

Monday, 1 January 2046

I went to the party with Mark and Kelley. Then I went to Yenner's and spent the night. Then I came home at around 10am to find Mom asleep on the couch. She woke up at the sound of the door sliding closed behind me.

She didn't look happy. I had neglected to call her again to let her know I was staying out all night.

"Rabiyya, we've talked about this before," she said, wiping the sleep from her eyes.

"I know. I'm sorry." I thought about giving her the "I'm not a baby anymore" line but that seemed weak even to me.

"I worry about you."

"I know."

We just looked at each other for a minute. Then I looked down.

"Why don't you have a seat? I'll forgive you, but there's a price. You have to tell me what you did last night."

I sat down. I didn't want to talk about last night, but then I didn't want to talk about the past few months. Just last night seemed like an easy out. I knew she just wanted to know some of what I was up to. I didn't blame her. I hadn't talked to her much lately.

"I went to a party with Mark and Kelley."

"The one at Civic Center?"

"No, in Oakland. A private party."

She got a worried look on her face.

"Don't worry, I didn't do anything." I know she was worried about drugs. There is a river of mind-altering drugs out there, drugs to make you feel any way you want. The illegal ones are often risky because they aren't controlled, but they are much cheaper.

I've never tried them.

"Did you have a good time?"

"Kind of. There were a lot of interesting people there. But the music was bad. Well, everyone else liked it but it was that irritating rip-rap and retro-house that's so popular right now. I started to leave then ..."

I saw her. She was there. Katia Nasr, who I hadn't seen in 3 years, was suddenly standing right in front of me with the biggest of grins. "Happy New Year, Rabiyya Patrick," she said.

"Hi Katia," was all I could say. She had been the source of most of my fantasies since high school and all I could say was "hi." And I was staring at her - her warm brown eyes, delicate nose, lips, chin, all in perfect proportion, make-up non-existent, framed by her short brown hair. The curve of her neck as it disappeared into her black turtle-neck sweater, her narrow shoulders, modest breasts, small waist ... everything just as I remembered.

The wave washed over me: my heart was pounding, I knew my pupils were dilating, I could feel myself growing excited. I hoped she didn't notice.

"You are still happy to see me," she said. "Just don't run away this time."

She had noticed.

"Sorry about that. I was so embarrassed. I am so embarrassed again." Embarrassed and very awkward.

She laughed. Then I noticed an Irish-looking guy walking up behind her. He was tall with red hair - like spun copper - and very handsome. Bearded. He put his arm around her waist.

"This is my boyfriend," she began. "Pete Sullivan. Pete, this is Rabiyya Patrick. We went to high school together."

We shook hands. I was extremely disappointed but strangely relieved at the same time.

I let Katia and Pete do most of the talking. I found out that he was 27, a veterinarian, a strict vegetarian (of course), and had moved to Napa from Hawaii. Katia was a student at UC Davis and also wanted to be a vet. One of her friends had introduced them and they had been dating for six months.

As we talked my excitement finally went away, despite my being attracted to him too. When I realized that I was very attracted to both of them I had to get out of there. I excused myself, said goodbye to Mark and Kelley who protested loudly but thankfully had a short attention span, and ran to the BART station. I wasn't ready to go home, however.

I pinged Yenner while waiting for the train and asked him if I could come over. Not only was he home but he said yes. I really wanted to be with him at midnight.

It was only 11pm. I had an hour to get there.

By 11:45 I was at his door, which was still programmed to open for me.

"This is a nice surprise," he said as I walked in.

"It's kind of a surprise to me too." I sat down right next to him. He put his arm around me. It seemed like he wrapped his scent around me too. He makes me feel safe. "I did read your last e-mail."

"I know, you told me."

"Right. It wasn't easy," I confessed. "I didn't want to read it."

"I don't blame you."

"I'm so sorry, Yenner."

"Shhhhh.... let's not talk about that right now."

I shifted down until my head was in his lap. For several minutes I just looked up at him; watched him as he played with my hair. Then he leaned down and kissed me. Warmth flooded my body.

"It's midnight," he announced. "Happy New Year."

I smiled but didn't reply. After another minute I said, "Yenner?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm ready."

"Ready for the new year?" he asked.

I laughed. "No, I meant I'm ready for you."

He didn't say anything else, but leaned over and kissed me again. And again. And the next thing I knew his massive body was hovering over me, supported by his great arms, and he was rubbing his face against my beard. Then he sat up, straddling my legs, and pulled his t-shirt off.

I was again overwhelmed with his size. I reached up and ran my fingers through the thick brown hair that swirled across his huge chest. I noticed my hands were shaking.

"You're trembling again," he said softly.

"Ignore it."

"Yes, sir," he said.

"I had no idea you were attracted to men," Mom was saying.

"Either did I until I met Yenner," I said. "He's ... exceptional, I guess."

"He certainly sounds exceptional. But that story about his family and the camp is terrible."

"I know. It really puts my own issues in perspective."

"How are you dealing with it? Your attraction to him - to men."

"I don't know. It's just there now. I don't know what to make of it. I guess I'm just seeing what happens."

"Does it bother you?"

"That's not an easy question to answer," I said. "I guess it bothers me because it was so unexpected. It confused me. It still confuses me. I'm still attracted to Katia. I was even attracted to her boyfriend. It's crazy!"

"Don't worry about it, honey. You're young. You'll figure it out."

Then I grinned stupidly.

"What's so funny?"

"Well, I have finally had sex, but it wasn't what I thought it would be. I always imagined it would be with a woman."

"But it sounds like you enjoyed it."

"It was wonderful. Amazing."

We were both silent for awhile. I wondered what she was thinking about.

"I'm hungry," I finally said, changing the subject. "How about a late breakfast?"

She gracefully agreed to change the subject and have breakfast. I mixed up some frozen orange juice and microwaved the soy sausages while she made vegetable omelets. Then we took it to the roof and ate in the shade of the solar array with San Francisco wrapped around us.

Tuesday, 2 January 2046

There were things I couldn't tell Mom. Although she is sometimes more like a friend than a mom, I don't tell my friends everything either.

Yenner showered me with affection. He is so gentle with me. I felt like I was surrounded by him on several levels, physically, emotionally, even his musky scent was all over me. He acted as if I were the most precious thing he'd ever touched.

I had no idea what to do, but he never made me feel awkward. In fact I really didn't do anything for a long time but touch him. I touched everything, felt everything. It was such a strange sensation, exploring another man's body, but a welcome distraction from my normal obsession with myself.

I could feel the brand he referred to - the one he was given in the detention camp. It was on his left butt cheek. I didn't look at first, but I could feel its shape. I wonder why he had never had it removed.

At one point he was lying on his stomach and I saw it for the first time. The huge welt in the outline of a crescent moon, You would call it *hilaal*, burned into his furry butt. So that's what the brands meant. We didn't talk about it and I was kind of thankful.

I think we fell asleep at around four in the morning. We were lying on our sides with him behind me. I had my head on his arm, using it like a pillow. His other arm was draped over me. He was nuzzling me in the neck and the back of my head, his breath warm on my skin. After I fell asleep, I slept very well.

But at nine he kissed me awake and said he had to get to work. He told me I could stay but I knew Mom would not be happy with me so I had him drop me off.

As confusing as it was, it was also the best I've felt that I can remember. It was like being wrapped up in a warm blanket of pure joy on a cold, foggy morning. I want to do it again.

Sunday, 7 January 2046

It has been a few weeks since I released my search agent. I haven't been able to get up the nerve to reconnect to the web with the new pad though. Even by connecting wirelessly the location of the client computer is triangulated and I didn't want to risk being at that location when the connection was made. I know it is theoretically untraceable to me, but I'm being careful. So Yenner volunteered. He said he would walk somewhere that cameras wouldn't track him.

I don't know where he went, but he was gone for two hours. He followed my instructions to retrieve any data from my search agent and returned back to his place. While he was

gone I bought a shirt at a walk-in store near my own house to document my location. Maybe I'm being paranoid. We met up today.

The results were not surprising. Most of the security protocols were pretty standard. A few were of an adaptive polymorphic variety that is beyond my experience, though I may study them if other paths are dead-ends, but more than a few were surprisingly weak and dated. One webspace that might have documents of interest to me still uses elliptic curve encryption.

I identified five webspaces to try to enter myself and gave the agent the go ahead to sweep the web. Now I have to decide when to try hacking into them. This I have to do myself, of course. And I need to figure out a way to travel out of town without being missed or tracked. Mark may be able to help with that. Maybe the gang he ran with in high school could lift a PacLink pass I could use. I don't think they even exist anymore, but he may still know a few of the former members.

This is all so ridiculous. Recently I've been thinking that I should just let it drop. My last semester starts next week and I really need to concentrate on that.

This time I registered from home. I again chose the in-person classes. The VR class is less expensive, but it's worth the extra money to me to be physically in the classroom. Plus it gets me out of the house.

I'll be taking Molecular Systems Engineering, Nanoelectronic Devices, and Introduction to Biomedical Nanotechnology. The last was Yenner's suggestion. The syllabus looked interesting enough so I signed up. I have to admit I'm wondering if there is a purpose behind his suggestion but I'll set that aside for now. I have enough to spin about anyway.

I still haven't decided what to do when I graduate. There are just so many variables all of a sudden: Yenner, the "Message" as we've come to refer to it and what it might represent, and my own anxiety about myself. I have been pretty stable emotionally for the past month or so - no panic attacks - but who knows what might trigger another one?

Mark is off Wednesday so we are going to hang out. I'll ask him about a PacLink pass then.

Sunday, 14 January 2046

I went to Yenner's last night. We had sex again. I feel like a dam has burst and now that I've experienced it I can't get enough of him. At first I thought maybe it was just the novelty of the idea - having sex with a man - but I do like him.

One of the things I like about being with him in public is that no one seems to notice me. I catch people looking at him all the time, and kids openly point. For the first time ever,

I've found myself feeling small. But then anyone without a similar modification would be small next to him.

I do like his size and strength. Although he's very gentle with me, maybe even too careful, I can imagine what he is capable of. I am fascinated with his body hair. It's soft and dense and thick like yours, only brown. It feels unlike anything I've felt before when he rubs against me. I love being on top of him, resting my face on his chest, smelling his skin. While I'm there I don't want to leave. I feel safe and warm and ... I don't know. I'm not sure how to explain it.

Did you and Dad feel this way together?

Before I left, I asked him what happened after those guys rescued him and the others from the HS, but he didn't want to talk about it.

"I'll write you again. It's much easier for me," he said.

So I have to wait.

Wednesday, 17 January 2046

The latest from Yenner...

Rabiyya:

As promised, here is more of my story.

When we were in the bus they gave us each a small bottle of water to drink. Then they explained that we had to pass through a security checkpoint so they blindfolded and handcuffed us to the seats in front of us. After a while the bus stopped and I heard the driver speaking Spanish to someone outside. About 10 minutes later, we were moving again.

We traveled blindfolded for some time, it seemed like hours, then we stopped and our blindfolds were removed. We were in some kind of loading bay. There were boxes and crates everywhere. Here we had to make the decision. Six of us chose Nevada. The others wanted to stay and fight. I wanted revenge, but I felt I had to get out of the country while I could. What I hadn't thought about at the time was what I would do once they dropped us off in Nevada.

After we used the restroom, we were given a small meal, more water, and strange grey coveralls which were so hot that we let them hang with our torsos exposed. As we ate I noticed that the bus was no longer white, but yellow. And the HS logo was gone. I wondered if it was SmartPaint, which was fairly new at

the time, or if they had simply switched buses right in front of us without us noticing.

We transferred into a National Ecology truck. National Ecology disposed of hazardous and radioactive waste. It had radiation warning symbols on the sides. I wondered if it was a fake too or if the company was participating in the resistance. I still don't know.

Finally they put five of us, including myself, in the cargo tank. The sixth, a white Baptist minister from Waco that had been imprisoned for publicly criticizing government policies as un-Christian and for participating in the underground railroad helping Muslims escape, was given a NE uniform. Since the cab could only hold two people I concluded that only one of the TBA men went with us.

It was a clever idea, transporting us as radioactive cargo. The tank could not be X-rayed and infrared detectors would be useless. It would fail a close visual inspection, but only if they knew where to look. We were warned that we would be locked inside for as long as a day, but we had protein bars, plenty of bottled water, an LED lamp and a resealable container for our needs. After all I had been through, it seemed luxurious at first.

After a few hours we were miserably hot. Although there was ventilation, it was not enough for five men. Nor was there enough room for us to lie down. We had all been awake for so long, but all we could do was sit or squat uncomfortably. I was glad none of us were claustrophobic.

The coveralls were incredibly uncomfortable. It took no time for my own sweat to pool in the feet of my pant legs, but after some investigating I discovered the feet could zip off. It was a small relief. Later I was to find that they had an inner lining, which could be worn by itself.

Although I managed to sleep for a bit, I spent most of the time talking to an Iraqi guy. His name was Faisal. His family had moved to America after the Iraqi civil war. Ironically they had been supporters of the Americans. His mother was a Kurd whose parents had been killed during the time of Saddam.

I couldn't bear to think about my own family. The anger and loss I had felt early on had faded for the time being, and there was only despair and numbness. The mourning and fury would come later.

We stopped. My thoughts ran between hope and terror. Had we reached our destination or were we being searched? Did they stop to refuel or just take a break? I could hear faint voices through the ventilation duct, but I couldn't recognize them let alone make out the words.

Then we were moving again and my heart began to slow. We all started talking, pointlessly speculating about what had happened.

After what must have been a few more hours I woke when my head slammed against the side of the tank and we were thrown against each other. The truck seemed to be swerving to a stop.

The next thing I remember was waking up in a tangle of bodies. I tried to move my arms and legs, hands and feet. Aside from my pounding head everything seemed to be okay. We were no longer moving.

I didn't move, but rather strained to listen. I could hear nothing outside. After a few more minutes I separated myself from the others and looked around for the hatch. We had flipped onto the side, so it was overhead. This also meant that the tank must have somehow separated from the body of the truck. I silently thanked God that the hatch wasn't resting against the ground.

It was still locked. I put my feet against it and began pressing with all my strength. The pain in my head was nearly unbearable, but I figured that I could either try to escape or die. It was like no squat I had ever done, my legs ached and my feet felt like I had run a thousand miles. After a minute I could hear something begin to give, but I had to take a break. My legs, feet and head were in agony. I ate two more bars and sucked down one of the bottled waters.

By this time we were all awake except for one, who I later found out had a broken neck. I told them what I was trying to do. Someone thought we should bang on the sides and yell but this plan was quickly deferred until we had failed to get out another way. Which right now seemed to be by breaking out.

After resting for a minute, I didn't want to wait any longer, I began pressing again. My head felt like it was going to explode. I'm still amazed that I didn't have a stroke. The pain was so severe that I was hallucinating. This will sound very strange, but it was like a star was burning in my head. I almost vomited.

At the sound of metal groaning, the lock suddenly snapped and the hatch flew open. It was night. The Iraqi guy, Faisal, stood up and looked out. "The truck was destroyed," he said as he quickly surveyed the area. "We skidded off the road into a ditch or wash. There are vehicles on the way."

And I could hear a helicopter.

Friday, 19 January 2046

I ran into Jamal on my way home from class today. He was waiting for the bus at the corner of Howard and 6th across from the masjid. I hadn't seen him in over a month. I felt guilty.

"Ibnyy," he said simply.

"Hi Jamal. Sorry I haven't been by."

"You were very upset when you left last time, how are you now?"

"I'm okay. It's still hard to accept. I try not to think about it, but as you have observed, I think too much."

"You should have some pride in your heritage, Rabiyya. You are an Ash-Shariif. You are from a well known tribe."

"Yeah, and I'm probably the last one."

"Then it is a good thing that you are here now." He was looking at me in that intense way of his.

"You think there is a purpose to my being here?"

"I do."

There was that faith thing again.

"Do you know who the Ash-Shariif's were?" he asked me.

"No," I said. If you had ever told me I didn't remember.

"The Ash-Shariif were responsible for the care of Al-Harram Ash-Shariif and the Qa'bah during the time that the Ottoman Empire controlled Arabia."

"I didn't know that."

"Shariif means 'noble'."

"I didn't even know that much." *Rabiyya Ash-Shariif*, my name would have been if they had given me your last name. It did sound nice.

The bus pulled up. I found myself wanting to talk to him more, but it would have to wait.

"Ma'assalaama," he said as he boarded.

“Ma’assalaama,” I called after him.

I think I’ll stick with Rabiyya Patrick.

Tuesday, 23 January 2046

I hacked into a private webspaces today.

I finally used the PacLink pass that Mark got for me and went to San Jose. I’ve never been so far south. It was kind of exciting, but I was very nervous for several reasons.

I didn’t want to be recognized so I wore a cap and a pair of old comm-goggles that I found a few weeks ago. They didn’t work anymore but did the trick. I even shaved off my beard (I look like a boy again).

After I got off the train I walked to a park that I had found online. It was not very crowded. Most everyone there was eating lunch. I sat in a corner against a tree and scanned for nearby electronic devices. Not that I expected anyone to be able to hack into my own connection, but it couldn’t hurt.

I connected to the Internet using one of the pirated registration IDs in my pad, ran my presence through an anonymizer, and put on my VR goggles. It didn’t take long to get into the webspaces I had chosen once I found it. It has been years since I’ve hacked, but it came back to me pretty quickly.

The backend was a Delphi database. I connected and began my search. Everything I pulled up was automatically spooled to my pad so I could go through it later, but I wanted to do this in person in case I noticed something that my search agent wouldn’t.

The system sent out access notifications to the sysadmin, but as they were issued I redirected them into limbo. No one would know that the NextGene tables were accessed unless they directly queried the system.

I was in the private domain of one of NextGene’s primary investors. I was able to download employee lists, products, vendors, project budgets, variance reports, encrypted e-mail logs ... but nothing looked immediately useful. Since I couldn’t very well do a search for anything that could be linked to me, like my fathers’ names or my birthday, all I could do were very general queries.

I left the webspaces.

I was tempted to try another site I had targeted, but I had been connected for several minutes already. I quickly downloaded the latest results from my search agent and disconnected.

As I rode the train home I started one of the tools on trying to break the encryption code for the e-mail records. Each year was independently encrypted, so I started with 2024 - the year of my birth. While the pad was working on that I combed through the other results. I focused on equipment purchases. I knew some of the hardware that would be required to ... create me, but that wouldn't prove anything. Still, if I wanted to know how many kids really came out of the project, it was a place to start.

It rained most of the way home, but by the time we pulled into the Financial District station the sun was back out.

When I got home Mom wasn't home yet. I shredded the PacLink card. The pad was still trying to break the code. It was warm from running so long.

I re-read Yenner's last e-mail. The way he ends it makes me laugh. "I could hear a helicopter." It's like a cliff-hanger on an entertainment site. I think I'll ping him and ask him when the next episode will be available.

The pad is still working on the e-mail encryption. I'm surprised it's taking this long. A twenty year old encryption code would not take this long. Unless it's been recently re-encrypted for some reason.

That's an interesting idea. Now I'm really curious.

To be safe, I just disabled the new pad's communication chip. I don't want any more surprises.

Thursday, 25 January 2046

I had the dream about your death again - but it was different this time. It's been around four years since I've had it. I was hoping it was gone for good, but apparently not.

You were taking me to the *halal* (*kosher, permitted*) store, the one that was on Divisidero, to buy lamb. You held my hand as we walked down the busy sidewalk and kept smiling at me. I was so happy, though something in the back of my head was telling me that this was all wrong.

Then we were at the airport. Dad was waving goodbye to you as you walked through the security checkpoint, but I was filled with a sense of dread. I was desperately trying to tell Dad to make you stop, to make you come back, but I couldn't talk.

Then we were in Mecca together. You were wearing your *ihram* (*a seamless two-piece white garment that men performing the Hajj must wear*) and we were walking around the Qa'bah, performing the Tawaf. I kept trying to pull you away, begging you to come home, but you didn't pay any attention. You just smiled at me.

The universe exploded. Millions of bodies clothed in white were sucked into a flaming sky, swept into a tornado of fire. I clung to your hand but you were slipping away. I could hear myself screaming now, "don't leave me! Don't leave me!" over and over.

But you blew away too, still smiling at me. I heard you say something that I didn't understand and you exploded into flame like everything else. This is when I always woke up, crying my eyes out. But this time, I didn't wake up.

There was nothing around me as far as I could see but sand. The sun filled the sky - the sun was the sky. Everything was a blindingly bright white and orange at the same time. Then I saw the Qa'bah. It stood there, scorched and ominous, wavering in the oppressive heat. It seemed about 100 meters away. The *kiswah* (*an enormous black cloth that covers the building most of the year*) had burned away. Its single door was open and I began to crawl toward it.

I woke up, yet instead of the intense sense of loss and pain that I used to feel afterward, I was just very sad. I was also soaking wet.

I can't sleep now. My first thought is to call Jamal in the morning, but I'm not sure I want him interpreting this dream. Who knows what he would come up with. I'm sure it would have something to do with God. I'm not sure I can tell Mom either. Maybe I'll just talk to Yenner about it.

Sunday, 28 January 2046

Yenner sent me another installment about his journey to Pacifica.

His life has certainly been more interesting than mine, though I don't envy him. Though he has told me more than I wanted to know, I realize that I still don't know much about him.

Rabiyya:

We are almost at the end of the story, at least the story of how I got here. There is more about me that you still won't know, of course. There is the 13 years between my admittance as a refugee and now.

Although I don't know exactly what you have been up to for the last 13 years, it's a pretty easy guess. You were in grade school, junior high, high school, and now college. You lived with your mother. You hung out with your friends. You returned to San Francisco. You grieved for your fathers. And more recently, you have agonized over who and what you are.

The past 13 years for me have been - well - that will be a story for another time. Here is more of this one...

We were huddled in the storage tank of the now-destroyed radioactive waste truck. Myself and four others, one of whom we realized was dead. I don't remember his name, but he said he was Saudi. He was an older guy, maybe 60, which now doesn't seem so old. But I remember thinking that at least he had a reasonably full life and probably didn't know what hit him.

And yes, there was the helicopter that you teased me about. I could hear it hovering for a while, which confused me. But it was dark, and they were probably analyzing the situation. Then I could tell it was landing nearby. I was terrified - again. I was also extremely frustrated at being so helpless. For months I had been a pawn under the control of others and I was desperate to take my fate into my own hands. But I always came back to the same fact: I really was helpless.

There was a series of loud popping noises and then an exchange of gunfire. We didn't know who was shooting at whom. We were all tempted to stick our heads out and look, but no one dared. If they had attacked the truck they knew we were in the tank. The fact that they hadn't tried to destroy it raised my curiosity. Or perhaps they thought we were already dead.

We heard two more shots, silence for a few minutes, then I heard someone walking toward us. Gravel crunching beneath boots. "Hello?" a man's voice called out. "Is anyone in there?"

We didn't make a sound. It was nearly pitch black in the tank. The only light we could see was from the stars through the still open hatch. The foot steps approached slowly. "I'm not going to hurt you. I want to help."

Even though my body was pumped full of adrenaline, my head still felt as if it were splitting open. With every beat of my heart it did split open. Over and over and over.

The man climbed up on top of the tank and walked to the hatch. He directed the beam of his flashlight into the tank. It shone upon the dead Saudi man, the rest of us huddled out of his line of sight. Then he knelt down. "Don't be afraid," he said.

I heard him set something down on the tank. I assumed it was a weapon. Then he leaned into the opening.

I grabbed him by the front of his shirt and pulled him in. In one second I was on top of him. My hand was around his throat. He struggled uselessly. You know how strong I am. Even in my weakened condition I could have snapped his neck. "Are you alone?" I demanded. He couldn't answer so I relaxed my grip.

“Yes,” he grunted.

Kamyar, the Persian guy, stood up and looked outside. He came back in with the man's rifle. “There's an old pickup truck on the side of the road. I can't see inside of it. The helicopter is across the road. I saw one body, maybe two. I think one is our driver.”

Faisal asked Kamyar for the gun. “I can handle a gun. Let me check the area.”

In the dark I saw Kamyar look at me. I nodded my head. “But he's Sunni,” he whispered in my ear.

This was not the time to tell Kamyar what I thought of his comment, so I just said “it's okay, give him the gun.”

I was raised nominally Shi'a. We had a Shi'a Qur'an, celebrated *Ashura'* (*observation of the martyrdom of Husayn bin Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad*), went to a Shi'a mosque - when we went at all. I am aware of the differences and animosity that exists between many Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, especially in the Middle-East, but I suppose having grown up in a relatively secular and Christian society I thought it was much ado about something that everyone really should have gotten over by now. It's been what, 14 centuries?

Faisal took the gun and climbed out while I continued to question my prisoner. His name was Tom something. He said he used to be a rancher but since the drought he just did odd jobs for people in town. I asked him if we were in Nevada and he said yes. So we had made it that far. I had Kamyar look through his wallet. There was nothing that contradicted his story.

William, the black guy, also climbed out of the tank. He said he was going to help Faisal. I was in too much pain to argue.

Eventually we all got out. We even took the Saudi so we could bury him properly out in the desert. Faisal and William washed him with some of our precious water in the bed of the truck while we drove and then dug a grave with the shovels that Tom conveniently had with him. That fit the story too. A handy man in a 30 year old truck with shovels. It probably seems somewhat ridiculous to wash his body only to lay it in dirt, but that's what we did.

Faisal offered the *janaaza* (*funeral prayer*), then we dressed him in the thin white fabric underlining of his coveralls and placed him the grave. We buried him. Faisal lamented the fact that we didn't have a white sheet to wrap him in, but I remember telling him that I didn't think God would care about such a minor detail right at that moment. The white garments would have to do.

What I wished for most right then was not a white sheet, but the ability to remove the tattoo and brand from his body. But the flesh, I had to remind myself, was just a shell.

It turned out that Faisal had found Tom's wife in the truck. She was nervous and didn't say much. I wasn't sure what to make of that since Tom said he was alone, but it was too late at the time. After we buried the Saudi, and against my better judgment, we went to Tom's house. It was in the middle of nowhere. The nearest lights were on a hill a few miles away. He must have been a rancher at one time like he said.

He let us shower, which was the first time I had taken a hot shower in over three months. You have no idea what a luxury that was. He fed us, which was also a blessing because it had been many months since any of us had tasted real meat. While in the bathroom I found some pain pills, took a handful on the spot and put some more in one of my pockets.

I asked him why he was helping us. He knew what we were, that was quite obvious. He made a point of saying that he didn't agree with the government's position on Muslims (William was not Muslim, but had been arrested for assisting us). Tom said he was aware that what he was doing was a crime, but I still didn't trust him. If he was poor and having a tough time these days then why risk everything to help us? Why feed four hungry men? Why did he even bother to stop on the road? Why not just call the police?

I told the others to make sure they kept track of Tom and his wife at all times. Particularly, they were not to make any phone calls. By the time we had finished eating Faisal and I were certain it was a trap.

After Faisal had scoped out the scene on the road, he concluded that the TBA guy had somehow managed to get out of the truck before the missile that was apparently fired from the helicopter hit it. Other than the tank, there wasn't much left of the truck, and less of the minister. He thinks the TBA member killed the two men in the helicopter after they landed. How he managed this is a mystery. Faisal also found a device on him that we weren't familiar with. We eventually discovered that it was a type of directed energy weapon that could disable inadequately shielded electronic devices. Faisal thought he used it against the helicopter and forced it to land. It also explained why no one came to help.

What didn't make sense was how the TBA guy was killed. Faisal thought Tom had shot him. He explained to me why he believed this, but I won't bore you with the details. He was also unable to find his gun or the guns of the HS officers in the helicopter. He suspected Tom had locked them in the toolbox of his truck.

As I thought about these events later, I wondered if Tom had called the authorities before he had approached us. If he had, why didn't they come

immediately? They had lost a helicopter. Why didn't they investigate sooner? I estimated that between the time the truck was destroyed and we left the scene, maybe less than 30 minutes had passed. But this was just a guess as we were all knocked unconscious. Maybe there simply wasn't anyone else in the area.

Tom offered to let us sleep in his barn, which was more like a giant garage than a barn. He said in the morning he would drive us as near to the border as he could. But as soon as he returned to the house we tried the door. It was locked from the outside. Faisal had no doubt he was calling the police or HS at that very moment. He said Tom would probably get a nice reward for turning us in. I wondered if he had done it before. His barn was conveniently empty of anything that could have been used as a tool or weapon.

The guys all expected me to break the lock, but I had studied it and there was no way that I could have done so. It would not have been a good idea anyway as the door faced the house and had a big spotlight over it. William noticed that it was wired as well. But I had a better idea. It took me several minutes, but as quietly as I could I broke a hole in the far wall of the garage. It was just some type of fiberglass with an aluminum frame. Literally, a snap.

Later Faisal was to comment on my strength. "I tried to break the wall as you did and could not," he told me. "Allah has blessed you with amazing strength."

I didn't have the heart to tell him the truth.

We took a large backpack we had found in the barn and put the remaining bottles of water and protein bars in it. Faisal kept the weapon he found. We found some rope too. Kamyar had managed to hold on to Tom's flashlight and William had thought to keep the LED lamp. But unfortunately we were stuck with the strange gray coveralls unless we wanted to run around in the thin underlining. There was no clothing in the barn.

We were all sleep deprived and exhausted, but we ran. There was no alternative. My head was feeling better, but I was still miserable. I carried the backpack, naturally. I could have outrun them all, and I thought about doing just that. They would only slow me down. But by this time I had become rather fond of Faisal, and I would have felt like I was betraying all of them. Also, in the past few hours they had come to look at me as some kind of leader, despite my being the youngest.

It was around midnight when we had eaten, so I guessed it was almost two in the morning. That gave us several hours to find a place to hide in the middle of nowhere, and hopefully sleep the next day.

Wednesday, 31 January 2046

Rabiyya:

Here is the next part of the story. I didn't think it would be so long when written down, but as I write I keep remembering more and more. I am even leaving a lot of details out.

We ran until William fell down. Even for a middle-aged man he was in poor shape, and the feet of our coveralls were not made for running cross-country. The soles were about as protective as cheap sneakers.

In the starlight it looked like we were near a ridge. After a brief rest we started walking toward it. A few hours later, as dawn broke, we found a large rock ledge that we could all fit beneath. It was better than I had hoped for.

We stayed there all day and took turns at watch. I went first. It was a beautiful area. We were at the foot of a steep ridge of dark orange and red sedimentary rock that glowed in the morning sun. As the sun rose I realized that we had been walking more north than west, but that was probably for the best. Still, I was surprised that we hadn't been followed. It made me wonder if we simply were not worth the effort. I thought about how many people were at that moment probably fleeing the country as well. It would be impossible to catch them all. This made me feel a bit better.

As I waited for the next watch I examined the backpack. I was wondering if it had a tracking device, but I couldn't find one. It held eight 1.5 liter bottles of water. We each carried a bottle as well, but it wouldn't last more than two days.

I looked at my companions as they slept. Faisal was a small man, maybe 40. I wondered if he had been married or had kids. I knew little about him, but that was still more than I knew about William or Kamyar. Kamyar was tall and rather exotic looking, but I didn't trust him, mostly because his dislike for William and Faisal was so transparent. He seemed to trust me, however, at least for the moment. He was around 30. I remember thinking that he was old at the time, and now I am older than he was then. Time is a powerful force.

I thought again about leaving them. I was confident that I could make it alone, but not at all confident that we would make it together. My reasoning basically came down to this: either one of us could survive or none of us. I remained with them.

Finally I slept, and when I woke again Kamyar was at watch. He was doing something with his hands, but his back was to me so I couldn't see. The sun was going down so it was time to move on. We all had a protein bar, a drink of water, then were on our way again.

We walked for two days, sleeping by day, walking at night. The days were hot, but not as hot as they could have been. Daytime temperatures in the southwest routinely reached the 120's.

On the third night we happened upon one of the battlefields from the war. There were tanks, trucks, smashed robots of various types and even downed aircraft as far as we could see. It was surreal. We tried several of the trucks but none of them worked. I wasn't surprised, however I did find a sharp blade.

As we walked through the graveyard of war machines, William saw something move. We all froze. I turned off the flashlight I had been using to search for things that might be useful. It was cold so we had our coveralls fully on, except for Faisal who was always too hot. An object was approaching us, and I realized that it was a robot of some kind. It moved like a spider on long, articulated limbs. It was some kind of sentry, about six feet tall. The central body had multiple sensors that glowed with a dull red. It reminded me of the sentry in the room we had slept in back at the detention camp - except this one could move. It was a terrifying design.

My heart began to race. If we moved we would be shot. If we stood still at least one of us would be hacked up. It went directly to Faisal, and suddenly I realized what we were wearing. The suits were insulators, keeping heat from escaping. They helped hide us in the infrared. No wonder they were so hot.

"This is a restricted area," it said. "You have five seconds to identify yourself." All three of its barrels were aimed at Faisal. It didn't seem aware of the rest of us.

He was weeping and began reciting *Al-Fatiha* (the opening surah of the *Qur'an*). That much I did recognize. I again felt helpless. Then there were three clicks. It was out of ammunition. Two arms with blades emerged from its body. They glinted blue in the starlight. I finally did something.

"Stand still!" I yelled, then, unzipping my top to expose my torso, I ran as fast as I could. As I expected, it followed me. As I didn't expect, it was fast.

In the dark, running, I desperately searched for something to use as a weapon against it. Then I remembered the weapon that Faisal had found. I circled back around and called to him, "use the weapon!"

Faisal must have had the same thought because as I ran by I heard a series of popping noises. I could feel the static electricity in my hair, but it didn't stop the sentry.

Instead, it changed direction and headed for Faisal. William, who had found a long steel rod, swung it at the robot right as it reached Faisal. He struck one of its legs.

He managed to knock the machine off balance but it didn't seem damaged. Then it attacked him.

Faisal began to run toward me, while I conducted a more methodical search for something to use against it. I needed a pole like William's.

I heard a scream and looked up to watch William's head fall to the ground, follow by his body once the machine pulled out one of its blades. At first I couldn't believe my eyes. Thankfully it was dark enough that I couldn't see the gore.

Kamyar was running away. I noticed that he had picked up the backpack.

The robot turned back toward us. I put Faisal on my back (he was too slow) and ran toward one of the tanks. We managed to get inside and close the hatch right as the sentry reached us. We could hear it trying to open the hatch but it quickly gave up and there were no further sounds. I imagined it was sitting right outside waiting for us.

We could not see outside. The vehicle was completely sealed. The external cameras and monitors were all dead, of course, but using the flashlight I was able to find a long steel pole to use as a weapon.

There was no time to rest however, as our water supply was leaving us. I forced the hatch open as quickly as I could. The sentry was immediately at the opening and I thrust my makeshift spear into its body. It didn't pierce it, but it was thrown off the tank. I jumped out.

Using the rod as William had, I swung at the machine's legs as hard as I could. I damaged one of the joints. The leg could no longer bend. I damaged another. And another. It dragged itself around in circles for a minute and I repeatedly struck its sensors as hard as I could. It stopped moving. The bones in my hands and arms ached.

Faisal had been watching from the top of the tank. He asked me if I had killed it. Then we heard a very loud explosion from the direction that Kamyar had gone. I was furious at his betrayal and sprinted in his direction, leaving Faisal well behind me.

In front of me were the remains of a second sentry, still smoking. A man in camo fatigues had a weapon pointed at Kamyar. I stopped. He looked at me and

smiled, "I hate to waste good American hardware, but you Moes ain't worth anything to me dead."

It would seem Yenner is really getting into this cliff-hanger thing.

I did see Yenner this afternoon, though we didn't talk much. We took a drive to Land's End and took a long hike along the coast. It was a perfect day. I was standing at the edge of the cliff, watching the green and blue waves crashing against the eroding rocks below, when he pulled me to him and kissed me. I was erect before his lips even made contact with mine. My shorts did a poor job of hiding it.

He kissed me again, so softly, gently. He says I am precious to him.

"I think it's time to go back home," he suggested.

We did.

Saturday, 3 February 2046

After around 250 hours, my new pad finally finished decrypting the e-mail log and gave me two files. The nanoprocessor had run so hot I had to keep it in the freezer so it wouldn't shut down. And the freezer ran continuously for 10 days to keep the temperature below freezing.

The nanoprocessors they put in these things aren't designed to run continuously as they generate too much heat, but I was anxious for it to finish processing the file.

Mom had asked me what I was doing. I told her it was an extremely complex calculation for one of my classes. I don't think she believed me, but she let it go.

The result said: Decryption complete. Further resolution not possible.

One of the files is nearly a terabyte in size and still looks encrypted to me. The other is a simple file called README that says:

YOU WILL FAIL

It is difficult to believe it is not meant for me. But how could someone know I would ever see it? It occurred to me that I was on a wild goose chase. Maybe I am just a rat in a maze. The file could be nothing but random characters - a distraction.

I was furious. It took every bit of self-control I had to keep from hurling the pad at my window.

I opened up the large file and viewed it as it was. It did look like random Unicode characters. I thought I should just drop the entire thing. Someone was just playing a game with me, or maybe anyone finding his or her clues.

But as I scrolled through the beginning of the file I wondered if the original e-mail compilation had been translated into another language before encryption. Maybe it was translated, encrypted, then combined with the README file and encrypted again. The decryption tools assumed modern standard English, but what if it wasn't in English?

I just set it to try 200 different languages and now I'm off to join Mark and Kelley at an African art festival in the Sunset.

Wednesday, 7 February 2046

My dear Rabiyya:

This, finally, is the end of the story. As you read it, I hope you will not judge me too harshly, but I know I would do the same thing again if I had to re-live the experience. You will know what I am talking about when you get to that point in the story.

I know you will have many questions. Just save them up and when I see you Friday you can ask all you want.

I can't wait to hold you in my arms again!

Things happened very quickly. It was morning, and the sun rose above the ridge to the southeast, which was directly behind Kamyar. The Mo hunter (*Mo hunter. Mo is a derogatory term, from Mohammed*), as they called themselves, was briefly blinded. Much to my surprise, Kamyar pulled a gun from one of his pockets and aimed it at the guy. But he was too slow releasing the safety and the hunter fired his weapon at him, blowing a hole through Kamyar's torso.

At about the same time, Faisal had run up off to the side. A large boulder was between him and the hunter. As Kamyar fell to the ground, Faisal picked up a rock and hurled it at the hunter from the side of the boulder. It missed him, but made a cracking noise when it hit a rock on his far side.

I wasted no time as our latest attacker looked away from me. I had a large rock in my hand in one second and threw it at the Mo hunter's head as hard as I could. It hit him right as he was pulling the trigger of his shotgun-like weapon. Obviously, he missed me. He dropped the gun and fell backwards.

I raced over to him and kicked the gun away. He was out cold. Then without hesitating, I reached down and twisted his head 180 degrees in the wrong direction. I killed him.

This is something that you must know about me. I have killed a man.

Faisal walked over toward me slowly. "You killed him," he said in a surprised tone of voice.

"He was *hunting* us, Faisal."

"There is too much death in the world," he said.

"Because there is too much hate in the world," I responded.

I walked over toward Kamyar's body and picked up the backpack. There had been five bottles of water in it, but one had mostly leaked away. The backpack was damaged and covered with his blood, but I had no choice but to continue wearing it.

After we finished the remaining water in the damaged bottle, I picked up the gun Kamyar had secretly held on to. I guessed that he had taken it from one of the HS officers that were in the helicopter after Tom had killed them. He was a sneaky bastard.

I looked at it. I had never held a gun before, and at the time I had no idea how to use it beyond pulling the trigger. Faisal knew what it was immediately.

"It is a Ruger 380 semi-automatic. About 10 years old. He did not even take the safety off."

I did not ask how he knew. I just gave it to him. "We need to get out of here now." I was afraid that one of the hunter's buddies would show up, or another sentry.

Faisal looked at me. "We must bury Kamyar."

I thought he was crazy and said so. "The only dead man in this valley that deserves a burial is William, and we don't have the time, energy or water to do it."

"Kamyar was our brother," Faisal said, as if that explained everything. He meant, of course, that Kamyar was our Muslim brother. But I certainly didn't grieve for him.

“We don't have the time for that - or the tools. We have to find a place to hide *now*.”

“I cannot leave him like this.”

“Faisal, he betrayed us!”

“He was frightened. You should forgive him.”

“I don't.”

“And you grew up in a Christian culture. I expect better of you.”

At that moment I wished I could have gagged Faisal, tied him up, and thrown him over my shoulder.

“I'm leaving,” I said and began walking back to pick up the hunter's shotgun weapon. I carried the remaining water in a makeshift sack.

“I am going to bury him, Yenner.”

I stopped and looked back. “Don't make me carry you out of here.”

“Do not threaten me. I do not care how strong you are. You cannot break my will.”

“Faisal, I'm not threatening you. I'm saving you.” With that said, I picked up Faisal and threw him over my shoulder. I also picked up the shotgun, and I walked until we were several miles away from the battlefield. I had hoped to come across the hunter's vehicle, but our luck was not that good, and I didn't want to waste time and water looking for something we might not find, let alone be able to use.

As I walked I kept telling myself that I had made the right decision. It would have taken the two of us, really just me, hours to bury Kamyar and William (if I had buried Kamyar, I would have buried William too). We didn't have shovels and we were already tired, hungry and thirsty.

To this day I feel guilty for betraying Faisal's wishes and leaving them there. I didn't think about it at the time, but we could have at least covered them with rocks. Yet that would have still taken time we didn't have.

At around noon I found an acceptable sleeping place between two enormous rocks and put my silent partner down. He hadn't spoken to me since I picked him up. He didn't speak to me the next day either, but he did walk with me that night after we had slept.

We walked for two more days. Over or around one ridge after the other. Across an empty highway. Miles and miles of rock and dust and scrub. We abandoned our coveralls, just tearing off enough to wear as shorts. They simply made us sweat too much. We were filthy. I knew we must have smelled unimaginably bad. We ran out of water.

I hope you never have to experience the thirst and hunger we felt. Our lips were dried and cracked. My tongue felt like leather. My breath burned in my throat. It was difficult to walk, or even to concentrate on walking. Faisal started mumbling about going back home. He said his wife would be angry that he was so late.

It hurt too much to talk so I said nothing. Finally, as dawn broke, he stopped. I stopped and simply stared at him as he looked around. In a brief moment of clarity, I knew that he was hallucinating. He collapsed.

I sat down next to him. It seemed pointless to continue. I wanted to simply go to sleep and never wake up.

The sun began to rise behind us. In the distance, I saw something glow with reflected sunlight. It called to me.

I lifted Faisal up and carried him again, stumbling in the direction of the glimmering reflection. Several minutes later I realized it was a sign on the other side of a road. It read "Death Valley National Park".

I tried to tell Faisal but I could not speak. Breathing was misery. My head was pounding worse than ever. I knew we were both seriously dehydrated.

I sat down next to the sign, on the west side of road, and put him back down. He was unconscious. I remember thinking that we were going to die, but that I no longer cared. We had made it to California (this was before the security barrier). We were free again.

The next thing I remembered was waking up in some kind of makeshift hospital room. An IV was in my arm. My feet were bandaged. My lips still hurt like hell.

I remember thinking that we had been rescued. There were others in the room, but I didn't see Faisal. I wondered where he was.

"You're back," the man that entered the room said. For a horrifying instant I feared that he meant I was back in America. "You're safe now. Thanks to that big gun of yours, we found you."

He later explained to me that I had been firing it into the air and that a border patrol drone had detected the shots and investigated, transmitted our location and

picture, and a helicopter had picked us up an hour later. When it arrived, we had both been unconscious. I still don't remember firing the weapon.

"My friend..."

"We think he'll be fine too. He's still sleeping. It was very close with him."

"Where are we?"

"Barstow. About 150 kilometers north-east of LA. Welcome to Pacifica, Mister..."

"Seradjfar. My name is Yenner Seradjfar. My friend is Faisal, and we request political asylum."

Thursday, 8 February 2046

It's an onion. A one terabyte onion.

What I thought was the NextGene e-mail log from the year I was born turned out to be layer upon layer of YOU WILL FAIL in every conceivable language. Each successive decryption reveals two files: one that says YOU WILL FAIL in some language, and a larger one that remains encrypted in another language.

Now that the pad has learned the pattern, it is screaming through deeper and deeper layers. But it will take weeks to process through them all, until there is nothing left, and I wonder if there is any point.

I'll have a collection of thirty-odd billion YOU WILL FAILs in hundreds of languages.

I'm tempted to buy a mini-computer with the horsepower to tear through it in an hour, but that seems excessive. Obsessive? I wish I could use the reality simulators at school.

But I have to let it finish. I have to know if there is something else there.

Saturday, 10 February 2046

We had a small earthquake this morning when I was at Yenner's. He thought it was exciting, but it really scared me. It only lasted a few seconds, but I was covered with sweat by the time it stopped.

"I hate those things," I said.

He stopped smiling. "Sorry. I thought it was fun."

“Not fun.”

He looked at me for a moment. “You can release the couch now.”

I had been gripping the back of the couch. My knuckles were white. I let go.

Yenner walked up behind me and wrapped his arms around me. “You know nothing will happen to you when you are with me.”

I wanted to change the subject. “Did you save Faisal?”

“What?”

“Faisal. Did he live?”

“I heard you. It just wasn't what I was expecting.”

I twisted around in his arms until I was facing him. “Well?”

“Yes,” he said slowly. “Faisal is still alive.”

“Where does he live?”

“Do you know where Nevada City is?”

“Yeah. Why there?”

“He likes to be near the mountains ... to experience the forests in case they burn away.”

“Do you still talk to him?”

“Yes. I've even told him about you. We can go visit him someday.”

We.

“Do you think about your family?” I asked.

“Every day. Sometimes I hate myself for abandoning them.”

“They would understand.”

“They would? Did you understand why your American father left you?”

“No, but that is different.”

“Maybe. I hope they would understand.”

"I wonder if any of them are still alive."

"I hope not, at least not there. Most of the prisoners have been killed anyway. The first years I was here I used to look through the government's refugee webspace but I never found anyone I knew. I finally gave up." He lifted me up and carried me around the couch. We sat down.

"We were lucky to get through when we did. During and right after the war, hundreds of thousands of people escaped, but as time passed the Americans tightened down their borders and Mo hunting became a profitable business. The government paid people to bring us back. Others just hunted escapees and people fleeing the country for fun."

"I don't understand why they didn't just let people go. They didn't want them there anyway. It's just meanness."

"It's a malignancy," he said. He sounded tense.

"What is?"

"America. It's a malignancy on the world and the planet," he said through clenched teeth. "It should be wiped from the face of the Earth."

"You can't say that. You sound just as bad as they do."

He was now obviously angry. "Look at it logically, Rabiyya. Look at what it has done to the world in the past several decades. Look at the misery it has created planet-wide as it tries to control the destiny of one country after another in the name of 'freedom' and 'democracy' when the reality is greed, control and hate. Look at the resources it has consumed. Look at its effect on the climate. They killed my *entire* family. They tortured and murdered *millions*. They killed *your own fathers!*"

I've never seen him spark off like that. "What about that group - Take Back America? They helped you escape. They risked their lives to fight back. I've read in many places that up to half of Americans secretly oppose the policies of their government. What about them?"

"Tell me this. Would the world be better off - right now - with or without that country?"

He looked at me harshly. This was a side of Yenner that was new to me and I have to admit it was scary. I know the answer to his question. I know that the world would be much better off without the America of today. But I also know that it is not that simple. In another generation it could be very different. The politics of extremism burn hot and destructively, but eventually, they always burn out.

"There is no answer to that question, Yenner."

“Don't give me that.”

“Do you remember how you first began telling me your story? You wrote something like, ‘this will be hard to believe, but it has happened over and over throughout history’.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Think about it. Now I'm going to say it to you - this might be hard to believe, but it has happened over and over throughout history as well. What is going on now in America will end.”

He just looked at me.

“I have to go now,” I said. He didn't want me to leave, but I did have to get out of there. So I came home and pinged Mark. I know I have homework to do, but I can't concentrate. Rather than spin about it endlessly, I decided to hang out with someone with more mundane issues.

I'm riding to Oakland.

Saturday, 17 February 2046

Yesterday it went too far.

My pad chirped during one of my labs. At school I keep it on emergency chirp only, but since no one had used it before, it chirped twice before I realized what it was. I pulled off my VR headset and looked at it. The origination point was my new pad. It had to be Mom. My heart started pounding.

“Mom?” I asked as I left the lab.

“Rabiyya? Can you hear me?” It was her voice, but there was no picture. “I need you to come home. There's something wrong with the floor cleaner again.”

“What is it doing?”

“Rabiyya? Rabiyya? Are you there? Please come home!”

“Mom? Can you hear me?”

“Hurry *ow!*,” then she screamed.

“*Mom? Are you okay?*”

The connection was still live, but there was no response.

I was in a blind panic. I left my pack in the lab and ran out of the building with only my pad. I pinged Yenner although I hadn't talked to him since I left his apartment a week ago. He'd called me four times and sent several apologetic e-mails that I ignored. I felt badly, but I didn't know who else to call that I could trust.

"Well, you decided to call me back," he said. He looked hurt. I could tell he was home. Then he noticed I was crying. "What's wrong?"

"I think our floor cleaner is attacking my Mom, can you meet me there? It's unit 2005. I'll tell the security system to let you in."

"I'm on my way," he said.

I ran into the garage and stopped at my bike. I pinged our building twice but there was no response, even from the security system. I made it home in record time and found the doors to the building open, but no one was at the front desk.

The elevators weren't working. There was no power. *Where in the hell is everyone?* I thought.

I ran up the stairs as fast as I could, thankful for the backup lighting, trying to remember how the manual override to the door worked. I'd never used it before. Then about halfway up, I realized it required a mechanical key that we kept in the kitchen. The building office also kept one.

Back down I went, only to find the office door closed and locked. "Shit!" I yelled as I banged on it. I can't remember the last time I cursed, but it wouldn't be the last time that day. No one answered.

I ran back up the stairs and bolted down the hall to our front door. The familiar door that had always faithfully slid open for me remained stubbornly closed. I pounded on it. "Mom?!"

Of course I couldn't hear anything inside. I banged on it again and put my ear to it. Nothing.

"Mom!" I yelled. "Open the door!"

Still nothing. I tried to slide it open myself, but it was locked. I couldn't force it.

I stared at it, betrayed by my own door. I was beyond frustrated, and suddenly wished for a simple key like everyone carried around in the old days.

I am so used to everything being electronic ... used to accessing everything though my pad or a terminal somewhere. Passwords and retina scans and thumbprints. Facial, voice and DNA recognition. All of which I know how to get around.

But a locked door was beyond my ability to break into.

The power is out in the building, but the emergency lights are on. They must be on an isolated system. The life-safety system has failed - none of the doors will open from the outside. I wondered if they would even open from the inside without breaking them out.

The internal communication system is down.

It made no sense unless there was a serious computer problem. *A computer problem. My building has been sabotaged.*

My mind was spinning out different possibilities as I pulled out my pad and tried to link to our home system, but it was also down or refusing the connection.

I heard the door to the stairwell slam shut and could feel the floor vibrating. Yenner jogged around the corner. The cavalry had arrived. "The power in your building is out."

"Yeah, you noticed." I didn't think about it at the time, but he wasn't even sweating.

"Shit!" I said again. "I can't establish a connection."

He looked at me in shock.

"Don't look at me that way."

He turned his attention to the door. "Is there a manual override? Did you try to push it?"

"Yes, but I don't have the key, and yes, but it won't budge."

"Your mom can't open it from the inside?"

"No, and I don't think she can get to the door either," I felt completely helpless, but I refused to start crying again. "We have to get her out, Yenner."

"I can't believe they would attack you like this," he said.

"Get her out, Yenner. Please get her out." My voice broke. I had to fight to remain composed. At that moment I felt like curling up in a corner somewhere. Not very adult - or effective.

He tried to push on it as well. I could hear creaking, but it didn't move. "Doesn't security have a key?"

"I don't know where they are, and the office was locked too. Yenner, please get her out."

At that moment I heard a snap behind me. One of our neighbors forced his own door open - the breakout section swung into the hallway. He looked at us. "What the heck is going on, Rabiyya? The power has been out for twenty minutes."

The power never goes out anymore.

"I don't know. My mom is trapped inside. I can't open the door."

Our building generates its own power but can access the grid anytime.

"She's trapped? She just has to push hard - these doors breakout from the inside."

"I know that," I said impatiently.

"He doesn't think she can," Yenner said.

My neighbor took his first real look at Yenner. Mr. Shaikh was even smaller than I, so Yenner must have looked like a mountain to him.

"I'm Yenner Seradjfar," he said to Mr. Shaikh. "I'm a friend of the family. Do you mind if I look at your door?"

"Do I have a choice?" he joked.

"It's a positive pressure 90-minute fire door," I said. "Three centimeters thick. Linear drive. Aluminum tracks bolted to the lintel and floor. Top and bottom sealed-bearing rollers."

"How do you know that?" he asked as he examined the door and wall from the inside.

"I'm a freak, Yenner."

"This is not going to be easy," Yenner said.

"What?" Mr. Shaikh and I asked simultaneously.

"You want me to get her out. I have to break it down. I can't think of another way."

I didn't know what else to do. "Please get her out, Yenner," I said yet again. Mr. Shaikh pulled me into his doorway.

My heart was pounding. I tried to remember the construction of the frame for the door but my mind was suddenly blank. *How much does he weigh? How fast can he run?* I couldn't even calculate the force with which he would strike it.

Yenner had walked to the other end of the hallway. It was probably 15 meters long. My heart continued to pound in my chest. I felt dizzy.

He launched himself down the hallway, accelerating like an Olympic sprinter. I could feel the wind as he passed. It was ... breathtaking. One second later he twisted and struck the door with his right shoulder and arm.

I could feel the vibration of the impact, and over the boom of his great body slamming into the door, the sound of building materials cracking and snapping. The walls shuddered. I could see daylight. He had pushed it forward about four centimeters at the top and right.

"Christ almighty," Mr. Shaikh said.

"Jesus had nothing to do with it," I replied distractedly. Then I looked at Yenner. He winced in pain and stumbled, but quickly tried to hide it. I ran to the door and tried to push it further open. "Mom?!"

"Rabiyya!" I could hear her. *Thank God*, I thought.

"Hold on, we're coming in!"

I pushed but it still wouldn't budge for me.

"I have to do it again," Yenner slurred. He looked dazed. I wondered at the time if he had a concussion. *How fast was he moving?*

"Are you okay?"

"I will be fine," he said. It seemed painful for him to talk.

"I don't mean 'will be', I mean 'are'".

"Please stand aside, Rabiyya."

And he ran at the door again, this time striking it with his left side. He didn't seem to hit it as hard this time, but it was enough. The door swung open as if on hinges. Debris was all over the floor around it. Yenner fell down. He didn't move.

I saw my neighbor pull out his mobile. "I'll call for an ambulance," he said. I ran into the house. I had to step over Yenner.

Mom was in the kitchen, laying on the counter. Her right leg was elevated. It looked like she had made a tourniquet around her calf out of a dish towel, but she was also applying pressure with her hand. There was blood everywhere.

“Be careful!” she yelled as she pointed at our out-of-control floor cleaner. It had apparently been waiting for her to come down again, but now it was moving toward me. The small blade that it used to scrape with was extended. It didn't look very menacing though, and I wondered how it had been able to cut Mom's leg.

Suddenly I *hated* the thing, and as it drew near enough, I simply slammed my foot down on its arm and it snapped off. Then I flipped it over and turned it off.

Yenner is still in the hospital. I'm going to go see him tomorrow. The emergency team was able to operate one of the elevators with their battery and carry him out. And I now know that he weighs 150 kilos - nearly twice as much as I do.

But he's not immune to injury, and managed to dislocate his left shoulder, break three ribs and a collar bone, puncture a lung, and I was right - give himself a concussion. He was also bleeding internally.

The paramedics also took Mom, but said she should be back this weekend. She just needed microsurgery on the back of her lower leg. I wanted to go with her, but she insisted that I stay and watch the house.

The building's systems came back up about an hour after everyone left. I could hear people talking in the hallway but I ignored them. I thought about checking out a few news spaces. I didn't.

Nor did I sleep last night. I haven't eaten. I'm not hungry.

This morning the building contractor reconstructed the door frame, drive and pocket and at least got it working again. It still looks like a wreck but he's going to finish next week. And I've cleaned up as much of the mess as I can, but otherwise have just been sitting here staring outside or looking at the cleaningbot, which remains upside down in the middle of the room.

Suddenly, it seems ridiculous that a common robot could generate so much drama.

I could use my pad to check it out, but I don't want to deal with it right now. I am furious with myself for allowing this to happen. I am furious with whoever is playing games with us. I am also very scared.

Mom just got back home from the emergency room. She's on crutches.

Sunday, 18 February 2046

Once Mom got home, I suddenly felt exhausted. I could really feel the need to sleep after being up for two days, but she wanted to talk and sat down next to me on the couch. I took her hand.

I can't remember our conversation with my usual clarity, but it went something like this...

"I don't know where to start," I said. "I'm so glad you're okay. I can't ..." I choked up. "I can't lose you too."

"I'm not going anywhere, honey," she said.

"I'm so sorry." *I am not going to cry again*, I kept thinking to myself.

"Sorry for what? You didn't make the cleaner malfunction at the same time as the attack."

"What attack?" In my self-imposed isolation, I realized I had no idea what had happened in the past 36 hours.

"You haven't turned on the monitor or been online," she said matter-of-factly.

"No."

"Over a hundred buildings on certain power and communications networks had system failures. They think it was some kind of virus. Last I heard, they still hadn't isolated it."

"It wasn't an accident?"

"Some American extremist group claimed responsibility."

I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed that on my way home Friday. But then I was pretty focused. In fact I just remembered that I left my bike in the elevator lobby.

There hasn't been a terror attack in years.

"The floor cleaner didn't malfunction," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"The first time - last year. It was infected."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"It wasn't that simple. There was a message in the virus code. I didn't want you to worry."

"What kind of message? To whom?"

"We think it was meant for me."

“We? Who is we?”

“I told Jamal and Yenner about it.”

“But not your mother.”

“I didn't want you to worry, Mom. You already worry about me too much.”

“You're my baby. It's my job.” She grinned. I was relieved that she wasn't angry.

“So what did the message say?”

I just looked at her.

“Rabiyya. What did it say?”

“It said,” I began slowly. “In all capital letters, ‘I KNOW WHAT YOU ARE.’”

She looked stricken. “NextGene?”

“That's what I thought.”

“How did it get infected?”

“I haven't figured that out yet, but it happened on my birthday. While we were at dinner, in fact.”

“Did someone break into our home?” She looked very anxious now.

“I don't think so. I checked all the video records, but they could have been changed.”

“You checked the building's records? I can't believe they gave you permission.”

“They didn't,” I said quietly.

She sighed.

“And our own security system doesn't have any record of entry between the time we left and returned.”

“A wi-vi?” She suggested.

“I don't think so either. Well, it is a wi-vi, but in this case I don't think that was the vector of infection.”

“You're running out of options.”

"I know. Whoever is behind this is extremely sophisticated. They've created a puzzle I can't solve."

"Yet," she said. "And they infected the cleaner again."

"Apparently."

"Have you looked at it?"

"No."

She watched me for a minute. "That's not like you. Are you okay?"

"I haven't slept since yesterday."

"You've just been sitting here?"

"Mostly. I cleaned up the ... kitchen." I couldn't say blood. I looked at her lower leg and foot. It was immobilized. "How is it?"

"I can't bend it for the next week or so, but they've reconnected everything. The gastrocnemius was almost sliced through. It nicked the posterior tibial artery."

"Why would the scraper have been so sharp? That seems like a lawsuit waiting to happen."

"Believe me, I was very surprised."

"I'll check into that too," I said.

Neither of us spoke for a while, and I began to drift off.

"You must be exhausted," she said finally.

"I think I can sleep now."

"Are you going to see your friend tomorrow? Yenner?"

"Yes."

"He's really something, isn't he?"

"Yeah." *He really is something.*

"I hope to meet him soon. When he isn't tearing out half the wall."

“You have no idea how desperate I was to get in here.”

“Why don't you go to sleep. I'll see you in the morning. We can have breakfast on the roof. I know you like that.”

Amazingly, as I crawled in bed, I felt okay. Mom was safe, and I was going to see Yenner tomorrow. I fell asleep immediately.

We did have breakfast on the roof, but I didn't tell her what I was using the new pad for. Maybe if I actually get some useful results.

I'm going to see Yenner now.

Monday, 19 February 2046

Yesterday I went to see Yenner at Mission Medical Center. It was my first time there and it took me over 10 minutes to find the right building. He was still receiving regeneration therapy.

There were three other men in the room, so I was somewhat uncomfortable after I walked in.

“Hi. Crowded room,” I said quietly but with a smile. It was nice to see him.

“Don't worry about it. They have AV sets on most of the time. I, on the other hand, have actually been reading a book.” He proudly presented a printed book.

“Wow! A real book!” I looked at the cover. “*Empire's End*. Fiction?”

“Yeah, thirty years old, but it was prophetic in many ways.”

“Where did you get it?”

“They have a library of donated materials. Soft and hard.” He stared at me for a minute. “So how's your mom?”

“She's fine. She got home last night. She can't really use her leg for several days but she's okay. They said it was good that we got to her when we did.”

He started to say something then stopped. He looked thoughtful for a minute. “I assume you heard about the terror attack.”

“I'm still not sure what to make of it. Interesting timing.”

“Eight people died. The timing was worse for them. I’m sure it had nothing to do with your home appliance problems.”

“You’re probably right. My mom thanked you by the way. She said she wanted to meet you as long as you didn’t destroy anything else.”

Yenner laughed and then winced. “I promise. No more Superman.”

“How are you?”

“Mending as we speak. It kind of tickles, though the nurse said I shouldn’t feel anything. And the bruising is still pretty bad.” He pulled down the sheet to show me his torso. Massive bruises covered his right arm and parts of his back.

“Oh.” I winced. “Wow.”

“It’s a problem that ... comes with being too strong. I’ve injured myself a few times. My skin, bones, etcetera can’t take the abuse my muscles can generate. But I’ve never run into a door at top speed before. That was a first.” He smiled.

I had been thinking about how fast he had been running. “Ten meters per second?”

“Good guess. Probably a bit faster, though it’s been years since I clocked myself.”

“My Olympic athlete,” I joked.

“Ah. Not eligible.”

Over the past 50 years, the role of genetics became more and more apparent in athletic competitions. Some people simply lucked into inheriting genes that gave them a great advantage over others and all the training in the world by the less fortunate could never compensate for the difference.

People like Yenner, who were genetically modified, were not permitted to compete in most legacy competitions, but there were games for the genetically and hormonally enhanced, and they had become very popular in the past two decades.

Then there were those that were genetically engineered to begin with. This has only recently become an issue and has created a new area of legal challenges. It is difficult to prove with genomic analysis if a person was endowed by chance or design without testing the parents as well. Even that can leave room for interpretation.

“When do you get out?” I asked him.

“Should be Tuesday. Actually, I need to come by your place first.”

That made me irrationally happy. "Why?"

"I left something in your sky dock."

"You *flew* to my house?" That explained the lack of sweat when he came out of the stairwell.

"I borrowed a SkyScooter. Wanna go for a ride?"

"Whose is it?"

"One of my neighbors."

"I've never been in one before."

"You'll love it."

"I'm not so sure about that." It sounded terrifying. "When do you go back to work?"

"Wednesday."

"Isn't that a bit early?"

"I'll be fine. You'll see. I just drive around mostly anyway."

"And make mechanical repairs," I added. "And carry around tanks of hydrogen." I looked down and noticed that I was smoothing out the hair on his forearm again. He noticed too and smiled.

"My precious little man," he whispered. *My precious little man, Dad used to say to me.* "You worry about everything."

"Well ... especially you right now. You willingly risked injury to help us."

His face soured. "And my supplemental insurance denied part of my claim."

"Self-inflicted."

"Yeah."

"I'll pay it."

"The hell you will. It's okay. MediCal will pay enough of it."

"Just try and stop me."

He laughed and winced again. "I know better than to mess with you, Rabiyya Patrick."

"Well, we may be able to get some money from the security company to cover it, but I'm not sure. We found out that the remaining guard had left the building to look for the other, who got stuck across the street at Martha's. He had been getting coffee when the power system went down."

"That seems very strange."

"Everything is very strange right now."

"Speaking of which, have you looked at the floor cleaner yet?"

I rolled my eyes. "No. I'm avoiding it." *It still sits, upside-down, in the middle of the front room. We just walk around it, neither of us mentioning it, neither of us able to ignore it.*

"Do you want to wait until I'm there? Can you wait until I get out?"

"I don't have class Tuesday - that works for me."

He took my hand and brought it to his lips, "thank you."

"No. Thank *you*, Yenner."

"Rabiyya?"

"What is it?"

"This probably isn't the time or place but I really need to tell you something."

"Okay." I could feel my heart start to pound in my chest. My body moved into a heightened state of alert. He was going to say *it*.

"I love you, Rabiyya."

He said it. And I had no idea what to say in return. I don't know how I feel. I don't know what love feels like. How could I know? I love Mom, but it can't be the same. And I remember thinking that I was in love with Katia, but later I realized it was just a crush.

I don't know how I feel about Yenner.

"Yenner..." I started.

"I know you don't know how to respond." That struck me as somewhat condescending, if true. "I just had to tell you."

He looked at me. "Haven't you figured it out yet, Mr. Genius? I would do anything for you."

"I know," I said under my breath, mostly because I didn't trust my voice right then. "I..."

He nodded and grinned. "Go home. I know you have a lot of think about, and I just gave you more."

Wednesday, 21 February 2046

I just pulled the new pad out of the freezer (it seems so funny to keep it there) to see how much of the file remains to be decrypted. It's only a third of the way through it. I put it back. I'm not going to look at the results until it finishes.

Yenner was released from Mission yesterday. Before he left I linked in to pay the balance of his bill, but someone had beat me to it.

"Mr. Seradjfar's account is paid in full," the hospital's patient account avatar said. It looked like a generic Asian woman. I appeared as myself, as I usually do when I'm in a public VR space.

"Who paid it?" I asked.

"That information is confidential," it said.

Of course. "What was the payment amount?"

"That is also confidential."

"What was the time of payment?" I tried.

"The account was satisfied at 10:46, local time."

"Did Mr. Seradjfar pay it?"

"That information is confidential."

"What is his patient number?"

"That is also confidential."

I was pretty irritated and very suspicious, but at least I had one piece of information to go on. I thanked the avatar and pulled myself offline.

It was 11:35 when our home system chimed. "Yenner Seradjfar requests access."

“Let him in.”

“Hi,” I said as he walked in a few minutes later.

“I see they fixed the door,” he said. “I prefer entering your apartment this way.”

“Very funny.” I frowned.

He could tell I was not happy. “What’s wrong?”

“Did you pay your bill?” I asked.

“No, I thought you did.”

“No. I just went to the Mission webspace and it was paid.”

“By who?”

“It wouldn’t tell me.”

“Maybe my insurance?”

“Maybe, have you checked your mail?”

“Yeah, there wasn’t anything from them.”

“This keeps getting stranger,” I said.

He looked at the floor cleaner, which still hadn’t been moved. The broken arm was right where I left it.

“You’re going to try and find out who paid it, aren’t you?” He asked, still looking at our upside-down robot.

“Yes.”

“You haven’t started on the cleaningbot?”

“No.”

“Are you ready?”

I was finally ready, and I connected to it with my old pad and performed much the same analysis as I had last time. Yenner watched me, but didn’t ask any questions at first. I started narrating as I worked. After a few minutes I realized it helped me focus.

"The infection is similar to the previous one," I began. "This is a newer variety, though. I was wondering about that. It will attack anything that moves, not just pets."

I looked through the update log. As I expected it had no entries. "I can't see how it was infected, but once again the system footprint changed. In this case eleven days ago."

"The first time was on your birthday," Yenner said. "What was eleven days ago?"

I thought for a minute. *What is significant about the 9th of February?* I didn't come up with much. "It was the day after the 8th of February, which was six months after my birthday."

"Assuming it's not a coincidence, why the day after?"

"It's not a coincidence," I realized. "I think something was supposed to happen on the eighth, and when it didn't, they infected the cleaner again."

"You have no evidence for that."

"It's just a theory," I admitted. "But I'm beginning to wonder if the timing of the so-called terrorist attack was really a coincidence as well."

Yenner stopped watching my fingers fly over the controls of my pad and looked at me. "Don't you think that is a bit paranoid? Are you so important a target that your stalker would risk injury to tens of thousands of people?"

"My mom was injured, Yenner. She could have lost her foot"

"Rabiyya, not everything bad that happens is about you."

I stood up, threw my pad down and glared at Yenner. "You're not being attacked here. At best my mom and I are being harassed and it has something to do with who I am." I realized I was yelling. I stared at the floor and lowered my voice almost to a whisper. "You don't know how that makes me feel."

It made me feel sick, and I could feel the slightest amount of pressure in my chest. I sat back down and closed my eyes. I needed to clear my mind. Yenner put his arm around me. "I'm sorry. That didn't quite come out right," he said.

I sighed and looked back at my pad, which was face down on the rug. "I don't want to see the message," I said.

"Maybe there isn't a message this time," Yenner suggested.

"Oh, there is one, you can be sure of that. Why else go through all the trouble?"

He said nothing for several minutes as I continued staring at my pad as if it were to blame. *Why is this happening to me?* I asked myself for the thousandth time. *Why am I even worth the effort?*

"Let's get it over with," he said. "I'm here with you."

Yenner was right, and I picked up my pad and started scrolling through the code that was modified by the virus. A dozen different potential messages flew through my imagination, none of which I wanted to see. After about ten minutes, I found it.

YOU HAVE FAILED.

"I have failed WHAT?" I shouted at the indifferent pad. *"What do you want from me?"* I had promised myself I would not lose control. I would not cry. I didn't, but the pain in my chest burned. Yenner reached around and pulled me into his lap. *Like I'm a big baby* I realized.

"What do they want from me, Yenner? Why are they doing this to me? Why? *What do they want?"*

I repeated that question again, but Yenner didn't say anything. There was nothing he could say, he just continued to hold me and patiently waited for me to calm down.

Several minutes had passed when the home system chimed. I jumped. "You have a message," it announced.

Adrenaline flooded my body again. I sat up straight. "From whom?"

"Unknown."

I turned to look at Yenner. "What is the point of origin?" I asked.

"Unknown."

"Voice or text?"

"Text."

"Read it."

"The message says, 'Injury was not intended.'"

"When was it sent?" I asked.

"Unknown."

“When was it received?”

“The message was received 35 seconds ago.”

“Transfer the message to my pad,” I ordered.

“Unable to transfer,” it said. Then: “There are no messages to transfer.”

“*Save last message received!*” I yelled desperately. But I already knew it was hopeless. I also knew that any relay node wouldn't have a record of it either.

“There are no messages to save.”

“Read all messages received in the past five minutes.”

“No messages have been received in the specified time period,” it said stubbornly.

I sighed and slumped against Yenner.

“Well, that's that,” he said.

“Not necessarily. Just because the record of the message has been erased doesn't mean the message itself is gone. It could still be in memory, just not retrievable by the system.”

“Something else for you to work on.”

“I don't want to think about it,” I said bitterly.

I again transferred the contents of the robot's memory to my pad and locked it. I again ground the system chip to dust. And I asked Yenner to carry it to the building's recycle unit, which he did. I watched it get shredded and the parts sorted into bins of various materials. There won't be any robots in our house for a long time.

Yenner asked me if I wanted to spend the night with him and I said yes. He returned home in his SkyScooter (I didn't want to ride in it - I admit I'm afraid), and I took the subway to his apartment.

I don't know how I feel about him, but last night, I knew I wanted to be with him.

Sunday, 25 February 2046

Our front door, our only door, is good as new. I now keep the key for the manual release in my pack - just in case. And I bought a manual vacuum cleaner yesterday. When I got home we both looked at it and started laughing.

Mom gave me her best are-you-crazy look and asked, "you mean I have to *push* that thing around the house now?"

"It's very retro," I said. "You'll be the envy of the neighbors."

"The neighbors won't know, will they Rabiyya Patrick?"

I laughed. I knew she was kidding. "Since when do you care what anyone else thinks? Besides, I'll do it too."

So we have a robot-free household now.

Mom is walking around normally again, though she still has to be careful. The biosyn micro-sutures have started dissolving. Soon there will be no trace of the injury.

Everything else seems to be unraveling though. I haven't had any luck tracing the payment for Yenner's stay in the hospital yet. I can't find any trace of the mystery message delivered to our home system Wednesday, and the new pad has barely chewed through half of the 'Onion File' as I've started referring to it. I am seriously thinking about buying a mini-computer. I started thinking about the fun things I could use it for when I'm not decrypting mystery files, like reality modeling and nanotech simulations.

I stayed at Yenner's again last night, but he had to work today so I rode back home. This was only the second time I rode to Yenner's. I usually take the subway since he's not a bike person, but when I ride I get to really see the City.

I often wish I could go back in time and experience San Francisco as it used to be. I can mentally overlay my memories or images of how it was onto the current reality, yet that is only part of it. How different are the smells now? The sounds? Watching the movies made here before the war provides clues but some things are clearly inaccurate.

Mom says that San Francisco was much dirtier than it is now, especially in certain neighborhoods. And there were huge, elaborate murals that covered the sides of entire buildings, particularly in the Mission. I believe her, but it is very difficult to imagine. Now it is so sterile compared to the rest of the Bay Area.

It had been destroyed once before by the earthquake and fire of 1906, but the destruction 14 years ago was much more thorough.

My pad chirped as I was riding down Embarcadero. I pulled aside to take it out of my pack and look at it. *I should really get some chat-shades like Mark*. It was Katia. My heart skipped a beat.

I briefly thought about letting my pad take the call. *What does she want?* But I accepted it.

She wanted to meet me for lunch or dinner. I felt like I should have said no, but I didn't have a reason not to. I didn't want to tell her no anyway, I just felt like I should. *I haven't done anything and I feel guilty already.*

I didn't ask her about Pete. *Are they still dating?* She didn't say anything about Pete. *I don't want him to come.*

At first I thought about asking if Yenner could join us, but then I realized I didn't want him to. I haven't really talked to Katia in ... four years? It's been a long time. It will be awkward enough without a third party.

We are having lunch next Sunday.

Friday, 2 March 2046

I finally managed to trace the payment for Yenner's medical expenses to Toronto. It turned out that all I needed was the payment date/time and his patient number, which he gave me. As far as I can tell, that was the point of origin. The payer was ALF Enterprises, whoever they are. I was not able to find any other record of its existence, which did not surprise me.

So, he has some mysterious benefactor. I wonder if it is his wealthy friend from Texas, but that would mean he is somehow monitoring him - or us. I haven't told Yenner of the payment or my guess yet.

The pad continues to peel layers off the Onion File. It should be done in another week, but I've decided to buy a mini-computer tomorrow anyway. I still have two more terabyte-sized files to deal with and I'm not wasting any more time.

The mini-computer has a refrigeration system to keep the processing core cool. It generates a fair amount of heat even though it has an efficient core. I won't run it that often - at least not continuously like the new pad. It's around 100 times as powerful. The model I'm getting is Chinese too. They make the best computers.

I wish I could decode my personal life. It has gone from simple to complex in only a few months. Yenner tomorrow. Katia Sunday. I have very mixed feelings about this weekend. Some of it may be guilt. No, it is guilt.

Monday, 5 March 2046

I had sex with Katia yesterday. This is why I was feeling guilty before meeting her. I knew I wanted to do it. I had fantasized about it for so long that once I had the opportunity, I just let it happen. Like inertia.

Now I keep thinking it was a mistake.

We ate lunch at the Peruvian restaurant in the Ferry building and spent most of the time talking about college and high school. Then she asked the question I had been asking myself for the past four years: why didn't we date when we had the chance?

"I don't know," I responded. "I was young and afraid. I wasn't ready."

"I wanted you to ask me out. I was pretty sure you liked me."

"Liked you? Katia..." I nodded my head. I felt my eyebrows climbing my forehead. "I liked you."

"You didn't date anyone."

"No."

"And now?" She asked.

And now. "I am ... seeing ... someone."

Did she look disappointed? "You are? What's her name?"

I hesitated. "It's not ... a ... her. I've been seeing a man. For the past few months, I guess. His name is Yenner."

"A man?" Now she looked very surprised. "I'm confused."

"Not as confused as I am."

That made her laugh. "You must like him," she said.

"I must," I agreed.

"Is it serious?"

"I don't know. I mean, I don't know how I feel. He said he loves me."

"How can he not? You're so handsome and sweet."

Sweet? I know people think I'm good looking, but I never thought of myself as sweet.

"I am not sweet."

"You are, you just don't know it. I watched you in class. You are confident, but shy and uncertain at the same time. I think it's cute."

“Cute is sweet?”

I reached out and took her hand. To me, it seemed soft and fragile. I could feel myself become aroused. My skin flushed.

“Why are you here, Katia? Where is Pete?”

She had looked down and was staring at our hands. “He had to go back Honolulu suddenly. I don't know when he'll be back. It's been over a month.” She paused for a few seconds. “I don't know if he will be back.”

“So you called me?”

“It was so nice to see you at that party. I thought ...”

I simply asked her. “Do you want to come over?”

It was my lust speaking. My curiosity too. I didn't expect to have sex with her, but I wanted to.

She said yes.

We did have sex. I wonder now if I was any good. In retrospect, I wonder if I seemed awkward to her. She seemed to enjoy it too, but I felt very clumsy at times.

It was a very different experience than Yenner. Yenner is strong and hyper-masculine. Katia is ... not. While we were together I felt like I was living out my high school fantasy. I felt like my mind had left my body. I didn't want to stop. She finally had to ask me to.

She could see the disappointment on my face. “Sorry,” she said.

“You don't have to be sorry, let's just lie next to each other for a while.” I held her. Being with her was more wonderful even than in my fantasies, and now that I know what it is like, a sensation beyond my wildest dreams, I just want to do it again.

I haven't stopped thinking about it. I can't stop thinking about it.

I like her soft smile and beautiful brown eyes. I like her small, firm breasts. The smell of her hair, the softness of her flawless skin.

I am arousing myself again.

There is this part of me that is aware that my interest in her is mostly physical. It always has been, and because I never let myself get to know her it is the only way I can be attracted to her. She is nice and polite and a bit aggressive, but I like that too.

To my horror, mom was home again as we walked out. It was late. The sun was already down.

“Hi,” Mom said. She was on the sofa reading a paper book. Her face betrayed no emotion, but I was an embarrassed wreck.

“Mom, this is Katia Nasr.”

Then her eyes grew wide with surprise. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Katia. I’m Amy O’Brien. Rabiyya told me about you years ago.”

“I’m going to walk her to the BART station,” I said.

We left after a short conversation. As the door slid shut behind us, Katia said “she’s beautiful.”

“Thanks,” I said simply.

“Why is her last name different than yours?”

“It’s a long story.”

“She doesn’t look like an O’Brien.”

“She’s half-Irish and half-Ethiopian.”

“But you’re half-Arab.”

“Yeah. My Abuyah, remember?” I said little harshly.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

I was not okay. I was more confused than ever, and as much as I wanted to see Katia again I knew I couldn’t.

“I had the most amazing time with you, Katia,” was what I said instead.

“But?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yenner? Pete?”

“It’s more than that.”

“Let’s talk in a few days,” she suggested.

That was a good idea. I kissed her good bye. I pulled her into my arms and held her. I didn't want to let go, yet I couldn't wait to get away.

As I walked home, I wondered what kind of grilling I was going to get from Mom, yet it wasn't so bad.

"Do you remember that talk we had several years ago?" She asked. She was still sitting on the sofa.

"About sex."

"Yes."

"That it is not to be taken lightly," I said.

"And?"

Mom is rather old fashioned when it comes to sex. It is her belief that only committed couples should do it. That even non-believers can appreciate the wisdom of the admonitions against casual sex by most religions. She had warned me that it often leads to pain, distress and disease, not to mention inconvenient pregnancies. It can ruin relationships, destroy families, destroy lives. All of this I reiterated to her.

"Did you think of any of this when you were with her?" She asked. Her tone was not angry or condescending, but I could tell she was concerned.

"No. It just seems so old-fashioned." I know she is right, it can lead to unfortunate and unintended consequences. But does it always? Does that matter?

"Do you think I would believe something simply because it was traditional?"

"Of course not."

"Well, it may be old-fashioned," she began. "And I know some traditions are nonsense, but some have value. I am not going to tell you how to live your life, but just tell me that you will think about this."

I nodded my head. "Okay."

"And tell me you used protection."

Red faced, I told her. Mark had brought me some condoms and foam some time ago. In fact, yesterday was the first time I'd looked at them. I expected her to continue talking, but instead she just smiled, kissed me and went to her room, leaving me to my own torment.

I didn't sleep well last night, and it was difficult to concentrate in class today. I want to talk to someone about this, but I don't know who. Mark? Jamal? Mom? Yenner? You would be furious with me, I know.

Thursday, 15 March 2046

It's been 10 days. I've talked to Yenner. He's not happy. I've talked to Katia. She's not happy. The pad has finished decrypting one of the files, though the final result was exactly what I was afraid of - millions of messages saying "You will fail" in hundreds of different languages. I'm not happy. I bought the mini-computer I've been looking at, but I haven't set it up yet. Luckily it doesn't have feelings. I'm sure it wouldn't be happy either.

You certainly would not be.

Yenner. *Haven't you figured it out yet, Mr. Genius?* he had said to me a few weeks ago. *I would do anything for you.*

Then I went and had sex with Katia.

I saw him last Saturday when I went to his apartment. He was sitting on his couch in his green shorts - and nothing else as usual. He looked so good, I wanted to touch and kiss him, but I stopped a meter or so away. I was slammed with guilt.

"Hi," was all I said.

"Hello," he replied. Then he got a puzzled look on his face. "What's wrong?"

I didn't say anything, but just stood there feeling vaguely nauseous.

"Rabiyya?"

"Yenner," I finally began. "I've done something wrong." I had to sit down on the floor.

"What is it?" a worried look appeared on his face. "Tell me."

"It's hard. Oh, God, I'm so sorry." I felt sick.

He came over and put his arms around me, pulling me to him, face to face. I had planned to tell him about Katia when I got there, but upon seeing him, and realizing that I did have feelings for him of some kind, the guilt was multiplied a hundred fold and I was suddenly horrified by my actions.

"Hey, my little man, what are you sorry for?"

"I betrayed you," I whispered. "I'm so confused, Yenner."

"I don't understand. You betrayed me how?"

"I had sex."

"You had sex? With who? How did you meet him?" Incredibly, he sounded more surprised and curious than upset.

"Not a him. With a woman." I pulled back and met his eyes. His face was nearly expressionless.

"Oh," was all he said.

"You're not upset?" I asked.

He said nothing for a minute. "No ... I will admit to being hurt, but I'm not upset. You're only 21. You're still growing up, and I know we've never talked about our relationship, friendship, whatever you want to call it."

You're only 21.

"You said you loved me."

"I do love you," he said. He tossed my taqiyah aside and ran his fingers through my hair. "I do love you..." He began kissing my cheeks and I could feel myself growing. "I know you are conflicted. I wish I could take your pain and confusion away." His lips ran down the side of my neck and then he gently forced me onto my back. "You do not owe me anything, I just want you to know how I feel, nothing more."

For thirty minutes or so, he was the only thing in the universe. When I became aware of my surroundings again I realized I was lying on top of him. He was staring at the ceiling. "Are you going to see her again?" he asked.

"I can't," I whispered.

"Do you want to see her again?"

I paused for a moment, then - "Yes."

He kissed the top of my head. "I do not envy you, Rabiyya Patrick."

I am not sure of what he meant by "see her again". Did he mean simply to visit with her or to have sex? Either way, my answer is still "yes". If I lived in a vacuum, I would love to have sex with her again. But I don't. She has feelings. I have feelings.

Yenner has feelings.

Dad was very lucky that he had you. You had complete respect for his feelings and your relationship. I should be able to provide that to someone.

Sunday, 18 March 2046

I didn't see Yenner this weekend. He was out of town again. I am starting to wonder where he goes, however. Back when I didn't have a clear idea of what he did, it was easy to think *oh, he's just on a business trip*. But now that I know he has a more-or-less blue collar job it doesn't seem right. Like, he goes to power meetings for fuel cell station maintenance workers?

Mark rode over and we hung out here all day. I showed him my new mini-computer and loaded a few VR experiences on it. He did *African Genocide* for almost an hour. I watched him while tinkering with the server settings. He was sweating after 15 minutes. After he had been shaking for a while he pulled off the headset.

"Harsh, bud. And the seniors just nimped."

The horrors people can pretend don't exist... "You might have picked something less traumatic," I said.

"Intensity check," he explained.

"I guess it passed," I responded, referring to his physiological response.

He said the minicomp was just as realistic as the V-Rex centers. I really need to put it to work on the other files, however I told him about the messages I've received and the most recent one that I called the Onion File.

"So it says 'you will fail' many ways till end of days?" he asked.

I gave him a funny look. *Does he think he's a rip-rap artist now?* "Yeah," I answered.

"Lemme see."

I didn't see any point, but he wanted to see it so we put the headsets back on. I accessed the new pad and transferred the files to the minicomp. Suddenly we were floating next to each other right above a featureless silver geometric plane. I waved my hand and the concatenated results of the decryption appeared to spread across the "sky" in all directions, horizon to horizon. The words appeared just large enough to be legible.

"This is a tiny fraction of the results. There's a terabyte of data here. I don't know why someone would do this."

“Mind jack,” he said. “They messin’ with ya.”

“You think?”

“You worked it further?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe this is a code too,” he said.

I turned and looked at his avatar, suddenly wishing that my own avatar could convey complete astonishment. Not only was that the first perfectly formed sentence I had heard come out of his mouth in months, it was a perfectly logical possibility that I hadn't considered. *I'm not thinking clearly about any of this. My expectations keep getting in the way.*

Immediately my mind started spinning out different ways to approach this new puzzle. I killed the sim and pulled off my headset.

“Thanks,” I told him. “I hadn't thought of that.”

He gave me his best smug-thug look and disappeared into my bathroom. When he came out, he was holding the packaging from the condoms he had given me. I felt my face redden.

“Been busy?” he asked. “Pack empty.”

I didn't respond right away. I just looked at him.

“You banged a girl,” he said with some amazement. A big grin formed on his face and he walked over to me.

I looked down.

“*Waaa!* Proud of you! Yeah!” He laughed and slapped me on the back as if I had saved the world. “Who was she?”

I didn't answer.

“C'mon bud,” he pleaded.

You don't need to know, I thought at the time. “Katia Nasr.”

“Katia ... from the party.”

“Yeah.”

“You boned just lookin’ at her.”

“You noticed that?” I asked, surprised.

“Kelley.”

“Ah.”

“You don’t look happy,” he observed.

“No.”

“Not good?”

“No, it was amazing. At least to me. I had no idea...”

“But?”

“I don’t know how I feel about Yenner. And her boyfriend just came back from Hawaii.”

“Chizz. Hook up with one chick and stick, I say.”

I sighed. “I didn’t plan everything to happen this way, Mark.”

“How she feel?”

“Like me. Confused.”

I again find myself envious of the simplicity of Mark’s life. It seems like if something isn’t already a mess, I’ll find a way to make it so.

Friday, 23 March 2046

Mark was right, the millions of YOU WILL FAIL files ended up being yet another level of encryption. This time it resolved into 48 ridiculously huge hexadecimal equations. I spent all week solving them but they’ve only left me with yet another mystery. The first equation, I call it the first since it resolved from the beginning of the Onion File, solved to 0. The next, 6. The next, 2. The next, 7...

Concatenated together, they create this string:

062706460627062f062706a7062f06280627062a06310643

An entire terabyte of data has reduced to almost nothing.

I am certain I have twelve groups of four here, each beginning with a zero and six as follows.

0627

0646

0627

062f

0627

06a7

062f

0628

0627

062a

0631

0643

A chill just ran down my spine after listing them as such. I know I'm getting close, and it is beginning to scare me. I know it is another message but I can't take it any further right now.

I think I know what these groups represent, but I want Yenner to be here when I test that idea.

I don't want to be alone.

Saturday, 24 March 2046

I just asked Yenner to come over.

"I think I'm about to solve the puzzle of the Onion File," I told him.

"You're serious."

"Yes. I'd like you to be here."

"I'm on my way."

Just like that, and he was on his way. Of course, I would do the same thing if he had been similarly engrossed with something. These cryptic messages have dominated my life for months now.

Yesterday I stopped by the masjid to see Jamal. It had been weeks. I told him about everything that had happened with my mom and the floor cleaner. The YOU HAVE FAILED message. The mystery text message that appeared and vanished without a trace telling me that "injury was not intended."

I did not say anything about Yenner or Katia. I'm not ready to reveal to my Abuyah's former Imam that not only have I had sex, but I have had sex with a man and a woman. Jamal is fairly progressive, his best friend was a gay Muslim, but I know he would not approve of my new sex life.

I don't even approve of it, yet I still want both of them. *Disibline*, you would say to me, mispronouncing the 'p' in that Arab way of yours.

Jamal had an interesting observation. "There is always the possibility that the senders of the messages do not have a malicious intent," he said.

"How can you say that?" I asked. "They injured my mom!"

"You yourself said that they claimed it was an accident. You know how complex systems are these days, they could be telling the truth."

"But why go through all of this effort and risk to us? What are they trying to do?"

"Get your attention?"

"Well, they've got it!" I nearly yelled.

"Keep your interest?"

They've done that too.

"The abilities of this stalker of yours are very sophisticated. If he truly intended you harm, you would not be here. He could have erased your assets. Your identity. Your life. You know that."

I did know that. I'd been thinking the same thing for the past few weeks, but it still brought me back to "why?"

And how did Jamal come to that conclusion so rapidly?

"Why do you say 'he'?"

He waved his hand dismissively. "He, she, they. It does not matter."

"I'm very close to solving one of their puzzles, but I stopped."

"You are afraid."

"Yes."

"Did Hassan ever tell you the story of the Roman King Decius?" He asked.

“No.”

Jamal proceeded to tell me. A group of seven men in the city of Ephesus near the western coast of Turkey converted to the religion taught by the Prophet Isa, who Christians call Jesus. It was around the year 250. These men were close to Allah because of their fearless preaching and willingness to give up everything in order to follow the correct path. The king believed them a threat and tried to capture them, but they hid in a cave and begged Allah to save them. Allah made them sleep for 200 years, and when they woke, the region had changed and the new king was a believer. When their identities became known, they were celebrated and the new king, Theodosus, sought their blessings.

By the time he finished I was crawling with impatience, but was careful not to let it show. “And of course the moral is to have faith.” I said.

“Close. Those that put their entire trust in Allah will be aided by Him in unknown ways.”

I didn't say anything for a while. The horrors of human history swirled in my head. “Jamal, there is something I should tell you.”

“You don't have to,” he responded.

“This taqiyah I wear. It is not for God. It is not for Islam. It is for my Abuyah.”

“You don't have to tell me,” he repeated.

“I don't...”

“Stop,” he interrupted. “Please.” A tear ran down his cheek. For him? For my Abuyah?

I did stop, but not in my mind. *I don't believe.*

“Let me tell *you* something,” he said with an unusual intensity. “You are a miracle of Allah, Rabiyya. And someday you will see that.”

His faith is so absolute. I actually find myself envying that right now.

Yenner just arrived. Gotta go.

Monday, 26 March 2046

On Saturday I solved it. I showed Yenner the final results from the Onion File on the wall panel:

0627 0646 0627 062f 0627 06a7 062f 0628 0627 062a 0631 0643

“What does it mean?” He asked.

We were in my bedroom. Noise from the city passed softly through the window. The hum of the minicomp was barely audible. I had finally set it up to digest the two remaining files, at least one of which I hoped really was an e-mail archive from NextGene.

“I think they are Unicode values,” I said.

“What are the letters?”

“It’s a base-16 system. Hexadecimal. I’ll explain later.”

He looked at me. “Are you okay?”

“I’m a little dopey. I took two tranquilizers.”

“You need to lay off the meds.”

“Don’t tell me what I need,” I barked. “I didn’t ask you to come over to tell me what I need!” I immediately regretted it.

“Okay, sorry,” he said a bit angrily.

I sighed. “No. I’m sorry, Yenner.”

“Okay. Let’s just do it.”

I took a deep breath. “Okay.” I looked at the panel and tried to steel myself. “System command,” I said.

“Ready,” the minicomp responded. My heart felt like it was going to pound its way out of my chest.

“Render values as Unicode. Identify domain.”

“Values are in the Unicode Arabic domain,” it said.

کرتابدفادانا

I wasn’t expecting Arabic.

“What does it say?” Yenner asked immediately.

"I don't know," I said.

"What do you mean you don't know? Your Arab father didn't teach you his native alphabet?"

"I don't remember," I said. *But I did remember...*

I was sitting on your lap in the downstairs study. I could smell the wooden furniture, dust, dad's collection of hardback books. An old-fashioned Arabic keyboard was in front of me. We were looking at an antique OLED screen.

"I'm going to start teaching you the Arabic alphabet," you said. "It is important that you pay attention."

"Yes, Abuyah."

"There are 28 letters, and several other characters that are not really letters, but are just as important. We will start with the letters first."

"Yes, Abuyah," I repeated. "Is 'A' first?"

"In a way, it is called 'alif'. It is the first letter in al-Awwal, the First, one of the 99 names of Allah."

"Like in 'ana'?"

"Exactly! And see, alif can have two different shapes, depending on where in the word it appears."

The screen changed.

"This is 'ba", as in al-Baatin, the Inward, another of the names of Allah."

... I did remember.

Someone was holding me. My head felt fuzzy. "Abuyah?" I asked.

"It's Yenner." The voice was familiar. I opened my eyes. You were gone and the pain of your absence struck me harder than it has in years.

Yenner. "What's going on?" I asked.

"You had some kind of seizure. You really scared me."

"A seizure?" I pulled away from him and looked around the room. *Home*. "What happened?"

“You said you didn't remember the Arabic alphabet, then your eyes rolled back in your head and you fell backwards.”

The Arabic alphabet? I looked at the wall panel. *Arabic is read right to left.* “I don't know the words though. It says something like ‘kirtaab dafaadana’.”

“You remember the letters now?”

“Yeah. It was weird. I had this powerful memory of Abuyah teaching me the letters and the 99 names of God.” *It was so real. I could still smell you. And now your absence is painful again, even after all this time.*

I stared at the panel. “Something's not right.” I focused on the three letters at left. *alif, noon, alif*

“Ana,” I said.

“What?”

“Ana. It means ‘I’.” I said. “System command.”

“Ready.”

“Reverse order of Arabic characters.”

انادافدباترك

“Insert a space between the third and fourth characters from the right.”

“You figure it out?”

“A little. It says ‘I ... something’.”

Ana daafdbaatrk?

“Sound it out,” Jenner suggested.

“Ana daafidabaatrik.”

My hands began shaking. *This isn't possible,* I remember thinking. “System command!”

“Ready.”

“Insert a space between the first ‘daal’ and second ‘ba’.”

“You’ve figured it out,” Yenner said.

“Oh my God.” I could hear my heart pounding. My throat began to constrict. “Who would do this to me?” I choked out.

“Tell me.” Yenner pleaded. “Please tell me.”

But I couldn’t talk. I fought back the tears and failed. Emotions swirled through my head and the joy and new pain and sudden uncertainty that my father *might* still be alive drove reality far into the distance. After some time, I eventually remembered myself and became aware that Yenner was holding me again. I wiped my face and stared at the panel. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

انا دافد باتريك

“Can you tell me now?” Yenner begged.

“Arabic has no ‘pee’ or ‘vee’ sound,” I explained. I was strangely calm. Resigned? “In standard Arabic they are sometimes transliterated as a ‘bee’ or ‘ef’ sound and represented as ‘ba’ or ‘fa’.”

“Okay? So?”

“Those characters. They say ‘ana daafid baatrik’.”

He put two and two together in his head. “I David Patrick.”

“Yes.” I said. I stared at the words as if in a trance. “It says ‘I am David Patrick’.”

“Oh my God,” he agreed.

Sunday, 1 April 2046

The minicomputer has completed decrypting the last two files. Neither was an “Onion” like the first one, nor were they e-mail logs. The second resolved to a large set of differential equations which were easy enough for me to graph. The last is another string of Unicode values, also from the Arabic domain.

I haven't taken them further. Once again, I want Yenner to be here when I do. Partially for the support, but also to prove to him that I can face whatever they say without crying.

He called me a crybaby last week.

On Friday we were having a conversation about the last message. What it might mean, why it might have been delivered in such an oblique manner, what I should do about it.

"My search agent was still active when last I checked," I said.

"When was that?" Yenner asked. He was sitting at the small table next to the door to his kitchenette. His camera was positioned so that I could see his face and the top of his chest and mountainous traps. *Swirling brown hair*. I imagined that his scent was being transmitted too...

"Around six weeks ago?" I guessed.

"Anything useful?"

"Possibly. Certainly a lot of follow up on. But I want to finish with these files first."

"Are they done?" He asked.

"Yes."

"But you haven't looked at them."

"Not really."

He didn't say anything, but he looked frustrated.

"What?" I asked.

"You're just ... just"

"Just what?" I asked crossly.

"A little too emotionally fragile."

I scowled at him. "You mean I cry too much."

"It might be more accurate to say that you cry too easily."

"I've been through a lot!"

“We’ve both been through a lot. Most of us in this country have been through a lot. Pain and suffering are not unique to you, you know.”

“You don’t understand.”

I could see him sigh. His great chest rose and fell. I wanted to kill the connection and be rid of him. I didn’t.

“No, *you* don’t understand. You’re 21 years old, Rabiyya. Accept what you are. I know you can do this. Accept the pain in your past. It will make you stronger. I speak from experience.” He paused. “It’s time to be a man.”

“That’s just macho Texas bullshit.”

“Is it?” He asked. Then both of us were silent for awhile. “I should get going. I want you to think about this. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Can I see you this weekend?” I asked. I was anxious to be with him suddenly.

“I don’t think so. I have a lot of homework to catch up on.”

“Fine, talk to you later.” I killed the connection before he could respond.

I know it was an immature response. Jenner thinks I need to grow up. He’s probably right.

Friday, 6 April 2046

Mark and I hung out here most of the afternoon. We played VR games on the minicomp.

The first time I saw Mark he was in the student lounge at the UC reading *A Comedy of Errors*. I was sitting across from him. I don’t remember what I was reading, if anything at all. I used to go down there just to take naps between classes. Sometimes I would even sleep through them.

I thought of him as “the fat black guy”. For several weeks I would see him and think, there’s the Fat Black Guy. Each week he would be reading a different Shakespearean play. His hair changed weekly too. Then one day he said hello. In his own way.

“Yo, Araboy.”

I looked up. “Me?”

“Yeah, any other Arabs around?” He asked.

I did look around. There weren't. "How do you know I'm Arab?"

"Skin, face, funny white hat." He gave me his smug-thug look, but somehow I knew even then it was just a look.

"That's pretty good. Not many people can tell. But I'm actually half Arab."

"Not as clue-free as I look. Or sound. Check?"

"Check," I said. It was the first time I'd heard someone use 'check' in that manner in years. It was also my first introduction to Mark's peculiar speech pattern. I'm pretty sure he can speak standard English, he is a college student after all, but I've never heard him. And I've never asked him about it.

It was incongruous. He read Shakespeare (I later found out it was for a class) and spoke like a gang-member wannabe (I later found out he actually had run with a gang in high school).

He held out his hand. "Mark."

I tugged his back. "Rabiyya," I said.

"Rabiyya? That Arab?"

"Yeah, it means Spring."

"Sounds like girl name."

"No, it's a boy's name." I repeated it the way you pronounced it. The beginning 'raa' as a flap, the ending 'ain' by constricting my throat.

"If you say so," he said.

I continued to see him in the UC lounge as the semester progressed and we usually just nodded. Then one afternoon someone pinged him while he was surfing on his pad. The lounge was usually very quiet and that day was no exception. I could follow his entire conversation. I learned that:

- * His name was Mark Ewansiha.
- * He lived with his parents in Oakland.
- * He had a girlfriend named Kelley that lived in Fremont.
- * She was going to a different school.

* He was very much in love.

* I was jealous.

That day, I stood up and left the UC. I couldn't listen anymore. I spun through the same cycle I had been through a hundred times before and would go through a hundred times again. I'd get angry. I'd feel inferior to everyone else. I'd become irritated with myself.

At the time, I had never dated anyone. There had been the one time that I kissed Katia, but I had blown that opportunity by fleeing afterward. No, that's not true. I was just afraid. I was afraid of dating her - dating anyone. No, that's not right either. I was afraid of myself. I never dated anyone because I was afraid of myself. God knows I had many opportunities.

When I started college, everyone was very friendly to me. Half of my classmates wanted to date me, or at least befriend me despite my younger age. They thought I was attractive. But I wasn't proficient at making small talk. Socializing was tedious. After turning everyone down I developed a reputation. No dates, no parties, few friends.

The taqiyah helped. I let people think that I was just a conservative Muslim boy rather than a snob, or worse - the truth - I was a nano-geek with unusual self-esteem issues.

I stopped hanging out at the UC, but I ran into Mark again in the bike garage about a month later. He called me Araboy again.

"Please don't call me that," I said.

"Rabiyya."

"Good memory."

"You always ride?" He asked me.

"Usually. Sometimes I walk."

We started talking bikes and where we had and had not ridden. He was new to riding and was trying to lose weight. I suggested we start riding together on weekends and within weeks had a new best friend.

Mark is uncomplicated, dependable, direct yet respectful. Well, he sometimes makes an effort to appear disrespectful, but I can tell that in reality, this is just an act. He has a way of looking at the world that I'm not used to. He puts a pragmatic spin on things I've done over and over for years. And he didn't expect anything unusual from me. He was just what I needed.

My friendship with him gave me the confidence to join the campus soccer club. It wasn't a university team, but the Bay Area has a network of teams that compete for fun. The other members were hesitant at first because of my rep, but then they discovered that I was *good*.

It's funny. I haven't thought about this for so long. I used to be bitter about not having a girlfriend despite the fact that it was essentially by choice, and then when I began dating I didn't even realize it. I just thought of Yenner as a friend that I had sex with. But then he's not a girl either.

Today's lesson: jealousy is self-inflicted.

Monday, 9 April 2046

Yenner came over last night and sat with me while I translated the final results from the other files. The results were disappointing and frustrating, and now I need to go back online and find more information.

The Unicode file was another string of Arabic characters that hung on the screen like offensive graffiti:

الحرية

"What does it say?" Yenner asked.

"I'm not sure ... al-hurriyah, I think. It means 'freedom'."

"Al-Hurriyah? Like the organization that used to be Al-Qaeda?"

"I think so. They don't really have anything in common though," I said. "Al-Qaeda was destroyed years ago."

"The American government still considers Al-Hurriyah a terrorist organization."

"It's trying to end the American occupation!" I said - a little too loudly. "The Americans call everyone that criticizes them terrorists!"

"Okay - I know, you don't have to preach to the choir here. I'm just saying..."

"Sorry. I know you know."

“Do you think your dad is a member?” Yenner asked. “Are they trying to contact you? Recruit you?”

“I can think of easier ways to ask.”

“Let's look at the last file,” he suggested.

I pulled up those results. There were several equations that described curves. Even graphed they were less friendly than the Arabic characters.

“I don't know where to start with these,” I said.

“Maybe you have to find the clue.”

“This isn't a game.”

Yenner turned to me and very seriously said, “are you certain of that?”

“No....” I admitted. I stared at the graphs. I had an idea. “System command,” I said.

“Ready.”

“Remove space between graphs. Render at the same scale.”

The curves seemed to form letters. If I interpreted them creatively ...

xxthefirsteluwherethelasteluwwhen

“The first tell you where, the last tell you when,” I interpreted.

“The first and last what?” Yenner asked.

“Maybe the x's aren't x's.”

“System command. Overlay first two graphs. What is the intersection?”

“Intersection is x equals -122.406795 y equals 37.787682.”

“Map them as longitude and latitude,” I told the minicomp.



“Wow,” Yenner said. “That answers that.”

“Union Square,” I said, stating the obvious.

My heart was pounding. I was trembling with excitement and fear. When I first saw this map, I was hoping against hope that I might be about to meet my own father right here in San Francisco. I had his name, the name of a powerful world-wide organization that certainly had the resources to pull off this ... game, as Yenner thinks of it, and I had a location. At that instant, I felt relief, despair, panic, hope, anxiety...

Am I too late? Is it an invitation? Is it a warning?

“Now I just need the ‘when’,” I said to myself. I told the minicomputer to overlay the next two graphs. Both curves seemed to intersect the y-axis at the same point.

“What is the intersection of these two graphs?”

“Intersection is x equals zero and y equals 7854.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Yenner asked.

“Please clarify question,” the minicomputer said.

“He’s not talking to you,” I told the machine. Then to Yenner, “Or were you?”

He chuckled. “Mostly to you. I think. Is there a difference?”

“I have feelings,” I said dryly.

“That much is certain!” he said theatrically. “I’m sure you’ll figure this out, but right now you should probably concentrate on more important things.”

“Like what?”

“Your project?”

He was right, and I did start working on my homework, but concentrating on it was a different matter. A few things continue to bother me:

We are still assuming the Al-Hurriyah message referred to the controversial organization rather some other group or simply the word "Freedom", which may have a more subtle meaning.

I still don't know the significance of 7854. July 8, 2054? 7 August 2054? Either way, it's too far in the future. It must mean something else.

Saturday, 14 April 2046

Before taking the subway to Yenner's I hung around in a news space and watched a story about our shrinking ice caps. The Arctic cap vanishes completely during the summer now, but since it was floating anyway it hasn't had a direct effect on sea level. Its melting, however, reduces the amount of sunlight and heat that is reflected back into space. This creates the feedback loop that somehow took everyone by surprise four or five decades ago.

A small increase in air temperature because of the buildup of carbon dioxide triggered some melting, which allowed the ocean to absorb more heat, which triggered more melting...

The Greenland ice cap has been experiencing accelerating melting for 50 years and there are huge rivers of melt-water pouring into the sea. Some scientists expect the thermohaline circulation in the Atlantic to collapse by the end of the century. There is already evidence that it has slowed.

The glaciers of Kilimanjaro have been gone for decades. The Alps, the Andes, Irian Jaya - gone. Even the glaciers of the Himalayas, source of the Ganges and other life-bringing rivers in south Asia are mostly gone.

A third of the increase in sea level in the past few decades is from Antarctic melting. The ice shelves melted faster than anyone had predicted in the last century, and much of the peninsula is now covered with grass.

Many low-lying countries and island nations have attempted to sue America for refusing to control greenhouse gas emissions and contributing to global warming. But it is no longer the largest greenhouse gas producer - China claimed that distinction decades ago. However the damage was done long before China and India became major contributors. India is in a permanent state of emergency because of the loss of the water reservoir of the Himalayan glaciers.

The average global temperature has risen over two degrees so far this century. The severe drought in the west and massive hurricanes have finally shocked America into action, but it is too late. Seawalls are being constructed to protect some cities, but New Orleans has been mostly abandoned.

Elsewhere on the globe, tens of millions of people are relocating to higher elevations. China has massive programs to build new, more sustainable cities further inland at the same time it is modifying certain districts of Beijing and Shanghai to accommodate higher sea level. Bangladesh is just trying to survive.

This is an interesting time to be alive. After thousands of years of stability, our climate is in a state of flux.

Tomorrow I go back online to check out some of the webspaces that my search agent found. I can't figure out the 7854 without more information, so I might as well look elsewhere.

Yenner is taking me to dinner at the Thai restaurant near his building that I like so much. I admit it. I'm addicted to curry.

Thai. Meanwhile, Bangkok is flooding.

Tuesday, 17 April 2046

About a week ago I stopped taking the mood stabilizers that my shrink prescribed for me. It hasn't been easy. My head has been fuzzy for the last several days and it even affects my hearing. Everything seems to ring and echo.

On Sunday I spent a considerable amount of time online via the unregistered pad and found out exactly what I didn't want to. After hundreds of attempts, ten of us were conceived at NextGene. Five were born. As of the last update of the database that I broke into (maintained by a biotech company in Petaluma), two had died.

Subjects 2, 3 and 7 were still alive as of mid-2040. Subject 2, a female, was born 24 August 2023, about a year before me. Subject 3, a male, was born 30 November 2023. Other than their genetic prints, I was unable to retrieve any additional information about them.

Subject 5 died of progeria at the age of 13. He tested negative for the condition as a fetus, which means he had a form that they could not test for. Or that the test simply failed. *Or that he developed it later.*

Subject 8, another male, committed suicide at the age of 15. No reason was listed, though he had a history of severe emotional problems.

I am Subject 7. The genetic print is identical to mine.

I picked the wrong time to stop those meds - my stomach is in knots - I can't sleep again - but I have not cried. I have not told Yenner or Mom. I think my next step is to see if I can find more information about subjects 2 and 3.

It may as well be embossed on my forehead: Subject 7. I'm surprised I don't have an EUPC code tattooed on my ass.

Saturday, 21 April 2046

Today Yenner and I drove down to Half Moon Bay. I hadn't been since I was very young and I didn't recognize anything. I'm not sure what I was expecting. I just remember that you and Dad took me there once.

Yenner and I went for a long walk on the beach, which has become very narrow in places. I told him what I had discovered about the NextGene experiments.

"So three of you are still alive?" he asked. He then quickly added, "Sorry, that didn't come out right."

"As far as I can tell. Myself, a woman that is in a psychiatric facility in Los Angeles - her name is Cara Kwong, and another man. I couldn't find any trace of him though."

"How do you know he's still alive?"

"I don't. I just couldn't find any evidence that he died. I have his genetic print, but I couldn't find a match anywhere. It's like he's been erased."

"What about the woman? Kwong. She's Chinese?"

"Yes," I said.

"Why is she in a mental hospital?"

"Hallucinations, delusions, emotional instability, self-mutilation." That was all I said. I left out the repeated suicide attempts, which I guessed were really pleas for help since she never succeeded.

Yenner grimaced, but said nothing.

I looked up at the sea gulls flying overhead. "I'm going to see her," I said.

"You're what?" His tone conveyed disbelief.

"I'm going to see her. I'm going to Los Angeles."

"Why would you do that? What do you hope to accomplish?"

"I have to talk to her Yenner. She's the only person I know that's ... like me."

He stopped walking. "She doesn't sound anything like you."

"Her SIQ is even higher than mine."

"What if they won't let you see her?"

It was a good question but I didn't respond except to say "I am going to see her." Then I asked, "are you coming with me or do I have to bring my mom?"

"I'll go." He lowered his voice and put his hand on my upper arm. "You know I will follow you anywhere."

I looked at him - at his brown hair that glowed in the sunlight - the sweat beading on his forehead - striking green eyes - permanent stubble on his cheeks.

"I love you. What else can I say?"

Once again I remained silent.

He looked away. "I read your poem," he said. I had e-mailed him a poem I wrote about myself after discovering my "subject 7" designation.

"I know it's not very good, but in my defense I didn't really spend any time on it. I was in pain and it just slipped out somehow."

"Well, just don't quit your day job," he said.

"I'm sorry I don't know how I feel, Yenner." I was referring to part of my poem:

I want not for friends, yet I am alone?

One is my lover, whom I do not love?

"But you think you love Katia?"

"Of course not. I don't know her that well."

"Is it the gay thing?"

"I don't know. You're not dealing with the best adjusted person here."

“You are stating the obvious again,” he said with a big smile.

I laughed.

“I still love you.”

“I know, Big Bear.”

“Big Bear?” He chuckled.

“Yeah - Big Bear. That is how I think of you now. You used to be Mr. Green Eyes.”

“I like Big Bear better. And it certainly fits.”

“Good,” I said.

He took my hand and we started walking again, letting the waves wash around our feet. There weren't many people on the narrow beach. Some kids ran by us chased by two barking dogs. The kids were laughing. I looked around.

“Where are their parents?” I wondered out loud.

“I don't know, maybe they are local. I just hope they have sunblock on.”

“Speaking of which, we don't. We should get back to the car.”

We turned around and Jenner removed his shirt for the walk back.

“Show off,” I said.

He grinned and shrugged his massive shoulders. I marveled at the carpet of thick glowing hair that covered him, at his enormous muscles. “How strong are you?”

“I've told you. Too strong.”

“It would be interesting to watch you exercise.”

“Oh, I don't get close to maxing out. The nice thing about the gene replacement is that I don't have to train that hard to maintain this. But I'd like you to come, that would be fun. We could see how strong you are.”

“I have no idea.”

“Then we'll find out.”

For a while we walked in silence, then I took off running. "Race ya back!" I taunted. Although I ran as fast as I could on the wet sand, as I expected it didn't take long for him to catch up. He paced me.

"You're pretty fast," he said with a smile on his face.

"Shut up."

"How long can you keep this pace?"

"Not much longer," I said. "I can't sprint forever, you know." I looked at him and he grinned again. He took off. How can he be so big and move so fast? I tried to get my legs to move faster, tried lengthening my stride, but I didn't pick up much speed, if any. I saw him reach the steps up to the parking lot and stop. I ran up a few seconds later.

"That was fun," he said between heavy breaths. "We should do that more often."

"And why would I do that to myself?"

"What do you mean?"

"You would always blow by me. What would be the point?"

"It's not supposed to be competitive, just fun. I don't exert myself like that enough anymore."

"Easy for you to say." I frowned and looked down. He put his finger under my chin and lifted up.

"Hey, how do you think I feel when you are working on the computer or doing your homework? You easily grasp concepts and see patterns that I never could, no matter how hard I tried. I've watched you think, Mr. Genius. It's supernatural."

"Don't say that, it's not helping."

He sighed. "You really are impossible sometimes."

"No, merely improbable."

Yenner pulled me to him and kissed me. I could feel the sweat on his body. His strength against my body. I began to feel dizzy.

"It's erect," he said.

"Yeah. You do that to me."

"I'm glad," he said, then put me on his shoulders and ran up the steps. We couldn't get home fast enough.

Sunday, 22 April 2046

This morning I figured out the 7854, but I had help in the form of another message from nowhere. I was still at Yenner's when his home system announced a message - for me.

"A message has been received for Rabiyya Patrick," it said. We both stared at the monitor, which was blank, in shock.

"Play it," Yenner finally said.

"Seven, nine, four, three," the system said. That was it.

"Who sent the message?" he asked.

"Unknown."

"What was the point of origin?"

"Unknown."

"Read message again."

The system hesitated. I knew it was gone already. "There are no messages to read."

We looked at each other and I rolled my eyes. "Here we go again," I said.

"They know you are here," Yenner said. He looked very uncomfortable. "They know you are here - *now*."

"I think it is safe to assume they know everything," I said. I am getting used to being stalked like this. It doesn't even make me feel panicked anymore.

"But it's just another number," Yenner said.

At that same moment a likely solution formed in my head. "Yes ... but it's a higher number," I said slowly.

"You just looked up," he said.

"I did?"

“You always do that when you calculate something in your head.”

“I do?”

“Yep,” he said. “I can tell you figured it out.”

I was pretty sure I had figured it out. “The numbers are the days elapsed since I was born,” I said, launching into the explanation without being asked. “If I’m right, the first one meant the 8th of February. Remember that it was the day after that when our floor cleaner was infected with the YOU HAVE FAILED message?”

“I think so.”

“I think we were supposed to meet these people at Stockton and Geary. And we didn’t show up.”

“We?” Yenner asked, surprised yet obviously pleased. *Oh, God, I am thinking of us as ‘we’.*

“And now they’ve given us - or me - a later date. The eighth of May.”

Yenner was beaming. “See? You did it. I would have never figured that out.”

I feel like an idiot for not figuring it out earlier, but once I had the second clue it became completely obvious.

I think next weekend I’d like to go down to LA to try and meet Cara. I want to go before I meet these people. I know Yenner will be in town. I wonder if I should ask Mom to go too. Or maybe not. I probably shouldn’t even tell her why we are going. She’s not going to like it.

Thursday, 26 April 2046

Katia called me yesterday afternoon and said that she had to talk to me in person *right then*. She was taking the train all the way from Davis.

“Is Pete coming?” I asked.

“No,” she said. She looked very upset. “I’m on my way to your place.”

“Okay,” was all I could say before she killed the connection. Many possible reasons ran through my mind before she arrived, but they were all guesses based on no information.

I will admit I thought about having sex with her again. I think about it often, but I didn't get the impression she had sex on her mind after I talked to her.

"I'm pregnant and it's yours," was the last thing I expected to hear.

The room turned white. I thought I was going to pass out. *Sex is not to be taken lightly.* I vaguely remember asking, "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I had it tested. It's not Pete's, and that means it's yours." Her tone wasn't accusatory, but rather desperate, anxious.

You have to abort it. I thought immediately. Not so much because I didn't want to deal with a child, not because I didn't want the responsibility a part of me even liked the idea of fathering a child with Katia. What scared me was the child itself.

I have long wondered if I could even reproduce. I know it isn't rational. And now I am having images of some genetically defective baby. I'm still not convinced that I am genetically healthy, especially in light of the fates of my fellow "subjects," and now I had made Katia pregnant?

How is it even possible? We took every precaution we could think of. She said she was taking an ovulation suppressant. How?!

I was wrong. There is a God, and he hates me.

"Does Pete know?" I asked.

"Not yet."

"What are you going to do?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know. Why are you asking me? I can't make that decision for you," I said. It was difficult to look at her. She looked so helpless. It was painful to see.

We just sat across from each other for a minute. I watched as she wrung her hands. I wondered if she was doing it consciously.

"There is something I have to tell you, Katia," I said finally. "Oh, God, and you're not even going to believe me. But if you are going to keep it, there is something you have to know about me."

She looked even more worried. "What? Is something wrong with you?"

"I don't know," I said. And then I told her the story. Incredibly, she believed me.

"I always knew there was something different about you," she said.

"So I'm afraid for the baby."

"You know he'll be tested for everything."

"He?"

"Just a guess."

"They can't test for everything, Katia. We'd still be gambling."

"So what do you want me to do?" She asked again.

"I can't tell you that."

"Please tell me that."

I thought for a few minutes. I couldn't have been thinking clearly at the time, but I still feel the same way now. That has to mean something. "If we can get every possible assurance about its health I think you should keep it."

She smiled. "Thank you. But now I'm scared."

"I'm not telling you to, that was just my feeling."

"No, I want to. For several reasons."

She stayed the night because it was too late to take the train back, but I did nothing but hold her as we talked the hours away. We didn't fall asleep until almost dawn. Suddenly our Thursday classes didn't seem so important.

I know that no matter how thoroughly they screen the fetus it will guarantee nothing. Subject 5 had died of a genetic disease that he had tested negative for.

We are gambling with an unborn child's future. Would you forgive me, Abuyah?

Saturday, 29 April 2046

I am hurtling toward Los Angeles in the PacLink Maglev. Yenner is with me. I didn't even tell Mom we were going. In case we get back late tonight I told her I would be staying at his place.

Right now we are in the San Joaquin Valley near I-5. The twin elevated tracks run parallel to the highway, in some cases right above it, for a long distance. Irrigated crops and orchards are interspersed with controlled-environment greenhouses and water reclamation plants and stretch in all directions as far as we can see. The central valley remains mostly agricultural and produces nearly all the food Pacifica consumes. Excess is sold mostly to Canada, although as their climate warms agriculture up there is changing too. The rest is sold to Mexico and overseas. More exotic foods are imported. Very little land or water is wasted raising animals. Animal meat is a rare luxury.

Aside from Yenner pointing out various things in the valley, we haven't spoken much. I continue to spin about Katia and the baby - our baby - growing inside of her. Now that the initial shock and excitement have worn off, I am worried about a thousand things...

How Pete will react. How Yenner will react. How Mom will react. For that matter, how Katia will react after it is born. If it is born.

What kind of arrangement will we have to raise it? If they form a domestic partnership or get married, would I let Pete adopt it? Would he want to? Will he even accept it?

How foolish it is to bring a child into this world - right now? What kind of future will it have? Will it even have a future? How much power will I have to protect it? Can I protect it?

What will it be like? Boy or girl? Will it be unusually smart? Will it be emotionally unstable? Will there be anything unusual about it?

There are so many unknowns.

We are passing in and out of tunnels as we go through an area that Yenner calls "the Grapevine". The air is clearing as we leave the thick orange smoke of a wildfire behind. I can see our location on the monitor in front of us. We are getting close.

I wonder what LA will be like in real life. The smells and sounds. The crush of people. I've seen it in pics and vids, but it will be something else to see it in person from the train. It will really be something else to walk around on one of its thousands of streets.

SoCal has a population of around 35 million. That huge number is made possible by the massive desalinization plants along the coast and water recycling facilities inland. Yenner said I will be able to see desalinization plants once we enter the LA basin.

The train just stopped in Santa Clarita. The next stop is in the San Fernando Valley, and though we get off in a city called Inglewood, the maglev extends to Tijuana. These cities are all just patches in the vast quilt of the SoCal megapolis that stretches from the Mexican border along the coast north to Santa Barbara. The refugee cities, which are now pretty much permanent, spread inland as far as Palm Desert. I looked at all of this online, but I can see the beginnings of it already. Endless buildings and streets and elevated rail.

We just passed under the San Gabriel mountains. To the left I can see the towers of downtown LA - a forest of sparkling skyscrapers. In the distance to the right, through the atmospheric haze and partially blocked by the many residential and office towers, I can see the enormous domes of the desalination plants. Although they are generally disliked, they are indispensable and dot the coast for hundreds of clicks.

SoCal is brown. The ground is brown. The mountains are brown. The dust-covered buildings that are never washed are brown. The use of water for non-arid landscaping is pretty much illegal. When the train slows I can see desert landscaping and rock gardens, but in general, everything is brown. I suddenly feel incredibly spoiled living where I do. Half of the people in my country live in a vast desert.

The train is stopping. We are in Inglewood. I am about to meet Cara.

Tuesday, 1 May 2046

Yenner had to sit in the waiting area while I went in. He linked into the web and was gone before I was even out of the room.

I had called the Inglewood Behavioral Health Center from home to inquire about the visiting rules. I told them I was an old childhood friend. I had discovered that we actually had both lived in San Francisco at the same time so if the hospital did its homework the story would hold up. I also claimed to have kept in touch with her sporadically.

Although I told them I wanted my visit to be a surprise, I hoped they wouldn't follow up with her. I don't think they did. At least if they did ask her about me she didn't let on.

They asked me to identify her on a monitor. She was reading a hardback book in a common area that contained several other patients. Even though I had only seen a few photographs of her, I recognized her immediately. My heart jumped into my throat. "That's Cara," I said as I pointed her out.

"Please remove your taqiyah before you go in," the woman at the desk asked. "It may upset some of them."

I looked at her with surprise. Few non-Arabs call it that. She winked at me.

She passed me to two men who escorted me down a long hall and through several doors into the large room I saw on the monitor. She was still reading the book with her back to the door when I walked in. A moment later she lifted her head and her shoulders became tense. She straightened her back and felt the back of her neck. I realized the back of my own neck was tingling. I resisted the urge to scratch it.

As the door slid shut she gasped and stood up, then turned and looked directly at me. Her eyes were wide. *She knows*, I remember thinking to myself at the time. It was about then that I noticed the smell of lavender in the room.

I could tell that my escorts were unsure of what to do. They were trying to decide if I was making her uncomfortable enough to remove me from the room. "Please give her a moment," I said.

She crouched behind the table but never took her eyes off me. We had probably been staring at each other for 30 seconds or so when one of the workers touched my shoulder. "You should probably leave, I'm sorry."

"No!" she half-screamed, half-croaked. For the first time I became aware of the others in the room. Half of them were staring at her in shock. The attendants were surprised as well. "Please let him stay," she said in a more normal tone of voice. Then she stood again and began moving cautiously toward me. I realized I was incredibly anxious.

"She spoke," one of the attendants mentioned to the other. I later found out it was the first time anyone had heard her speak in months.

Even from across the room I could see the scars on her face, but as she approached they became that much more apparent. Suddenly I was very angry at the people behind the experiments at NextGene. It was one thing to correct well-known and documented genetic defects, but it was something else entirely to perform enhancement tests on someone, and I now knew that was exactly what was done. My own fathers had forbidden it for me, but now I know that their wishes had not been respected.

She must have sensed my anger because she paused. It wasn't until I forced myself to relax that she began walking again. She stopped about a meter away.

"I know you," she said to me. "You are Rabiyya Patrick. I read about you." She reached up and touched my face. The tingling in my neck became so intense that I gasped. The scent of lavender grew stronger.

"How do you know who I am?"

"How do you know who I am?" she asked me back. I later realized the stupidity of my question. She obviously had been on her own fact finding mission at some point.

"The smell, the tingling ... pheromones? Touch?"

She nodded. "You smell lavender," she stated.

"Yes." I said. I almost felt hypnotized. My heartbeat seemed powerful but glacial. Time slowed to a crawl.

"I smell cinnamon," she said.

"I smell like cinnamon?"

"Just to me," she said. Her almond eyes were locked to mine. The scars on her face stood out in sharp contrast to her fine Asian features.

"You knew about this already?"

"Yes."

"How?" I asked.

She merely shook her head and looked away. The pheromone-induced trance seemed to evaporate.

"I wish I could talk to you in private," I said. "I have so many questions."

And this was most frustrating of all. The government or at least the facility must know that Cara was at minimum genetically altered, but I didn't want to reveal how, and certainly didn't want to reveal my own passive involvement.

She leaned forward and whispered in my ear. "I know why you are here, but you shouldn't worry." I am still not sure what she meant by that, but I didn't pursue it further because she apparently didn't feel at liberty to say.

"When you are better then maybe we can talk more," I suggested.

"I will never be better," she said bitterly. A spark of rage flashed across her face so rapidly that I am still wondering if I imagined it. "They made me like this!" She looked at me with a pained expression. It seized my heart.

"Do you know what it's like?" she asked under her breath. "To see everything so clearly while people around you stumble around without sight? Do you know how painful that is?"

"To know better and be powerless?"

"That's only the beginning."

"I'm not as intelligent as you are, but I feel like a freak sometimes."

She actually smiled. For a moment, I had an image of an innocent Asian girl. "You should spend some time with me," she said. "You would learn the real meaning of the word freak."

"I wish I could."

"I wish you could too. I'm so alone."

I looked around the room. She shook her head. "I can't talk to them, they don't understand me. And the doctors won't talk to me, because *they* don't understand me."

"My shrink is pretty smart," I said. "But I usually know the angle he's going to take before he does."

She nodded her head sadly. "The things I've told them. They think I'm crazy. I am, but not in the way they believe."

"I can come back again," I said.

"No. But I'm glad you came. For the first time ever, I feel hope."

"Hope for what?" *How did I bring her hope?*

"That humans won't destroy themselves. They are so close. I believed it to be inevitable."

"Why? What do you think is going to happen?"

She became agitated and shook her head. "It's so clear in my mind. So clear."

"Tell me," I prompted.

"No! I can't start thinking about it again."

"Okay," I said. "Let's talk about something else."

But it was too late. Her mind had entered whatever loop I had activated and she began to cry and pull at her hair.

"I'm sorry, you must leave now," one of the attendants said to me. As he pulled me out of the room I could see two other men in uniform trying to keep Cara's hands away from her head.

"NextGene," I thought I heard her say.

"I'll try to come back, Cara. I'm sorry, please don't give up."

"You don't know about NextGene." I heard her mumble. I wanted to ask her what she meant but the doors slid shut and her voice was gone. She was gone.

The scent of lavender was replaced by disinfectant. I felt empty.

“How did it go?” Yenner finally asked as the PacLink Maglev raced north through the smoke-filled valley toward home. The endless sprawl of the LA area was far behind, protected from the smoke of what I soon learned was a category two wildfire in the Sierra foothills.

We hadn't spoken since I met Cara. I didn't want to talk and he seemed to sense it. *How did it go*, I thought to myself.

I didn't look at him when I responded. “It doesn't make any sense to me now, but during the few minutes I was with her, I felt normal.”

Friday, 4 May 2046

I've been spinning about my visit with Cara. What I wanted to ask her and didn't. What little she was able to tell me. And especially this: “[I now have hope] that humans won't destroy themselves. They are so close.”

She refers to humans as *they*. As *them*. Does she not consider herself human?

On the other hand, maybe she was just referring to the impersonal “they.” She did tell me, “I know why you are here, but you shouldn't worry.” I could interpret that to mean she thought I was questioning my humanity or degree of “customization” and that I had nothing to worry about.

But I do. The pheromones we exchanged, that alone proves I am different. Yet I have the same number of chromosomes as a human. Of course I am human, that I can reproduce clinches it.

Yet - am I transgenic? I could easily find out, but have chosen not to. Do I have an active vomeronasal organ or simply a more sensitive sense of smell than everyone else? No wonder a person's scent has always been so important to me. I could smell Cara as no one else could. Just like she could smell me...

Lavender and cinnamon. Can we generate other types of scents for each other? Where are the pheromones generated? What other surprises have been designed into me? Will my child think that cinnamon smells like daddy?

Monday, 7 May 2046

If I'm right, our “appointment” with those behind the messages is tomorrow. I've tried not to think too much about what will happen, the purpose behind their unilateral

communication, why they've been communicating with me in such a mysterious way, and particularly - what it has to do with Dad.

"I am David Patrick" the first file revealed. Are you David Patrick? Are you my father? Are you still alive somehow, fourteen years later? Where are you? Why have you taken so long to contact me? Wouldn't it have been easier to just send me an e-mail? What do you have to do with Al-Hurriyah?

Yenner asked me a good question over the weekend. "What time on Tuesday are we supposed to be there?"

I had been wondering the same thing. Since I had interpreted the number to be the number of days since my birth, I decided that the time must be the time of my birth: 5:10pm.

I am both excited and terrified.

I haven't said anything to Jamal about it. He would probably want to come with me and I don't want anything to happen to him. I haven't said anything to Mom or Mark. No one knows but Yenner.

I haven't said anything to Katia, though I have recorded a delayed message to be sent to her if I don't return within a month. I have also arranged for money to be transferred to her if she gives birth to my child, alive or not. It has occurred to me that I might be abandoning my unborn child just as my own fathers abandoned me, and the least I can do is make sure they are taken care of.

I've also left messages for Mom, Jamal and Mark.

Yenner is going with me. Since they know about him, I don't see why not.

Tuesday, 8 May 2046

Today is the day. Yenner will be here in a few minutes and then we will walk to Union Square. I am bringing nothing with me, not even my pack. I wonder if I would be able to go without him at all.

Any remaining excitement has fled. I am scared.

How can I convey the fear? It is like my chest is being crushed and no matter how hard I try I am unable to breathe. Even the shallowest breath eludes me. Death is a certainty, and I can only wait until the burning in my lungs mercifully ends as I lose consciousness.

To hold off the compulsion to panic, I mentally replay the conversation I had with Jamal a month or so ago...

"There is always the possibility that the senders of the messages do not have a malicious intent," he said.

"How can you say that?" I asked. "They injured my mom!"

"You yourself said that they claimed it was an accident. You know how complex systems are these days, they could be telling the truth."

"But why go through all of this effort and risk to us? What are they trying to do?"

"Get your attention?"

"Well, they've got it!" I nearly yelled.

"Keep your interest?"

They've done that too.

"The abilities of this stalker of yours are very sophisticated. If he truly intended you harm, you would not be here. He could have erased your assets. Your identity. Your life. You know that."

I did know that. I'd been thinking the same thing for the past few weeks, but it still brought me back to "why?"

But no matter what motives I try to apply to the sender of the messages, it still amounts to speculation.

Negative thoughts keep intruding into my mind. My graduation ceremony is this weekend and I wonder if I will be able to attend. I talked to Mark yesterday and I wonder if it will be the last time. I pinged Katia just to check in on her and I wonder if I will see the birth of my child. I surprised Mom by kissing her goodbye this morning and I wonder if I will see her again.

Yenner is here. Oh, God I feel sick.

Tuesday, 22 May 2046

I'm home again, but I don't know for how long. The past two weeks have been a whirlwind that have, it seems yet again, turned my world upside down. As for myself ... I feel better. Probably the best I have in a very long time.

I guess I have to start at the beginning, when Yenner and I were on our way to the intersection of Geary and Stockton. We were walking up Market Street toward Stockton, fighting our way through the crowds of shoppers and people leaving work, when a large, black four-door luxury car pulled up next to us. The back door lifted open and a voice called our names. I looked at my watch, it was 5:02. I frowned.

“Faisal?” Yenner asked. He moved between me and the car and peered inside.

“Yes, Yenner. Both of you please get in, I’ll explain later.”

I was on the verge of panic. Yenner knew this person. Had he known about this all along? We weren’t at the right location and it wasn’t the presumed time yet, had something gone wrong? I began backing away.

Yenner was exchanging urgent but hushed words with the man in the back seat. Then he stood up and looked around. His eyes were wide. Without a word, he lifted me and pushed me into the car, jumped in behind me, and pulled the door shut.

“Go!” the man who called himself Faisal told the driver. There was a rapid series of clicks beneath the car then I heard the whine of turbines. As they increased in pitch the car lifted into the air.

A surge of panic and betrayal overwhelmed me. “Let me out! Let me out!” I yelled.

I heard the car’s computer chirp. “Warning, this is a no lift-off zone, penalties will be...” The driver muted it.

Yenner grabbed me and pulled me into his arms. “Please calm down, Rabiyya. Faisal will explain.” Then he glared at Faisal. “*Now.*”

I climbed over Yenner and peered out the window at the crowd on the sidewalk below, which had cleared an area around where we lifted off. I saw figures running toward us. They drew some type of weapon and I pulled away from the window. The car shuddered.

“Shit!” the driver said. “EMP guns.”

The car shook again and the instrument panel died. “Rabiyya, you’re hurting me,” I heard someone say. But it didn’t register. People were firing at me. I was not on solid ground. I was not in control of my situation. I was going to die.

The car began to move forward rapidly and I twisted around to peek behind us. The men fired their weapons again and the vehicle shook and dropped several meters. I heard a *thump* against the car. It felt like my stomach was in my throat. I realized I was soaked in sweat.

“Did anyone hear that?” I asked. No one seemed to pay attention.

"The propulsion system is heavily shielded but is still being affected by the weapons," a woman was saying as the car stabilized. "Navigation looks good ... everything else is off-line."

"Rabiyya, you're hurting me," I heard again. I realized it was Yenner. I had a death-grip on his wrist and forced my hand to relax. "I need you to be strong right now," he said quietly.

I looked at him, but then the view behind stole my attention. All I could see was the familiar canyon of buildings created by Market Street shrinking in the distance ... then the Ferry Building ... then the Bay Bridge ... then San Francisco vanishing into the afternoon sun as the car took me away from my home against my will.

I felt the pain in my chest again. "Rabiyya, this is Faisal, the Iraqi man I escaped from America with. I told you about him."

"Hello, Rabiyya. I have heard much about you."

"What do you want?" I asked. "Who were those men with the guns?"

Even in panic, my mind was running through the possibilities. There was more than one party interested in me - why I could only guess. Faisal's group had pre-empted the meeting with the senders of the messages. Assuming Yenner had not betrayed me, or been duped himself, this party meant me no harm. I tried to convince myself of this.

"We don't know who they were," Faisal said. "But they won't bother you further."

"How do you know that?"

"The group that sent you the messages will take care of them."

"Al-Hurriyah?"

"Yes."

"Who are you?"

"Al-Hurriyah."

What had happened became clearer in my mind. "So then a faction within Al-Hurriyah was sending me these coded messages? And a third-party became aware of my existence somehow and wanted me for some unknown reason, then..."

Faisal was nodding. "You were originally supposed to meet our agents on the ground," he interrupted. "But when we became aware that someone else was interested in you, we

intentionally pre-empted that meeting without alerting those that you were to meet until we spotted you on the sidewalk.”

“How do you know this so called third-party will be handled?” Yenner asked.

Faisal merely looked at Yenner.

“Of course, those would have been just their agents on the ground,” I observed.

“They will be questioned,” Faisal responded. I shuddered at the thought of what that questioning might entail. Then I remembered the noise I heard outside.

“I don't know if this is important,” I began, “but I heard a thump against the car the last time they fired at us.”

The woman in the front passenger seat turned and looked at me with alarm. “A thump - like something bumping against the body of the vehicle? Like someone threw a shoe at us?”

“Yeah, that's exactly what it sounded like,” I confirmed.

“I didn't hear anything,” the driver said.

No one else had either. “Rabiyya has unusually sensitive ears,” Yenner said.

“We can't check the exterior because everything is off-line,” the driver said.

How convenient, I thought. I had an overwhelming desire to get out. “We need to get out, Yenner,” I said. “Something's not right.”

“How can you be sure?” He asked.

I just looked at him.

“Right,” he said.

After much discussion they concluded that we needed to evacuate the vehicle. If it was an explosive device that I heard attach itself to the car, then it was probably set to detonate below a certain altitude. In other words, if we landed. We also shouldn't risk staying in the car too long.

The driver reduced our ground speed as much as he dared and initiated a slow decent. As we flew over the Benicia bridge he said, “I think we should jump out at 20 meters. In about 10 seconds.”

The river was wide and muddy here. Industrial areas lined the banks.

“How fast are we going?” Yenner asked.

“I'd guess 20 klicks.”

We were about to bail into the Sacramento River. “I can't swim,” I said to no one in particular.

“Just hold on,” Yenner said. Then he forced the door open, grabbed me, looked down and left.

Thursday, 24 May 2046

I'd been in free-fall once before. The year before you left for Hajj, you had been teaching me to swim. We were at the outdoor pool of the club you and Dad belonged to and you asked me to jump from the five meter diving platform and swim to the side of the pool.

According to tradition, the Prophet Muhammad said that all boys should be taught three things: how to swim, how to ride a horse, and how to use a bow. It didn't matter to you that the Prophet lived over 1,400 years ago and things weren't quite the same anymore. You were going to teach me anyway. We never made it past swimming.

The sensation of falling was not pleasant. It felt like someone had reached inside of me and was trying push my lungs into my head. I held my breath. The five meters felt like an eternity and when I hit the water it seemed as if my entire body had been slapped. I was able to paddle to the side of the pool and get out but I refused to get in again. I could tell that you were disappointed but you let it go. “Next summer, insha'Allah” you said.

Apparently God did not will it.

And so I fell again, only this time it four times as far. My insides were still up in the car even though the rest of me was accelerating toward the river at 9.8 meters per second squared. Yenner held me against him, putting himself between me and the water. I remember him telling me to breathe but I couldn't. I held my breath for the few seconds it took us to fall; those few seconds that lasted too long. As we hit the water, right as I was closing my eyes, I saw the sky tear open. The car had exploded.

The next thing I knew we were under water. Yenner had his arm around my chest and was swimming upward. After we broke the surface, I gasped for air and looked around. The car was gone. In its place was a slowly dispersing cloud of smoke. A few pieces of debris burned about 100 meters upstream.

“Are you okay?” Yenner asked me. I realized I was treading water on my own. The water was cold and dirty.

"I think so. Are you?"

He nodded.

"Someone tried to kill us," I said. *Or was it just me?* It was a shocking realization and I know at the time that I hadn't processed through it. *Someone tried to kill us.* Shock kept me from feeling more terrified.

I half dog-paddled / awkwardly swam to the north shore, which was about 50 meters away. Yenner stayed behind me. He probably could have gotten us both to shore faster by himself, but I wanted to do it. If I have learned anything over the past two weeks, it is that I need to stop being so dependent on him. On anyone.

Eventually all five of us were standing in the mud along the broad, flat riverbank, dripping wet and cold. We were surrounded by abandoned warehouses, asphalt parking lots, and rusting railroad tracks and ships. I was wondering who owned the land and why it was in such a state of decay when the driver, whom I later learned was named Michael, offered some good news.

"I transmitted our location before we jumped out. With any luck, we'll be picked up very soon."

"How?" I asked. "She said everything was off-line."

"The emergency beacon is ... was shielded," Michael said.

We walked toward the highway and elevated tracks of the PacLink, both of which ran parallel to the river. They were some distance away and up a gentle slope covered with tall yellow grass. As we walked we discussed our brush with being barbecued in the sky and speculated about who was trying to kill whom. I was neither happy nor surprised with who the most likely target was.

It turned out Michael was right about an emergency signal being sent out. As we were walking across a disintegrating parking lot that was rapidly turning into a field we heard a helicopter. The woman saw it first. "It's one of ours."

We flew north-east. I didn't think about it at the time, but it is very strange that the authorities hadn't appeared to investigate the explosion by the time we left the area.

I was introduced to everyone. Michael, who was the driver, was about Yenner's age and was from Alabama. The woman's name was Beth. She was from Germany but had no accent at all. The helicopter pilot was named Aziz. He was a refugee from Jordan.

It was Beth who explained everything to me.

My father, David Patrick, is still alive. He was severely injured in the first riots and landed in a hospital. He lost his right arm. Then he was sent to prison for 12 years. I surprised myself by not reacting to this information, at least physically.

A part of me prefers the idea that he is dead. Death is final. Certain. But alive he can feel the pain of his wounds. Alive he can feel the pain of losing you, Abuyah. Alive he can feel the pain of his imprisonment. Alive he can feel the pain of watching his country self-destruct.

He had been released a year ago and his citizenship was restored. He had a job as a paralegal. My father, once the chief counsel at a major corporation, was now a paralegal.

"Did he contact you?" I asked.

"No, we located him. It wasn't easy. The government changed his name."

Why would they do that? I wondered. "Why were you looking for him?" I asked even though I knew the answer.

"Leverage."

"To get me," I said.

"To help persuade you."

"Why?"

"We need your help."

"You want to recruit me!" I exclaimed. I was simultaneously furious and bewildered.

"We need your help," Beth repeated.

"What help can I possibly give? I'm a 21 year old kid that can't even swim!"

She gave me a *don't-you-give-me-that-crap* look. "You're an exceptional genius with a possibly unmatched degree of proficiency with both nanotech and computer systems."

"You've been watching me," I stated.

"For some time."

"The coded messages? A test?"

She shrugged. "And an interesting puzzle."

Jamal was right. Yenner was right.

“You took a little longer than we had hoped,” she added.

I ignored her statement. “So back to my father,” I said. “When do I get to meet him?”

“It’s not that simple. First we need to determine if we can trust you, although Yenner has vouched for you. Then you have to assure us of your assistance.”

I glared at Yenner and thought, *I’ll deal with you later*. Yenner glared at her. “What level of assistance?” I asked. “And I’m not sure I want to work with an organization that the Americans consider terrorist.”

“We are not terrorists,” she laughed.

“Some actions attributed to ... Al-Hurriyah would be considered terrorism by a reasonable person,” Yenner said. My glare turned to surprise.

She nodded and waved her hands. “Yes, yes, yes. There are more aggressive elements in Al-Hurriyah that are less ... patient than the rest. But I can assure you that nothing we will ask of you is terrorist in nature.”

“And what exactly would that be?” I asked.

“Later,” she said.

“And what about my father?”

“If we reach an agreement, we will provide an opportunity for you to meet him.”

“What if I don’t?”

“You’ll be on your own.”

This was not an attractive option. Someone was apparently trying to kill me. To them, I was considered a threat, but these people thought of me as an asset.

“Where can I meet him?”

She took a deep breath and paused. “He lives in Virginia.”

“America?” I asked. My heart filled with despair and seemed to plummet into the earth. “I have to go into America?”

Saturday, 26 May 2046

Faisal lives in a log house in the Tahoe National Forest. This is where we stayed most of the time. I don't know how he is able to afford the place. Even though it is uncomfortably close to the American border (for me), real estate in the Sierra is very expensive.

It was so quiet there. The only sounds were the wind and birds in the trees and the occasional whine of a border patrol drone. I took many walks through the forest around his home, sometimes alone, sometimes with Yenner or Faisal, sometimes with Yenner and Faisal.

Our first day full day there, Wednesday the 9th, I had a disturbing realization.

We were sitting on the porch outside of the room we had been given. It was mid-morning. Faisal had left to pick someone up that I was to meet.

“Yenner?”

“Yeah?”

“I don't have my meds.”

“I thought you stopped taking them.”

“Just the mood stabilizers, not the anti-depressants.”

He just looked at me for a minute. He sighed. “I will help you through this.”

“I'm scared.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

I ignored his comment. I've taken an anti-depressant of one kind or another for over ten years. Mood stabilizers for most of the past three years. At the time I was taking two anti-depressants, one of which is experimental.

As emotional as I still am, they seem to help. I get depressed and desperate and angry sometimes, but not like I did for those first years after the war. Not like when the blackness would envelope me and would become an unthinking ball of fury. Not like when I would collapse into the deepest darkest black hole and want to die.

My heart was pounding, as it often does. I was scared and angry. I had been taking the drugs for so long that I was terrified to live without them. Terrified of how I might feel. Terrified of what I might do. It didn't matter that they were prescribed, I still had withdrawal in front of me.

Without saying a word, I stood up, hopped off the deck, and walked into the forest. I looked at the trees and knew what they were. I had seen them in a book once and remembered. They were Douglas firs and sugar pines and yellow pines. They were white firs and incense cedars and dogwoods and madrones. I knew this because of the lengths of the needles, the number of needles in each cluster, the look of the bark, the shapes of the leaves, the size of the cones. I read about these trees a few years ago - once - and I still remembered.

The sun was climbing in the sky, its light shattered by the branches of the trees. Shattered by the trees of the forest. I looked up at the trees and wondered what the withdrawal symptoms would be like. I knew about the trees but not about the drugs I was taking. That struck me as rather ridiculous. The trees were indifferent to the irony. They sighed in the wind.

What was I doing there? At first I thought I had been kidnapped, but then I realized that in a way I had been rescued. By a world-wide organization that exists to free occupied Arabia. An organization that wants my help. An organization that the most powerful country on this continent classifies as terrorist.

I was there because I was kidnapped. I was there because I was rescued. I was there because they want me. I was there because I might be able to meet my father.

I hadn't brought up Yenner's involvement in all of this yet. I knew he was involved somehow, but I didn't want to deal with it. "Yenner has vouched for you," Beth told me.

The so-called business trips he took. I'm sure they were for Al-Hurriyah. The new pad. I'm sure it was provided by Al-Hurriyah. What I wasn't sure of was his knowledge of the messages.

He seemed genuinely surprised by them. He did injure himself breaking into my apartment to rescue Mom. He did seem alarmed when they sent me a message at his house.

I didn't ask him about any of this until we were on our way home, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Monday, 28 May 2046

After a few days, I could tell that my meds had worn off. I didn't want to talk to anyone and stayed in our room. I didn't even want Yenner around.

He had told me some time back that I was "fragile." That day I was way beyond fragile. I was explosive.

I lay on top of the bed, staring at the wooden slats of the ceiling, thinking about Dad. Thinking that he abandoned me. I don't know why I hadn't considered this before - he didn't leave me and what remained of his life to protest the bombing of Arabia. Instead, he left to die. He couldn't bear to live without you and he left to die. He knew there would be riots and violence and he wanted to go out venting the fury he felt against his government over your death.

He left to die. There is no doubt in my mind. He left me to die.

The thought spun endlessly in my head.

He left me so he could die.
He left me so he could die.
He left me so he could die.

I was furious.

He promised me he would be back. HE PROMISED ME.

Yenner walked into the room.

"The man that contacted your father is here," he said.

"Not now." I kept staring at the ceiling. I imagined myself burning a hole in it.

"This isn't just about you, Rabiyya. There are larger issues."

"Leave me alone." I was fuming. Yenner's "larger issues" seemed irrelevant.

Yenner sparked off like I had never seen before. "NO! I will NOT leave you alone. I am sick of your self-absorbed behavior! I am so sick of your wallowing in self-pity!"

I sat up on the edge of the bed. My hands were shaking. I could barely control myself.

"You're genetically engineered. Deal with it. Accept it. Stop letting it control you! Your fathers were taken from you. Deal with it. Accept it. You keep whining about not being human. YOU ARE HUMAN. Go look in the mirror. YOU ARE HUMAN. Accept it. I can't keep enabling this ... twisted self-image you have. I can't take it any more. You have to control these things instead of letting them control you!"

He paused and paced back and forth, then noticed that the bedroom door was open and shut it. "You have a choice here," he said more quietly. "You can go through your life miserable and very likely alone or you can accept yourself and your past and build on it. You have to accept it or you will never be happy. Do you understand me? Do you? You will never be happy."

I didn't move. I was hearing what he said but not listening. I filed the words away in some buffer in my head for later processing. Right at that moment my mind was a vortex of rage.

Yenner got down on his knees in front of me and tried to cup his hands around my face but I knocked them away.

He tried again. I knocked them away again.

Again.

Again.

I wanted to punch him. I have never hit anyone in my life and I wanted to punch him. I looked around the room. I wanted to destroy it. Instead, I ran.

I ran out the door and kept running. "You have a choice!" I heard him yell after me.

I ran I ran I ran I ran I ran I ran. I followed the twisting highway down the hill into town. I ran through town. I ran through an area Faisal called "no man's land" where he said a lake was 100 years ago.

In my imagination, I tore a tree out of the ground and used it as a club to destroy every tree in the forest. Every building in town. My rage was unquenchable and I wanted to destroy destroy destroy.

I ran I ran I ran I ran. I followed the highway into an old gold rush town called Grass Valley.

You have a choice, Yenner said.

I could let the rage control me or I could control it.

I had a choice.

I stopped running. I was soaked with sweat. The adrenaline rush of my rage had given way to an endorphin rush from my flight. I felt better.

It was late afternoon. I paced back and forth. I could let the rage control me or I could control it. I could let my self-pity control me or I could control it.

I had a choice.

I sat down on the sidewalk then lay on my back. My anger was gone. I was on a sidewalk somewhere in Grass Valley laying on my back. It suddenly seemed like a strange thing to be doing.

I remained there. I had a choice. I closed my eyes. I could no longer hear my heart. It had slowed to its normal cadence. I just lay there, breathing slowly.

Tires rolling on pavement. A shutting door. Footsteps coming toward me. I opened my eyes. Yenner.

"It's hard," I said to him. It was my way of apologizing.

"I didn't say it would be easy," he said.

I climbed to my feet. "You're rescuing me again."

He shook his head. "No, I'm just giving your pitiful ass a ride back."

I laughed. "I am not pitiful."

He looked at me. "Say that again."

"I am not pitiful."

"Again."

"I AM NOT PITIFUL."

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"I'm glad you said what you did."

"Yeah. I'm right, aren't I?"

"Yeah. You're right," I agreed.

The car hummed through the forest back to Faisal's. *He is right*, I thought to myself. *I do have a choice*. This was my thought at the time and I still agree now, a few weeks later. But agreement does not make the problem miraculously go away.

He told me that he had followed me in the car. I had run 20 kilometers.

I watched the trees zoom by. Green green green, so much green. Dark green in shadow, bright green glowing in shafts of sunlight. I love green.

I turned and looked at Yenner. "Thank you, Big Bear."

He smiled and put his hand on my leg. I looked down at his hand and studied it for a moment, the veins and skin and tendons and hair, the scar that ran from between his index and middle finger to the wrist, then placed mine on top.

I realized at that moment that I loved him. I became aware at that moment, as the car sped along the ridge through trees and horizontal beams of sunlight, that I was in love with a man.

Wednesday, 30 May 2046

We had been at Faisal's house for a week when I was finally introduced to the man who met my father. They certainly took their time. Or maybe they just waited for me to pull myself together.

The withdrawal symptoms of my meds were fading by that time but my mood was still all over the place. I fought very hard to give the appearance of calm, however. It was harder than usual, but even Yenner later commented on it. *I have a choice* became my mantra while I was there.

They had told me that his name was George, but he introduced himself as Jorge. He looked at me as if sizing me up. "Yeah, I think you can pass," he said. He had a slight Chicano accent.

"Pass?" I asked. "As Hispanic?"

"Well, you're not going into the States as an Arab, that's for sure."

I chuckled nervously.

"I can see some resemblance," he said in reference to my father. "Especially in the eyes."

"How long ago did you see him?" I asked. I could feel tears welling up. I fought them.

"A few months. It took me a while to track him down. Longer to get him to trust me. And it wasn't easy for him."

"To talk about me?"

"Yes."

"What ... what did he say?" I tried to keep my face frozen. Everyone was watching me intently, especially Yenner, but I ignored them. "What did he ... look ... like?"

I was breathless. Anxious.

I have adjusted to the idea that he is still alive. In retrospect I am surprised that I had never considered the possibility before. His death had been assumed by everyone. When we hadn't heard from him after the Washington riots...

So many were killed. The extent of the slaughter only became apparent years after the war. The American government was not forthcoming with the details of anything after the bombing of Arabia, but it was clear that what happened in Washington D.C. was nothing less than a massacre. He simply had to be dead.

But I now know that he's not. And as Jorge spoke to me several emotions swirled inside of me, each fighting for dominance. I allowed none of them to be seen. I was water boiling within a shell of ice.

"I brought a message from him," Jorge said.

"Audio? A vid?"

"VR."

"VR?"

"Would you like to see it now?"

I looked at Yenner. He looked back, but didn't say anything. My Big Bear that was always there for me regardless of how crazily or selfishly I behaved.

"Is it okay if just Yenner stays with me?"

"Of course," Faisal said. "Why don't you use the computer in the study? It has the decryption key already. I assume you can figure out how to use it." He grinned.

Yenner laughed. "Rabiyya can figure out how to use it without even seeing it!"

"You trust me?" I asked.

"Yenner trusts you, and I've known him a long time. So, yes."

We talked for a while longer. There were more references to their needing a commitment of support from me, but I still didn't have a clear idea of exactly what they wanted me to do. Then Yenner and I left the front room where we had all been gathered and went up the stairs to the study. I took the chip Jorge had given me and slipped it into the machine. I found the headset and pulled it halfway on. I looked at Yenner.

"Before I start this there is something I want to tell you."

"Sure."

I paused. *I love you.* I had to tell him. I felt it. He deserved to know.

"I..." I stopped and looked at the worn carpet that covered most of the old wooden floor.

He smiled, "it's okay. It can wait."

"No, I want to do this," I said uncertainly.

"It can wait," he said softly.

He had given me a temporary out and I took it. I watched him for a minute and then pulled the headset over my eyes and ears. "Okay. Here I go."

Friday, 1 June 2046

"Hello, Rabiyya," the image of my dad said to me - or rather to the recording device that Jorge had set up in the room. I was in a small, featureless white room with a single chair that held my father.

"Daddy," I said out loud. It was impulsive and involuntary. I had been standing, but fell to my hands and knees. He couldn't hear me or see me, of course. He wasn't really with me. But I could see and hear him. And it was him. It was my dad.

The last time I saw my father I wasn't even eight years old yet. It was 14 years ago, though he looked like he had aged 30. He was clean shaven now, but I recognized his face. His eyes, his nose, his lips. The angle of his jaw. I could see that he was hiding whatever had replaced his right hand and arm beneath his jacket.

He seemed so old, so small and thin - nothing like the strong, robust man I remember. I know that is partially because I am about his size now, but also because of what he has been through.

"I had a week to prepare for this ... message to you, but I couldn't decide exactly what to say. I finally decided to do it extemporaneously. Hopefully I won't leave anything out. I don't know if this opportunity will be granted to me again."

"The words do not exist to convey to you how sorry I am. I left you. I can offer no excuse. I utterly failed you as a father and I will carry that shame to my grave. You should have been my first priority, but I was too stricken with grief for ... Hassan ..." He sighed and looked at the floor in front of him. "It has been so long since I have spoken that name ..." He paused. "I let the grief rule me. There was nothing else."

"They told me you and Amy were alive. I was hopeful of that since I left you at her house in Marin. Our own home, well ... it seems like a thousand years ago yet I just have to close my eyes and I am there ... I have had so many dreams that I am there with you - and then I wake up.

“I hope you have experienced the joy and pain of love by now. Hassan ... habiibii ... was the world to me, and when he was taken away ... it destroyed me. I just wanted the pain to end. I gave you so little thought.” His face became twisted. He looked me straight in the eye and tears began running down his tortured face. “I am so sorry, my precious little man.”

“That you are alive and well has brought much joy to the life I have here. I am not the same man you remember, Rabiyya. I have been broken. They have even taken away my name. I live in a small room and have little real freedom. I am no longer in a prison but I still can't leave.” He touched the base of his skull, apparently unconsciously.

“They tell me that they may be able to bring you here. Please don't come. I want to know you are safe in California, not on some suicide mission. I would like nothing more than to see you and hold you and talk to you, but I made my choice 14 years ago. I chose to die, only I had no idea it would take so long.

“I don't want you to think my life is completely miserable. I go to church. I know a few nice people that I can talk to and socialize with. There are still good people here.

“I still enjoy cooking. Do you remember when I used to make dinner for you and Hassan? The *kebsa* he liked so much? He always said it was nearly as good as his mother's.” He was silent for a moment and then he smiled. “You used to speak Arabic to each other and tease me, do you remember that? I never learned enough to keep up with you. You were so bright. You could remember everything you saw and heard. You soaked it up like a sponge. We were so proud of you.” A tear ran down his cheek. “Oh, God, I want you to know how proud we were.”

“There is so much I want to know about you. I don't know if you can return a message to me but if you can please do. I want to know everything. I want to know about your friends, your loves, your fears. What you enjoy doing. What you are studying in school. Are you an engineer like Hassan? You always wanted to be. Do you still pray? They showed me a picture of you walking with a very large man they said was a friend of yours. I see you wear a taqiyah like your Abuyah did when he went to the mosque.” He smiled again. “You are so handsome. And you look like such a good Muslim boy.” Then he laughed. “Good Muslim. That's not something you hear here in the States. Hassan would be so proud. I am so proud.”

“I am almost out of time so I have to finish. Tell Amy that I love her, and know that I love you more than you can imagine. Much more than I realized 14 years ago.” His voice broke. “Good bye.”

He and the room vanished. I took deep breaths. I forced myself to breathe slowly. I didn't trust my hands so I left the headset on. I could feel the wave growing inside of me.

"I can't stop this," I heard myself say under my breath. I was still on all fours and my arms began shaking. I fell onto my side. The wave towered over me. There was nothing but the wave.

I felt the headset being pulled from my head and his arms around me. "Let it out," he said. "Just let it out."

I did.

Sunday, 3 June 2046

For several days, Beth, Faisal, Jorge and I danced around where our loyalties were. Whether we trusted each other enough to make commitments. Whether I would help them - effectively joining Al-Hurriyah.

I didn't like the idea. I still don't. I am not going to do anything that I believe is unethical. I made this clear. And I am not going to do anything that puts anyone I care for at risk, meaning, among other things, that I will have to operate as anonymously as possible. Probably wishful thinking.

I had long known what their goal was, at least at a high level and as an organization, and it was something I could support - forcing America out of the occupied parts of the Middle-East. Yenner knew this and obviously had communicated it to Faisal.

Finally, after days of feeling each other out, they took me to a place called Malakoff Diggings to tell me what they had in mind for me.

Malakoff Diggings, Faisal explained, was the site of the largest hydraulic mine in old California. Nearly two centuries ago, an elaborate system of dams, tunnels and aqueducts was created to funnel rivers from the high country into giant water cannons called monitors. The monitors created torrents of high-pressure water that washed away the sedimentary layers of earth that were filled with gold particles. The gold was extracted from the runoff in sluice boxes, but the mud and gravel flowed into area streams and rivers. Downstream, the gravel buried farmland. So much silt was created that flooding became a major problem. Even the Sacramento river filled in to a degree that large ships could no longer make it to the city.

It's been almost two hundred years and the man-made canyon, about two kilometers long and one kilometer wide, is still an open wound in the earth - bare and raw.

It was there where I found out what they needed my help with. We sat near the bottom of the enormous pit / canyon on the rusting remains of the high-pressure water system. The sun was hot.

“We haven't been able to bring down the Coalition defense grid in occupied Jordan,” Beth told me. “It's a very impressive system. We can't defeat it.”

“And you think I can,” I said.

“We hope you can.”

“What do you know about it?”

“It has multiple nodes, any one of which is enough to give them a tremendous advantage over our allies. And each node can restore all other nodes to full functionality unless they are physically destroyed. Many are in a constant state of motion.”

“Our allies?” I asked.

“We have been working with the Arab Liberation Army,” Faisal said. “For over five years. They would have been ... crushed by now if it weren't for our assistance.”

I shook my head. “This is way too big for me.”

“It's way too big for any of us,” Faisal said. “But you won't be alone on this.”

“It is rather strange that you trust me to this extent.”

“Yenner trusts you completely. I trust Yenner completely.”

“Yenner is in love with me, are you sure you can trust him? Perhaps his judgment is clouded.” I was glad Yenner was not there to hear that.

“I trust his judgment. But since you've brought it up I will add that before we give you access to anything truly sensitive we will ask you to submit to a truth scan. Do you have any objection to that?”

“No,” I said immediately.

“Well, that was easier than I expected,” Beth said. I could tell she was relieved.

“Okay, back to the problem at hand. So physically taking out all of the nodes is basically impossible,” I said. “Have you tried a polymorphic wi-vi? Something like the G-This code that brought down the Shanghai Red?”

“Yes,” Beth said. “You name it, we've tried it.”

“The operating system is self-repairing, of course,” I said, mostly thinking out loud. “Using advanced heuristics...”

“And adaptive,” Beth added.

It was, to borrow Beth's phrase, “an interesting puzzle”, and my mind began spinning out various angles of attack without really knowing anything about the problem. *If this, then that. Unless this, then...* Within a minute I had dozen different potential solutions.

“Well, I have some ideas,” I said.

Faisal smiled broadly. I noticed that he had bad teeth.

“But no guarantees,” I added.

“We don't expect guarantees ... of that sort, anyway,” Beth said.

“What kind of resources can you offer me?”

“I don't think you'll be disappointed,” said Beth.

“We'll talk about that after we formalize the deal,” Faisal said.

“Formalize it?”

“There's a lot to talk about,” Beth said. “This is going to change your life for several months.”

“At least,” Faisal added.

“I still have to think about it,” I said a little too forcefully. But I knew I would accept - they knew I would accept. I had already come too far.

I looked at the man-made cliffs around me. The ground should have been 150 meters over our heads where we sat. Men had washed away mountains for gold. For three decades they had destroyed the farmland and livelihood of others to satisfy their own greed.

We haven't changed a bit.

Tuesday, 5 June 2046

The nature of the mysterious messages became a bit more mysterious while I was away. I was hoping to have the matter resolved. They did answer some questions, but new ones emerged.

“You still haven't explained how you sent the messages,” I said.

“We weren't involved in that,” Beth answered. “I don't know.”

“Or you can't say.”

“I really don't know”.

I wasn't sure if I believed her at the time, but I do now. It makes sense that this group might not know the technical details of how the messages were conveyed. Why would they be told more than they needed to know to fulfill their function?

“Well, while we're talking about this,” I began. “Why the hostile message?”

“Hostile message?”

“*I know what you are?*” That was the first message I saw. It was embedded in the Catnix code that infected our floor cleaner on my birthday. That's not particularly friendly.”

Beth looked at Faisal. “That's not the message we were told was sent.”

“What were you told?”

“It was our understanding that four messages were sent. The first one, in the Catnix code that you refer to, asked ‘*What happened at NextGene?*’ This was to get your attention and motivate you to begin searching for answers, into which the other team would embed various clues or puzzles. When you missed the first rendezvous they sent another message to egg you on: ‘*You have failed.*’ Then ‘*Injury was not intended*’ after the accident during the terror attack, which, as you know, was not us, and finally the numeric message at Jenner's to give you the new meeting date.”

I never saw “*what happened at NextGene?*,” so someone either changed the original message before or after the cleaningbot was infected. Whether that someone was in Al-Hurriyah, the at-that-time mystery party, or yet someone else is still unknown. Why is still unknown.

I have an idea about the transmission mechanism for the messages, but to my knowledge the technology behind it is still theoretical. However, I have not been able to come up with better explanation. I decided while I was with my “hosts,” as I had come to think of them, that I would keep my theory to myself for several reasons.

The facts are:

- * The first virus appeared on my birthday.
- * The second virus appeared six months and one day after my birthday.
- * According to the building security records and my own audit of our home system, no one except me and Mom had physical access to our floor cleaner at any time.
- * The viruses were not wirelessly transmitted. I am absolutely certain of this regarding

the second virus because I disabled the communication module myself and verified that it was disabled.

The possible solutions are:

- * The building and our home security systems have been tampered with in a manner that is undetectable.
- * Mom or I infected the cleaner.
- * The messages were “deposited” by some unknown technology, which may be available to two or more parties. This is my current theory.

I am still bewildered by the idea that someone, anyone, would devote these resources to researching, testing, and recruiting me. They almost seemed desperate.

And there is the obvious question of how did they learn about me in the first place? One of my instructors?

Friday, 8 June 2046

The 20th of May, the day before we left for home, they did the truth scan. It was exactly what I expected - a computer monitored my brain activity while they asked me a series of questions, observed my reactions to a series of statements and showed me a series of images, including images of Yenner, Mom, you and Dad. Yenner and I talked about the results as we drove home.

“They were very happy with your reactions,” he said as we drove out of the foothills of the Sierra into the Sacramento Valley.

“What did they expect?”

“Pretty much what they got, but the confirmation pleased them. You have no idea how excited Faisal is.”

“I’m not sure I like him,” I said.

Yenner nodded. “He’s pretty uptight, but he has a good heart. You should have seen his reaction when I told him I was gay. It was ‘abomination this,’ ‘forbidden that,’ and ‘homosexuals can’t be believers.’”

The Muslim world reacted somewhat differently to the definitive proof that sexual orientation is genetically influenced than did the Christian world, although the existence of a genetic basis created heated debates within both that are ongoing today. One difference between Islam and Christianity is that as science uncovers the mysteries of the universe, the *Ulama (Islam’s clerical establishment)* generally accept them as further

proof of the glory of God while Christians, particularly fundamentalists, often deny and fight them, particularly when they are inconvenient and contradict their prior claims. For example, the Catholic church's reaction to Galileo, or the fundamentalist belief that the Earth is around six thousand years old.

Regarding the genetic predisposition for hetero or homosexual attraction, all but one Islamic school of law eventually proclaimed that homosexuality must be a defect created by the will of God and that it was the afflicted party's responsibility to maintain a celibate life.

Yet, even the concept of celibacy is unattractive to Muslims. Jamal once told me that the Qur'an derides celibacy as being against the will of God - that we should "be fruitful and multiply" - and if God is creating humans that are unable to fulfill this command because of their sexual orientation, they must abstain from sex.

The remaining legal school reasoned that homosexuals should be held to the same standards that heterosexuals are; that they should be allowed to form a family. In other words, they should only be permitted to have sexual relationships within the confines of a marriage. This astonishingly progressive edict added fuel to the conflicts which have been burning within Islam for decades. It was a direct rebuff to the Traditionalist view of the *Shariah* (*Islamic law, correct Muslim way of life*) and another event in what Jamal calls "The Islamic Reformation." I know you were raised as a *Wahhabi* (*a puritanical sect of Islam founded in Arabia*), but you obviously abandoned it to follow this more adaptive line of reasoning.

"Failure to adapt results in extinction," you would say to Jamal.

Now that I think about it, it seems likely that I owe my existence to your desire to serve God's will by creating a family, Abuyah. The family is considered a microcosm of creation in Islam and a model for the *Ummah* (*Muslim community*). That would be so like you, trying to be the best Muslim you could.

In America, the genetic basis for sexual orientation further splintered Christian social conservatives. Reactions ranged from complete denial of the existence of genetic causation, to requiring prenatal tests for homosexuality and terminating the fetus if a predisposition existed (apparently abortion was the lesser of the two evils) to "oh, it must be okay then."

But back to Faisal. "He finally accepted it," Jenner said.

"What changed his mind?"

"Time. Exposure. He just had to process through it."

"So what about the test results?" I asked, changing the subject.

The core truth scan was no surprise to either of us. I had no intention of betraying them or their mission (at least as I currently understand it), and I could be depended upon to make every reasonable effort to follow through on anything I committed to.

“Your reaction to me was interesting,” he said.

I looked at him. “I am in love with you, Yenner,” I said preemptively. It came out easily, honestly, without hesitation.

He reached for my hand, brought it to his lips and kissed it. “I love you too,” he said. He kept hold of my hand for some time after that.

“Your reaction to America...”

“Anger?” I asked.

“More like distrust. Fear,” he said. “And you reacted to your dad with anger.”

That was no surprise. I am angry with Dad. I am very angry at him. But I am also very happy that he is alive, because I plan to see him. Jorge explained that he has a bio-electronic device, he called it a leash, implanted in his brain stem that will incapacitate or possibly kill him if he is removed from a specific geographic area or if it is tampered with. He can't come to me, but I can go to him.

“What about me?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“How did I react to myself?”

He laughed. “They didn't test for that reaction. What would you expect?”

I thought for a moment. “Rabiyya: mess.”

He laughed again. “Yes, but you're *my* mess.”

Tuesday, 12 June 2046

We drove west along the Yolo Causeway, part of Interstate 80 that connects Sacramento, the capital of NorCal, to Davis, where Katia goes to college. The causeway, which was destroyed in the war but rebuilt, crosses the Yolo Bypass floodway, which is usually rice fields during the summer and a shallow lake during the winter. The floodway was constructed several decades ago to control area flooding during the wet season.

"I have something else to tell you," I said, breaking the silence. "You're probably not going to like it."

"Try me," he said.

"It's a big one."

He looked at me briefly.

"You know my friend Katia?"

"Yeah, your girlfriend from high school ..." he hesitated for a moment. "That you had sex with," he finished slowly. He looked at me again.

I didn't say anything.

"She's carrying your baby?"

"Yeah."

He sighed loudly. "Wow, that is big."

I didn't say anything.

"I know you are young, but haven't you heard of birth control?" He said with some sarcasm.

"Of course," I said irritably. "Do you think I'm that careless? We used condoms and foam. She was taking an ovulation suppressant anyway because of Pete."

"And she still got pregnant."

"Yes."

"It's a little hard to believe. Is she sure it's yours?"

"Yeah, Pete had been away for a while when ... it happened."

"And you believe her."

"Look, when she has the amniocentesis we'll know for certain, but I have no doubts."

The procedure will check for thousands of potential defects and chromosomal abnormalities. Because I am the way I am, ours will be particularly thorough. It will also mean that I'll have to be sampled too.

I've tried not to think about that too much. Getting a gene screen has been one of my greatest fears for years now, but I know I must do this.

Yenner and I didn't talk much for the rest of the trip home. We were irritated with each other but I think he will be okay with it. Since we've been back we haven't discussed it at all.

The City was back lit by the late afternoon sun as we drove across the upper deck of the Bay Bridge. The familiar sights were comforting: the Phoenix Tower, the twin Chongqing Tech and China Unicom buildings at Peking Plaza, Twin Peaks, San Bruno mountain... I could even see the top of our building - one of dozens of residential high-rises South of Market.

The closer we got to home the better I felt. I still had to tell Mom about the baby. I still had to explain where I had been, although Yenner had called her from Nevada City the day we arrived there. I was sure Mark had been pinging me right and left. And Jamal - I still don't know what to say to him, but I can't just disappear. It will only be a matter of time before he calls Mom to check in on me.

Then there is the mystery group that apparently wants me dead, but everyone assures me they are not a threat at the moment.

Wednesday, 13 June 2046

It's strange not having any homework to do.

I can remember when I was very young, before you and Dad put me in advanced classes, I would never do my homework.

"The school sent us an e-mail," you once said to me as you walked into the den. I was at the computer and poking around online. "They said you didn't turn in your homework all week." You seemed calm but even then I knew it was an act. You were furious.

"God must not have willed it," I said.

You grabbed me by the ear and yanked upward. You were very strong and it hurt. "Do *not* use Allah as an excuse for your failure," you said with a raised voice.

"Ow!" I yelled. I pulled away and ran up the stairs to your bedroom. "Daddy, Abuyah hurt me."

He looked at me and sighed. "Stay here, Rabiyya," he said. "I'll be right back." Then he left the room and shut the door.

“What did you do to him?” Dad asked. Although you were speaking in hushed tones I could still hear you.

“This is the third time the school has contacted us about his homework,” you said. “The boy is irresponsible and I will not have an irresponsible child.”

“You didn't answer my question.”

“Do not tell me how to discipline my son,” you said.

And then, much more quietly, “In case you have forgotten, Hassan Muhammad Ash-Shariif, Rabiyya is my son also. I don't think physical punishment is appropriate. If he's not doing his homework there is a reason and I think that is what we should focus on.”

“It's not just the homework. He used Allah's name inappropriately.”

“What did he say?”

“He said that he did not do his homework because ‘God must not have willed it.’”

Then I heard Dad laughing.

“That is not amusing,” you said. It only made Dad laugh harder.

“You told me,” Dad started, “you told me once that you used to say the same exact thing to your parents!” He continued to laugh. “You have to admit it's pretty funny.”

The front door slammed. I remained motionless on their bed. I heard footsteps coming up the stairs and Dad opened the door. He looked at me. I could tell he was trying to keep from laughing, then he walked over and sat down next to me.

“You know, when your Abuyah was a little guy like you his father would hit him with a stick.”

My eyes grew wide. “He hit Abuyah?”

“Yep. His father had a stick hanging on the wall. When Hassan was bad he would take it down and hit him.”

“Did Grandpa Patrick hit you?”

“Well, in a different way. I had to pull down my pants and he hit my bottom with his belt. Hard.”

“Are you going to hit me now?”

He pulled me into his lap. "No, my precious little man, of course not. I will never hit you, and neither will your Abuyah. I promise you that."

We sat there quietly for a few minutes while I thought about fathers hitting their little boys. Dad broke the silence.

"Will you tell me why you aren't doing your homework?"

"It's so boring. I know it already."

"It's too easy for you," he said.

"Yes."

He was quiet for a minute and then said, "okay, I'll make you a deal. If I promise to move you into advanced classes will you do your homework? I know you already know the material, but it is important to us that you prove to the school that you can do it. Deal?"

"Okay, Daddy," I said. Then I got up and ran for the door.

"Hey! Not so fast," he said. "There's one more thing."

"Yes, Daddy?"

"You knew what you said would make your Abuyah angry."

I didn't answer, but he was right. I did know.

"Don't say it again."

"Okay, Daddy."

"I'm very serious, Rabiyya. I don't want you to say it again."

"I promise."

"Good. Now please go do your homework."

I never did say it again. And you never did hit me.

Sunday, 17 June 2046

I filled Mom in on everything when I got back. Katia is pregnant with my child, I met one of the other NextGene kids, Al-Hurriyah wants me to help them, Dad is still alive (I let her watch the VR segment Jorge recorded), and Yenner was an Al-Hurriyah member.

I left out the trivial detail about some mystery group trying to kill me. There is nothing to be gained by telling her that.

Yenner and I finally talked about his involvement with their recruitment effort. When the "talent team," as he called them, discovered that he and I went to the same UC campus they asked him to case me. So he did, and then he fell in love.

The plan was, he thought, to get to know me and then if he thought I would work out, bring me up to the Gold Country to meet some of the key people in the local organization. He said he didn't know about the messages at first, though the thought had entered his mind. He didn't know about my father either. Then when one of the messages decoded to "Al-Hurriyah" he knew but felt he should pretend otherwise. He apologized profusely.

"I didn't know how you would react because of the anguish we had unintentionally caused you," he told me with a pained expression on his face.

I forgave him.

Anyway, back to Mom. I had dropped so many bombs on her at once that she was speechless at first. Then she started crying.

When Mom cries because of something that I do, I feel like the most horrible person in the world. It hurts me physically. All I want is for her to be happy and sometimes it seems that everything I do ends up hurting her.

I groveled on my knees apologizing and begging her to stop crying.

"Why don't you trust me?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I was worried *sick* about you. You have no idea. You have this entire life that I know nothing about."

"No, it's not like that. Most of this stuff happened so recently and quickly that there just wasn't time to talk to you about it. Believe me, I need your help."

"You're involving yourself with that organization? Doesn't that scare you?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Oh, by the way, Dad wanted me to tell you hello," I said.

She looked at me blankly. "Yes, I watched the segment."

"Oh, right."

“That was too surreal. He’s dead and gone, then he’s not dead but still gone.”

“I’m going to see him.”

“You’re *what!*? ... okay ... okay ...” She paced back and forth. “I have to think about all of this, Rabiyya. It’s too much. We’ll talk about it once I’ve processed through it.” She stared at me for a minute. Her mouth hung open. It wasn’t a happy look. “You, young man, are out of control.”

She went to her room and closed the door. She’s right, of course. I am completely out of control. My life is out of control.

The next two days we barely spoke. She was bouncing between anger and despair, and I felt very frustrated and somewhat guilty. So I hung out with Mark and Yenner and talked to Katia as much as I could. Finally, Mom knocked on my door and wanted to talk.

We discussed my going to see Dad and my preparations for that. I told her that I will be trained by one of the people I met in Nevada City - Jorge. I have to learn Tejano and proper Spanish as part of my assumed identity. That part actually sounds fun. And I have to learn about life in America.

We talked about Al-Hurriyah and what they want from me. She was not happy about my involvement, but didn’t explicitly oppose it either. I think she liked the fact that I probably wouldn’t need to leave the country in order to contribute.

“So when do you start?” she asked.

“In a few weeks. They have a lot of information to pull together and give me.” I paused. “Did you know that part of it is a charitable organization? Not only are they fighting the occupation of the Middle-East but they also build and support medical facilities around the world in areas that lack adequate health care.”

“In Islamic countries,” she said skeptically.

“No, Mom, *around the world.*”

“Most of the world lacks adequate health care,” she said, unimpressed.

Then I told her the status of the NextGene kids. She was very uncomfortable with the fact that two had died rather tragically and one of them had disappeared, and she was visibly upset when I told her about Cara. I even told her about the pheromones and that we could “smell” each other.

“I have been genetically modified, Mom.”

She denied it at first, then was very angry. "Hassan and Dave explicitly forbade that. Oh, you have no idea how furious Hassan would have been if he had known."

That confused me. "Jamal told me ... well, he implied that Abuyah asked them to select the most favorable sequences for certain traits."

"He *what*?"

"They had to come from their own chromosomes, but he did ask. According to Jamal."

"I don't see why Jamal would make that up," she said thoughtfully.

"I don't think he did," I agreed. "I believe him."

"And if what you say is true, those hack scientists didn't stop at that." She stopped and stared out my bedroom window. "You know, Dave once asked me if I knew if you had been enhanced in any way. I didn't know, of course, but it's interesting that he suspected."

"Why did he ask?"

She looked at me as if I were an idiot then started laughing. "Because you are so damned smart! And your memory ... you really amazed us when you were little because you could recite our conversations days later - verbatim, as far as we could remember."

"I did?" I laughed. "I suppose it is rather ironic that I don't remember that."

There is something we still haven't discussed yet, and that is Katia and our baby. This surprises me because I would think that she would be very interested and possibly even happy about it. But she's said nothing.

Tuesday, 19 June 2046

I met Katia for lunch Sunday. I took her to an Indian restaurant in the Outer Mission. I was craving curry again.

She's in her fourth month already. It's hard to believe: March, April, May, and now it is June. She's put on about five kilos and looks more beautiful than ever. I kept smiling stupidly. She thought it was cute.

"Of course you are happy, you don't have to carry him!" she joked.

"Him?" I asked.

“Just a feeling.”

I am overcome with emotion. When I think about the baby I want to weep with joy. When she first told me it seemed like a disaster but now I am excited.

“Do you regret it?” I asked her.

She grinned. “Not yet. It helped that Pete is okay with it ... now.”

“Now?”

“I'd never seen him so furious. He wanted to beat the hell out of you.” She looked at me apologetically.

“I guess I can't blame him.”

“How did Yenner take it?”

“Ummmm ... we really haven't talked about it much.”

“You have told him, right?”

“Oh, yeah. He wasn't happy either. I wonder if he is jealous.”

“Of ... the link this creates between us?”

“Maybe. That could be,” I said.

“You were thinking of something else,” she prompted.

“This is going to sound strange, but I think he's jealous that *he* can't carry my baby.”

We both burst out laughing, but based on various comments that he has made I do think Yenner is jealous of this very thing.

“I've scheduled the amniocentesis for next week,” she said.

“Okay.” The procedure makes me nervous for several reasons. “Would you like me to be there?”

“Pete offered too,” she said. “Do you want to come?”

“Yeah, if he doesn't mind.”

She just grinned. “I'll let him know you're coming too.”

I think it is interesting how different she seems now than a few months ago when she practically begged me to tell her what to do about her pregnancy. Perhaps that is because she has everyone's support, or maybe it is an instinctual / hormonal thing, but she is a lot more self-confident. Her response to my interest in being with her through the procedure is indicative of that. She basically told me, "you are coming whether Pete likes it or not."

I am pleased that her attitude is so healthy and that she has such a good sense of humor about it all. She is going to need it as Pete and I step all over each other's turf. I am aware of the coming - inevitable - awkwardness between us, and all I can do is be patient and aware of his feelings.

The next year or so is going to be very interesting.

"Rabiyya, I wonder if your mom would be willing to talk to me," Katia said.

"To see if she ... experienced anything unusual with me?"

"Exactly."

"I'll ask. I'm sure she would be happy to help."

We just watched each other for a few minutes. Then she asked the question that I couldn't answer: "*Did* your mom experience anything unusual while carrying or delivering you?"

"I don't know. I'll have to ask about that too."

Thursday, 21 June 2046

When I was ten and in sixth grade, my science class took a field trip to Point Reyes, which is actually on the Pacific tectonic plate. It, like everything else west of the San Andreas fault, is slowly moving north relative to the rest of North America.

The war had been over for almost three years when we found the flag. My friend Noah had seen it first and called out to me.

"Rabiyya! Come look at this!"

He was in a stand of trees a few hundred meters from the cliffs. I ran over to him. There, lying in a patch of grass and dirt in the middle of the trees, was a 50-star American flag. Others came over to see what we were looking at. It was half buried in dirt and pine needles and still attached to the top end of a flag pole which had snapped off. We just stared at it. I can remember the expressions some of my classmates wore: fear, anger, grief. Someone was crying. Someone else vomited.

During and after the short but destructive war, many people, businesses and property owners brought down their American flags. Some carefully folded them up and put them away, others organized flag burnings. More than a few kept theirs flying for months afterward in silent protest of the war and secession they believed should have never happened. Although many that opposed secession fled the west coast, others stayed, finding themselves torn between their homes and the America they loved. The year following the war was chaotic in many ways.

America had attacked its own citizens and dropped bombs on its own cities. The boundary between right and wrong became blurred for many people. Extreme opinions and reactions were commonplace, morality became highly subjective.

With reality turned upside-down, everything and everyone became a target. On both sides of the new border there was continuous violence and occasional terror attacks. Here in Pacifica, the United Nations helped the remnants of local law-enforcement agencies and the rebel forces prevent complete anarchy. Although the UN peacekeepers are long gone, the trauma of conflict and pain of separation continue to this day.

People find it easiest to think in terms of black and white, but the reality before them was very, very grey.

It was the first time I had seen an American flag in over a year and looking at it was painful. I immediately thought of you and Dad and San Francisco - home - an entire city *gone*. I felt sick to my stomach.

Noah pulled it up and held it in the air. "I think we should burn it!"

"Yeah!" everyone yelled. "Burn it!" They began chanting, "burn it, burn it, burn it..."

"No!" Someone shouted suddenly. At first I wasn't sure where the "no" had come from, then I saw everyone staring at me. I had said it.

"Why not?" Noah asked.

"We used to be Americans," I said. "Our parents were Americans."

Our parents were Americans, but we, as our media now calls us, are Generation P - the first to grow up in Pacifica.

"I was *never* an American," one of the other kids said defiantly. "All they do is drop bombs on people."

"Yeah," a girl agreed. "My mom calls them 'war-worshippers'."

Others started yelling and soon they were once again chanting, "burn it, burn it..." I looked around for the teachers and saw them standing a short distance away, just watching us. They seemed paralyzed. One of them had tears running down her face.

I grabbed the flag pole from Noah and took off running toward the water. Although I was the youngest since I had skipped two grades, I was still the fastest runner and pulled well ahead of the few that were chasing after me. When I reached the edge of the cliff I briefly stared down at the waves of the Pacific Ocean. Then, wasting no more time, I hurled the flag pole as hard as I could, throwing it like a javelin into the waves below. I could hear the flag snapping in the wind as it fell. It hit the water and was pulled out of sight by the weight of the metal pole. By the time the others caught up it was gone.

"What did you do that for?" one of the bigger boys said angrily.

"That was our past," I said, still staring at the point where it had vanished. Then I looked up at him. "Burning it won't change anything."

What I didn't say was that I couldn't bear to watch something else burn.

Tuesday, 26 June 2046

BBC World News WebSpace Archive - 24 March 2032

"We now have confirmation that a fourth missile was launched at the Arabian Republic from America's Prometheus orbital defense platform," the BBC news anchor said. "The Indian contractor for the South Asian Mutual Defense Organization confirmed that a fourth nuclear warhead was tracked to and struck the Arabian city of Medina, revered by Muslims as the City of the Prophet, but did not detonate. I repeat - a fourth American warhead struck Medina, Arabia but failed to detonate.

"It is now only hours since we saw the satellite images of mushroom clouds erupting over Mecca, Jidda and ar-Riyadh, and already millions worldwide are lashing back at the United States in any way they can. We have reports of rioting in cities across the globe as enraged protesters attack American embassies, consulates, businesses and individuals. American nationals and anyone that appears American are warned to seek shelter immediately until the rioting ends."

– To your right you can select the location of your choice for a live or 15-mlag report –

"We go live to Srinivas Ganesh in Paris where protesters have overwhelmed the Parisian police and French military..."

“Martin, fires are raging across the city as tens of thousands riot in response to the attack on Arabia and particularly the destruction of Mecca. The building engulfed in flames behind me is the Chancery of the Embassy of the United States in Paris. We do not know at this time how many people are inside the building, but we do know that the American ambassador was not in the city today. In one of the webcam feeds you can see that the Hotel de Talleyrand, which houses the Embassy Consular Services, is also burning as are American restaurants, stores and offices throughout Paris.

“Although the military has employed crowd-control devices, they have been overwhelmed by the growing number of people ...”

– feed terminates –

“We seem to have lost Srini...”

– pause –

“Nowhere are the demonstrations as large as in predominantly Muslim countries where protesters are demanding that their governments take immediate action to punish America. In Turkey, Pakistan and Indonesia, millions have poured in to the streets and are calling for war with America although those governments have not yet issued a response to the demands of their citizens. It is known that Indonesia and Pakistan have nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them, but most analysts do not expect them to actually use the weapons against the United States.

“World leaders have been quick to condemn the attack and warn of inevitable retaliation, but no one has yet specified what form that retaliation might take.

“The White House has issued a statement claiming that soon the world would thank America for destroying the heart of the so-called ‘Wahhabi Menace,’ which they claim, along with Al-Qaeda, is responsible for the destruction of much of New York City six months ago. Although the new Arabian government has painstakingly attempted to distance itself from the policies of the deposed House of Saud, it is not known how successful it has been in reducing the funding of militant Islamic extremists around the world.”

– Select to view American President’s speech –

“One moment ... one moment ... we have been informed that the American embassy in Grosvenor Square is burning ...”

I pulled off the headset and the images of buildings in flames and streets filled with millions of roaring protesters were suddenly replaced by the familiar simplicity of my bedroom. The sun was shining through the window. San Francisco was quiet.

Every American embassy and consular office was destroyed within days. Thousands of Americans were brutally murdered. The riots raged for a week until Islamic clerics joined other religious and political leaders world-wide in demanding an immediate cessation of violence pending United Nations action.

Ironically, the beginning of the Second American Civil War may have saved the entire world from war. The self-inflicted misery and strife in the United States was viewed by many as adequate punishment and talk of international military retaliation abated.

But as the War of Secession ravaged America, over a million troops that had been staged in Israel and Occupied Jordan surprised the world by marching into and occupying parts of Arabia.

America, following its expulsion from NATO and subsequent withdrawal from the UN, found itself with one remaining ally: Russia.

The occupation was mostly a failure. America did not have the resources to maintain an occupation of that scale and many of the supertankers that transported oil back across the Atlantic were attacked. The parts of Arabia that remain under American control mostly support the occupation of other parts of the Middle-East by the "Coalition."

Saturday, 30 June 2046

Yesterday, I took the PacLink and met Katia and Pete at her doctor's office in Vacaville. They gave her the results of the amnio. I tried to prepare Katia for the likelihood that they would find unusual sequences, but it could have gone better.

"The good news you already know - the baby appears physically perfect," her obstetrician, Dr. Dien said. "But the lab found some sequences that concern us." As if for emphasis she wore a very concerned look on her face.

Katia paled. I held her hand tightly, despite the frown Pete gave me. I wondered if he knew about my ... uniqueness.

"You just mean you've never seen them before, right?" I asked. "You didn't find any known defects or abnormalities."

Dr. Dien turned to me. "That's right, but just because they aren't known doesn't mean they aren't undesirable mutations. We've run every comparison we can, but we have no way of knowing how these will express."

"What do you recommend?" Pete asked.

"Since these sequences don't occur in Katia, we need to analyze the father's genes."

All eyes turned to me. I knew I would have to provide a sample. I was willing to give one. I had decided this months ago, but I wanted to see how far the doctor would push.

“If you were unable to obtain a sample?” I asked.

She looked at me as if challenging me. “Point five percent of the fetus’ genome that is unique to humans has not been seen before. That’s an astronomically high percentage to assume that the apparent mutations are all benign. The larger exceptions occur in regions responsible for synapse and brain structure, olfactory development, and glandular structures in the skin. I probably don’t have to verbalize my recommendation.”

“Rabiyya,” Katia said nervously as she cradled her stomach. “Please.”

“Please what?” Pete said with some hostility. He looked at me. “What the hell is going on?”

“This is going to sound rude,” I began. “But could Katia and I talk to Dr. Dien alone?”

“What!? The hell you will. You got my girlfriend pregnant. You created this ... thing. No, I don’t want anything else going on behind my back.”

“It’s not a ‘thing’,” Katia said. “And you left me. You said yourself you may not be back.”

Pete didn’t respond. We stared at each other. His face was red with ... anger? Shame? I felt anxious, but otherwise calm. I understood why he was upset.

“Okay,” I said finally. “You may take a sample, but I need you to promise me that you will not use the sample for any purpose beyond the analysis needed here.”

Dr. Dien looked at me for a moment. “Please follow me,” she said. She took me into another examination room and shut the door.

“Thank you,” I said.

“The results did not surprise you,” she said. “In fact, you expected them.”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Mr. Patrick, is your child genetically engineered?”

At the sound of those words my knees buckled and I found myself sitting on the floor. My chest began to hurt. “No,” I managed to say. Breathing was difficult. I put my hands on the tile on either side of myself for support.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

"I'll be fine."

"What are you not telling me?"

"Dr. Dien, I am 100% certain that you will find the same or similar sequences in me."

She actually sat down on the floor in front of me. She seemed to study me while I concentrated on relaxing and breathing. Then she asked, "have you ever heard of a company called NextGene?"

The room spun and went black.

Yenner just called. I'm meeting him for dinner so I'll have to finish this later.