregnancy, and then the whole event with the UN Security Council that followed. He couldn't help it he grinned again thinking of the look that must have been on their faces. Not for the first time, and probably not for the last, he really wished he could have set it up for two way communications instead of just the recorded statement. Those thoughts were mostly self serving, but it was the only shred of humor in the whole tangled mess, so he clung to it.

Then there was that failed suicide bombing. Nigel wasn't really clear about how his guys were in just the right place at just the right time. Good thing though if that plaza had been as busy as it normally was that time of day... Michael shuddered. Still by good luck or G-d's infinite Mercy, only one injured was the suicide bomber and even he wasn't killed. His mind dwelt on the what if's for a moment longer but he just shook himself, take your miracles where you can get them, and be thankful, he thought to himself.

Ulli piped up at this point interrupting any more dark thoughts, "Mike, Rebbe Yehuda can be here a few minutes early if you would like. I'm in contact with his Ulli and they are only about a minute out."

Mike smirked, "Well lets not keep the good Rebbe waiting. He's nice enough to make the trip to my office once a week like this, lets not leave him standing around."

Sure enough he no sooner sat up and straightened his suit but the door opened with a whoosh of air, and in walked a man who looked way too young for as grand a title as rebbe. Rebbe Yehudah ben Nun entered with a solemn and serious look on his face, still at little more than Michael's own age, it was hard to view him as the learned authority he actually was. It wasn't even that he didn't wear the traditional rabbenate clothing, after all the Karaite sect never really went in for that. It was solely his youth, at least until you looked him in the eye.

Combat veterans talk about the thousand yard stare, when the want to refer to someone who's been to see the elephant more times than he would like. Rebbe Yehudah had a ten thousand yard stare. You could tell he had seen the abyss and found a reason to keep going. Right now, Michael felt like he needed that experience desperately. The Rebbe had once told him that IDF soldiers always joke, that you get real world combat experience, about fifteen minutes after you could have really used some real world combat experience. Michael had never been in any military, but standing down the UN Security Council after the little demonstration Bangkok, was what he imagined combat was like, it left him in a very dark place.

Michael stood to greet him, "Rebbe, thank you for coming."

The serious face cracked into a smile, "Michael, it's nothing. You've been so generous with the community here on MU, it's the least I can do."

Michael shook his head, "Taking care of one's own, is the duty of every man. Please have a seat."

The two men settled back into the comfortable chairs, in companionable silence for a few seconds. Then Michael leaned forward, resting his fore arms on the desk. "Well the world hasn't

ended," he started, then smiled, "I still wonder if I did the right thing."

Rebbe Yehuda, leaned back in the chair and crossed his legs comfortably and shrugged. "We've been over this a dozen times since your meeting in Bangkok. They didn't leave you much choice, and so long as they don't attack you, no one is harmed by it. I don't see what other option you had. Had you done nothing, they would have kept coming until people did die."

Michael let out a long sigh, "Yeah I know." He shook his head, "Look, I'm sorry to keep coming back to this, but I'm just frustrated with how quickly they were able to drag me down to that level."

The Rebbe's eyes lost their focus, as if he was seeing something else completely, "Those who only understand force, have a remarkable way of doing that to even the best of men."

Michael just let out a grunt of agreement. "I suppose all we can do is figure out what's next."

The Rebbe smiled a small understanding agreement. "Seems that is always the way of things." Then changing the subject, "How is Tattianna?"

Michael chuckled, "Rock solid as always. Though her condition means I tend to be a little more careful about how I say things. I won't say mood swings, mind you, my survival skills are better than that, but lets say she has less patience than she used to have sometimes."

The Rebbe snorted, "Yes that is to be expected, and will pass in time. Still I am glad to see that you've started on your family. It is the next generation that matters. That is where our better selves can be found." Again his eyes appear to focus on some distant vision that only he can see. "They are the potential, to make all of our strife and struggle, mean something."

Michael whistled a low note, "That my good Rebbe, is why we have these talks." Both men chuckled a bit. "Seriously though, it helps put what needs to be done for survival in perspective. Not that any line can be crossed without consequence, but rather that," he hesitated looking for the words.

"That the cost of the consequences is acceptable for the chance it brings the next generation, to hopefully do better?" The Rebbe supplied.

Michael nodded, "Just so." Again the silence drew on for a few seconds as both men thought about what that might mean in the real world, as opposed to just a thought experiment.

"Oh speaking of Tattianna," Michael changed the subject again. "She decided to invite Elaine Winters and her parents to Shabbot dinner."

Rebbe Yehuda's eyebrow arched in amusement. "She seems determined in her efforts."

Michael leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes for a moment. "Yes she is. I wish I could just be opposed to it but I'm drawn to her as well." He let out a big sigh. This wasn't the first time that he and the Rebbe had discussed Elaine, but Michael was feeling his resistance weakening. "I..." he stopped thinking for a second and started again. "Any man who looked at Elaine would want her. I'm not just any man. I've got responsibilities to Tattianna and soon children, and to MU, and to the Shultzinger Enterprises shareholders. I'm a public figure, private lives and public figures don't really work."

Rebbe Yehuda felt the smile playing at the corners of his mouth as he struggled to keep a straight face. "It's been a long time since I saw a man try this hard to talk himself out of something, that there is no reason to deny himself."

Michael shook his head, "What if it doesn't work out? With all the additional pressures involved?"

I am risking everything!"

Yehudah actually laughed out loud at this point. "Michael my good friend, we all risk everything, every day of our lives. One thing about life, is that no one makes it out alive." Grinning to help lighten the mood, "Do your due diligence, just as you did before you added Tattianna to your life. Write your ketuvah fair and with a better understanding this time of what a marriage really requires. Be happy." He said the last with a shrug that seemed to say, 'why not?'

Michael grumped, "Glad you find this so amusing, because your family is invited to dinner as well."

Yehudah chuckled, "Looking for a buffer between her and her father?"

Michael shook his head, "I'll handle that when and if it comes to that. No I just want you to meet her."

Yehudah nodded. Then almost as an after thought. "Invite David Rosen as well."

Michael's eye brow raised, "Really?"

Yehudah shrugged, "I know he's American style Orthodox, but eventually we need to get past all of these labels and this is a good opportunity for me to put out an olive branch. The restoration of all things is coming one day, let us try to restore a little part of it all each opportunity we get."

It was Michael's turn to shrug, "It's not like he and I don't have a good working relationship anyway. I'll make the invite."

Yehudah nodded. "If we Jews can't learn to focus on what unites us rather than all the little things that divide us, what hope has the rest of the world?"

Mike chuckled, "I'm not planning on hosting peace talks. Still you're right, no reason not to invite him. Maybe he'll bring his youngest with him. I hear she's visiting from Cambridge this month."

Time had gotten away with them again as it often did on these weekly meetings. Ulli just silently appears and points to his bare wrist where a watch would normally go and Michael checked the time. Yehudah's Ulli must have been doing the same thing for he stood up. "I know you've got appointments."

Michael groaned a bit, "Yeah always something. Thank you again, these talks help more than you know Rebbe."

Yehudah smiled, "Any time Michael. I'm happy to help. I assume Ulli will give us the time you want to see us Friday evening?"

Michael smiled, "Yeah where would we be without Ulli." Then suddenly it hit him. The terrorist attack. It had been Ulli that thwarted it. He tried to keep his face neutral as Yehudah left. Before the next appointment arrived he quizzed Ulli about the event. "Of course Ullies are not Stoolies so we couldn't tell you what had been learned of his plans. We could however redirect traffic away from the area and make sure that trained security was routed toward the problem area." Ulli shrugged. "No confidences broken. No innocents harmed. All just a matter of timing."

Michael wanted more time to think about this new revelation but the Atlantean Ambassador was arriving at that moment.

* * *

Michael was distracted through the meeting with the Atlantean Ambassador. He kept thinking about the Ulli issue. As the meeting wrapped up, Michael told Ulli to delay the next meeting if possible and get John Stuttzman online.

A few minutes later the harried face of John Stuttzman appeared floating in the VR glasses. "Hi Mike. What can I do for you?"

"John, thanks for making the time. Did you know that the Ullies were responsible for the thwarting of that suicide bombing attack last week?" Mike bluntly asked.

John shook his head, "Figured that out did you? Yeah I had my suspicions at the time and quizzed Ulli about it. Forced it to go step by step through it's logic chain."

Mike interrupted, "You didn't think this was something you should have shared with the rest of us?"

John shrugged again, "I would have if they had violated any portion of their privacy settings to do it. As it was though, they worked it perfectly within the privacy settings."

Mike interrupted again, "I don't want Ullies being used for law enforcement!"

John was getting a bit frustrated by the continual interruptions. "Damn it Mike, it wasn't law enforcement but public safety. Hear me out on this. Long story short, the bombers Ulli offered to get him mental health assistance but this was a religious fanatic who didn't want help, he wanted to make his point by killing a bunch of people."

John took a deep breath and continued more calmly, "So what one Ulli knows they all know, but can't say or use due to the privacy settings. For public safety though, they just routed people around the plaza at the time the bomber was going to be there. You know how they do it so you always make your meetings right on time? Well same process. They also routed security, on their normal scheduled patrols to the area." He raised his hand to stave off the expected interruption. "They didn't tell them why they were there. Just made sure that they were where they could respond to the chemical sniffer going off when the bomb got close. It was pure timing. Your human security forces and your automated detection systems are what caught the bomber. All Ulli did was arrange for people to be in the best place to make the most of the systems available." He paused to let Mike have his say.

Mike let out the breath he didn't realize he was holding. "John that's a damn slippery slope."

John nodded, "I agree. As unintended consequences go, I think this one can be called a win. Still I agree with you, that something about it all makes me a bit uncomfortable."

Mike took a deep breath, "So why didn't you say anything to us?"

John shrugged. "Honestly? I was hoping no one would ever know. Ulli couldn't have accomplished this if everyone knew how it was done, and as I said in this case it was a win."

Mike shook his head. "I think we need to let the rest of The Eight know. I agree with you, in so far as Ulli did nothing wrong this time. Still what else might they decide to do, 'for our own good', if we aren't careful?"

John nodded. "OK, at the next meeting we bring it up. Until then, need to know only. We don't want to lose this advantage against the barbarians for no reason other than our fear of what it could mean. Agreed?"

Mike felt tired again, "Agreed. Please get us all a breakdown of exactly what happened though so we can make an informed decision, if you would please."

"Of course Mike." the AR display of John flickered a bit as he turned to wave as something out of the field of vision. "Sorry Mike but I really need to get back to things here at the moment."

"Of course John. Thank you again for making the time for my questions." Michael sagged into the chair as the image of Stuttzman vanished from view.

"Ulli..." Michael started and then stopped as the thousand questions he wanted to ask, seemed to float in the fuzz of his mind. "Never mind, just let my next appointment know I'm available."

Chapter 6

Michael sat behind his desk and sighed. Ten whole minutes to himself before his last appointment of the day arrived. How they managed to get four hours out of Ulli was beyond him but Ulli was rarely wrong about these things. He frowned, Ulli scheduling his time was a normal Ulli function, but after learning about the Ulli's involvement with the capture of the suicide bomber, he found himself looking at the decisions, and assumptions he had made about his Ulli differently.

There were dangers to all tools, he rationalized. The big difference here is that mankind had thousands of years to learn that if you used a dumb tool like a hammer wrong, it smashed your thumb. What was the analogy for smart tools? Somehow he was sure it would be worse than a smashed thumb.

Mike was sitting there pondering the situation when Ulli popped up in his vision doing the little Ulli dance, "Two minute warning boss, time to get your game face on."

Normally such antics would make Mike smile and start to prepare for a meeting. Something was different about it all today. What was different struck him just as the door was opening for his meeting. Ulli hadn't changed, Mike had. Mistrust had crept back in, something that wasn't really there since the very early days with his Ulli.

Before he could firm up any thoughts on the matter, three young men walked nervously into his office. Mike had read the bios on two of the three. Raj Pradep CEO of Orbital Express, William Baker the CEO of MicroShips Mining company, and the last gentleman who seemed a bit of an odd addition and wasn't on the invite list. His AR bio read: Sanjay Ramesh CTO for MindGames Inc. a VR game designer.

Mike stood to greet them, and as he was shaking hands all around. "Gentlemen, welcome. I'm told you are here to amaze me with a revolutionary new idea." He raised an eyebrow in mild challenge.

All three nodded at once, but it was William Baker who took the lead first. "Mr. Shultzinger, thank you for making this time for us in your busy day. I think you'll find it one of the best decisions you've made recently." The other two were nodding like bobble head dolls.

Mike grinned at them, "Not to be too flippant about it gentlemen but with this big of a block of time, it will either be an amazingly good business opportunity or we'll wrap up early and I get to surprise the wife by coming home at a reasonable hour for a change."

The three men dutifully laughed at what they all hoped was a joke, but they all looked a bit sick. Raj picked up the conversation at this point, "Well since all of the NDAs are in effect, lets not waste your time and get right to it." He nodded and they all took a seat in the chairs Mike waved toward. Raj waved his hand and floating in the air before them was a small chain of floating islands. "As you can quickly see we're here because you have the expertise to produce the launch platform." He smiled, "Before you ask no we're not looking for a cash investment, anything that you put forward will be an in kind contribution from your manufacturing facilities. We really do need your expertise in island building." He shrugged.

Michael whistled, "You boys were thinking just a bit out of the box. I don't know if the science works out on ANY of this but assuming it does, I think you might be on to something."

All three young men released a breath that they weren't really aware they were holding. "From the top?" Raj asked?

Michael smiled, "Yeah, from the top. This has way too many places where the devil can be in the details."

Raj grinned, "Just so. We've been wrestling with him over those details for almost a year now. One of the last problems was just solved by someone here on MU. A lunch meeting with Bjorn Winters proved most enlightening."

Michael realized he was trying to name drop, and decided to crush it and get them back on track. "Not completely sure who that is. So from the top."

Raj recovered well and went in to lecture mode as he saw Mike settle back comfortably in his chair and turn his full attention on the three young men. "Electric rail gun launch platforms. By sinking the launch rail a half a mile into the ocean and a quarter of a mile above, you can use the pressure of the water to support the extra length and dissipate the heat." He watched Michael's face looking for clues but when he saw none continued smoothly, "So why hasn't this been done? Well several good reasons, most of them having to do with acceleration and g forces, not capability. Escape velocity is about 6km per second, and over as short a rail as we're talking, that is many times the acceleration tolerances that NASA says are safe. People would be putty leaking out of the back of any capsule they were put in." Raj shrugged. "So we just change the rules. Our launch is done at 3km per second. And we just don't send people." Raj flipped a couple of small icons up to visible level and expanded them, "This is our launch vehicle. You will notice that the central payload chamber is suspended in a graphene foam that is filled with hydrogen much like the new air ships use. As the payload overcomes inertia and is slammed back toward the rear of the vehicle it will compress all of that hydrogen down into a special burn chamber." He traced the path of the gas with one hand as he rotated it to give Michael a better look at the burn chamber. "At this point the vehicle has cleared the mouth of the rail gun and is plowing it's way through the air. This is where friction becomes the threat, air molecules still provide plenty of resistance and heat. This heat is channeled along these graphene rods bringing the head back to the newly compressed hydrogen to create a rocket that will continue to constantly boost the materials on board." Raj smiled, "Just like that we launched a 1000kg payload for two hundred and fiftieth of the price of a normal launch. More that that really because with an hours time, we can be ready to launch again. Any questions before I turn this talk over to Mr. Baker?"

Michael knew that Ulli had already investigated the math and wouldn't have schedule this much time for someone who wasn't most of the way there. "Not at this time. Mr. Baker, you seem to be up."

The plump young blond man nodded and grinned nervously causing his blond curls flopped across his forehead. He looked about as far from the 1960's crew cut mission control types with their white button down shirts and pocket protectors as you can get. Still once he got into his part of the demo, you could tell he knew his part. "Now that we're past the atmosphere." He grabbed the launch vehicle and zoomed in even further, sweeping all the little islands and launch drawings away with a casual sweep of one hand. "This is where MicroShip's job comes in. The launch vehicle will divide like the husk on an ear of corn and each of our Micro Ships will pull away from the protective foam skeleton and orient for the long trip to the asteroid belt."

Michael interrupted, "So how are you maneuvering?"

William grinned, "Well here's where we get a bit creative. These vessels are not really any bigger than the old coffee cans my grandfather used to keep all of the screws and nails in out in his shop. In an effort to limit the number of moving parts most of this ship is 3D printed all out of once piece so it can withstand the acceleration of launch. So they create a small electrical field

and use the solar winds to guide it."

Mike's eyebrows raised in surprise, "This is workable?"

William shrugged, "For this application yes, though probably not a viable option for manned craft that aren't planning to take three days to move three degrees on their angle of attack." He shrugged, "For this though, it will work out just fine. Once we've got these micro miners harvesting raw materials we can build better options that don't need to survive a trip out of the gravity well, and have them waiting for us when we arrive."

Mike rubbed his face, "What time line do you see for this?"

"Before the miners can have enough material for say an O'Neal cylinder?" William waited for Michael's nod. "Well that depends on a lot of factors, like on the number of these we can launch, and how efficient they will be at mining, but as a range, as short as twelve years to maybe as much as thirty if everything that can go wrong does. Some of that though is why we have Sanjay here.... Sanjay."

Sanjay smiled nervously and then nodded. "Well, I've got two jobs."

Mike smiled back, "I wondered what a game designer was doing here."

Sanjay grinned, "I'm here to make sure that the project isn't forgotten over it's long pay off time. I'll explain, I've created a game where people are mining asteroids with all of the little micro machine tools we're sending. Also where they have the ability to use some simple design tools to make other tools they wish they had for the game. They will get paid in "points" for this effort and spend points to try out new machines. In the end, we'll let them know that they were actually mining real asteroids and training the AI to do it. At a billion examples, we can tell them and then award crypto tokens in relation to their scores. Five percent of the over all project has been budgeted to train the AI. As the popularity of the game wanes, this news will boost it again and make sure we actually get our billion plus examples. Also when a game goes viral, then enough people play it to create a built in constituency."

Mike grinned, "Once they have been given a stake in the project, heaven help anyone who wants to defund it."

Sanjay grinned, "Exactly."

Mike rubbed his face, "Ok devil is always in the details. Where are the points of failure?"

Sanjay answered, "For my part, communications lag."

Mike nodded. "Can maybe fix that with the quantum internet we're building."

Sanjay nodded, "That thought had occurred to me as a probable solution."

Mike looked to William, "For me it will be the time it takes to get the newly designed equipment out to the job site."

Mike nodded, "Printing it on site would be preferable but I've never done additive manufacturing in a micro gravity vacuum before."

William nodded, "Yeah that's one of the problems. We could try to hollow out an asteroid to create a MicroShip yard, but that will take a lot of time."

Raj grinned, "Regulators."

Mike snorted, "Yeah tell me about that one." The three men all chuckled. "Still I think I can handle that one for you."

Raj grinned, "That thought had occurred to me as well, it's another major reason we're here today."

Mike shook his head. "Sorry to do this to you gentlemen, but I need time and I'll need to bring in at least Stutsman and maybe Rosen and MacAllen as well. I cannot give you an answer today, but if you'll give me enough room in that NDA to speak with them, I should be able to get us to the real negotiating by the end of next week."

The three men looked at each other and nodded. Raj spoke up, "Get them to agree to the NDA and you can assemble your team just as we've had to. I'll follow up with you early next week for a progress report and plan an actual meeting if we're going to proceed early the following week?"

Mike chuckled, "This could be as big as floating islands, if it works."

William said in a serious voice, "We'll make it happen. Your help just makes it much more likely, and on a reasonable time scale."

Mike grinned, "Just so." Then he stood to shake their hands again, "Gentlemen if you'll excuse me, I have some calls to make."

Chapter 7

Mike was in the shower just enjoying the warmth of the water. He smiled lazily, he'd managed to slip out of work a bit early and it felt good just to relax. At least while it lasts he thought, and tensed back up. Thoughts of work crept back in, as he stood in the mist feeling the warm water run down his back, those men yesterday were on to something with that launch platform. Even if the asteroid mining operation didn't pay out the way they had hoped, a low cost orbital launch company was still worth a more than 5 years income.

"Michael!" Tattianna's voice called from the other room. "Are you ok in there?"

Pulled from his musings, Michael chuckled. "Yes dear." he said in that parody of a resigned tone.

Tattianna smiled and shook her head, "Just making sure you didn't drown. I'm not trying to rush you, but you've been in there for almost an hour. It's 17:30hrs, and they will be arriving in another hour and a half."

Mike shook his head to clear his thoughts, "Thanks luv!" he called out and then quieter. "Guess it's too late to run away from home. Ulli, cut the shower, and lets try to get ready."

He walks out of the bathroom and into their bedroom and smiles at Tattianna. "Thanks for the heads up, the water just felt really good."

She smirked, "Wouldn't have anything to do with you trying to delay tonight's events would it?"

"No." he said quickly, and realized it had been too much of a protest and so smiled a bit guiltily. "Well maybe just a bit." He sighed, "You know how much I love Shabbot dinner, and how much I hate dinner parties, and this feels like it might have crossed over that line."

Tattianna looked at him with that knowing smile, "Wouldn't have anything to do with a certain, Bjorn and Mary Winters being guests tonight would it?"

Mike turned his back to her as he fumbled in the printer to retrieve his clothes. "I'm sure they are nice people..." he started and then sort of ran out of steam.

Tattianna suppressed a giggle, "but you've never had to meet potential in-laws before."

Mike turned, "That's far from decided." He heard his words, and didn't really believe them either, but he wouldn't give up that easy. "Yes you've been right about things and about her so far, and yes I will admit, I've even misjudged her early on. That doesn't mean you're right this time." He turned back to fumbling for his clothes, "She's indicated no real interest. Culturally she's used to monogamy, so what you're discussing would seem alien, if not out right wrong, to her." He shrugged, "I haven't even completely decided what I think about her."

The silvery laughter that erupted behind him, made his face go flush. "My love, I know you. Maybe you think it's just a passing fascination for you, but I know better, and if you're honest with yourself, you know it to be so too. Relax, there is no rush, but be nice to Mary and Bjorn because they may well be fixtures in our lives for some time to come."

Mike snorted in a noncommittal way, and continued to get dressed.

* * *

Rabbi Yehuda was first to arrive. Mike was glad he would be here, even if his wife Miriam was more likely to team up with Tattianna than not. Mike stopped himself mid thought and wondered if Tattianna might have been right about why he was dreading this evening after all.

Little three year old Ani wanted to stay with his father and Mike as the ladies went off to the kitchen area to feed the baby before all of the guests arrived. Ani had somehow attached himself to Mike, and Mike had taken a liking to the boy as well. The small candies secreted away in his jacket pocket for just this occasion were slipped quietly to the boy with a wink and a shh gesture. Yehudah laughed but couldn't very well object at this point. "Michael! You spoil him!"

Mike grinned, "Every chance I get. He's a good boy, a little sweet for the sabbath won't hurt him any."

Yehuda grinned and shook his head, then to little Ani, "But how about we keep this between us and not tell mamma?"

Ani's eyes gleamed conspiratorially and he nodded, as the candy disappeared into his little mouth.

"Rebbe, Tattianna says I am dreading this because it's meeting potential in-laws for the first time. I told her she was getting ahead of herself. Still I'm glad you're here." Mike said as they waited casually by the door for their other guests to arrive.

Yehuda snorted, "Tattianna has gotten ahead of you, not herself, but don't worry about it she's been ahead of you and out of your league for a long time now."

Mike opened his hands in a conceding posture of surrender, "Suppose you're right there."

The conversation was cut short as David arrived. "Gut Shabbos David. I'm glad you could make it." Mike greeted him.

"Of course Mike, thank you for inviting me." David rumbled. "A bachelor is always happy for an invitation to Shabbot meal."

Mike grinned, "I hardly think you would have been spending a lonely evening."

David had the decency to look slightly embarrassed as he smiled and shrugged. "A time for all things under heaven."

Yehudah laughed at that one, "Just so. Still I'm glad to see you"

David shook his hand and smiled. "Rabbi Jonathan sends his regards."

Yehudah nodded. "Be sure you return mine when you see him next."

Mike groaned, "You two are going to behave yourselves tonight?"

They both laughed, "Just a friends having a lively discussion." Yehuda said. Remembering that the last time he and Rabbi Jonathan were in the same room friendly wasn't how most bystanders viewed it. Just this side of civil was being generous but then those were different circumstances.

The divide between the Karaite and Orthodox sects were old and deep, though in the modern world, less acrimonious than they had been historically. Still it was easy to get them going at each other.

Mike smiled tightly, "Well tonight lets try to keep it civil. I know you two can't help but jab at each other, it's kind of become habit, but we have Christians joining us and it might be a good idea if they think the disputes between us are somewhat less than the Catholics and Protestants of Northern Ireland."

David shook his head, "It's not that bad Mike. We tease each other, but to be honest and if you promise not to tell him I said so, I respect the opinions of the good Rebbe here, even when I don't agree with him. They tend to be well thought out."

Yehuda not to be out done, "Mike, you know me, I only seek to bring enlightenment, not condemnation on those who are honest and well meaning victims of their own traditions."

Mike just shook his head, "Oy veh, it's going to be an interesting evening." Both of his guests were laughing at his reaction as the doors opened for the Winters had arrived.

* * *

Introduction made all around Mike lead the group into the small formal dining room. Elaine smiled up at him, "What not going to use the main hall, in the shadow of the volcano?"

Mike chuckled, "I thought this more appropriate for a family dinner. Though if you want to take your parents in to show them the volcano you can. I was pretty amazed at what they pulled off with that one myself."

Yehuda leaned down to Ani and whispered to him, "Will you please go into the kitchen and let your mother know that Dohd Michael's guests have arrived?"

The boy nodded and took off at a run. Elaine ducked slightly out of his way and smiled. "Rebbe Yehuda, he's beautiful."

Yehuda looked up at Elaine and couldn't help but smile, "Thank you. Obviously takes after his mother."

A few minutes later Miriam and Tattianna return to the dining room with a happy looking Bina sleeping in her mothers arms. All gathered around the table each of the men were pulling out a tallit. David fumbled a bit not realizing it would be necessary but spares were printed up and sitting in the chair waiting on him. "David, I realize the Orthodox don't typically make a habit of wearing the tallits during shabbot dinner," said Rebbe Yehudah, "Nor typically do we Karaites, however here on MU this has become a bit of a tradition." He grinned at David waiting for the others reaction. He was not disappointed by the gleam in the older man's eye. "If you would like to observe the tradition with us you will find a tallits bag on your chair by the table." He turned to Bjorn, "Same for you, I know this isn't your tradition but if you would like to join us we will be happy to have you, and teach you how."

Bjorn hesitated but when David went for his tallit, Bjorn followed. The ladies were all seated around the table as the men stood at one end and Michael nodded to Yehuda to begin and they all said the bracha (the blessing) as Bjorn looked down at it not sure what to do. At one point David winced a bit and Bjorn thought it was unusual but said nothing. Mike looked over at Bjorn, "Let's try English first," he said with a smile. "A man should understand the words he speaks before he just does them by rote." Bjorn nodded and Mike spoke aloud "Blessed are you oh L-rd our G-d, King of the Universe, who commands us to wrap ourselves in the fringes." Bjorn

repeated and put on the tallit as he had seen the others do.

In the quite moment that followed Bjorn got up the nerve to ask, "You said He commands us to do this, but I don't remember this as one of the ten."

Yehudah smiled, "Not one of the ten, but it is one of the other six hundred three."

"Six hundred and three" Mary exclaimed from the table, "however do you do all of that?"

David said, "Actually it's six hundred and thirteen, and it just requires dedication."

Yehudah actually grinned at this, "David, you know it's not that bad." He turned back to the table, "Mrs. Winters, I assume you have a driver's license?"

Mary wrinkled her brow, "Sure, but..."

Yehuda held up a hand to stop her, "There are more than six hundred and thirteen rules and laws you need to observe just to drive on the road. Yet no one finds this too much. The six hundred and thirteen commandments of G-d, cover every aspect of life and most of them do not even apply to you directly."

Mary thought she had him now, "Our bible teaches that if you're going to keep the commandments you have to keep them all and to break even one is the same as breaking them all."

Mike felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. This was not how he wanted the evening going.

David started to say something, but Yehudah just rested a hand on his arm to restrain him. "I understand that is how the Christian world sees it. Yet I submit that they don't really understand what the commandments are, because you don't really study them as part of your faith." He saw her face start to contort as she was readying a response but he hurried along before she could object. "All of the commandments must be kept, on that we agree. Some simply do not apply to the daily lives of people. For instance about a third of them only apply to Levitical Priests telling them how to conduct the Temple service. If you are not a priest, you don't need to worry about that because you'll never be doing the things that the laws apply to."

He waited a moment and saw that she was thinking that over. He continued calmly, "Bjorn here for instance. If he ever gave birth would be required to rest in a secluded space for some weeks afterward, but I don't think Bjorn will ever have the opportunity to obey that commandment."

They all laughed and the tension was broken. "This evening, I want to encourage you to ask these kinds of questions. We will not be offended, nor are we here to tell you that you're wrong and we are right, that is for you and your husband do decide between yourselves and G-d." David raised an eyebrow at that. Yehudah got a bit of a mischievous smile, "David here is a different sect of Judaism than Mike and myself. You'll notice that from time to time we will tend to tease one another about our differences. This of this much like the differences between a Catholic and say a Mormon." he placed his hands far apart showing the differences. "Still we respect each other and can joke about our differences in what is usually a civil manner." David and Mike both chuckled. "I want you to feel free to ask these questions, it will help you to understand all of us better, and who knows you might even understand things you've read in your bible better because of it too."

Mary still looked unconvinced but Bjorn grunted and nodded wisely, "Thank you. Feel free to ask questions of us as well if you wish."

Mike saw his opportunity, "That's very kind of you. Maybe we should start with the blessings?" He asked Yehuda before the conversation could spiral any further into divisive areas.

The other men in the circle all did their best to hide small smiles as it was obvious what he was doing. "Quite right," Yehuda said. "Eishet Chayil?"

Michael nodded, and each of the men went over to their wife while Mike guided Bjorn he said, "The blessing over the women. This is just what you know as Provers 31."

Bjorn nodded, that couldn't be all bad so as each man wrapped his wife under his tallit, Mary asked, "What about Elaine? Shouldn't David take care of this?"

"No!" Mike nearly shouted and then realized how it sounded. "This is a blessing over the wife, typically it is the husband that does it."

David and Yehudah both looked at each other and fought back smiles as David now realized what was going on as well. "Quite right, I have not that right." Then turning to Elaine with a wicked gleam in his eye, "Unless you'd like to get married here in the next few minutes."

Elaine just shook her head, "David you like to live dangerously don't you."

Everyone just laughed though it was obviously a bit forced for Mike and Mary though for very different reasons.

After the blessing of the wives, Yehudah brought Ani under his tallits and Michael moved his hand down to Tattiana's swollen stomach. "The blessing of the son." Yehudah said and began first in Hebrew and then again in English for their guests. Then it was the time for the blessing of the daughter, Mike moved down the table to coach Bjorn through it as Yehudah took the sleeping Bina into his arms. Elaine smiled at him wrapped in her own father's tallit and for the first time shared in a ritual millennia old. Unexpectedly she found herself tearing up. She hugged her father tight, all of the sacrifices he had made for her her whole live, even now leaving his home to be with her just kind of jumped up to the front of her mind all at once and she realized the true benefit of this ritual.

Bjorn looked down at her, and just held her tight, sheltering her under the tallit until she'd gotten control of her emotions enough to face the public again. He contemplated what he'd just witnessed. Mary also had seemed to react to the blessing as well. What was it about this to affect them both so?

After everyone had recovered and returned to their seats Mary asked, "So why is their no blessing for the husband?"

David grunted, "Because it was G-d Himself who blessed him with a wife and children to pass along the blessing to."

Mary and Bjorn were both very quiet for a moment until Tattianna leaned over and whispered into Mary's ear too low for anyone else to hear. "You can always bless him later in private. They seem to like that best anyway." Mary broke into a fit of giggles and was blushing violently. Tattianna just leaned back in her chair with an overly innocent look on her face.

Mike shook his head, "I'd say no one likes secrets but in this case, I think we're all better off not knowing." Then he grinned at his wife, who was still doing her best to look like nothing was said. "On that note, Rebbe will you do us the honor of Kiddush?"

"My honor Mike." Said the Rebbe as he picked up the wine and blessed it, and the large loaf of fresh challah off the table and blessed it and passed it to those gathered.

Mary looked at Bjorn, "Uh, that looks an awful lot like Communion." she said to Rebbe Yehuda.

Yehuda smiled a knowing smile, "Yes I suppose it does." he said blandly. "According to Rabbinic Tradition," he nodded to David with a grin, "and in this case I would say they are probably accurate. The first time this was done was with the King of Salem and Avraham." He shook his head a bit, "In one of my comparative religion courses at the university, much to do was made over the similarities. All that can be said for certain is that it is likely a ceremony over three thousand years old with several different variations."

Mary looked uncomfortable with that answer but Mike seeing his opportunity to change the subject, asked, "Miriam, in honor of David here, would you please light the candles?"

Mary was confused again, "Why did you ask Miriam to do it?"

David smiled, "Because these heathen," and he grinned at both Mike and Yehudah, "don't light the candles on Shabbot."

Mike shook his head, "Yes unlike this poor tradition bound soul, we observe the commandment not to have any fire in our dwelling places on the shabbot." David chuckled. "Tattianna doesn't even know the blessings for it, but I knew Miriam was raised Orthodox and would know how. It's one of the reasons we're having shabbot dinner a bit early so the sun won't be set before the candles have burnt out. Well that and I thought we'd all like a cigar after dinner before the sun hits the horizon."

Bjorn's brows rose, "Now that sounds nice. It's been a while since I had a good cigar."

* * *

Proper rituals observed it was time for dinner. Amazingly dinner flowed fairly smoothly, the conversation was cautiously steered by Michael to harmless subjects. David and Yehuda, made a game of steering the conversation into dangerous waters, and watching Michael scramble to push them back out. Bjorn caught on to this game and found it amusing as well but refrained from upsetting the situation. Bjorn couldn't help thinking to himself that this wasn't the man he had come expecting to meet.

As the last of the fresh challah disappeared, Rebbe Yehudah signaled Mike and at a nod from him stood. "Michael had graciously granted me privilege of giving the brecha." With that he proceeded in Hebrew and then again in English for the guests.

Mary, relaxed by a glass of wine more than her usual limit couldn't restrain her self any longer, "Why bless the food after you've eaten it? Seems kind of pointless then."

Yehudah smiled broadly, "Ahh, common misconception! We don't "bless" the food. Prayer isn't magic." He shakes his head. "We bless the Creator for His blessing to us of the food. Part of the trouble here is language and culture differences. The word brecha which you translate bless is from the root word brech meaning knee. A brecha is a gift, as one would give on a bended knee. The food is His blessing/gift to us, and our thanks is the blessing/gift back." He shrugged a bit, "Blessing something in the modern English context is more akin to magic, but "magic ritual thought processes" was where the people were when the Christian missionaries found them, so it isn't really a surprise that they would incorporate it. It just really doesn't apply in this case."

Mary was pretty sure she had been insulted but not really sure how to respond. Bjorn knew she had been politely corrected, but in a condescending way, as one would a child. He didn't really care much for it, but he also couldn't disagree with Yehudah, because his statement seemed

likely true.

This time it was Elaine to the rescue, "Michael, Tattianna is looking awfully tired, and I think Ani has about exhausted his sitting still in adult company reserves." She smiled down the table at Ani who was being awfully good but still squirming and Bina who was just starting to fuss. "Do you suppose, we ladies should go freshen up and take care of the little ones for a minute, while you boys grab those cigars you wanted?"

Mike instantly felt gratitude wash over him, "That's a great idea Elaine. I'm sorry I didn't think of it earlier, Miriam forgive me, the attention limits of children are a new thing to me." He smiled down at Tattianna, "Though I suspect I will be learning more soon."

They all chuckled and rose from the table each group heading to a different area to relax after dinner. Mike caught Elaine just for a second as they passed each other, and whispered to her, "Thank you, great idea."

She knew she shouldn't let a little praise like that make her feel so good, but it did. She was happy she could make this a little easier for him. Though she had to admit if only to herself that watching him cringe every time her Mom and the Rebbe got in to it a little, was fun. Seeing him in the hot seat for a change was strangely satisfying, especially since he seemed to be the one who put himself there.

Chapter 8

Mike didn't quite let out a groan of relief as the door to his study closed behind them. "Please gentlemen, have a seat." he said while opening a humidor on the far wall.

Bjorn settled in to the over stuffed leather chair and looked around. The study didn't look like he would have expected, there was only one small shelf of ornate leather bound books, though he supposed in the digital age, books were more works of art than a practical way of accessing knowledge. Instead there were paintings and fine sculptures lining the walls, even the low table that sat in the middle of the ring of comfortable chairs looked more like a practical sculpture than a utilitarian table. Bjorn tried to get a sense of the man from the decor and again came up with conflicting perspectives. So much of what was studied these days was through the AR glasses that a man's library didn't tell as much about him as it used to.

Michael returned to his guests holding a large container resembling an intricately carved ice bucket filled with cigars, and in his other hand a stack of substantial and equally intricate ash trays. Setting both on the table, "There's a bit of variety there, though if you don't see something you would prefer please say something, as it's likely I just didn't grab it from the supply."

As each man settled back into his chair preparing his cigar, Bjorn's eyes got wide as he recognized some of the wrappers. "Oh I'm sure any of these will be an improvement on my usual fair."

David chuckled, "When it comes to cigars, more money doesn't necessarily mean better, but yes Mike always does have a nice selection." With that he used a small corner of his ash tray to light his choice. Bjorn studied the ashtray a little closer, then seeing the proper spot pushed the button and lit his own.

Mike looked over to a clock on the wall, "Seems we have about eighty minutes or so before actual sun set." Then almost as an after thought, "Probably another fifteen after that before three stars, David."

Bjorn was curious, "So you do this every week?"

Yehuda let out a large smoke ring, "It is the most important holy day of Judaism."

David, just grinned, "Yeah, the rabbis say that too, but you wouldn't know it by the way they act getting ready for Yom Kippur or Pesach."

"So the Sabbath is more important than Yom Kippur?" Bjorn asked. He was no expert on Judaism but almost everyone had heard of Yom Kippur.

Michael groaned a bit as he saw this conversation slipping into dangerous territory, not that he didn't like the topic as much as the next guy, but not for a first meeting with new people of a different religion. "Well Mr. Winters, think of it like this, Yom Kippur is your day in front of the Judge. If you've been keeping the Sabbath as you were commanded, it shouldn't be a bad thing when you meet the Judge."

David laughed, "Mike, I'd never heard it put quite that way, and I'm sure Rashi didn't put it that way, but I can't see where one can argue that point."

Bjorn smiled, "So did you see my plans for the boat?"

Michael grinned, "Yes and yes we'll work something out. No I can't talk about it any more, no talking shop on Shabbot."

Bjorn nodded, "Sorry, I didn't mean disrespect."

Michael shrugged, "None taken, its a wonderful design. I just will make time to go over the details with you maybe sometime next week?"

Bjorn nodded, "That would be wonderful, I had really only expected to meet with one of your engineers."

Mike waved it away, "Nonsense. Mr. Winters, if you need something, you just say the word."

Bjorn grinned, "Ok, can we stop with the 'Mr. Winters' business, you're making me feel old."

Laughs went around the table, and Yehuda and David cast mischievous looks at each other but Michael was faster and cut them off before they could make any new trouble for him. "That we can do. Thank you Bjorn."

The conversation started in fits and starts, it was difficult for these men not to talk shop. Religion was a subject Michael always seemed to try to avoid, and so politics naturally came up. For Mike and David this really was talking shop but it was also every day life and so while they tried to shy away, eventually they found themselves drawn in as well.

"I can't believe that they just pulled all patent protection for the islanders that way," Bjorn said.

Mike shook his head, "It's a hard ball move that may well back fire on them but for now, yeah things are a bit hard on the local businesses."

David snorted, "If it weren't for the ICO's and us controlling our own capital, that would have killed us. Look at how many businesses were shut down just when the search engines and social media companies shut off their advertising. Imagine if we were trying to raise funds in US dollars after this." He shuddered thinking about it.

Mike looked pretty glum as well, "It's why I tried to get away from the dollar as fast as I could."

Bjorn had an insight, "Ah that was the whole Bitcoin deal?"

Mike nodded, "Yeah I was trying to get some distance even back then, I didn't think they could hit Bitcoin as hard as they did."

David shook his head, "You had the right idea, just the wrong vehicle. It's one of the reasons I joined up with you. Bitcoin tried to go 'mainstream'. It sought legitimacy from organizations that have controlled the financial world for centuries."

Bjorn grinned, "Ah the great Jewish Banker conspiracy."

Mike looked a bit shocked, but David just snorted. "Not quite but enough truth to it to make the lie plausible."

Bjorn now looked concerned, "I wasn't trying to disparage anyone, I thought it was funny nonsense put forward by tin foil hat guys."

Mike sighed, "No, and David can probably give you a full lecture on how it was the Church and European government policies that pushed Jews into banking..."

David cut him off, "But I won't. You can certainly look that up, and it will probably do you some good. What I will say is yes bankers have a strangle hold on the world. Yes Jews are a part of it as we are of most other professions. Yes we will probably be the fall guy again when it all falls apart." He shook his head wearily, "Governments borrow more than they should, and then determine that a pogrom is cheaper than paying up." He took a long draw on his cigar, and then into the silence said, "That, bad as it is, isn't even the real issue."

Bjorn looked startled, "What is?"

David shook his head, "We really need Stutsman here for this one. The world is getting ready for a change. I don't mean a little one like the industrial revolution or the invention of fire." He looked at Bjorn intently and was surprised to see that the man hadn't just dismissed his statement. "As Artificial Intelligence improves from today's rather weak general intelligence into next year's super intelligence, people become unnecessary to society."

Bjorn snorted, "Without people what is the point of a society?"

Michael spoke up, "Oh the elites, think that they will still be fine because they think that they will own the machines."

David grinned savagely, "And there in lies the problem. They don't think that anyone else is quite as necessary to keep around as they are. After all who needs underlings if you just tell the computers what you want and they do it?"

Bjorn shook his head, "Surely this is all decades away?" He looked around the room expecting to see someone disagree with David.

Yehuda said nothing but took another deep pull on his cigar.

Mike shrugged, "Twenty thirty's is the answer I get from those 'in the know'"

David snorted, "Those same people were telling me Ullies would be twenty years away five years ago when I was looking into Stutsman."

Yehudah finally broke the silence, "And we're dangerously back to talking shop."

David laughed, "Well it's not like anyone else here has grand kids to talk about."

A halfhearted chuckle went around the room. Bjorn spoke up, "I'm betting that the women aren't having as much problem not talking shop."

Mike laughed, "Oh they are talking shop, they are talking babies"

Bjorn whistled, "Better not let Mary here you say it that way!"

The others laughed, Mike just grunted. "Why not it's true. Raising the next generation is their job, ours is just to provide a world where that can happen." He looked up at the clock, "Enjoy your last few puffs, sun set in six minutes."

* * *

Tattianna was tired, this whole pregnancy thing was much harder work than she ever thought it would be. Elaine was being so sweet helping her, at least whenever Ani would let her. She smiled watching Ani. He didn't have any of Michael's reticence, he was an unashamed Elaine

fan. Snuggled down between Elaine and Mary on the small sofa, he looked like the proverbial cat who swallowed the canary.

Elaine was absently playing with his thick hair, "So this is an every Friday event?"

Tattiana shook her head, "Oh not usually this formal, or this large. For a long time Michael treated this like 'Date Night'." She rubbed her belly, "I suspect this will become more the norm though. He says that he learned more about life and what was important from Shabbot dinner with his family than anywhere else."

Miriam was over feeding little Bina again but she looked up at the question, "Oh getting ready for Shabbos is a bit of a chore but it really is beautiful spending one day every week with the family." She shook her head wearily, "Yehudah is always studying, or working with people in the community. He's always at a meeting or a counseling secession.. I know he's very wise for his age and I'd spoken with other rabbi's wives before I married him, but I never really understood exactly how busy he would be. Shabbot evening, is the one night of the week that we have him, all to ourselves."

"Then we go and drag you out of Your cozy home to be with us." Tattianna said with a small smile.

"Oh no!" Miriam exclaimed. "It has been very nice to join you for the Sabbath."

Mary and Elaine both looked a bit nervous but Tattianna laughed lightly, "I'm glad and I didn't take it as an insult, but rather meant to express my gratitude for you sacrificing that intimate family time to be with us."

Mary and Elaine both relaxed and the tension just melted out of Miriam, "You and Michael have been amazing friends to us. I'm always happy to spend time with you," and she pointedly looked at Tattianna's swollen stomach, "and your growing family. I do miss the intimate time of having him home, but he's always a better man after his meetings with Michael."

Tattianna nodded, "Michael seems to be much better off after his conversations with the Rebbe. They seem good for each other."

Mary intoned, "As iron sharpens iron..." Neither woman was familiar with the quote and turned to look at her. "What? It's in the Bible."

Elaine rolled her eyes, "Mom, I think it's in the New Testament, not their part of the book."

Mary looked surprised and a bit taken aback that someone wouldn't share that same basic foundation, even if they had rejected it. "Oh, um, it means that one person makes another better by helping to shape and mold them."

Miriam looked thoughtful for a minute, "Is that what they are talking about? I mean it's your book and your saying but it is my understanding that the people writing it were Jews, so are you sure they weren't talking about havruta?"

Mary looked disturbed and almost offended by the notion that early Christians were Jews, oh she knew it on an intellectual level but they didn't do all those 'Jewish' things, that's why they were Christian after all. Elaine however looked more interested, "Havruta? I'm not familiar with the word?"

Miriam still had a thoughtful look on her face as if she was struggling to process some half formed thought, "Havruta is the practice of studying Midrash in pairs. The idea is, what a man studies on his own, he reads his biases into scriptures, but when he has a partner studying with

him, there is someone to help hold him accountable, to help him from twisting the scripture to fit his own desires." She said the last very distractedly but then looked up at Tattianna, "I think that is what it is! They keep each other grounded and not as tempted to twist what they read for their own ends."

Mary had a verse come unbidden to her mind, 'no scripture is of any private interpretation.' she shook her head to clear it, "Aren't we a sight, grown, successful women, talking about boys like school girls."

A bit of nervous laughter went around the room, but Elaine couldn't imagine having a conversation this deep with her other school girls. Still it was clear that her mother wanted to change the subject. "Well, I'm sure the guys have better things to talk about than us, so we might as well give them a little break too. Tattianna, when are you due? It's got to be getting close."

Tattianna groaned, "Oh I love him, but if he's not out in two weeks, I think I'll have the Doctor give him an eviction notice."

Mary and Miriam both laughed. Mary said, "Elaine was over a week late, and then when she did come, we almost didn't make it to the hospital she was in such a hurry."

Elaine chuckled, "What can I say, sometimes it takes me a bit to make up my mind, but then watch out." She smiled down at Ani who had managed to doze off. "Will he be ok? Or should we keep him awake so he'll sleep tonight?"

Miriam smiled, "If he's bothering you, we can move him to the floor but no Yehudah will probably end up carrying him home tonight."

Elaine looked down at the small face, "He really is beautiful. Sad that he'll one day grow up into a frustrating man like the rest of them."

They all chuckled but Tattianna couldn't resist, "Men are only frustrating when you expect them not to act like men. When you can accept what they are, then it's no longer hard to understand them."

Elaine blushed, and Mary said, "Oh can't let them just be men, imagine the brutes they would be, but you're right, they become a lot less frustrating over the years as they get a bit more civilized." Elaine saw Tattianna bite back a reply and was glad she didn't have to referee that fight.

Mary looked down at Ari, "So I have a question, I've heard it said that MU doesn't have a public school system, so where are you planning to send him to school?"

Miriam shrugged, "Oh just because there isn't a public school doesn't mean there aren't tons of public resources for education. His Ulli has already taught him how to read a what you would call a first grade level and he knows his Hebrew aleph bet. I figure when he's about seven or eight we'll need to have a conversation with him about what direction he wants to study."

Mary looked shocked, "But what about other children and what about other activities?"

Miriam looked a bit startled at the passion in her tone. "It's not like he doesn't get all of that through our community, after all he is the son of the Rebbe."

Mary realized she may have come off a bit accusatory, "Oh I see... What about those who aren't the son's of a Rebbe?" She looked at Tattianna.

Elaine cringed, this was about to get ugly no matter what she did, she probably couldn't stop it. Tattianna just smiled serenely and answered her, "Its up to their parents to provide for their social

needs as they see fit. Often Ulli will make suggestions to the parents of organizations available based on the child's interests. We see parents as the ultimate judge of what is best for their children, and except in cases of extreme abuse, we try to provide tools to help them, we do not usurp their authority." Elaine cringed again, nothing could be done now.

Mary was livid but bit her tongue, this was not her home and she was the guest here but these people were crazy if they thought they could just leave it up to parents, and computer programs, no matter how advanced, and it would all somehow magically work out. "That seems awfully... naive."

Tattianna smiled coldly, "Only if you fundamentally don't trust people to make the best choices for their family."

Mary couldn't just let it go, "Have you seen most people, would you trust their judgment?"

Tattianna sat back victoriously, "Of course not, that is why I would never subject any child to the capricious whims of any government run education facility who's body is always made up of those same people."

Mary was angry but Elaine finally stepped in, "Play nice you two." She turned on her mom, "How many times have you ranted about the lack of innovation and resources in education?"

"Well..." Mary stammered.

"Mom, they've solved it here! Ulli and the internet have replaced the need for traditional resources and provide one on one tutoring, and HERE" she said stressing the word, "parents ARE involved, because no one is telling them, 'send them to us to educate'. Here they know they must be involved if their children are to be educated properly." Elaine was getting very frustrated, when she turned to Tattianna, "And you know what she's done for a living and also that she's heard nothing but the garbage from the news networks trying to stop the flood of people out of the land based nations of the world and on to islands as fast as we can build them."

Tattianna stopped for a second, "See Elaine that is why I love having you here! I had not thought of it that way, all I heard was her accusations, not the propaganda campaign behind them."

Mary was still pissed. She wasn't propagandized, she wasn't, damn it! Still she held her peace when she noticed that the back and forth had woken Ari.

Miriam smiled at Tattianna, "Thank you for a lovely evening but really, I should try to get Ari back home to his bed."

On that rather sour note the evening ended. Elaine didn't immediately go back home with her parents though. Instead she spent a long time taking a stroll around the island, trying to sort out her feelings. Her thoughts were amazingly clear, it was her feelings that were a complete wreck.

Chapter 9

Elaine came into the suite and she could hear her parents still discussing the dinner. "...and that woman who thinks she can just turn kids loose with the internet to teach them. Parents know best, well yes good parents do, but what about all of the others?."

"I know Mary, but lets try to play nice, this is where Elaine has decided to make her home. That's her bosses wife, and you don't have to like the woman to be civil." Bjorn was saying as she came in.

She stopped gave each of them a peck on the cheek and with a bit of a mischievous grin, "Shabbot Shalom"

As she was closing the bedroom door she could hear her mother snort, "Peaceful Sabbath, indeed."

Elaine just went straight to bed. Listening to her mother and father do a blow by blow breakdown of the evening was not what she needed. She had expected her dad and Michael butting heads to be the issue, but to her surprise they came to a wary respect of each other. That Tattianna wouldn't get along well with her mom was just not something she could have envisioned or planned for.

There would be plenty of time to deal with it in the morning, for now all she wanted to do was curl up and remember what it felt like curled up safe and warm under daddy's tallit while Michael taught him the blessing. Such a silly thing to fixate on really, but she had felt so wanted and secure and loved as she listened to them say the simple prayer. She imagined what it must be like, for each week to have Michael gathering her under his tallit and blessing her with love and praise...

All of the chaos of the week caught up with her, and Elaine drifted off into a very relaxing sleep.

* * *

Michael was rubbing Tattianna's feet, as they relaxed in the sauna. "Zat voman comink in here accusing us of not knowink how to raise our children! Uhhug! I vas tryink so hard to be nice for Elaine, but zat voman has just been so brainvashed by her profession, she can't imagine people ever teaching their own children, and vit better results!"

Michael struggled not to laugh, she was always so cute like this, her accent always got stronger the more emotional she got. Mary Winters must really have gotten under her skin. So instead he decided to distract her, and took a playful nip at one of her toes. A few playful minutes later and were showering off together and crawling into bed. The choice of dinner guests left behind for some quite time, just the two of them.

Michael drifted off to sleep holding Tattianna in his arms. Tattianna lay there listening to his breathing as she tried to go to sleep but she was feeling muscle twitches in her stomach. They weren't painful but also weren't like the normal, pleasant aftershocks she would often get either. After a few minutes when they didn't really stop she carefully got up, trying not to wake up Michael. She laughed softly to herself, shouldn't have worried about that, he was sleeping like

the dead.

She made her way into the small bathroom and picked up her little "health tricorder" contraption that Elaine had picked up for her from Atlantis during her story on the medical conference there. She turned it on and Ulli began to analyze the readings. Just as Ulli started to tell her his findings, her body told her all she needed to know. One big cramp, and then her water broke and she was standing in the bathroom wet and shaking.

"Michael!" she called out.

Michael heard Tattianna call out and was instantly awake and moving. He had no idea where she was at or which way he should be moving but he was moving. Right into the corner of the dresser. He felt the toe joint dislocate upon impact. He hit the floor and somehow managed to get tangled in the blankets that had fallen off of the bed.

"Damn it Ulli! Lights!" he rolled over wincing both at the bright lights in his eyes and the pain of his dislocated toe hitting the floor. He managed to see that the bathroom door was open and crawled for it.

Tattianna heard the thump and Michael scream, then she heard him bellow for lights, he must not be hurt too bad then. She makes it to the bathroom door in time to see him crawling toward her. She couldn't help it she started giggling. "Oh, I'm so sorry. Are you ok?"

"I'll live. What's wrong?" he said trying, and failing to stand up.

"Baby is coming." she said.

"Oh. Oh!" he made an effort to fight his way clear of the blankets and managed to stand. His left foot was bleeding and Tattianna could see it was going to bruise up nicely. "What do you need?"

She couldn't help it the giggles hit again, "I love you." she managed to get out between the giggles. Then another contraction hit and she almost doubled up herself.

By this time Michael had made his way to her side and was guiding her toward the shower. "Let's both of us get cleaned up a bit. Ulli's already sending out the necessary alerts."

* * *

Ulli was raising the lights in her room slowly and the music was coming up. She couldn't believe it was morning already she felt like she had just went to sleep. "Ulli is it morning already."

"No Elaine, good news!" came a voice from the wall speaker. "Tattianna is having the baby! It is 01:30hrs, but your instructions said to wake you at any time."

Elaine was awake a lot faster than she would have guessed possible a few seconds ago, "Oh that is good news. How long do we have?" she asked.

Ulli's voice comes back over the speaker, "Her Ulli says at least three hours. Do you want more sleep?"

Elaine snorted, "Who could sleep now? I do want a shower though." As she said this the lights in the bath off of her room came on and she could hear the shower start.

She dressed comfortably and grabbed an extra blanket as she left her room. She was surprised to see Bjorn sitting at the breakfast bar with a cup of coffee.

"Daddy, you're up awfully late?"

Bjorn stretched a bit, "Oh when you get old, you don't sleep like you used to. I'll go back to bed in another hour or so." He noticed she was dressed, "Speaking of which, where are you off to at this hour?"

Elaine grinned, "I don't have a curfew anymore Daddy. Besides good news, Tattianna is having the baby. I'm on my way over to be there if they need me."

"Oh good, I thought that pretty, little girl, was going to burst at the seams if it didn't happen soon." Bjorn said.

Elaine hugged him on her way out the door, "Daddy! You... Well you're just You!" and with another peck on the cheek and a little giggle she was out the door.

Bjorn looked into his coffee, memories of rushing to get Mary to the hospital playing in his mind. Times sure were different then.

* * *

Ulli opened all of the doors for her as Elaine made her way through the Shultzinger residence to a small clinic in the back of the home. A med tech was bandaging up Michael's foot while the midwife was fussing over Tattianna, putting the monitoring sensors in place and pulling up the readings on her glasses.

"Do I need to stick around in case of fainting?" the medtech joked with Michael who more or less humored him.

"I think we'll be fine." He said rather flatly.

The medtech chuckled, "Probably, but I was also half serious. I know it is a cliché but this tends to be a rather emotionally strained time and people do pass out. Do you want me to stick around?"

Michael thought about it. Elaine could see the desire to not need help warring with his desire to cover all bases. "Oh I'll be fine but there are others who might be a bit more fragile," here he winked at Elaine, "maybe it wouldn't hurt to stick around for a bit."

Elaine elbowed his ribs as she came in for a hug. She was disturbed at how a friendly hug suddenly became way too intimate for how she was feeling and backed away. "Asshole" she said with a smirk.

He grinned finally feeling a bit better about it all, he motioned to his bandaged foot, "That's clumsy asshole to you, Ms. Winters."

She snorted and went to check on Tattianna.

Tattianna was not looking her usual calm relaxed self. Elaine could see that self doubts were closing in now that crunch time was here. "Hi ya beautiful! You look like more fun than the walking wounded over there."

Tattianna smiled, "Elaine, I am glad you're here. Elsa," she motioned at the bustling midwife, "says that things will start to move faster soon."

Elaine took her hand as she sat on the edge of the bed, "Shh, you're doing fine. I'm here and Michael will be here soon, he's just trying to get some extra sympathy over that foot."

Tattianna saw a flash back of Michael rolling on the floor half tied up in the blankets trying to crawl across the floor to reach her. "I felt so bad that I laughed at him, but really Elaine if you had been there you would have laughed too. He was so sweet but seeing him like that was so silly."

Elaine squeezed her hand, "We'll tease him about Ulli saving the video for us."

Tattianna's eyes sparkled for a moment in shared conspiracy, and then the next contraction hit. Elaine motioned to Michael, and moved back as he took Tattianna's hand. Elaine just rested a hand on Michael's shoulder and settled in. The next couple of hours were going to be long ones.

* * *

Tattianna was sleeping, the beautiful baby boy resting on Michael's chest as he sat next to his sleeping wife. Elaine had curled up with a blanket on the floor near by. All four, worn out and resting, happy just to be safe and together. Michael looked down at his sleeping wife and baby, this was what life was about. He looked over at Elaine curled up close by, and thought to himself. Tattianna is right, she belongs here too. I don't know how it happened but she is part of the family now.

Bjorn and Mary, and Rebbe Yehuda showed up not long after that. Mary carrying flowers, she might not care for Tattianna but it's the mothers code, anyone who brought a baby into this world, deserved at least flowers. Mary tried to get Elaine to come away and go to a real bed, but Elaine was having none of it. Michael smiled to himself. Looks like she's decided she belongs here too.

The day was long and tiring, but most things that are worth the effort are.

Chapter 10

Mike rubbed his eyes and emailed off the ship yards latest compilation of Bjorn's plans off to Elaine. The world is all turned upside down now. His son wasn't sleeping through the night, so Tattianna wasn't sleeping through the nights either. He shook his head in wry amusement, even with her taking most of the baby duties over night, he still didn't feel like he got enough sleep.

Ulli danced over into his vision, "Mike, John and David are arriving." and sure enough the door swished open to two very excited men.

"Mike! Let me congratulate you on the newest addition to the family." John Stutsman said with a big smile.

Mike met them part way across the office and shook their hands, as David Rosen grinned, "Mozel Tov!!"

"Thank you gentlemen, but today we're back to work. I take it you went over the files I sent?" Mike asked.

"Oh yeah, this is amazing." John said.

"I feel guilty asking it of you Mike but has due diligence been done on this one?" David asked skeptically, "It just sounds a bit too good to be true."

Mike grinned, "It's part of your charm that you ask it even of me. Still the answer is yes." he looked over to John for confirmation.

"Yeah David, I've run the numbers too. These young men are on to something. I think we should hold out for a collective thirty percent for our inputs, more if they want financing as well." John shrugged, "I don't want to squeeze them but at least from my perspective they will be needing a significant portion of my production facilities."

Mike nodded, "Between this and one prototype idea I have, Avalon will be the last full sized island launched for another two years."

David's brow wrinkled, "Can't production facilities expand to cover the increased production?"

Jon nodded, "To a degree but our resources aren't unlimited, and then there is the question of will there be over capacity in a year or two, once the infrastructure is in?"

David snorted, "Over capacity" he said as if it was a curse. "You really think that's a concern with all of the new applications for your technology that are coming about every day?"

Mike shook his head, "Bjorn reminded me the other day about the tech bubble back in the 1990s. Everything should pay it's own way."

David shook his head, "You Sir, are a stain on the reputation of every heartless tycoon just trying to make a buck." Of course they all laughed, but David continued more seriously, "Actually bubbles are what you're talking about and they happen all the time. It's part of the hype cycle and the get rich quick mindset of many so called investors. Plus the propensity of people to put money in things they don't really understand." He stopped and had an odd expression on his face, "Sort of like I'm getting ready to do on this." He really looked troubled. "I think this is a

sound investment, but I don't genuinely understand all the moving parts here."

John grinned, "What you don't trust me?"

"No it's not that. I just have always been able to grasp where the tech was going, but so much of what I would have just considered crazy science fiction is now just a new business model."

Mike grinned, "You live on a floating island David. We haven't been in Kansas for a long time." That brought a round of chuckles and Mike got serious again, "So are we going to do this?"

John nodded, "If these kids have a chance to actually pull this off, how can we not help them do it?"

David groaned theatrically "Oh if I'm going to the poor house at least I'll be in good company."

Mike rolled his eyes, "David, if this works, anyone involved is about to get stupid kind of wealthy."

David harrumphed, "famous last words."

"David if you want out, we're not trying to force you..." Mike said a little exasperated.

David broke into a grudging smile, "That's why I think it will probably work, but I still think you should let me spark a little bubble financing of it."

They all laughed, "OK well you each know your part. I'll meet with them and begin the negotiations in earnest. Thirty percent split evenly among us?" Mike asked.

Nods all around. John stood, "I'll begin testing hardware by the end of the week."

Mike and David stood as well, "Gentlemen, I'll be in touch." Mike said as he ushered them out of the office and turned back to set up his next appointment with the young visionaries.

* * *

As the others left, Mike returned to his work. Ulli popped up into his vision, "Don MacAllan, says he'll be about twenty minutes late for your appointment if you can make the work around."

Mike grinned, "Tell Don, for him, I'll wait." Ulli nodded and blinked out. Mike went back to his design table. MacAllan will be late to his own funeral, Mike thought to himself, glad he had accounted for that probability when he scheduled this meeting. How MacAllan ever managed to amass the wealth he has with his time management skills is one of the great mysteries of the world but one had to admit, when he arrived it was all work for as long as it took to get the job done.

It seemed he had only been wrestling with the problem for what seemed a couple of minutes and Ulli was opening the door and announcing Don's arrival. "Mike, I'm sorry I'm late. Congratulations on the new little Shultzinger."

Mike rose to greet him, "Don, don't worry about it. Just been struggling with placement of engines on my newest prototype." Mike motioned for his colleague to take a look.

Don studied the glowing hologram for a moment then grunted, "You know that the power source for this new prototype is controlled by MIT? Are you certain you will be able to get the parts from them given the current relations with the US? I mean the reason I was late is that the Bank of England was trying to revalue some collateral in light of the loss of protections for our products."

Mike got a wolfish grin, "Trying to put the squeeze on you eh? Well don't worry, this knife cuts both ways. These reactors are of the MIT design, but they will be home grown knock offs."

Don looked at him in shock, then howled with laughter, "Oh they will throw a bloody fit over that!"

Mike shrugged, "Won't they just..."

After a moment of savoring the irony about to hit the new US President, Don shook his head, "This isn't what you called me here for though is it?"

Mike shook his head, "No, I'm going to need a little funding for a new venture and I know it's one you'll want in on."

Don cocked an eyebrow, "You needing funding? Oh boy this must be a doozy."

Mike laughed, "Oh nothing like that, yeah I've got a couple of projects like that running and might find a way to get you in on them too if you've got the invest-able cash sitting on the sidelines. This project is more of a sideline that fell into my lap, and I don't have the cash to take proper advantage of it. Competition will blow up after it's been on the market for a year or two so, this is one you want to get in on, then out of fast when the margins start to narrow."

Don snorted, "Narrow margins, that sounds almost like working for a living."

Mike shook his head, "You make it sound somehow dishonorable."

Don waved his hand in front of his face as if repelling noxious odor, "Men aren't supposed to do work, money is supposed to do work, men are supposed to create value."

Mike chuckled, "Yeah, yeah, I know still, a hard days work never hurt anyone."

Don raised an eyebrow, "Let's not test it."

Mike couldn't help but be amused. Everyone knew Don MacAllen was a hard working man, but he did have the reputation for never doing himself what he could hire done. Part of the reason Mike was coming to him with this project, hiring it out and selling it all off was the only real way to make a profit off of it and this technology really did need to be available to the masses. "Alright should we get started then?"

Don shook his head, "As long as you don't use four letter words at me like work anymore."

Mike pulled out the yacht plans Bjorn had drawn up all of those months ago in his Washington farmhouse. "These are the raw drafts. I've had my engineers look it over and they've made a few adjustments, still I think it will need a team to plan the lay out best for printing. With that done, we should be looking at a print rate of one hull every one hundred and twenty hours. Minimal outlay of three printers from last years inventory, and most of the cost will be in management and distribution, and that is more your area of expertise than mine."

Don looked over the plans, "Hell this is amazing, I want one for just shuttling back and forth from the mainland."

Mike grinned, "Yeah it started life as a bit of a trimaran with those small outriggers at the ends of

the wings, but my engineers swapped those out for hydrofoils and the hydrogen burning small jet engines up toward the main hull or fuselage area depending on if you're wanting to think of this in terms of boat or plane."

Don looked up a bit startled, "Will it fly?"

Mike shook his head, "Not really. I mean once it's up on the hydrofoils and hitting at full speed it is operating more on the ground effects aerodynamics than it is on principles of buoyancy, but still it's not true flight. At speeds of over two hundred miles per hour on a full out run, it will still make it the fastest yacht on the water."

Don grinned, "So you're thinking what? Four thousand MU sovereigns for the first years run?"

Mike managed to look a bit embarrassed, "Uh actually I'm thinking a little less than that to do the start up, making about that the first two years, with the price dropping as others duplicate it at about twenty percent a year."

Don nodded, "Probably right, so we double our money up front in the first two years, and milk off what we can over the next two, and sell off before it actually becomes the new middle class bauble?"

Mike nodded, "Yeah you'll want to be out by then."

Don raised an eyebrow, "I'll want to be out?"

Mike shrugged, "I might try to keep it going if I can find someone to properly manage it. Not quite charity work but a way to make sure the average guy can get away from landed governments if he wants to bad enough. I see it in ten years being about the same cost as a nice home in the US or Western Europe or small apartment here on MU."

Don shook his head, "Should call you Moses, 'Let my people go'" he intoned in a deep booming voice.

Mike got a bit irritated at this, "Damn it, I'm not talking about giving them away on the corner, just bringing down the cost to help the average Joe."

Don grinned at him, "What ever you say Moe. Count me in, and who knows maybe I'll stick around a bit to help with your housing project for the masses." he winked at Mike.

Mike couldn't help it, he snorted and chuckled, "Nothing wrong with doing well for yourself by doing well for others."

Chapter 11

Mike was exhausted. New baby, new projects at work, something new with Elaine that took way too much of his thinking to try to figure out. What happened to his life? Sure it had always been a bit chaotic, just this time it seemed to be moving faster than he could keep up with. He ditched the clothes and headed for bed, he smiled as he saw Tattianna feeding the baby, sure enough clock says oh two hundred hours. "Sorry, long day." he mumbled as he slid in and kissed her.

She smiled back at him, "I was beginning to wonder if you'd gotten lost."

He started to go over the challenges of the day and then it hit him, what good would that do either of them. Just make her feel good and get some sleep, "Always lost until I'm with you." He smiled as he felt Tattianna lean down and kiss his brow, and that quick sleep over took him.

The lights came on full and Ulli's voice blared into the silence. "Alert Alert Alert. Michael report in immediately."

His eyes shot open, the baby started crying in the other room. He jumped from bed only narrowly catching himself before bashing his foot in the same spot again. "Ulli are we under attack."

"Unknown, what we know at the moment is that all the major governments of the world have gone on high alert. There are three volcanoes that spontaneously erupted and NOAH out of the United States is issuing tsunami alerts for the Aleutian Islands and large stretches of the Alaskan and Canadian coasts." Ulli answered. "You are needed in conference as soon as you can make it. The others are reporting estimated times of six minutes. I've unlocked the passages and am arranging proper staffing levels. I do need you to approve the over time."

Michael swore silently under his breath as he picked up the clothes off the floor. Tattianna was already off soothing the babe. As he put on the AR glasses over bleary eyes he realized why he was in such a fog, oh four thirty hours, this was going to be a long day. "I love you Tattianna, I'll let you know what's happening as soon as I know more." and out the door he went.

* * *

Mike made it into the chambers in just four minutes, but even so, waiting for him in a freshly pressed uniform is Commodore Nigel Weatherby looking as if he had been up for hours working on the problem not just pulled from his bed a scant few minutes ago.

"Nigel, what can you tell me?" Mike asked as he stumbled toward a chair, wiping the sleep from his eyes.

"Precious little at the moment. Volcanoes erupting and it seems that the tsunami will be much milder than first projections. We also know that the seismic readings show the whole focus of things in the Siberian wasteland." Nigel was about to continue when Mac Allen and Stutsman both staggered into the room looking about as bedraggled as Mike.

"Gentlemen, based on what Nigel is telling me, I think someone has been playing with the Halvarson effect." he shook his head. "We tried to warn them that this is just too dangerous to screw with."

Nigel nodded, as the other two were taking seats Rosen arrived looking worried. "From their perspective though, Mike we've got a weapon that they can't match or counter, that's a dangerous position to be in historically speaking."

Mac Allen rolled his eyes, "So instead we try to solve the Fermi paradox instead."

On that note, the rest of the gang of eight arrive minus only Samuel Jamison who's communicating via the Quantumnet from Atlantis. His text based answer appears to float in the middle of the table in everyone's AR glasses. "Something needs done. Maybe now they will listen?"

Mike shook his head, "I'm willing to put in another appearance in the Security Council, but I don't know that even this will have them ready to listen."

Mac Allen's Ulli popped up in the middle of the table, briefly replacing the floating text of Jamison. "Russian sources are reporting an asteroid impact. Fifty seven dead, and twelve square miles devastated."

Mike snorted, "Asteroid impact eh? Any sign that the Americans or the Chinese are buying that?"

Nigel shook his head, "No, but officially they seem to be going along with it. Both nations have offered to send search and rescue teams to the site."

David laughed, "Search and rescue teams, is that what they are calling it now?" A chuckle ran around the room.

Mike wasn't amused, "You know the Americans and the Chinese are doing the same experiments. The Russians just happened to draw the short straw and tap into the antimatter universe."

Stutsmann shook his head, "Aren't we getting a bit ahead of ourselves? After all we don't know for certain that is what happened."

The others all looked at him a bit sideways, and the text floating over the table changed. "Sure we do. An actual asteroid would have either done less damage, or been big enough we would have seen it coming." It only floated there for a moment when it changed again. "I've got the Atlantean Council asking what we know and how we plan to proceed."

There were rumbles all around the table. Finally Mike just answered him, "Sam, this is Mike. Tell them we're going to publicly go along with their asteroid story for now. We need to make arrangements to send ambassadors to the UN though. Each island should send one, and make it someone who's clued in already. We don't want the Halvarson Effect more widely known than it has to be."

The others looked at him a little annoyed that he didn't seek their council before speaking but finding no real fault with the statement let it pass.

The text changed again, "Shultzinger, this is Northman. We're off the coast of northern Africa at the moment. I expect it will take us about sixteen hours to make it to New York. Will that be time enough for your man to join us?"

Stutsmann looked at Mike and nodded. "Councilman Northman, glad to hear from you. We'll meet you in New York in sixteen hours, assuming that safe passage can be arranged. Who are you sending so we'll know them."

There was silence for several minutes on the other side and then the text changed again, "It's still to be determined, but if I have my choice, we're sending Scott Halvarson."

Mike whistled, "Mr. Northman, you always did have a way of sending a message that would make it's point. Understood. Now if you'll excuse us, we have preparations to make."

With that the meeting broke up, as each man went off to make what preparations the thought best for this new turn of events.

* * *

Mike made it back home. Spent a few minutes with Tattianna, calming her fears and holding the new born. Sunday would be his Bris Mila. Mike wasn't sure where the time was going. Already he felt like he hadn't spent enough time with him and this was only his third day in this world. Still demands of the moment wouldn't allow him to linger at home. He needed to be seen at the office, even if the events of the day had caused him to cancel more than half of his meetings and free himself up for the inevitable conferences.

Showered, and dressed in a non rumpled suit, Michael spent a few more moments with Tattianna before it was time to face the public. All over the news were stories about meteor showers and impact zones, with talking heads and conspiracy nuts alike running full steam ahead with their theories all based upon next to no real information and what little there was, likely misinformation. It would be funny if it weren't so serious.

Mike was looking at the prototype plans, walking the virtual corridors when Ulli popped up into his vision. "Elaine is on her way, wants to know if you can make a couple of minutes for her."

Mike thought about it, he had the time, and it wasn't like he was doing anything that couldn't be put off a few minutes. "Sure Ulli. Send her in when she gets here." He stopped for a second, "Oh yeah and order some lunch, I've not eaten yet today."

Ulli didn't ask what to order, he just did a quick calculation of what had been eaten too recently to want again and the nutritional needs off of his medical chart, and Elaine's. So that shortly after Elaine arrived, so too would the fresh chicken and spinach pesto pizza.

Elaine came through the door looking like she was just short of breaking into a run. "Mike thank you for..."

Mike was a bit shocked but hearing her voice, he just followed instincts and cut her off mid sentence with a warm strong hug. "Shh, it's ok. Yeah it's what you probably fear, no it's probably not as bad as it could have been. Yes, in time everything is probably going to be ok."

Face burred in his chest Elaine let out a sobbing laugh, "Did I really look that bad."

Mike kissed the top of her head, "Nah, you're beautiful as always, you just seemed a bit spooked. Like you could use a hug."

He felt the tension melt out of her as she finally pulled back from him and looked up, "So they couldn't resist playing with the Halverson effect?"

Mike shrugged, "You knew that they probably would."

"Fools will kill us all, I wish I'd never gotten those damn files." She had tensed back up.

Mike pulled her back in for another hug, "If you hadn't we wouldn't have had any way to back them off of just invading us. Shh shh, before you say anything else, once Halvarson opened Pandora's box, it was already too late. Nothing you had anything to do with. You acting so bravely and decisively just meant that we had access to it as well." He pulled her in extra tight for a second and then continued, "Here take a look at my newest project. It might help."

"Ulli temp share Ark Project files with Elaine." He smiled a crooked smile at her, "Top Secret." he winked. and just like that the room they were standing in changed and they were in a long hallway. Mike grabbed a part of the wall and pulled at it shrinking the view until a small unassuming ball the size of a beach ball. "The Ark is designed as a fully contained SUBMERSIBLE habitat." He gave a moment for this to sink in. "What we're talking about here is a life boat through troubles."

Elaine shook her head "But if they blow up the planet?"

Mike shrugged, "Well unless you mean literally, and even then there is a risky contingency, this craft should be able to ride out just about anything on the bottom of the ocean for one hundred people for over one hundred years. Plus the tools and genetic material of a million more to rise Phoenix like out of the ashes to rebuild."

Elaine was in shock, "How long have you been working on this?"

Mike grinned at her, "Oh since before we finished printing MU. Still we didn't have the time to make Arks until that was done."

Elaine sighed, "So are you going to want us all under the water in little bubbles now?"

Mike shrugged, "The core area is as comfortable as MU. The reason something this big can only support 100 people is all of the gear it carries and of course two thirds of the outer shell is compressible material to make it withstand the pressure of deep ocean rifts."

Elaine realized he was still holding her, and considered pulling away but it really did feel nice. She hadn't been with anyone in almost a year, and whether she wanted to admit it or not, Michael Shultzinger hit all of her buttons. "So what are you going to do about the Russians?" she asked.

"Well, not much can be done. Oh I've already sent representatives to the UN to tell them how foolish they are being, but I really don't expect it to stop the research. If we're lucky it will at least make them more cautious." He shook his head and was about to continue when Ulli signaled him that the pizza was arriving. "Join me for lunch?"

Elaine realized that with all of the excitement she hadn't eaten either, "Oh that would be great! Do you have time?"

Mike shrugged and pulled away from her to head towards the door and collect the pizza. "I cleared the day for anything that could be cleared. With all that is going on, I figured this took priority." He came back to the desk with pizza and lay it out on the top. Grabbing a piece for himself and motioning to her to take one as well. "I hope they will be careful but hope isn't a strategy. So I'll make up a few Arks and put people on them. Maybe all of humanity doesn't need to die for the foolishness of a few."

Elaine mechanically chewed the pizza. All the joy stolen from it by the dark vision of the future he painted. "You don't think there is any chance they'll just stop?"

He shook his head, "Not really. Just maybe they will be careful enough not to blow up the planet, and the Arks can reseed. The Eden project is really bringing a lot of hope there. Of course we also have a new project that I can't really talk about, no not even with you, yet anyway." He smiled at her. "This new project might offer a new frontier to settle. With that consuming the resources of the human race it might buy us another century." He shrugged, "though with the AI advancements, we're going to have that crisis before another twenty years."

Elaine sighed, "It's always one thing right after another, isn't it?"

Michael just smiled sadly, "It's why we make our contingencies and why we enjoy as much of the time we have as we can." He got up and walked around the desk to her. Pulling her gently to her feet he kissed her forehead and sat back down in the chair pulling her into his lap. "No one knows what tomorrow brings, so we enjoy today, and build for a better tomorrow."

Elaine snuggled into his lap, and kissed him. Yeah, she thought this was what it is supposed to be. Mike's hand slid slowly up from the small of her back and she pulled away. "Stop." she gasped. As much talking to herself as him.

Mike's eyes opened and his brow furrowed, "I didn't miss read these signals." he said with firm conviction.

Elaine gave a throaty giggle, "No, no you did not. Just, not yet. Tattianna and I, need to talk."

Mike looked confused, "You know how she feels about this. Hell she practically cooked up this whole scenario."

Elaine shook her head, "It's not about that. It's that the devil is always in the details and with her just having the baby, we just need to talk first." she trailed a finger down his bearded cheek. "I promise, we'll let you know." she winked mischievously at him.

Mike snorted, "Oh and I don't get a say in this?"

Elaine gave him a mock innocent look, "You could always say no." Then she giggled at the incredulous look on his face. "Let us work out these details, so that there are no hurt feelings, or problems that could have been avoided from the start. Let us do this right, and then just be the man we've grown to love. Make us as happy as we intend to make you." With that, and to avoid temptation, she stood up. Grabbed an extra piece of pizza, "Sorry to kiss and run, but some of us have work to do." she winked and out the door she swished.

Mike just sat there wondering what had happened to his life. It was better than he'd ever dreamed growing up, and yet more hazardous and terrifying, than he ever suspected. The future really was coming at them faster and faster every year. He thought of Tattianna, and Elaine, and his young son, and daughter yet to be born. Promise matched with peril as every year he seemed to have more and more to lose if he screwed it up.

Chapter 12

Michael Webber was tired and jet lagged as he landed in LaGuardia. The only thing that sort of made all of this worth it was seeing a large portion of the east river and about a third of Rikers Island cast in the shadow of the huge airship. No question about it Atlantis at least was sending a message. Grinning he gathered up his carry on and headed toward the hatch. He was supposed to meet the Atlantis delegation here at the air port and join them for the meeting with the UN Security Council. He sighed inwardly, this just couldn't end well. He really regretted not arguing more with Commodore Whetherby about this assignment.

Two and a half hours later, the Atlantis delegation is trooping through the air port looking like something out of a Hollywood blockbuster. In the lead was old Colonel Northman in his new role as Councilman of Atlantis. He stormed through the terminal as if he had just stormed the beaches to get here, and the dark cloud he brought along with him was almost visible. The man sure did know how to make an entrance. Behind him came a whole gaggle of assistants, flunkies, and functionaries. An attractive young woman in Atlantean military uniform was attempting to brief him as they came. Some where in the back was a very haggard looking and disoriented Scott Halvarson Jr. When things calmed down a bit, he would have to check on him. Just to see how his family was settling in.

Northman saw him and stopped his angry march with an abruptness that almost had his entourage running in to him. "Where's the rest of your delegation?" he snapped.

Young Lt. Webber just grinned, "Good to see you too Sir." he started calmly. Then he tapped his large carry on tote, "My delegation is in here. I just am here to provide basic security for this."

Northman's brow wrinkled. "I'll never get used to all this virtual this and virtual that. Thank you Lt. Webber. Care to join us at the hotel while we get ready for the meeting?"

"Yes Sir. My orders are to rendezvous with your delegation here and accompany you to the UN Security Council meeting tomorrow." Webber smiled at the Councilman. Secretly, Webber always thought highly of Northman, from his military days, to his days in the US Congress, and was a bit surprised by his willingness to emigrate to Atlantis, but Northman had a reputation for crushing sycophants, so he said nothing and just remained professional. Mamma Webber didn't raise any fools, well unless you counted his sister of course.

* * *

Getting through security at the UN was interesting to say the least. While they were in fact granted temporary diplomatic immunity of the same level as the other UN delegates, everything they had brought with them was scrutinized beyond any measure of what was considered reasonable. Shultzinger's hacking of their own 3D printers to print up his little robot tele presence machine and invade their conference last time unannounced had them all a bit on edge, and no one in security wanted to be the one to clear the next Trojan Horse through the gate.

They got to Lt. Mike Webber who had on his person exactly one item, a rolling carry on bag with a single black obelisk in it. Yes it did look like the one from the movies, by design. Mike Shultzinger might be a bit dramatic at times, but he had nothing on John Stuttzman, and this had

Stuttsman written in bold letters all over it. Completely sealed, and shielded, no one could figure out what it was or what it did. To make matters worse, even Webber himself only knew that it was a "communication device".

So twenty minutes and two calls to higher authority to get approvals, and Lt. Mike Webber was finally in what looked like any other corporate boardroom with Councilman Northman. He set up the obelisk in the seat that was assigned to himself, typed in the activation code and departed.

Northman looked at the unnaturally black surface that appeared to be glass smooth but gave off no hint of reflection. "I don't know what you boys on MU have cooked up but if I end up somewhere over the rainbow because of your theatrics, I will come back to haunt each of you." he growled to the machine quietly.

On the other side of the world in the MU boardroom, everyone broke out into a grin. Still only transmitting text message speeds from this type of portable device, they had run it through voice recognition software and text to speech software on each side making it appear as if they had true voice communication even if they didn't.

With the council chamber mic on mute, Shultzinger piped up, "John, how long did you say this thing will last?"

Stuttsman shook his head, "Mike no one is sure how long the atoms will stay entangled, but the radioisotope thermoelectric generator should last for decades. I mean while it was one of the early models, the Voyager space probe has one that is still functioning almost fifty years later. I'm more worried about how tamper resistant we made it, after all it's some of our cutting edge tech in there if they can figure out how we did it."

MacAllen grinned, "Well they won't be hacking it. The thing is completely sealed off from any signal that isn't quantum entanglement."

Shultzinger shook his head, "It's like anything else, nothing is perfect but they try to crack that case and the thermite goes off, spreading around the plutonium used for the power source, and melting everything else into a solid slab. Should be safe enough."

As they were speaking the conference room in New York was filling with the US, Russian, Chinese, French, and British ambassadors. The French ambassador called the meeting to order. "I understand we're here to discuss some petition of these so called island states" the French ambassador began in a bored condescending tone.

Northman saw red, "You're here to be told you're damn fools endangering us all if you don't stop this irresponsible line of research."

On MU, chuckles broke out around the room, "I think that's our cue," said MacAllen. "Let's introduce ourselves."

Back in New York, the light flickered on top of the black obelisk and a three dimensional holographic projection appeared. It was the Easter Island head, and the speaker boomed, "I am the voice of MU. You are given warning that continued engagement in such threatening lines of research will not be tolerated."

Everyone had jumped slightly at the sudden appearance of the hologram, Northman noted. He even appreciated the theatrics of it to grab the attention of these over confident pretentious...he reigned in his anger, it wouldn't do any good here. So he just shook his head, "Yeah what the talking head said."

Even as serious as this was, the laughter back on MU at Northman's reaction was genuine and

badly needed.

The British ambassador snorted, "MacAllen and his bloody mechanical toys, never one to show themselves"

The Voice of MU, pivoted to fix on the British ambassador, "We don't trust your word, and refuse to give you the gift of a hostage from among our own. Though we are fond of the good Councilman and would appreciate it if he were returned."

The French ambassador was livid, "You come here and dare to issue demands, to defame us by questioning our word, you insignificant pile of seaweed, Paris alone has a larger population and it only takes one nuke for you to be no more."

The Voice of MU was Michael this time, "Silence fool! Did no one brief you on why we are meeting today?" The head turned back to the Russian Ambassador, "If his government doesn't see fit to trust him with the clearance for this conversation then why is he here? The less said in front of him the better, I certainly will not be the one to read him in."

The other ambassadors winced, it was an open secret between them that the French ambassador didn't know the full situation, and that he was the only one who didn't. Seeking not to cause a permanent rift in their council over this the American ambassador spoke up, "We agree Voice of MU," he said it with only mild amusement, "that certain areas of research should be engaged in carefully."

Northman's turn to snort loudly, "Should be engaged in on the bloody dark side of the moon, if at all"

The French ambassador was looking a little green, much as a child does the first time he learns there is no Santa Clause. "I fear I must recuse myself for the moment, can we postpone this meeting for twenty four hours?"

The Chinese ambassador nodded, "This is wisdom. Let us each seek more information from our governments on how to proceed."

The proposal was seconded by Britain and by Russia and everyone started to leave. Northman sat there and fumed. "I never even saw congress run away from a topic that fast."

The Voice of MU turned toward him, "You really should return home, we'll share this technology with you, so that you can maintain a higher level of physical security."

Northman snorted, "Admit it one of you just wanted to be "The Great and Powerful OZ".

The voice of John Stuttzman comes over the device, "It was inspiring."

Chapter 13

"Knock, knock..." Elaine said as she poked her head in the door to the Shultzinger's quarters. The door had simply opened at her approach. She assumed Ulli had announced her but she still felt a bit odd just walking in.

"We're in here, Elaine" Tattianna called out from the other room.

Elaine walked in and Tattianna was sitting on the sofa with a cooing and giggling, recently named Alexander Yochannan Shultzinger, smiling, a gummy toothless smile up at his mother. "I was hoping I'd see you today."

"Well..." Elaine started and hesitated. "I kind of need to talk to you."

"About kissing my husband? I should hope so." she said but the wicked grin and the twinkle in her eye took all the sting out of the words.

"Oh, I'm not sure I'm glad he told you, or sorry we didn't talk first. Either way it's best it's in the open." Elaine knelt down on the floor in front of the couch to play with Xander's tiny hands.

Tattianna giggled softly, "Oh you so confuse him. I should feel bad about enjoying his befuddled reactions but I don't."

Elaine grinned. "Good for him to not be so all fire sure of himself all the time!"

Tattianna nodded "Exactly. Still when he came home and talked to me about it, I explained that you were very wise and that it was probably best we talk first. He just picked up little Alexi and wandered off muttering to him that women are crazy and he would find out more about it in time."

Elaine smiled, "So that's what you're calling him? Alexi?"

"I like it. Michael calls him Alex. Won't hurt him to have plenty of nick names to pick from." she shrugged.

Elaine grinned, "Well I was sort of thinking of him as a Xander." she played with the babe a few more seconds. "Tattianna what are we going to do? I don't have any framework to understand how a relationship like this can work."

Tattianna smiled softly, "I've seen similar arrangements work many ways. Some good, some not so much." she made a frown. "For us," she reached for Elaine's hand, "I think it best if you just spend time with him. I'm still recovering from having Alexi and for both physical and religious reasons, can't be with him intimately right now, so there is no reason you shouldn't if you like. As we give it a little time to settle in, you and I talk again." she shrugged. "When you're ready, and him too, though that man doesn't take long to make decisions, Well, once you convince him one needs to be made, that is. Then, when the time comes, I suggest you demand a ketuvah that is word for word the equal of mine. That way no one is feeling like, what is your term, second fiddle?"

Elaine smiled up at her, "Yes second fiddle. What's a ket... what ever you called it?"

Tattianna grinned, "Ketuvah, it is a wondrous Jewish tradition, or commandment, I don't know which but Michael could tell you. It is an actual marriage contract. Oh it sounds unromantic, or at

least I thought so, but after thousands of years of doing them, they've made it so practical. The things that are important to you, you just put in the ketuvah and he now knows that they are important to you. I have a special line in it that for my birthday every year, no business meetings that day. It's my day and I have him all to myself." She smiled.

Elaine was obviously thinking. "I can see how that would let the man know what was important to you. Men can be so clueless about the important things sometimes."

Tattianna grinned, "Michael is pretty good at figuring those things out, but it never hurts to help him along from time to time."

Elaine realized she hadn't let go of Tattianna's hand, so she pulled her hand over and kissed it, "I don't know how I found myself here, but I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be."

Tattianna leaned down and kissed her forehead. "There's no where I'd rather you be." Then she grinned, "Well except for later this week, that is."

Elaine looked up at her, "Oh what's happening later this week?"

"On Wednesday, Michael is sailing over to the Eden International Park, and getting a few updates. I want you to go with him. He's been under an amazing amount of stress these last few weeks. Make him take you, and an extra day or two, and just enjoy yourselves. You've earned it." She smiled at Elaine. "I'll invite your parents to the theater, and try to get to know them better over another dinner."

Elaine was all a rush about the idea of several days with Michael, but the thought of Tattiana having a clash with mom while she was gone. "Uh, are you sure? About my parents that is?"

Tattianna smiled, "Eventually we're going to need to get along. Yes your mother and I got off to a rocky start, but I'm smoothing the way. I barely convinced Michael it would be a bad idea to talk to your father about his intentions for you." Tattianna smiling broadly was nodding to convince Elaine she wasn't kidding. "I convinced him it would be better to let you drop some hints and bring them along slowly."

Elaine realized that the panic stricken look was still on her face, sighed and forced a small laugh. "Thanks. Daddy is pretty easy going but that might have been more than he was ready for. Not to mention mom..." and now the laugh wasn't forced, the giggles came as she pictured her mother's outrage, and Mike trying to explain how it was all ok, and the giggles kept coming.

She looked up at Tattianna who was still nodding, "We'll bring them along much more slowly than that." she said and squeezed Elaine's hand. "For now, go off on your 'business trip' and enjoy yourself. Leave getting them used to us being in your life to me. If it starts to go badly, I can back off and wait for you to help."

"Speaking of 'business trip', I should get back to work." She stood up and leaned down to hug Tattianna. "I hope you know I am in love with you too."

Tattianna delivered a quick kiss to each cheek, "Me too, or we never would have been to this point." She winked at Elaine. "Now go back to work, I think Alexi and I are going to try for a little nap."

Elaine giggled, waved, and headed for the door, for the first time in a long time she thought things were going to be ok.

* * *

Michael knew he really didn't have the time to go to Eden but the rest of "The Eight" were wanting a report and David had pretty much volunteered him. He smelled Tattianna's hand in all of this when David suggested Elaine go along as well because they needed some good propaganda pieces. So be it he thought, maybe he needed this, a couple of days away but still with secure communication links back... Still it was nice to be aboard the Mara again, though after working on the designs for Bjorn and Mary's new home, she was starting to look her age. He really wished they would resolve this bandwidth issue because it meant no Ulli until he got within a few miles of Eden. He supposed he could just upgrade the computers enough to handle Ulli like he was for Bjorn but at that point why not just print up a whole new vessel?

He was in the stateroom changing out to some more comfortable lounging clothes when he noticed woman's clothes folded neatly in the drawer. Tattiana's handy work in deed, looks like Elaine was moved in here as well. He smiled to himself, there were worse conspiracies a wife could be plotting for her husband. He was standing there looking in the open drawer when Elaine walked in.

She saw him, saw the drawer open and raised an eyebrow.

Michael turned red faced as he realized how this looked, "Didn't know we were sharing a room." he stammered guiltily.

Elaine let out a small laugh, "I didn't either, but I should have, after my conversation with Tatti."

Mike grinned, "Went well I take it?"

Elaine just smiled, "Close the drawer, they look better when they are on me anyway."

Mike chuckled, "I'll bet. Look even better when they're off and crumpled on the floor."

Elaine walked over to him and pulled him in close, "If you're a very good boy, maybe you can find out."

* * *

It was late and Elaine knew she should go back to sleep, but she couldn't. She lay there listening to Mike's quiet snoring thinking it was something she could live with. Still the idea of confronting her parents, and her friends back home, and then she thought that it wasn't really home any more. She wouldn't be going back to shopping with Debbie and the girls anymore. Maybe a few could make it to MU for the wedding if there was going to be one, but what would they think of it with Tattianna acting as Maid of Honor?

She felt a little tremble aftershock even now and it cut through some of the worry. This really was her chance at the fairy tale. Oh she was mature enough to realize it wasn't going to always be 'happily ever after'. Mike was infuriating sometimes, and Tattianna got along well with her but in every relationship there were struggles and that was one relationship she couldn't afford to struggle with...

She had always felt like relationships were too complicated and this one was orders of magnitude more so. She rolled over restlessly. Mike not even fully waking up, rolled over and pulled her to himself. The warmth radiated out from his sleeping form and the sound of his breathing leveled out again.

She looked at the clock. She needed sleep, a part of her mind pleaded. The rational part that knew she would have a busy day starting in about six hours. She snuggled back into Mike and matched her breathing to his, and the worries all found themselves banished. Gone only for now, but for now was good enough, and then she drifted off to sleep again.

* * *

It wasn't the alarm that woke her. The plump matronly cook came in pushing the breakfast cart, she had a real look of disapproval on her face as she asked Mike if he needed anything else. Mike shook his head as the older woman left, he looked down at Elaine. "Come on sleepy head, Captain says we're only about forty five minutes from Eden's dock."

Ulli came bouncing into the room, "I tried to tell his Ulli that you'd want more time than that to get ready but Mike had the wifi router shut down. Until just now."

Elaine shook her head trying to clear it. She remembered the good old days when it was just a buzzing alarm clock, not everyone throwing words at her so early. Making her English before she was ready too, who knew what would come out. "Of course I slept longer, you didn't have to listen to me snore all night." She grumbled.

Mike snorted, "I don't snore."

"Mhmm..." Elaine muttered as she drug herself toward the bathroom and the waiting shower.

"I don't!" he called out to her back as the door closed.

The shower wasn't as nice as the ones back on MU but it did the trick. She was wrapping her hair in a towel when the smell of coffee hit her. Yeah she thought, a little caffeine and I might just be ready for this day.

Mike was sitting by the tray, shoveling a fork full of pancake into his mouth. "Eat. Might not get another chance to eat, until our late lunch, at fifteen hundred."

She kissed him on her way to the other chair, and as she sat he poured the coffee and handed it to her. "I knew I kept you around for a good reason." she joked as she took the coffee from him and inhaled deeply.

Again he snorted, "So glad to make myself useful."

She favored him with a mischievous grin, "Oh you're useful most of the time, it just comes at the price of your insufferable ego."

"Ah that," he smiled, "Well false humility is a sin, and since I really am that good, ego as you call it is nothing more than just my natural honesty showing through."

She laughed, "If I didn't know you better, I'd almost believe you believe that."

He shrugged, "Well, I do, sometimes anyway." he grinned and then frowned, "At least until life comes along and kicks me really good just to cure any delusions I may have."

It was her turn to let loose with a dignified and aloof sniff, "How dare it be so inconsiderate." she said with mock severity.

His smile returned, "I mean really? Right?"

She rewarded him with a roll of her eyes and a small giggle. "I'd love to sit here all day with you and play, but we do have work to do, shouldn't you finish getting dressed?"

He eyed her wrapped in her towel, "Or undressed?" he countered wagging his eyebrows at her.

She couldn't help it, the temptation was there. "Knock it off, lets get work out of the way and maybe we'll take an extra day getting back?"

He grinned from ear to ear, "Oh now that sounds like a plan."

Chapter 14

Bjorn was doing the morning routine when Ulli came into his view, "You have a 10:45 appointment this morning. Dr Johnson has his office on deck 18 just off of Laired Plaza."

Bjorn spit tooth paste and wrinkled his nose, "Don't remember approving that one, Ulli. What's the good Doctor want?"

"Auto approval, " Ulli said as he did his little Ulli dance out of Bjorn's direct line of sight, "Part of the fine print when you agreed to your standard medical monitoring release form."

"So again what does the good doctor want?" Bjorn was a little irritated at Ulli being evasive. He couldn't tell if it was intentional or just a quirk in the programming.

"To meet with you and discuss some tests." Ulli said as if that really answered the question.

Bjorn hesitated, he could accept that answer and give the Doc a few minutes of his time, but he really didn't like this whole auto approval concept. "Tell the good Doctor that I'll not be able to make it today, Ulli"

Ulli didn't walk into his vision as normal, instead he simply appeared front and center of his vision. Something Ulli very rarely did, Bjorn figured it was probably programmed not to obstruct a field of vision, "Please Bjorn, meet with the Doctor." It was said without Ulli's normal antics or mild accent.

Bjorn was a bit taken aback by the way it was said. "Uh, ok Ulli. I'll meet with the Doc." Instantly, Ulli was dancing out of the field of vision, no indication of his earlier actions.

* * *

They couldn't have asked for a more beautiful day, Elaine thought as she walked the narrow gangway on to Eden proper. The sun was bright and warm, but the ocean breeze kept it from being hot. The small building growing up out of the surface housed a little covered pavilion that had obviously been made over into a conference room.

A small delegation was there to meet them. Ulli provided convenient AR name tags and bios. There was a very tan young blond man Calvin Reynolds, graduate of MIT, currently employed by Shultzinger Enterprises. Seems he's in charge of the automated machinery. An equally tan blond woman wearing a single piece wet suit, Deborah MacAlistar, graduate of Oxford University, oceanography degree, currently employed by the Atlantean science ministry. A dour gray bearded man, Yochanan VanDorn, PhD from University of Minsk, entomology. She thought to herself that he seemed out of place until she realized that they would need to build a whole biome of insects here on the islands if they were to support plants. Speaking of plants, a middle aged red haired woman wearing a big floppy straw hat was conveniently labeled Vikki Turnbull. Graduate of Georgia Tech and University of Nebraska with degrees in gene expression, synthetic biology, and agriculture. This was obviously the Eden Seed Company's contribution to the team. Finally the man standing up front, in his mid forties, she would guess with salt and pepper hair and the smile and confidence of a motivational speaker, Jack Robinson. Jack's bio didn't mention schools he attended until all the way at the bottom and then he listed a half dozen honorary degrees. What she did notice was he listed projects successfully completed and rather than an employment record his bio read as an accomplishment record. Seems he was not listed as

having an employer as such but rather was a consultant hired in by the Eden Project itself to facilitate the various applications by tourism businesses etc. that want to make use of the world's very first International Nature Preserve.

It was Jack who came forward shaking hands and greeting them. As she pulled her hand back she checked it to see if it was oily. Oh Jack was charming enough, but that was just it, he was so smoothly charming that she felt as if she needed to keep one hand on her wallet the whole time. Mike didn't seem to be having this same reaction but then again maybe he was just used to people like this.

In the cool shaded breeze of the pavilion, each member took about a half an hour and gave a brief overview of the work done so far. A year and a half into the project and thirty square miles of floating trash had been turned into three square miles of floating platforms in various stages of terraforming into a beautiful garden. The first little island that the pavilion was on was absolutely breath taking. Blooming tropical plants and arching arbors covered with climbing vines, even dwarf citrus trees heavily laden with fresh lemons and limes.

In the intermission before lunch Elaine was walking the little plastic paths between the great waist high masses of vegetation, just enjoying the sights when she noticed Vikki Turnbull approaching with a second big floppy straw hat. "You'll want this." Vikki called.

Elaine laughed, and wrinkled her nose a bit at the fashion statement but as she did so, noticed the skin on her nose was already feeling stiff. "Oh, I put on sun screen."

Vikki laughed good naturedly, "It's the ginger curse dear. Trust me, you're already a shade of red that makes me think I may have been a bit too long finding my spare hat."

Elaine took the hat and was surprised at how much cooler it did make things. With Vikki's help she secured the small hidden clips to her hair to keep the hat from blowing away. "I bathed in sunscreen when I first got here, and it helps but nothing really worked until I got over my dread of hats." Vikki said with a smile. "There, now you can enjoy yourself now, and not pay for it later. Well at least not as much." She amended.

"You've accomplished a lot out here." Elaine said gesturing to profusion of vegetation and the light buzzing of honey bees and flashes of color by various butterflies.

"Best job in the world if you like to garden. I get to pick the plants, and the insects I want, not what I inherited." Vikki said with a conspiratorial grin. "Not to mention young Calvin really knows his way around those printing machines and can give me irrigation wrinkles exactly where I need them." Then with another nod and a wink "Besides watching him out there in only his trunks helping to guide the machines through their first couple of courses is a show not to be missed."

Elaine choked a bit and looked at the older woman in surprise. "Oh luv, I'm just too old for him, I'm not blind. Just because he is young enough to be my son, he isn't my son. So what's the harm in a little admiration of the natural beauty?"

Elaine giggled. "Ok, I'll give you that. I was just a bit shocked to hear someone say it so openly in a work environment."

Vikki shook her head quietly clucking. "Oh out here we all know each other way better than any group of employees should. There is no one else. Still as long as I'm not making him uncomfortable ogling him lewdly, why get all upset about it." She shrugged, "Maybe those rules make sense in the big corporate world, where there is the chance to trade favors for FAVORS," she said with extra emphasis, "but out here. Bah, we're all too busy working most of the time."

Elaine shook her head too, "Sorry, I'm recently moved to MU from the States. I've not quite

adjusted to the, shall we say, more practical way things are viewed by true professionals, who are busy about building a better world."

Vikki again grinned, "A revolution without dancing, is a revolution not worth having," she quoted the old movie her father had been so obsessed with. "Speaking of worth having, lunch is served and it all comes from things produced locally. I think you'll really enjoy this."

Elaine's brows rose, "Ohh... Then lead on."

* * *

Bjorn nervously approached the the office door. Why on earth would Ulli have made such a big deal of this meeting. The door swished open on it's own as he approached. Inside was a small office that looked very much like the Hollywood idea of a Doctor/Lawyer/Architect office. Large wooden desk, leather bound tomes arranged on bookshelves on the walls. Some generic art interspersed through out.

The man behind the desk rose and extended his hand, "Mr. Winters? I'm Dr. Johnson. Thank you for meeting with me. Would you please have a seat?" as he gestured toward one of the comfortable looking leather wing-back chairs.

Bjorn eyed the man as he took his seat. Mid fifties, healthy, obviously wealthy though no ostentatious display was evident. Every detail was carefully crafted to convey the impression of wisdom and trustworthiness. Even the measured polite tone of his voice was soothing. This did not soothe Bjorn, instead it alarmed him. What was going on here. "Certainly, Dr. Johnson. My Ulli acted very odd when I asked him what this meeting was about, but he was very insistent I should come."

The man smiled as he seated himself again as well, "Yes they are so helpful so much of the time, that when they go all evasive it can be disconcerting. I hope I haven't caused you undue stress but for people in your situation, Ullies have been instructed to let people handle some conversations. Had you been more familiar with MU and it's capabilities, your Ulli would have handled this whole conversation himself."

Bjorn raised one eyebrow, "My situation?"

The doctor nodded, "I understand you are visiting from the mainland?"

Bjorn nodded, "My daughter took a job here, and we're staying while she gets settled in."

The doctor nodded again, "Well in the United States, what I am about to tell you would normally be a cause for some alarm. Many people don't handle the news well. Here on MU, it is usually more of an inconvenience than a life altering pronouncement."

Bjorn was getting concerned again and started to interrupt but the Doctor just held up a hand to stay him for a moment. "Please I know I am being a bit cryptic too. I just need you to have some background information before I tell you what this is all about. Mr. Winters, your Ulli has been monitoring your bio signs the same way every one on MU is monitored. Yesterday evening he detected some protein factors that are associated with Cancer." He paused for a second to let that sink in and watch Bjorn's face change as he took in this information. "Mr. Winters," he paused waiting for Bjorn's eyes to meet his again, "Here this is not a sign of an impending long fight with a deadly disease."

Bjorn's face wrinkled in disbelief, "Are you saying ya'll cured Cancer and it just didn't make the

news?"

The doctor actually chuckled at that, "No, what I am saying is that we catch it early enough, that stopping it is a relatively easy treatment."

Bjorn sat back hard in the chair and looked at the doctor for a long time. The doctor didn't rush words into the silence just let Bjorn process it all. "So not a cure?"

Sensing that Bjorn was ready for more, "Not a cure for someone with advanced growths. For most people at your stage, what you're really looking at is three days of discomfort. Think a bad case of the stomach flu. A weeks rest at most, and about a tenth of a Sovereign to cover the medicine, my visit, and a consultative visit with Mrs. Winters if you choose to tell her."

Bjorn shook his head, "Choose to tell her? I've got Cancer! I don't tell her that, that's just not right."

The doctor again smiled gently, "You have an illness that left untreated, would become cancer as you understand it. As it will most likely be for you, you have what will end up being a rather unpleasant few days and continued monitoring. This doesn't need to be any more intrusive than it has been since you came here, if you're able to install the proper equipment in your home back in the US?"

Bjorn rubbed his face, "So you're saying out sick for a week, and cancer is cured?"

"Pretty much. You will need ongoing monitoring because once it shows up it is more likely to happen again, but if it can be caught each time at what we like to call stage zero, just a hand full of cells, then it can be treated this easily." the doctor said in an even tone.

Bjorn sighed, "A tenth of a sovereign, sorry Doc, but I'm still used to using dollars, so how much is this going to run me?"

Here the Doctor really did break out in a wide grin, "Concern about the cost is a good sign you're far enough along in assimilating that you're going to live to have to pay it."

Bjorn snorted but grinned back at the Doctor.

"At today's exchange rate, you're looking at about eleven hundred US dollars."

Bjorn shook his head, "How can this be real?"

The doctor shrugged, "The benefits of constant monitoring, which leads to early detection, and intervention. We get it and apply the latest cutting edge treatments, months before actual symptoms would arise to cause you to see a doctor back home."

"I'm not going to die, am I Doc." Bjorn more stated than asked.

"Not likely, at least not from this. Telling your wife, or not telling her," the doctor shrugged with a light grin, "That could be the more dangerous of your choices."

* * *

Elaine slipped into the warm water of the hot tub in their room. The muscles sore from a long day exploring the various stages of completion on Eden. The video she shot from the drones plus the mountain of file footage downloaded would make for amazing PR vids. She was excited about getting to work on it all but tonight wasn't about work. Tonight was about exploring a future

every bit as amazing as they were working on on Eden, but in a whole new way. She smiled as Mike came out of the bathroom still dripping from the shower and headed to join her in the tub.

"Well you smell better." she teased.

He chuckled and slid into the water. "I hope so. Man it was a long day. Still it's amazing what they've accomplished."

Elaine grinned, "Well you do seem to have a knack for picking the right people."

He shook his head, "Oh this team practically assembled itself as soon as the opportunity was there. They'll be at it for years but after that lunch we had," he smiled, "I think tourists will probably be showing up much sooner than we expected."

Elaine grinned at him, "Speaking of lunch..." She reached below the water and pulled out a jar of the Eden honey. Eden honey was much like normal honey but had just a hint of salt to it from all the salt water plants. It was a distinctive export that she was sure would soon be a prized and pricey commodity. She had this bottle warming in the water of the hot tub, "Think we can find some use for this, now that I've got it all warmed up?" she smiled shyly.

Mike laughed, "Oh I think we might." he winked at her and took her into his arms. "I'm glad you've come into our lives." he said very seriously.

She shook her head, "Never would have imagined it, but can't imagine myself anywhere else now."

Chapter 15

Mike held Elaine close down in their cabin as the Mara slid into the shade of the docking area, "Are you certain we shouldn't just be open about all of this?"

Elaine held him to her tightly, "Oh I wish we could, but for something this unorthodox, we're going to have to prepare my family for it." She firmly pushed herself away from him. "Just hurry up with their boat so, we can tell them about it once they're off touring the world." she grinned.

"Coward." He joked back.

Elaine snorted, "You won't have to be the one to answer all of my mothers overly personal questions, each one phrased as if we're both guilty of something."

He chuckled thinking back to their first meeting, "Oh I've got a pretty good idea. After our first meeting in that now infamous interview," he shook his head ruefully, "I can imagine exactly what she's like."

"I am NOT my mother!" Elaine exclaimed in shock.

With a wicked grin Mike dove in sharply for a quick kiss, and said in a completely condescending tone as he pulled away, "Of course not dear." With that he hurried quickly through the lounge and up on deck.

Elaine started to give chase but the thought that she might be more like her mother than she thought really bugged her. She knew Mike was just trying to get her goat, but it probably wouldn't have worked unless there was a kernel of truth in there somewhere. She almost tripped over the coffee table in the lounge in her distracted efforts to move and put her self image back to rights.

Once on deck she could see off on the dock, her mother and Tattianna waving to them. She waved back and noticed that Bjorn wasn't with them. "Well, looks like Daddy wasn't just trying to get out of going to the theater, when he told Tattianna he was sick last night. He wouldn't have missed this if he was well."

Mike shrugged and stepped to her side by the rail, careful not to touch her lest he lose control and embrace her. "Um, I hope he's ok."

"Oh Daddy's Daddy, he'll be fine right up until the day that it all catches up to him. I bet I've only seen him sick a couple dozen times in my life." she smiled.

Mike leaned in to whisper in her ear just as the Mara was lowering the gangplank, "Good, not sure I'm ready to move in a mother in law, before her daughter is willing to hold my hand in public."

Elaine gasped in shock and drew back to look at him. There he was grinning from ear to ear, he just quickly danced across the gangplank at swept up Tattiana in his arms. She sighed and grinned. No sense being mad at him, he would make a joke about anything. If he thought of mom as a mother in law already, then things are going well. She was still over thinking things when Mary was hugging her and welcoming her home.

* * *

Bjorn was finally starting to feel better, three days of "discomfort" had turned into nearly five. Still it was nice each morning when Ulli reported to him that no cancer indicators had been found. He enjoyed MU but he really hadn't been working much since they had arrived and he kind of wanted to get back to life as normal even if it was a new normal. He had seen the new mock ups for the yacht and Michael's engineers had really made some nice improvements in his basic design.

That young man had his act together, Bjorn thought, remembering back to his days in his late twenties and early thirties. He couldn't help a small smile remembering those days. Youth and stupidity might be a waste of resources but they still held a wealth of warm memories. Probably massaged by nostalgia's magic but still he wouldn't trade them.

He finished putting on the new suit, this was going to be his first real trip out in a public forum since Ulli had given him the bad news, but Avalon was launching this morning and the Shultzingers had been kind enough to invite them to the formal event. Ulli had explained that it had become a bit of a tradition that each new island launched would be a semi holiday for all the other islands. Sort of a community gathering to welcome a new member.

"You're sure smiling a lot, for it being this early in the morning." Mary said from the other side of the room.

Bjorn turned and smiled at her and shrugged, "What can I say? It's good to be alive, and good to share it with good people."

She shook her head a bit, "I don't know what's gotten into you lately, but I like it." she smiled back.

Bjorn took in the simple green gauze wrap that was her dress and smiled again. Except for the miracle of modern glue, a stiff breeze would blow it completely away in the wind. It was beautiful on her, but he couldn't help but be amused thinking how scandalized she would have been to wear it back in Washington. "You look beautiful." he said with a smile finishing up the last button on his left sleeve.

She flushed slightly, "It really is pretty, but it almost seems scandalous to wear it out in public."

He laughed easily, "If the PTA could only see you now?" and arched an eyebrow.

She giggled, "Or Mother Superior Margaret Catherine. She'd probably lock me in a closet for a week."

Bjorn grinned, the strict old school nun who had been the administrator at her first teaching job was before Bjorn's time, but the stories about her made her seem like a force of nature. "Well I'm sure it was just that she knew she wouldn't look nearly as good in it."

Marry completely dissolved in to gales of laughter, "Oh now that's a mental picture I didn't need." she tried to recover and couldn't she held her sides because they ached with the laughter.

Bjorn just moved over to hug her gently. She recovered enough to look in the mirror and wipe her eyes, "If you've made me smudge my makeup Bjorn Winters," she began in her best school teacher voice.

Bjorn laughed, "Maybe we'll just smudge it really good and tell them we'll be late?"

"You're awful," she chided with a smile, "While it sounds fun, we really need to do this. This means a lot to Elaine."

"Well then, you finish fixing your face and we'll be ready to go." he kissed the side of her neck and pulled away, starting for the door.

* * *

Elaine was looking at herself in the mirror. The gown was beautiful what there was of it. She was just contemplating a change, when she stopped herself. Her parents love her and while they will be a bit scandalized, her mother at least knew this was the fashion here. She could thank their earlier shopping trip with Tattianna for that. With a last burst of determination she left her room into the main room of the suite.

Bjorn turned and his eyes went wide. "Honey, you look beautiful, and I know they go into a little more revealing here, but are you sure there isn't more to that dress you just forgot to put on?"

"Very funny Daddy." She shrugged, "This isn't a quite family Shabbot dinner, this is a formal occasion. Though, the first time I wore one of these I was incredibly self conscious, but while I won't call this conservative here, it certainly won't even be close to the most outrageous you're likely to see today." Again she sighed, "This is appropriate for my station here, and if I'm going to make my life here, this is as much a part of it as putting on a tie would have been for you in the early days of your career. At least high heels aren't expected here."

"Hallelujah for that," Mary said as she came out of the bedroom. "You look very beautiful dear."

Elaine looked at her mother, and all she could think was wow. For a woman in her late forties, Mary gave Elaine hope for the future of her figure. "Mom, that looks amazing."

Bjorn just smiled, "Yes you're both very beautiful and I'm going to be the envy of the crowd, but as Ulli just reminded me if we don't get moving, no one is going to see it."

* * *

They arrived in the grand hall, and Bjorn and Mary were both amazed at the layout. Elaine suggested they both take a trip up to check out the volcano while they were here. "Seriously, all the way to the top. It's worth it. Now, sorry to run off, but I'm working today."

"Yes of course dear," Mary said with a wave of her hand. "I'm sure we'll find plenty to keep us occupied." She took Bjorn's arm and lead him off toward the long heavily laden buffet tables.

Elaine found Tattianna first, she felt a pang of envy as she saw her in the revealing dress, the baby certainly had not diminished her beauty at all. "Tattianna!" Elaine greeted her with a kiss on each cheek. Tattianna's hand lingered a fraction longer in Elaine's than normal as she gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Sorry we're running a bit behind, but Daddy was being Daddy this morning."

Tattianna smiled, "Oh I find your father quite charming." Elaine realized she left unsaid that she found her mother much less so. "Michael asked me to send you on up to the control booth when you arrived. Seems there are some things to go over before we go live with the video."

Elaine grinned, "Always something. I really hope we can all break free of this at a reasonable hour this evening. I'd love to have some quiet time for just the three of us."

Tattianna nodded, "I've already made some arrangements. I want to hear ALL about Eden from your perspective." She said with a subtle wink.

* * *

Elaine made her way to the control booth and saw Mike working with Rosen and Stutsman. She wanted to run to him but this was work, both need to keep their game face on and get the job done first. David spotted her first and waved her over.

"Tattianna said to find you gentlemen in chaos central?" Elaine asked with a grin.

David snorted and Mike shook his head but it was John Stuttsman's sigh that told of the frustration. "They aren't giving us access to the main truck of the internet. The satellites at the launch area aren't allowing for uplink. Much of south east Asia is having an internet black out for the last twenty minutes. We can get ground connect access but it's very low quality feed."

Elaine frowned, "Seems pretty petty to block internet access of the launch."

Mike shook his head, "Information warfare, the less they can show us succeeding the more likely it is that their populations will believe their propaganda."

Elaine scratched at a bit of the dried glue on her shoulder that held her gown in place, "John," she rested a hand on his shoulder, "What about the same technology you used for that meeting with the UN? Can we take low quality footage we can get and boost its quality with software?"

John just grunted, and you could tell he was thinking, "Well we can try that, but it might be noticeable as we've not had practice at it."

"I take it using the quantum internet is out as well?" she asked

"Bandwidth, we have more of it over the hand full of land lines we do have over there." he shook his head.

"OK, what about point to point using the AirShips as a satellite substitute?" she asked.

"We only have one that can be in place in time, and we really need two." Stuttsman said.

Elaine stood up, "Ulli call my father and tell him I need him here as soon as he can."

Mike looked up, caught her eye and shrugged, "I'll take all the help I can get."

* * *

Bjorn arrived and went through all of the obvious solutions with them again, and one by one found out why they wouldn't work. Bjorn was getting frustrated, "You know, it's too bad we can't just blast it all out over AM radio. That travels for miles."

John Stuttzman smacked his forehead and let out a sulfurous curse. "Bjorn you sir are a bloody genius!"

Mike shook his head, "I don't know if this is worth breaking international agreements for. Even if we aren't a party to them..." he trailed off weighing the options.

John laughed, "No Mike it isn't but we'll just bend them a bit not break them." He was grinning from ear to ear, "Ulli, get my team to work on frequency hopping and encryption, with decryption keys to be sent via the quantum internet." He looked around at the confused faces. "Ah, let me unpack a bit. We send it out over many AM frequencies hopping between them. All encrypted and compressed. We send the frequency schedule and decryption/decompression algorithm via the quantumnet. That way the computers all know what frequency to look for information on next. It will take advantage of the quantumnet's speed, the computers will all know where to look before the slower moving radio waves reach them. It will sound like small static on multiple stations. I bet it takes them months to even figure out how we did it." With that last he laughed a bit maniacally. "Oh yeah, we're going to stump them good. Pirate radio lives again!"

* * *

Back in Seattle, Debbie Stevens is watching her old friend Elaine Winters reporting on the launch of the newest island nation Avalon. She can't believe how it just looks right, Elaine always had that little blog of hers but this was almost like being on the TV news. I mean she knew someone famous.

She watched the large island just glide out of Bangkok Bay and into the deep waters of the Pacific on it's three month long journey to it's final destination between Iceland and Ireland. It looked beautiful. She wondered what it would be like to live on one of those islands. Maybe if the government ever lifted the travel restrictions on them, she would go visit Elaine and find out.

She giggled feeling a bit silly doing it, but in an email titled "Fan Mail" she wrote Elaine and congratulated her on the great new job.

Chapter 16

Elaine followed Ulli to David's office where he had agreed to grant her the interview. She wasn't really surprised by the office, much like Mike's it was a bit disconcerting and designed to project power and make visitors feel just a little off balance. She found all of these power plays to be immature posturing, but she supposed when it was expected, it would be taken for a sign of weakness if it wasn't there. These white collar boys all wanted to act so sophisticated, but deep down they were still just brutes fighting over turf. She saw the validity in that view, but it didn't carry the scorn it used to. She could also hear Tattianna's voice in the back of her mind, "yes but aren't they cute little piggies". She couldn't help but smile thinking of that. Tattianna was no one's door mat, but she also didn't let herself get pulled into the "feminist struggle". She just smiled, accepted that men were different, and made her plans accordingly.

David was rising from behind the desk to come greet her, so she had to pull her mind back to business. "Hello Elaine, glad you could make it."

Elaine smiled warmly at him, and found it wasn't really forced, David had become a friend over the last few months. She would have found that beyond unlikely before her first world changing trip to MU but he really was a warm and thoughtful man. "David, thank you for making the time for me. I know your schedule is hectic."

David waved his hand to push it away, "Care to join me on the balcony? If you don't think it would interfere with the lighting or sound?"

Elaine grinned, "Oh it would have wrecked all sorts of havoc on the gear I was using even last year at this time, but with the live editing features now available on the new Stuttzman AR glasses, we'll scarcely notice the difference. Besides, it'll be a beautiful back drop."

David nodded, and said something sub-vocally to his Ulli and a portion of the wall slid open and the bright tropical sun streamed through.

Elaine marveled again at what had just become another part of her life. This was what people spoke of when they said million dollar view. OK in this case multi millions. The office of Rosen Finance's CEO was about two thirds of the way up the peak of the island, with views from the balcony over looking lush greenery and red tiled villas, all the way down to the resort accommodations and the ring of sandy beaches surrounding the harbor area. White sails winking in the sunlight miles out to sea. She spent a few minutes admiring and recording the view, "This will make a great intro shot, thanks again David."

David stood over by the small table holding her chair out for her with un self consciously old world manners. She had to admit David Rosen always knew how to make a lady feel like a princess. She took her seat and settled her small amount of equipment while he conversed with his Ulli to position the small umbrella on the table to provide the right amount of shade. She smiled as she realized the umbrella was a translucent film that could be adjusted to let the desired amount of light through. Five years ago that would have been remarkable all on it's own, and in many of the land based nations it probably still was, but here on MU innovations great and small were happening so frequently and in so many areas of life, they sort of just blended together.

David smiled at her, "So how was the last interview on the Atlantean Sovereign received?"

She grinned back, "Excellent! Which is part of the reason I'm back. You were right, it didn't stop

those who didn't do their homework from bungling, but it did help several of my subscribers know to do their homework. There were many thank you's to you in the comments section."

David shrugged, "Glad I could help. The so call Financial Press, is all but calling Atlantis a sham, but it's functioning more or less as we designed it to do. It's not my fault that no one bothered to ask what it was designed for."

Elaine shook her head slightly, David Rosen didn't suffer fools gladly. "Speaking of Atlantis, how is Arel doing?"

David snorted, "Amazing considering my initial opinion of his, shall we say unorthodox plan." He shook his head, but his voice was full of pride, "I didn't think he could make that crazy idea of his work. I was even a little nervous because I had vouched for him with the rest of the family. Still the last time I was at that sports bar he calls a financial institution," again creeping disdain for the change but oddly mixed with pride in his nephews accomplishment, "he had managed to have artists and street vendors talking like brokers and hedge fund managers." He laughed, "Oh the jargon was all gone and being replaced with some rather colorful new slang, but in the end, they are interested in their own finances and trying shoulder the responsibility of planning their futures."

Elaine enjoyed seeing the pride David showed in the young man who had been such a great resource for her on her last trip to Atlantis, she wondered if Ariel knew how he had gained the older man's respect. "Well hopefully their economy will settle down and get better."

David shook his head, "It won't settle down for ten more years, by design. The whole system is still ramping up. By what I had projected for that lot, their economy is going gangbusters. The 'Financial Press', " he said again almost like he wanted to spit, if such a thing weren't beneath his dignity, "was just lazily trying to project Atlantis numbers off of MU's numbers when it first got going." He shook his head, "As if policy differences don't matter. As if monetary design doesn't matter. As if base population doesn't matter."

Elaine held up a hand and got her game face on, "Shall we get started?"

David blinked, realized he had been winding up for his usual rant and snorted. "Just so." He motioned for her to ask away.

* * *

Elaine took a deep breath, "Good morning, and welcome to today's program. We have a very special guest. David Rosen's article after the launching of Atlantis was so popular, we've invited him back on to speak with us about the new Avalonian currencies." She smiled and the camera shifted to David. "Thank you for joining us. What do we need to know about the new currencies of Avalon?"

David cleared his throat, "Thank you for inviting me Elaine. It really is always a pleasure. I suppose the first thing to note about Avalonian money is that there are two types." He waited for a second for that to sink in. "First there are the 'Crowns of Avalon'", he ticks the example casually with a finger, "These you will rarely see traded. These are actual voting shares of the island and represent a claim on the national GDP, and claim to a title. Even owning one Crown of Avalon, entitles the holder to be called Esquire and attend the annual Vesting ceremony. That is where the participants vote for the advisers to the King for the next year based upon how many Crowns they possess."

Elaine said, "Oh a council for their infant king."

David shook his head again, "I'll never understand people's obsession with monarchy for monarchy's sake. Yes the young boy they created from the DNA of Alfred the Great first King of the Angle-Saxons and Máel Sechnaill mac Máele Ruanaid King of Ireland." He shook his head and frowned, "Don't know how they are certain they got the right DNA after all of this time," he shrugged, "Either way they created the young man, and crowned him Arthur Rex Avalon and are in the process of raising and educating him to be the King. Not sure I'd want that job considering what the lunatics did to procure their own Royal line but that's what the Islands are all about. Trying to find a way to live that isn't as bad as the neighbors." He grinned impishly.

Elaine's voice warbled, "I didn't realize that was how he was born."

David raised one eyebrow, "Yeah they don't usually lead with that in their tourism propaganda." Then he smiled, "Tourism though is their life blood. That is where the second tier money comes in. They call them Royals. Avalonian Royals are actually just pegged to the price of silver. One gram is equal to one Royal and paid out in whatever currency is desired at the spot price of silver in that currency. There isn't any holding of silver backing it, just a promise to pay out one gram of silver's price in any currency demanded on exchange."

Elaine broke in, "But, if they don't have any silver?"

David smiled, "Then why use silver?" He shrugged, "It is more or less a decent store of value and they will be taking in tons of foreign currencies as they become the playground of the world. They aren't tied to any land based nation's currency and yet can trade in them all. Taxation, happens at the currency exchange. As long as you are trading Royals it's almost tax free, but when you go to cash out back into the currency of your home country, that is where you get hit with a fifteen percent tax."

Elaine whistled, "Why wouldn't people just buy with the money of their home country or take their royals with them?"

David grinned, "It's illegal. If you get caught trading in say MU Sovereigns on Avalon the price to get free is five times the amount of the original trade. Or prison time if you don't pay up. If you take your Royals with you, then once you leave Avalon, they are simply declared counterfeit by the algorithm and forfeited to the crown. Young Arthur Rex may be, but he's still going to get paid what the law says is his due." David chuckled.

Elaine shook her head, "Why would they discourage outside investment so?"

David chuckled, "When first we met, that wouldn't have been your question at this point."

Elaine flushed a bit. "Granted, but it is now."

David smiled at her, "So it is, and good that it is so. They think what they will gain through the taxation scheme is greater and will prevent outsiders from just buying up their little Kingdom." He looked a bit grim for a second, "From the historical record, they may not be completely wrong in this."

"So no real opportunity for my subscribers to benefit from investing in Avalon?" Elaine asked.

"Well not directly. Though if you're one of those people who believe that the Central Banks of the big nations are trying to rig such things, it can make some interesting moves in the silver market as they seek to use that as a handle on the small island's finances." David shrugged.

Elaine smiled and in her sweetest most innocent voice, "So Mr. Rosen, is Rosen Finance involved in the silver trade?"

David barked an involuntary laugh, "For client confidentiality, I can neither confirm nor deny that."

Elaine grinned, "You heard it here first folks. Mr. Rosen, as always such a pleasure to spend this time with you."

The cameras all died and David made a motion to ask if they were off the record. "Yeah I've grilled you enough for one day." Elaine said with a wink.

He chuckled, "You know that when you air that last part it will probably make the silver market move."

She grinned back, "People always gotta look for an edge where ever they can find it."

"Can I ask you a personal question?" He asked her seriously.

Elaine shrugged, "As long as you don't mind if I choose to evade answering."

"Fair enough," he said with a smile. "How serious are things with you and Mike?"

The question hit her hard, "Uh..." she stammered.

David waved his hand to dismiss the protestations. "I'm not foolish. I haven't seen Mike this distracted in I can't tell you how long. Dinner was pretty obvious to both myself and Yehudah."

She hesitated for a minute before answering, "I think they could get very serious. Why?"

David sighed, "Interfaith marriages can be difficult." He held up a hand to stop her. "Oh a gentile woman marrying a Jew won't make any news except in the truly Ultra Orthodox world and even there it happens often enough. The Karaites are more indulgent of such things than my own Orthodox brothers are, but it can be hard. Add to that you will essentially be engaging in polygamy, a practice that many sects of Judaism have rejected for more than a thousand years, it could cause you trouble."

"I'm not worried about trouble!" Elaine almost snapped.

David again held up both hands in surrender, "I'm not saying you shouldn't do what makes you happy. I'm just saying don't do it blind. Speak to Miriam, Yehudah's wife. She grew up Orthodox and lives now among the Karaites. Seek her advice. Agree with your choices or not, she respects Mike too much not to do everything she can to help you. On that, you can trust her."

Elaine realized he wasn't just being nosy for it's own sake, he really was concerned for her. "Thank you David. I might just do that. I can see you meant only to help with this."

David relaxed visibly, "I'm glad you understand. As the book says, we are a stiff necked people, but if you can get past all the prickly defenses you can find your home among us. It just won't be easy the way you're going to try to do it. Not wrong to do it that way, but not easy." He smiled.

Elaine shook her head, "Never seem to manage to find the easy button. Thanks for the advice."

With out another word David rose and helped her to her feet. Gave her a polite chaste kiss on each cheek and escorted her to the door.

Chapter 17

Following Ulli through the open door, Bjorn got his first look at Michael Shultzinger's official office. Wow, all he could think of was how almost felt like being outside rather than in an office. All of the walls were video screens giving a view from the top of the island. A bit of vertigo gripped him for a moment and then passed. Michael was busy with something on the desk top but he motioned for Bjorn to come in and have a seat.

Mike finished what he was doing and looked up, "G'morning Mr. Winters." he smiled and held his hand out.

Bjorn took it with a smile, "I thought we'd gotten past all of this mistering?"

Mike smiled, "Of course, but this is business, at least mostly. While I'll admit this is the friends and family discount, and you wouldn't get this offer, had you not been Elaine's father, it is still a fair deal even to me."

Bjorn felt an eyebrow raise involuntarily, "Oh?"

"Well we did a bit of a redesign of your original drawings." Mike started.

Bjorn nodded, "I saw the hydrofoils in place of the pontoons at the ends of the..." he hesitated trying to come up with the best word, "arms".

Mike grinned widely, "Not arms, WINGS, the hydrofoils are attached to artificial muscles further up the wing's structure. The craft can now float, like a normal boat would, glide through the water on hydrofoils, and once at speed, using the wing in ground effect, can even 'fly'," Mike gestured the air quotes around the word, "for reasonable distances."

Bjorn eyebrows shot up, "That's an incredible improvement, but there is only one problem with it."

Mike chuckled, "That you're not a pilot?"

Bjorn shrugged and nodded.

"Well Bjorn, you're not the ancient mariner either and it's dangerous to be out to sea without experience, so..." He motioned for Bjorn to open the settings on his AR glasses. "I want you to meet Sindbad the Sailor."

A swarthy roguish man in his late twenties appeared before them. Dressed in the simple utility dress of a common sailor of five hundred years ago, Sindbad looked more like he belonged on a movie set than the deck of a real ship but Bjorn has put two and two together and after getting to know his Ulli, had no doubt that Stuttzman Electronics had been hard at work.

Mike shook his head, "Sorry for the cheese factor, but Tattianna swears that people will rather have mythical sea captains as their interface. We have a choice between twenty five different classical literature sea captains to choose from, all safely out of copyright protections." Mike chuckled, "I was told we're even in negotiations for a certain captain noted for his taste in children's cereal, but that can't be offered as an option until the negotiations are complete."

Bjorn grinned, "So this is my user interface, pilot, and seamanship data base?"

Mike just shrugged, "Pretty much. Why don't we take a virtual tour?" and without waiting for agreement, he used the shared environment that Bjorn had joined with the AR glasses and whisked them away to where they were standing in a luxuriously appointed states room on the yacht. "Master bedroom," Mike said as he gestured around, and then walked through the door to the next bedroom, "It's clone." He motioned Bjorn to follow and up the narrow stairs they went, to cockpit in the front. "All of the seats are designed to be shock absorbing, so at high speeds or in rough weather, you're still reasonably comfortable."

Bjorn was grinning like a kid who thinks he's going to get a new bike for his birthday. "It's all beautiful but I think you're forgetting it has to be on my budget."

Mike snorted, "Come on, lets look at the main deck. They passed through the full galley and back on to a large entertaining room. Casual benches alongside the walls and low tables and memory foam chairs were scattered through out. The room itself was huge, easily twenty feet across and thirty five long.

Bjorn blinked when he saw it and blinked again just to be sure, "How big did you make my basic plans?"

Mike shrugged, "Your original design was really too small to be secure upon the ocean." Mike motioned him through a sealed hatch at the far end of the room and they entered out on to an open deck. "Length over all is one hundred and twenty feet, and wing span is right at eighty feet. She displaces up to a maximum of one hundred and thirty tons, and weighs just over six tons as she sits now."

On deck Bjorn could see the aft section with it's large tail fin slowly waving back and forth like a giant fish. Mike seeing the confused expression elaborated, "Artificial muscles, just like in the wings. This swimming option is a slow maneuvering option. Relatively fuel efficient as it can work right off the solar panels. Come, lets go back to the cockpit and see how you and Sindbad work together."

Bjorn is following him through the vessel "This is amazing but how much fuel does it take to fly, because that little swimming motion isn't going to get us up to that kind of speed."

Mike nodded as they moved back on to the bridge and Sindbad waived to them, his gold tooth glinting in the relative gloom, after being outside. "You have three main options, solar power, the excess of which is used for electrolysis, to store hydrogen, that burns in the twin turbo fan jet engines right up under each wing. No you can't run on the jets indefinitely, but you do have an emergency range of three hundred miles. Also at a top cruising speed of nearly two hundred miles an hour, you should be able to out run just about any trouble out there. The second option is to use the jets still but use them with the hydrofoils, and this should extend your range to about five hundred miles on full tanks. Lastly you can float and use swim mode for maneuvering indefinitely while your hydrogen tanks refill."

Bjorn shook his head, "It's amazing, but I can never afford it. Even just maintenance on jet engines..."

Mike cut him off, "This new generation of graphene based turbo fans require very little maintenance and your on board 3D printers could produce almost any part you need. Yes it would take a bit of skill to put it in, but with your AR glasses and the automated captain system, you can be walked through it step by step. Also once a year, you probably should stop in at a qualified facility to have a full inspection done. You can stop in and visit Elaine while they are looking over your ship." Mike grinned, "This really is workable as I'll explain when we start talking money. Until then damn it just go for the test drive!"

Bjorn shrugged and started playing with the craft. Virtual icons appeared before him and between those and a few spoken commands to Sindbad, they were off. Cutting through the waves, and then flying over the waves, each turn and maneuver feeling natural. They glided through the air like a big manta ray gliding through the water. In just a few minutes Bjorn noticed MU on the horizon. "Huh, the simulation is good. I swear that island over there looks just like MU."

Michael chuckled, "That's because it is. This wasn't a simulation, you were remote piloting the real thing. How about we let Sindbad bring her the rest of the way in on swim mode?"

Bjorn gasped, "You mean I was actually flying that thing?"

Mike shrugged, "Well I anticipated that you would say 'A simulation is one thing, but flying another.' so I just short circuited the argument."

Bjorn snorted, "Aren't you just the cheeky bastard." he said in his best British accent.

This made Mike laugh out loud, "Over the years, I've just learned that sometimes you get farther by doing first and explaining later. Still lets pull off the AR glasses and discuss the details."

Bjorn blinked his eyes adjusting to the office after being on the ship. He looked at the video wall and sure enough off in the distance there was the little vessel making its way toward the island.

Mike rubbed his eyes too and yawned. "Sorry, little one was up late last night."

Bjorn grinned, "They do that, it gets worse when they decide to go on dates."

Mike hoped his face didn't look as guilty as he felt but he quickly changed the subject. "So when an engineer submits a raw design to us to review, he is typically offered between one and five percent stock option in compensation. Your designed had some serious rework done to it, but as you can tell, it is still your unique design that inspired it all. How I see this working, the vessel is yours as payment in lieu of stock holding. However for your agreement to do a bit of a world tour, showing off the design at various tech shows over the next year and a half, we toss in a one percent stake in the company that will be producing this design."

Bjorn really was speechless. It was exceedingly generous but it also was not charity. An eighteen month contract to be all around the world was no small thing. Still the vessel was beyond amazing and Mary would be set up for the rest of her life with a home like that. It could provide almost everything she would ever need. "It doesn't feel right not to have a counter offer," Bjorn said a bit bewildered, "but you are right. This is a fantastic offer, and you do get fair payment as well, if over a bit longer of a time frame. I accept, the only provision, is Mary agree."

Mike barked a laugh, "Of course, we wouldn't want Mary mad at me for pushing you in to something. How about I have Elaine meet us at the dock. You go get Mary and we let you show it off to them."

* * *

Mike motioned for Bjorn to lead his family up the gangway to the deck of their new home. The deck was a bit stark as they had no furnishings on it as everything was packed away for flight configuration. Sindbad was standing just inside the door and unlocked it for them. Mike hung back just a bit while Bjorn showed off his prize. He smiled when Elaine let out a squeal of delight

as she discovered the small hydroponic herb garden in the galley cupboard. Mary seemed a bit overwhelmed but obviously pleased.

Bjorn led her up through the bridge and cockpit area, and down to the bedrooms below the water line. Elaine hung back and when she was certain her parents were down the stairs, she jumped on Michael giving him a deep and passionate kiss. "You are wonderful my love. This is amazing and makes up for me dragging them away from their home. What ever I need to cover that their money doesn't you let me know, this is worth it." She breathed into his ear.

Mike chuckled, "Oh this is nothing. It's good for them, and it was mostly your Dad's idea. I just had the tools to make it happen. When we actually start selling these, I expect to more than make up anything I've spent on it. Besides terms like, yours, her's, mine, and ours, is likely to get pretty confusing over the next few years."

"Just you wait until I get you home mister, and I think we'll teach you all about yours, her's, mine, and ours." she giggled and took a quick nip at his ear. Then she heard her parents coming back up the stairs at the far end of the boat and sprang away from him as fast as a young teen with her first boyfriend.

Mike grinned, "We could just tell them."

"Shhh!!!." She only looked mildly panicked, "I'll know when it's right."

He smiled and nodded.

Bjorn called out, "Elaine, they even have a second bedroom if you decide to come visit us."

Mary added in, "Or if one day we have some grand kids who want to stay over."

Mike grinned and cut out to the deck area so as not to have to look directly at Mary. He wasn't sure what his face would betray.

* * *

As everyone joined him out on the deck, Mike held his hand out, "I take it this meets with everyone's approval?"

Bjorn shook his hand and nodded still grinning like a kid with a new toy, "Yes Sir, I do believe we have a deal."

Mary looked up, "Mike it is beautiful, tell your construction crew that they have done an excellent job."

Mike shook his head, "Sindbad pass along the compliments please and as soon as the Ullies have registered our agreement you will hence forth take your orders from Mr. and Mrs. Winters."

Sindbad did a comical flourishing bow, "Aye aye captain."

"With that, my Ulli is telling me that I have to get moving for an appointment." Mike smiled at them. "Elaine I think you're at that appointment as well?"

Elaine smiled, "See he's such a slave driver. Only, he's also right. It's a beautiful ship Daddy, you'll have to let me know what you name her."

With that they headed off toward the gangway back to MU proper.

Bjorn called off the side, "I'm calling her Dawn. This is the dawn of a beautiful second chance for my family. I think we'll take Dawn out for a little cruise. Would you care to join us for dinner this evening? You were such a wonderful host Michael, least I can do is return the favor."

Mike just waved. As they headed up into the bustle of the crowd.

Ulli popped up next to Bjorn. "Sorry he can't answer questions about where he will be that publicly. It's bad for security. He asked me to convey to you that he meant no disrespect. Tonight won't work as he has work obligations but would very much like an opportunity to join you on the Dawn at another time."

Bjorn was struck with the just plain commonsense reality of the statement. "No Ulli he was right, I didn't think about the fact that he has to concern himself with security. He has an open invitation, let him know any time, just let us know."

Mary curled into Bjorn's arms. "Where to my captain?"

Bjorn grinned down at her, "Sindbad, second star to the left and straight on til morning."

Mary shook her head. "What? I always wanted to say that and this seemed like the best chance I was likely to get." Bjorn chuckled.

Chapter 18

Tattianna came out of a stretch and felt every muscle just relax. With Bjorn and Mary in their own home life was starting to get to the new normal. Elaine had more or less moved in and at least for the moment the three of them were spending every possible moment together. Laying here warm and safe and just feeling incredibly lazy and loved, she didn't want the honeymoon period to ever end. Oh she knew it would but she was storing up moments like this for the rocky times. She snuggled in to Michael's side and as she looked across his broad chest her eyes locked on to Elaine's. She flushed and wondered if the younger woman knew her thoughts, but from the simple little smile on her face she supposed Elaine was just enjoying the moment too.

Elaine knew that even though today was supposed to be a "day off" that they should be heading in to the office. It was just so comfortable to just lay here and listen to Mike's rhythmic breathing. She looked across Mike's chest and noticed Tattianna snuggling in too. She smiled, it still amazed her to be here. This was not how she saw her future, but it felt so right. Tattianna looked up and met her eyes. Elaine couldn't help it she blushed. She slid her hand across Mike's chest to hold Tattianna's hand. His breathing didn't even change, that man could sleep through a hurricane.

Tattianna saw Elaine reaching out to her and took her hand. This certainly wasn't something she would have considered when she was Elaine's age, but in a lot of ways Elaine was much more confident than she was back then. Of course she had met Mary and Bjorn and what ever Mary's flaws were, they were good parents. She hoped that Elaine would summon the courage soon to let them know about her new family choice. Tattianna didn't think it would be as big of a concern as Elaine seemed to think.

Elaine caught Tattianna's eye again and gave her the look, and then looked to the sleeping Mike and smiled. Unfortunately before Tattianna could respond and join her in waking him in a memorable fashion the wall speaker sounded off. Alexi was awake and wanted attention. Elaine just deflated but shrugged as Tattianna just smiled a bit ironically.

Tattianna got up and tottered off to check on little Alexi. While Elaine was debating about joining her, the wall speaker piped up again. This time it was Ulli. "Mike. Mike sorry to wake you but you need to get up."

Mike's eyes came open and when the light hit them he shut them again. "Ulli, what is it?"

"Sorry Mike, but this one came straight from Commodore Whetherby and it's marked 'Urgent'." Ulli really sounded sorry but Mike had left word that anything marked 'Urgent' was to be relayed at once.

Mike sighed, opened his eyes, "Ok Ulli, I'm awake enough. Synopsis?"

"There was a press release in the US that they are introducing a new class of naval vessel based upon the island constructing techniques they recently pulled your patents on." Ulli said in matter of fact tone.

Mike groaned, disentangled from Elaine and sat up. "Day off canceled. Sorry luv, but looks like we're going to be working for a bit today. I've got to respond to this, it's sort of expected."

Elaine sat up and kissed his shoulder. "How serious is this?"

Mike shrugged, "Mostly that depends on what they've cooked up but I doubt it shifts the status quo much. Oh maybe for the land based nations but it shouldn't effect us unduly." Mike stood up and stretched. "Gonna grab a shower, care to join me?" he smiled broadly.

Elaine chuckled, "Yes, but we wouldn't make it to work like we should, so I won't." She got up as well, "Hurry up though, because I still need one." She walked off toward Alexi's room, "I'll break the bad news to Tattianna."

* * *

Mike and Elaine walked into the command deck where Nigel was making his daily inspection. Nigel saw them and was a bit surprised. Oh he could guess what would bring them both this way but it wasn't like it had to be dealt with right away. "Michael, Ms. Winters, I thought today was supposed to be your day off?"

Mike shrugged, "Got a wake up call coded 'Urgent'."

Nigel shook his head, "Well yeah but not critical. This could have waited, they'll be more than a year just getting the thing built." He snorted, "And that is all assuming the government can work it as well as you were able to."

Mike grinned, "Well we do have that going for us. Still I should respond and try to get out in front of as much as I can. Elaine is here for crafting the optics, but I'm going to need you for strategic analysis."

Nigel nodded, "I had a brief conversation with Councilman Northman from Atlantis earlier this morning. I know you're aware of his history but being that he's a product of the US Army War College, I thought I'd get his view on what a mobile base would mean."

Elaine piped up, "Mobile base? I thought this was just some kind of new war ship?"

Nigel shook his head, "No, no this is being billed in their media as a Force Projection Base. It is joint services. Let's go into one of the conference rooms so I can pull up some visuals."

Elaine looked a bit nervous as she followed the men into a little briefing room off of the main bridge.

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Nigel waived his hand over the table. "Ulli bring up the released artists renderings."

Elaine felt her breath catch, that wasn't by accident. Some one was definitely sending a message. Where as Shultzinger's islands all resembled, well normal islands, with this there was no pretense. The stark armored sides sloped up on island, the top had a tall spire with an obvious air control tower and weapon mount. The mostly flat top was laid out with runways. Two large runways for landing even heavy cargo planes on and many smaller runways for UAV. There is no denying what this is. It's no one's home, this is a weapon of war.

Nigel pointed out the runways and the control tower to Mike as he slowly spun the whole monstrosity, "Introducing the Mobile Joint Task-force Base George Smith Patton Jr. As you can see in addition to the manned and unmanned air craft accommodation, each side has an armored entrance to a fully functional surface craft dock. Including if the propaganda is to be believed

three dry docks that can fit any vessel currently in the Navy's inventory except for the aircraft carriers that this monster is obsoleting." Mike let out a low whistle. "Oh it get's better, each of these sides is littered with rail guns, two pounders. They can pretty much shred anything within five miles of them. With that much firepower coming at us, even MU would feel the impact. For each one of those rail guns we're talking about a two pound tungsten slug ripping out with a muzzle velocity of mach 6, every thirty seconds."

Mike hit his hand down on the table, "What the hell do they think they will need something like this for."

Nigel just held up his hand, "That's not all." He rotated the model up farther to see beneath it, there easy to see on the lower level was three gaping bays for submersible craft. "Yeah you're seeing that right. Each joint task-force base will have four nuclear subs assigned to it, and who knows how many unmanned floating craft. They had to have learned some lessons from that little bit of embarrassment that Atlantis heaped on their heads, last spring."

Michael rubbed his face, "How big is this thing?"

Nigel snorted, "more than two and a half times the size of MU or Atlantis." Nigel took a deep breath, "In addition," he rubbed the spot between his brows, "as a Joint Task-force Base, it will house thousands of mechanics and support personnel and fifteen thousand active duty Marines and Soldiers, and two Army tank battalions. This thing pulls up off your coast and have a really interesting time on your hands. With this you have a fully operational base the size of Fort Drum and Homestead AFB combined."

Mike sat there for a moment silent. Elaine started to wonder if the enormity of it was crushing him as she felt it pushing down on her. "They're building this to come after us?" she squeaked.

Mike looked over at Nigel, "Are we the target of this?"

Nigel shook his head, "Oh it would make a mess of us, but they wouldn't need this to invade us. This is more likely because you reminded some one in the pentagon that we live on a world that is three fourths water."

Mike let out a breath he didn't realize he had been holding.

Nigel favored him with a slight smile, "For what it's worth, Northman agrees with this assessment. This is as much to prove to the world that they've still 'got their mojo' and not to get any ideas that they've slipped."

Mike nodded, "At this level, perception is as dangerous or as effective as reality and much of the goal is just being able to project a convincing threat of force." He sat for a second and laughed. "DAMN, but that thing can certainly do that."

Elaine realized that most of this was big bullies bluffing each other so that no one decided to pick the fight. "Well we can't let any one side appear too strong or they might decide to believe their own propaganda and do something stupid."

Mike smiled at her, "You have a plan?"

Elaine smiled, "I do but you're the wrong one to implement it."

Mike's face scrunched up? "Oh?"

"Yeah, we need Tattianna to do an interview. Unfortunately not with me this time or it will seem a set up, which it is, but it shouldn't look like one." She grinned at them.

Nigel raised an eyebrow, "What are you up to?"

"This needs a lighter touch. This is like, a shoving match between school yard bullies. Typically a dangerous place to be." she conceded. "Only it's not dangerous for the cheerleader who competes on a different level. Tattianna will give an interview, she will be asked, and she will say it is silly posturing and testosterone fueled insecurities." she raised a hand to stop them both from interrupting. "She can say this, because she's not a physical threat. She reminds everyone that America, and Russia got a black eye during the launching of Atlantis. This is America's answer to saving face. Then she laments that it would be better if they could make the scientific achievements that MU and Atlantis have made, and prove themselves that way, instead of vulgar displays of war machines. As if making it bigger was compensation for some other... Deficit."

Nigel grinned, and Mike shook his head smiling. "Do you really think it would work?"

Nigel laughed, "She's got my vote."

Mike snorted, "Good thing you don't have a vote then." he said with a laugh.

Nigel still grinning madly, "Yeah but doesn't change anything. If she can make it all seem in the public eye like posturing and then put an amusing twist on it by suggesting they're compensating..." he laughed harder. "Oh Mike, even if we've got to do more damage control later, Tattianna of all people delivering that line... The whole world would just eat it up."

Mike grinned back, "Foolish to hire a PR adviser and not take her advice, I suppose." He leaned in and hugged her close and kissed her on the forehead.

Nigel raised an eyebrow.

Elaine giggled at the look on his face, "Oh we've been trying to let people know slowly but you're almost like family." She pointed a finger at him, "And before you start thinking I'm a home wrecker, it was mostly Tattianna's idea."

Nigel snorted, "That I believe. No one I know would willingly cross her. Which will also make her delivering this..." he hesitated..."Scolding, is the best word I can come up with to describe it, all the more effective."

Elaine grinned and bounced with excitement. "Ohh... Scolding, yes that is exactly the tone we're going for. The cool girl the bullies are trying to impress not being impressed with their display."

Mike says, "OK we'll need to run this by the rest of the Eight, but I think we're on to something."

Chapter 19

Tattianna was tired, she and Elaine had been doing test interviews for the last two days. She felt a bit like she was cramming for an exam, and in a way she supposed she was. This was more public than she had been in several years but she liked the idea of talking about the challenges of working mothers with this reporter. She did an interview with her early on in her career and it was a real boost for both of them. Danna Sheroe is now working for a French fashion and lifestyle magazine. Tattianna wasn't sure how that was going to hit Elaine's target audience but Elaine didn't seem worried about it.

Danna was led in through the official entrance to their residence and past the miniature volcano and the large entertainment areas. By the time she came into the small sitting area where they were going to have their interview Danna was thoroughly turned around. She suspected that without the assistance of his Ulli, even her oh so young and yummy guide from the security services would have been hopelessly lost in the maze.

"Ma'am, Mrs. Shultzinger is just through that doorway there." He said in a deep rumbling voice. "I'll simply wait for you here. When your business is concluded, I will escort you back to your hotel, if you would like." His stiff formal military manner just made her want to figure out how to make him smile or laugh, or in some way break the severe discipline he was holding to.

With a big warm smile she replied, "All the way back to my hotel, oh my my." His face flushed furiously but to his credit his expression didn't alter.

"Uh, yes Ma'am." he said in a flat 'I can neither confirm nor deny those events' tone of voice.

She giggled, "Thank you Ensign Douglas, wasn't it?"

"Yes Ma'am." still looking impassive despite the obvious blush.

She giggled again and turned away to get her game face on. Besides he was so young, she could be his... she stopped herself mid thought, older sister she said to herself and when it sounded hollow, repeated it to herself.

"What was that Ma'am?" the young security officer asked.

It was her turn for her face to redden, she hadn't meant for that to be out loud. "Oh just getting my game face on before the interview." she lied, badly. So as not to have to let him see her face she stepped forward into the very tasteful sitting room. Tattianna smiled at her from the couch where she was sitting playing with the three month old babe. It was a domestic scene she was sure few of her readers had, or maybe even really wanted, but certainly had all fantasized about.

"Tattianna! I want to thank you for this opportunity." Danna began.

"Oh no Danna the pleasure is all mine. You and I seem to cross paths at many of the turning points of my career."

Danna smiled broadly, "Which often as not gave my career a boost as well."

Tattianna gestured to a low sofa, where Danna could set up comfortably for the interview. "Your home is quite amazing, by the way." Danna said.

"Thank you, my hosting duties have grown in the days since we last did this. What was that almost a decade ago now?" Tattianna asked.

"Oh we don't want to think about how long it's been, as we couldn't possibly be old enough for it to have been that long." She grinned wickedly. "In all seriousness, you've come a long way. I heard last month that the Sultan of Brunei made a very rare trip abroad, solely to see MU."

Tattianna smiled, "He was very gracious. I think he and Michael had some business they were working on."

"Ah yes, the enigmatic Michael Shultzinger. I don't suppose I could get an interview with him as well while I'm here?" Danna asked, trying to make it seem casual.

Tattianna shook her head, "His schedule won't allow for it."

Danna smiled widely, "His schedule? Too bad, I would be interested to know how he feels about them revoking his patents."

Tattianna, "I want this to be about being a working mother," she caressed Alex's cheek as he cooed up at her. "I will give you this much though, because it's part of being a supportive wife as well." Tattianna stopped as if she were collecting her thoughts and she could see Danna's eyes glittering with anticipation.

"He was hurt that they tried to steal his ideas, to have what he had worked for and sacrificed for just stolen from him was painful. Even last week he was meeting with the security forces over this new island military base that the United States announced. He wasn't happy with the technology being used in an aggressive military purpose. I explained to him that he had embarrassed the US and Russian government when Atlantis published their submarines shadowing a civilian craft. This is just them trying to save face before the world. He and I would have preferred, if they had chosen to compete in the realm of scientific or economic advancement that could have been shared by the whole of humanity. Just like the near daily innovations coming out of MU and Atlantis, and as soon as they are settled Avalon. Instead they make this over sized monstrosity for their war machine, one wonders if they are compensating for some... Inadequacy." Tattianna delivered the last with all of the irritated and exasperated tone of a mother disappointed with her child's squandering of his potential. "That is the last I want to discuss that subject, it's depressing."

Danna couldn't believe what she had gotten in an unguarded moment before the interview had even started properly. This was going to be the key headline, this would be the interview of the year. "Of course, I didn't mean to drag politics into things."

Tattianna waved her hand as if to fan away a bad odor. "So shall we begin?"

"Of course...."

* * *

Tattianna waved her hand, and Mike let out a howl of laughter. Elaine looked smug. David was just shaking his head. MacAllan just gasped, "Blimey!"

John Stuttsman actually laughed out loud, "Did you ever doubt she could pull it off Mac?"

"Oh I knew she could do it, but she did that so naturally, and so smooth... Mike you married

way, way above you." MacAllan said with a grin.

Mike smiled, "I get lucky that way." He glanced over at Elaine and almost choked as she just winked at him.

Elaine was pleased with herself, "So this will be out there in three days. What do we have to follow it up with?" she looked around the room. "Anyone with a new breakthrough to announce that can put the exclamation point behind her innovation challenge?"

John shook his head, "After the ill fated Berg experiment, I'm not ready to roll anything out."

David shrugged, "Our economic reforms are all opposed and illegal on landed nations because they provide privacy."

She looked around the room and each person in turn shrugged.

Her eyes rested on Mike, "Well..." he started, "Your dad is showing off his new self contained yacht at the Tokyo tech show."

Elaine sighed, "Well we could push the green aspects of it but for what those are going to sell for, it doesn't really have the punch I'd like."

Mike shrugged, "It'll be another three weeks but I might have something. NDAs won't let me go into the details but I can contact the affected parties."

Elaine looked at him, "Can you give me a clue as to what it is?"

Mike shook his head, "I've not even told Tattianna. Other than a few business men, who've also signed the NDA, no one knows." Mike shrugged, "Give me a few hours and we'll see what we can do. Even if I can be ready and I'm not sure I can, the others may or may not be ready with their part."

Elaine was now all sorts of curious, "How big is this?"

Mike just grinned and tried not to look at John and David, "If it works, MU level big."

Chapter 20

The launch vessel was just getting into view. It wasn't as soon as they had hoped but to be at the point of launching tomorrow with only three weeks notice was no small feat. The half mile long, vaguely bowling pen shaped vessel was floating off on the horizon. Swarming all over it were workmen attaching the long tubular track of the rail gun to fat end of the bowling pen. That thin cord stretched back for over half a mile. That should be enough for today's low orbit test. When this was ready to go into full service, that cord would stretch three miles and have multiple beads along the length like pearls on a string to supply additional power. Hard to believe that was going to be the key to the future but if this worked as planned, the world was going to change again and more than it had since the launching of the Islands or the discovery of the Halvarson Effect or Quantum Communication.

Mike looked over to see Raj nervously grinning at him. "Do you think we're ready?"

Raj shrugged not overly encouragingly, "I hope so, but even if not, we'll learn enough to get ready."

Mike shook his head in concern. "I know I put your team on the spot by moving up the date and doing a public launch like this, but we really do need to capture the imaginations of the general public of the land based nations if we're going to turn their governments from this antagonistic stance. Something like this is flashy enough that we've got a chance to do just that."

William Baker was calm when he replied, "This will be the biggest publicity coup of the last decade if it works." He shrugged, "If it doesn't, well the first self driving car competition didn't have a single competitor complete the course. It will be embarrassing and likely will hurt funding drives a bit, but it only delays us for a few months before we try again."

MacAllen snorted as he turned toward the young blonde man, "Awfully big gamble for you to be so calm son." he said as he swirled his Scotch around in the glass, as if trying to gain an augury from the shape of the ice.

Raj answered with a shake in his voice, "He's always like this before the big milestones. It's later that it all catches up with him. After our first meeting with Mr. Shultziner, he was barely able to speak without a stammer for two days." Raj grinned at his business partner and friend, "I on the other hand fall apart before the main event like a sensible human being."

Mike nodded, "Well what will be, will be, we've run all the simulations, and the math works..." He shrugged, "Still it's going to be a long night." There were murmurs of agreement all around the balcony. "Gentlemen," Mike said raising his glass high, "To history making." Again the small crowd on the balcony gathered to watch the launch system assembled rumbled with agreement. Each and every person there had more than just financial stake in the events of tomorrow afternoon. Not that the financial impact would be small but this was a big step along the path that nearly every science fiction writer of the last century had been promising them. The world of the future wasn't just coming, in many ways it was already here, but the birth pains that accompanied that long dreamed of future were also getting more intense.

* * *

"Good morning MUlanders!!" called Doug Grimes the face of MU's primary news and education

channel for all of it's existence. Each workday morning he would start off the morning show with just these words. "And what a busy Tuesday we have in store for us today. Many of you may have noticed a lot of commotion off to the north west of the island yesterday and this morning. I have it on the best authority that this is the latest advance in human achievement. In what has been described as an express train to the stars, those workers are assembling a giant electromagnetic launch platform. Here to give us some more details on exactly what that mouthful really means to all of us is one of the most intelligent young ladies, I've ever had the privilege to meet, and I'd say that even if she wasn't my new boss. Ms. Elaine Winters everyone."

The camera panned over to where Elaine was sitting before a big empty screen on which a live feed of the ongoing work to make the vessel ready was displayed. "Thank you for such a glowing introduction Doug. It's still not helping your review though." she smiled brilliantly at the camera. "All joking aside, this is a momentous day. This launch platform works off of the same principles that rail guns and maglev bullet trains have used for years. What makes this special, is that our new ability to live and work on the sea has made it possible for very long tracks to be used that allow for very high rates of speed without disturbing the neighbors." She made a bit of a face at the camera at that last statement. "As you can see from the illustration," as she says this the camera cuts from her to the CGI demo tape, "The flip ship, appropriately named "Industry", that's the bowling pin shaped vessel in the picture, has the first sections of rail attached while it is still floating horizontally on the surface. Once attached, the wide aft section of the vessel will begin to fill with water. This will 'flip' the ship into a vertical position. The space craft will be fitted into the far end of the tube, and travel at tremendous speeds first down into the water and then back up to enter the now vertical flip ship and launch out the top."

The camera cut back to Doug, "So how soon can I book my vacation to Mars on this."

Elaine smiled as the camera came back to her, "Oh Doug the speeds at which this vehicle travels would pretty much make most living tissue into a gooey jelly while still in the acceleration tube. So for you, we can arrange it tomorrow if you like, but for our audience members it's probably not recommended."

The camera flashes back to Doug looking wounded. "So if it can't transport people..."

Elaine smoothly took back narration, "Well we have traditional rockets for that, and some of the new private industry rockets are quite reliable and efficient. This is for launching of supplies and machines. To launch a 16oz. T-Bone steak into orbit for you to enjoy on that proverbial vacation would cost almost a full Sovereign, or say \$10,000 US Dollars, that's with traditional chemical rockets. With the new magnetic launch technology that same steak could make it to orbit for just a few pips. The company estimates about \$50 US dollars per pound with the technology they are planning to demonstrate later today. The word I hear from the financial world that it is expected to drop to less than half of that in three years, once efficiencies are realized in production and operational expenditures."

She looks dead into the camera, "So if you want to be able to afford that Mars vacation Doug, better invest early, because this technology, if it works, will change everything."

Doug is nodding wisely as the camera brings him back in to view. "Thank you again Elaine for taking time out of your busy day to help us all understand this momentous occasion." He swiveled his chair slightly to look into another camera off to the side, "We'll be monitoring this story all day, and will break in to our usual programming with updates as the occur."

The camera light goes off and the 'Quiet' warning light goes out.

Doug looked over to Elaine, "So what do you think their chances of pulling this off are?"

Elaine shrugged, "Mike, David, and John seem to think they can do it, and they're not known for

backing losers."

Doug's brow furrowed, no need to tell him who she meant by 'Mike, David, and John'. "Well," he said a bit more soberly, "if Mr. Shultzinger, and Mr. Stuttsman, bullish and David Rosen has put his money into it, where does a sap like me get in on the action?" He asked seriously.

"I don't know that they are doing direct investing just yet. I think they want to show a tangible product before they roll out an ICO, but contact David's office. From what I understand his nephew over on Atlantis has figured out some correlating investments that should benefit indirectly from this."

* * *

Raj looked over at William, "Well we'll know soon."

William nodded, "Ready first twenty percent test."

They were standing on a small ring floating at the end of a long umbilical cord to the "Industry" that was slowly working its way through the process of tilting into firing position. "I want one at twenty percent and if there is anything, and I mean anything that isn't exactly as we predict we do another at thirty five percent until we're sure." William said. "I know I seem like I've got it all together,"

Raj laughed at him, "Yeah buddy I know. We'll both be pretty drunk tonight either way but I really hope it is celebrating."

They watched the bow of the 'Industry' slowly make its way skyward, when the radio squawked. "Industry One, Industry One, come in."

"This is Industry One, Raj here," Raj said nervously into the mic.

"Industry One, this is MU control. Just letting you know that we've picked up two Aircraft Carrier groups converging on this location. They say no hostile intention. One is the USS Ronald Reagan, the other is Chinese. It's not identifying itself yet and is too far out for a positive ID." MU control went silent.

"Roger, MU control. We're taking your statement under advisory now." Raj turned pale and looked to William. "Will they try to stop us?"

William shook his head, "I don't think so. It seems like simple observation to me. Still lets see if we can get the test off a bit early before they arrive." With that he radioed up to the 'Industry'. "Open both ports, I know we said we wanted to go slower, but I want this test shot before we do a live one, and I'd rather rush a bit now than not have our test run in before company arrives."

"Industry, to Industry One, roger that, wilco and out." The automated voice of 'Industry' replied. Moments later the ship started to tilt faster. "Industry One, Industry, new estimate for launch position is seven minutes."

"Roger that Industry, we'll be ready." Raj closed the mic, "I hope." he added so only William could hear.

A short eternity or about eight minutes later, the platform rumbled and hummed and in a plume of white smoke, the capsule streaked toward the clear blue sky.

* * *

Michael and Tattianna were sitting on the balcony playing with little Alex while the minutes ticked by. Ulli keeping both of them in the loop as to where the war ships where in relation to MU and the test site. Elaine was down in the studio giving a blow by blow accounting of the Industry flipping into position, and the new visitors that the UAV's had been getting footage of. All of this going out live on the internet.

Michael relaxed in the sun happy to just have a few minutes peace while everyone's attention was focused elsewhere. Tattianna asked, "So what were those emergency calls this morning?"

Michael snorted, "The American and Chinese Ambassadors letting us know that they were sending forces to 'witness' our launch but not to interfere unless we were found to be launching some new weapon."

Tattianna shook her head, "but this isn't a weapon, it is just for launching the space ships." she giggled, "Never thought I'd be saying that like it was a normal thing."

Michael grinned at her, "Yeah it'll take some getting used to. The point about weapons isn't wrong on their part. Nigel and I did some calculations with it just as a contingency. You could launch a five hundred pound object at mach five and slam it into almost any place on earth with this launcher. So while they are justified in being concerned, in this case we really aren't plotting to over throw them. I think that is a hard concept for any of them to really wrap their heads around. I think it's because if they had the chance any of them would gladly dispose of the others if they could. I sometimes wonder how humanity has made it this far." As if to punctuate his father's statement little Alex let out a loud gurgle. "See even Alex agrees with me."

Tattianna smiled watching the two of them, and not for the first time realized how fragile it all was now that they had stepped out so publicly from the herd of humanity. Of course if she were honest with herself she thought, it was always fragile, it only appeared safe because she was ignorant of who actually held power over the peoples of the world.

Jets could be heard approaching. American and Chinese air craft met in the skies above MU. They circled around the great Air Ship Henri Giffard like flies buzzing around a horse. Then with no real warning, Michael and Tattianna heard a distant hum and then a pop as a contrail flashed up through the sky, and then began falling back to earth. "Ulli, what's the news?"

Ulli popped up walking on the ledge of the balcony as if it were a tight rope. "All good so far. The telemetry all came back well within the tolerance levels. The only concern is that now that the vessel is back in the water, the Chinese appear to be moving to intercept it before the MicroShips chase team will reach it."

Michael snorted, "Get me Nigel, now!"

Nigel's Ulli connected them in seconds, "Mike, I know what you're going to say but don't worry, William has told me that they have scuttling charges on board for just this sort of thing. That capsule has no real value to the companies involved and they'll destroy it before letting the Chinese get their hands on it"

Michael grunted, then nodded, "Thanks Nigel. Just keep an eye on our 'guests' if you would please."

Nigel sighed, "Always sir, always." was his only reply.

* * *

Elaine dashed from make up to the anchor's chair. Settling in she saw the camera man giving her the count down with his fingers, three, two, one.

"Hello again from MU's information and education channel. Big news for those of you who were not on the surface to see. The first test launch of MicroShips space craft happened just moments ago. The capsule has splashed down, and I believe we have live video of it." she motioned to the producer who switched screens to footage from the Henri Giffard's control deck. The capsule splashed down and choppers lifted off from the Chinese carrier racing toward the capsule. "You will notice it made it's trip wholly in tact but unfortunately the helicopters you see approaching it are Chinese military craft." her voice came in narrating as the scene played out on screen. "The actual chase craft from MicroShips as you can see are a little farther out so rather than allow the technology to fall to the Chinese," at this point on screen the capsule flared brightly and sank below the waves, "MicroShips chose to scuttle it."

The camera came back to focus on Elaine, "The good news is with the positive test, Orbital Express has give the green light to a second more comprehensive test to launch in just a few minutes. In this launch not only will they be doing a full power test of the Orbital Express launch system, but will also be testing MicroShips deployment capabilities."

The CGI demo came up again, "As you can see, this launch will actually go much higher, the launch vehicle will then open and deploy a fleet of twenty seven small craft each tethered with a graphene ribbon. This highly conductive web of vehicles will expand to form the world's largest single aperture radio telescope dish. During it's twelve hour flight, we will be able to get a picture of the universe that we couldn't possibly get from terrestrial radios. Size matters in the radio telescope world, and this twelve mile radius dish will dwarf all others used to this date by degrees of magnitude. The raw data is to be transmitted to a data warehouse on Atlantis. This data will be made available to the world at large with it's own crypto token sale. The plan according to the Orbital Express website is for one gigabyte of data to be equal to one token. Tokens will open for bid as soon as the data can be compiled. We expect this to be sometime late tomorrow evening."

Having finished showing the deployment of the vessels, the demo ends and the view cuts back to Elaine. "This mission is a test and will only be in orbit for twelve hours, at which time the craft will simply re-enter the Earth's atmosphere and are expected to burn up. Don't worry though, if all goes well with the testing, I have it on good authority that a longer section of track is already on order with Shultzinger Enterprises and should deliver by the end of the year. Routine launches of durable supplies to the International Space station and Survey Drones to the planets and asteroid belt should be possible by the first quarter of next year."

"I'm just getting word that the count down has begun" The cameras cut to a view of the Industry from the top of MU and in just a very few seconds, the large white plume is in evidence again as the small craft streaks through the air. Not far about the Industry the heat builds and ignites the propellant and a puff and an even thicker plume streaks out. "That was amazing. I've seen rocket launches before, but this was something quite unique. We're getting word from their control stations that altitude is being achieved."

The cameras come back to Elaine who has her hand to her ear obviously listening closely to a report coming in. "I'm just getting word, separation has occurred and twenty five of the twenty seven nodes have deployed." She looks up at the camera, "Now, word is coming in from the engineers at MicroShips, they are considering this a success despite the problem with the two nodes that didn't separate. The word I am getting is that the other twenty five are all broadcasting

data and still moving in to place. They expect this to only hamper the Telescope's efficiency by less than ten percent."

"Thank you all for joining us on this historic occasion, today we have opened up a gateway to the stars." The camera light went off and the 'quiet' sign went out. Elaine stretched. "That's it team, we did it!"

A cheer went up around the room. Elaine smiled smugly, take that, all you controlling bureaucrats! she thought. This was going to make a real difference for humanity and it was men like her Michael who made it happen. She wished she could share this moment with him, but she was glad he was with Tattianna and she had little doubt he would be in a mood to celebrate this evening.

Chapter 21

Mike was nervous. It had taken weeks to get everyone to agree to this meeting. The security concerns alone were a nightmare. One well placed torpedo and the landed nations could insure their own continued dominance for another thousand years. Getting these twenty odd men all in the same place without even their Ullies knowing where they are was no easy task. There wouldn't be another chance for a meeting like this, he knew they had to make the most of the next twenty four hours.

He looked out over the faces of men in the room. Each of them intelligent, aggressive type a personalities. These were individuals, but he needed them to pull together on this one. Benjamin Franklin's words kept running through his mind, 'We must all hang together or we shall certainly all hang separately.' As usual Ben had a knack for summing up the situation succinctly. With a deep breath he began, "Gentlemen. I want to thank you for coming. I know it wasn't easy and the level of cloak and dagger on this one was a bit much even for me, but it has to be that way. I think most of you know each other, but just in case," he waved his hand along one side of the long table, "the rest of the Eight from MU." He nodded further down the table, "Alan Northman, a representative from our esteemed colleagues of Atlantis." He continued around the table, "Alister McTavish and the rest of the envoys from young Arthur Rex of Avalon." Finally coming up the other side, "Finally our representatives from Industry, Raul Ramos of Eden Seed. Raj Pradeep of Orbital Express and William Baker from MicroShips."

"I want to thank you all for this off the books meeting. I know we made you leave all of your communications gadgets behind and we're out past the range of our Ulli as well." Mike favored them with a tight smile. "It isn't that we don't trust our computers, but they are computers and can be hacked. For everyone's safety this meeting couldn't be official, I mean can you imagine a more tempting target than the Mara is right now for those who want to strangle the seasteading movement in it's infancy?" He shrugged. "Also what is on the agenda for today is too sensitive to risk what the AI's might make of it. With their latest tendency to be subtle and manipulate outcomes, I didn't want to add that risk."

With that he rolled out the large world map of the western hemisphere. "I'm certain you all know of the new war ship the Americans are building, the "George Patton"?" There were nods from around the room and even a few grins. "I see you smiling and that is good, because it means that my wife's performance had it's desired effect." He let that sink in for a minute and watched some of the smiles morph into expressions of suspicion. "Yes that was all a set up. An amazing young woman in my PR office came up with it." He saw the wolfish grin cross Northman's craggy face. "Yes Alan, that one."

Northman nodded, "She's a smart one alright. Does she actually believe it or does she know it is a cover?"

Mike looked down a bit embarrassed, "I've not even told her or Tattianna what we're about to discuss here."

Northman whistled but nodded approvingly. "I'm impressed. The fewer who know, the better our chances of success. Better to let those ladies continue on with what they think of as the truth, than to force them to figure out how to keep a lie straight." With that he pulled some translucent red plastic disks out of his ever present jump bag, "May I?"

Mike nodded and gestured to the map, "Time is short, best that we get to it." He took his own seat.

"I'm Alan Northman. Most of you at least know of me. I've attended the US War College. I've commanded her troops in combat. I love the idea she was founded upon more than my own life, but that idea has been betrayed by those who seek power for it's own sake." His voice rang out crisp and loud and condemning in the silence of the small conference room. "As one who lived in that world, let me tell you what the General Patton really is." With that he started flipping the red disks out onto the map, one after the other in a neat little pattern down the eastern and western coasts. "The General Patton is the first of the US's cavalry forts." He took a moment to arrange the discs in a supporting pattern where the fields of control nearly over lapped each other. "These are analogous to the nineteenth century cavalry forts, that were used to restrict the movement of the nomadic natives." He dropped down a couple of more discs and demonstrated how they could then be used to push the line out farther and farther from the coasts. "Once the nomads were pushed out of the territory they moved in settlers sure, but they didn't fill up the western states, even today the population isn't big enough to fill up the western states. They simply seized the land for the US Government. Up to eighty five percent of the land in some western states is owned by the Federal Government. It was to insure that the natives couldn't use it to regroup, and that the settlers were concentrated in areas where they would be easier to govern and police." He took a moment to straighten out the discs. "This is the fate that awaits all of us who sought out the frontier of the sea, if we do not recognize the threat and act accordingly. We will find ourselves dispossessed of our waves, much as those natives were dispossessed of their land." He motioned back toward Mike.

Mike let those words sink in for a bit and then stood again, "Thank you for your insight Allan. The real question is time. Right now it takes the US a little more than twenty months to get the Patton ready for trials. That will improve with each iteration. The Russians, Chinese, even India and perhaps Brazil may begin similar construction efforts. Each will contribute to the rapidly shrinking area of operation left to those of us who blazed this trail. Much like happened to the Mountain Men, and Fur Trappers, and eventually even to the cowboys of the old west. The machines of 'Civilized Control' will move across the waves. Best guess we have without actually running computer simulations, that would risk exposure, is a decade. Why you are all here gentlemen, is to give us an alternative to war, that we can build in less than a decade."

Mike took his seat. The room was stunned silence. That's when the fight broke out. Some couldn't believe it. Others couldn't imagine why they hadn't seen it earlier. The debate raged for over an hour before a break was called for food.

* * *

MacAllan threw a dinner roll at Mike striking him in the chest.

"What was that for, damn it?" Mike looked up angrily.

"You're brooding, stop."

"Am not." Mike growled and then realized how it sounded.

"Yeah, I could tell." Mac grinned at him.

"OK maybe a little but that was our only full meeting and we blew it." Mike was angry but more than that he was worried. The native tribes were each fighting the Calvary in their own way and were defeated in detail. What makes this bunch think they are so much better?

Mac yawns, "You didn't blow it..." Mac started.

Mike cut him off, "Yeah what would you call it then? Atlantis is only half supportive, because of their own internal political struggles." Mike waved him down, "Yeah yeah I know we expected that it still isn't good news. Avalon was surprisingly receptive and David thinks they might have an angle on financial pressure much like Regan did to the Soviet Union, but I'm not convinced that will be enough."

Mac shrugged, "It's more than you had yesterday. Besides Eden and Orbital Express are both on board."

Mike snorted, "On board with a war effort. Those Kinetic Energy Weapons that William put forward, are a blessing if we're willing to go to open hot war. Raul on the other hand, his answer makes my skin crawl."

Mac nodded again, "Aye, that he does. Biological is always a messy business. I'd rather we never had to resort to that, though"

Mike shrugged, "So a decade and counting fast and no one is agreed upon the solution. I'd say that was the very essence of a failed meeting and a lost opportunity."

Mac grinned at him and picked up another dinner roll off of the bar, "We had a group of twenty men who are all very bright and problem solving lot, if I do say so myself," took a bite. Around the mouthful of roll, "All of them thought coming here that there wasn't a real problem. Each of them are now going home to work on a solution."

Mike started to interrupt but Mac threatened to throw the half eaten roll in his hand. "Ok, ok, so they aren't all working together on the same solution. Mutually agreed to and Shultzinger sanctioned." He looked at Mike with a pointed look. "Doesn't matter. What does matter, is that they all now see a problem, and are each working on it. Maybe no one solution will fix everything, but just like floating islands, they might buy us time and allow us to continue the fight."

Mike snorted and raised the roll like a glass, "To buying time, and fighting the fight." as he savagely bit the roll in half.

Mac's turn to snort and grin, "Exactly, just make sure you don't choke on it."

* * *

Mike was exhausted when he came in the door, a total of six hours of sleep in the last forty eight was not a schedule he wanted to keep up for very long. It was late, so he headed straight for the bedroom. Elaine was soaking in the hot tub. Tattianna was feeding Alex. He just stood in the door way drinking in the scene. This was what he was fighting for. This was why he couldn't lose. Mac's words about buying time and continuing the fight echoed in his head.

"Are you just going to stand there?" Tattianna asked.

Mike laughed, "No, but you three are just really a sight for sore eyes."

Elaine shut off the bubbles and slid around to the edge of the tub closest to him. "You look exhausted. Care for a soak before bed?"

Mike rubbed his face, "Yeah that's probably a good idea. I'll grab a shower while Tatti finishes up with little Alex, and I'll put him to bed and join you."

As he closed the door to the bathroom and Ulli started the shower, he just felt the weight of the

whole trip come crashing down. This was bigger than any of them could do alone, but they didn't seem ready to work together either. The foaming spray hit him and he could feel the muscles in his neck and back relax some. He decided to put it all aside and enjoy his time with his family. Ten years was a long time for him to come up with an alternative. Stuttzman's confidence that the Singularity would give them tools they don't have now seemed a little bit like Yehudah's call for faith that G-d would work things towards His will. Mike didn't doubt either of them, but also knew that neither promised things would be good in the short run for the people who were his responsibility.

Mike felt a bit better after the shower, and as he picked Alex up from Tattianna he felt more determination than he believed possible. He would make a better world for his children. He might not be able to defeat evil for ever and always, but he would carve out a space for his family to grow, healthy and happy and whole.

Alex's well contented snoring almost made him laugh. Yeah, my son, for now life is good and needs to be enjoyed. Speaking of which, there were two young ladies waiting for him in the other room, who would no doubt be happy he was home.

Epilogue

Bjorn and Mike were working on a new design for submersible computing pods. Mike had been amazed at just how innovative an engineer his future father in law turned out to be. Things were tense at first, but as Bjorn came to believe that Mike was really looking to protect and care for his daughter, rather than just add her as a notch on his bed post, he had come around.

What seemed to seal the deal was the day Mike walked him through the Ark. That's what he had taken to calling the submersible sphere designed as a last retreat. Genetic samples of every form of life he could preserve, and tools to reintroduce any species from that library. Tools to make the tools, to re-establish a comfortable tech base. Living space for three hundred souls. Fusion reactors that could run for centuries as long as hydrogen was plentiful. The Ark had cost him as much as the whole island of MU, but unlike MU, this was his. This was his families future, should all go wrong.

Bjorn had taken to the Ark like a man obsessed. For him it was a legacy worthy of his remaining years. A gift to his daughter and her family for generations if need be. This was the ultimate expression of love, a home that was safe from all that came to conquer it.

He and Bjorn had argued long and hard about adding the Halvarson Device to the ship. Bjorn saw it as a suicide device, where Mike viewed it as the last hope. Hopefully they would never need use it, but if all was lost, and death was staring them in the face, this would be the final chance to find that better world.

Bjorn pulled up the latest pod design, "See Mike, it's right there." He pointed to the floating AR image. "By isolating the quantum communication center there it has enough shielding from the core to have less chance of decoherence."

Mike squinted, "Maybe but what keeps the gamma particles from just blasting through it like they did on the last one?"

Bjorn tweaked the display and water rushed into the chambers surrounding the communications module, "about two feet of water. We need it for ballast anyway, so why not add it here where it can be the additional shielding we need?"

"Hmm, maybe, just maybe that is what we've been looking for." Mike rubbed his face, "I take it you've already run the simulations on it?"

Bjorn nodded, "Well it works for these. It's still an issue with the ones you want to launch to space."

Mike shrugged, "One fight at a time, eh?"

Bjorn laughed a bit, "Yeah, that's pretty much all anyone can do. One fight at a time."

Mike nodded, "Well if we can get these deployed over the next six months that will at least secure our Ulli network and allow a limited access anywhere in the world. That will have to be enough for now."

Bjorn wiped his hands off and stood up, "You bringing the family for dinner tonight?"

Mike grinned, "I don't do those kinds of plans and you know it. Gotta take it up with the bosses."

Bjorn laughed, "Oh my poor foolish son, as if one woman running your life wasn't hard enough."

Mike shrugged, "What can I say, they do a better job of it usually."