

Friday, 6 July 2046

Katia's doctor is familiar with the NextGene experiments. She wouldn't tell me how, but she promised that my secret - now my and Katia's secret - was safe with her. I really have no choice but to trust her. We've managed to dance around the issue with Pete for now, but he'll have to know eventually. He already suspects something.

I had only passed out for a minute and when we returned to the examination room he was furious. He definitely has a temper, though he seems like a decent enough guy otherwise. Katia insists that his anger is from his humiliation and lack of control over the situation and that he is usually very compassionate and gentle.

It's interesting how we change when we feel threatened.

I'm sure he feels humiliated. I got his girlfriend pregnant. She has insisted that she is keeping the baby. She has insisted that her child recognize me as his (she continues to believe it is a boy) father. So if I am Daddy, what does that make Pete?

Anyway, it turned out that the unusual sequences in our baby are very similar, but not all identical, to mine. Dr. Dien has asked to examine the baby's development weekly. Something tells me that this is not necessary, but she has the authority to request a court order to terminate the fetus so we agreed to play by her rules.

It's not easy to do. The court must first choose two independent doctors and they must agree. But in this case the genetic deviations are far enough from normal that I expect the decision would be unanimous - despite the similarity to my own.

Katia is carrying my baby. The idea overwhelms me. The more pregnant she appears, the more my feelings swirl around her and the tiny miracle inside her.

It does seem like a miracle. Not only did she become pregnant, against all odds, but the idea that two young people who require zero knowledge of how the process works can create such a chemically and biologically complicated organism seems miraculous. The child seems miraculous. The process unfolding inside of her seems miraculous.

The scientist in me can explain it all away as the product of a billion of years of evolution. I can describe how it works and why. Before I was a father - *I'm going to be a father!* - it was a purely clinical process. But now it is a miracle.

My thoughts are returning to her again. Is it natural to love the woman who carries your child? Should I try to fight it? Are we hard-wired that way? She has become so precious to me now. I would do anything to protect her.

I am strangely happy. I have Yenner. I have Mom. I have Katia and I have our tiny child. I am happy. This is new.

Tuesday, 10 July 2046

A few nights ago at dinner, I finally forced Mom to talk about the baby. I didn't understand why she kept avoiding the topic. She was about to be a grandmother. I would have thought she would be excited.

"You never asked me why I carried you," she said to me. Her voice was tight. She was upset.

She was right, I had never asked. I hadn't thought about it until she told me that I wasn't technically her son, but it didn't seem to matter so I never asked.

"I just assumed you did it as a favor," I said to her. "Didn't you know them before?"

"No. We met through a surrogate agency."

"Oh," I said. I waited for her to continue.

"I can't have children of my own, honey. You're it." She smiled. It was genuine. Then her face fell again. She told me that her ovaries had never developed properly because of a genetic defect. She referred to it as primary amenorrhea.

"You have Turner syndrome?" I asked her.

She looked surprised. "How did you...?" she began, then shook her head and smiled. "That's my baby."

I tapped my head. "Good memory."

She was nodding. "Close, it is similar to Turner syndrome. It doesn't express itself as severely, but it was enough."

"I'm sorry, Mom."

"Now you are going to be a father. I have very mixed feelings about this, but it seems to be good for you. You have been very different lately. It's been nice to see."

I have been busy. Between Katia and Yenner and Al-Hurriyah and my unexpected trip to the mountains and planning for the next several months there has been more than enough to distract me from myself. And the baby has changed my perspective about a few things, especially myself.

"The baby has changed everything," I told her.

"They can do that," she said.

"You know, the fact that I can reproduce helps me feel more normal," I said. I immediately regretted it. "Oops." I winced in sympathetic pain. "Sorry."

"It's okay, I've lived with this for a very long time."

"It still bothers you."

"Yes. That part caught me unprepared, but I want you to know that I am happy about it, despite how it may seem."

"Thanks, so are we."

"And Jenner?"

I rolled my eyes. "Later on that," I said, then changed the subject. "You know, Katia wanted me to ask you something, is that okay?"

"She wanted to know if I experienced anything unusual with you?"

"Yeah." *Must be a mom thing*, I thought.

She shook her head. "Nothing the doctors thought was unusual. You were busy in the womb, but they said your activity level wasn't cause for concern."

This made me chuckle. Then she seemed to drift off. "What?" I prompted.

"There was something, but I thought I imagined it."

I waited impatiently before motioning for her to continue.

"It's going to sound strange."

"Mom, this is me. Everything about me is strange."

"After you were born you were afraid of Hassan and Dave."

"Afraid?"

"You cried when they tried to hold you. Actually, now that I think about it, you didn't like anyone but me to hold you for two or three months."

"And then?"

"Suddenly it was okay. You finally warmed up to them. As you can imagine they were very relieved. They weren't happy about being rejected by their offspring."

I have been wondering what that might have been about. Obviously something didn't seem right to me at the time. Did they smell wrong to me? I'm curious to see if my baby behaves in a similar manner.

"Do you think our family can get any less conventional?" I asked Mom as I cleaned up after dinner.

She laughed. "What is conventional anymore?"

"I don't know, but we certainly aren't. You carried the genetic offspring of two men, who has now gotten an old friend from high school pregnant despite being in a homosexual relationship himself. And this old friend of his, the one carrying his baby, is in a relationship of her own."

Mom looked thoughtful. "You do have some interesting dynamics to work out, but the most important relationships seem quite healthy and loving ... supportive."

She was right. Other than the tension between Pete and myself everything has been remarkably smooth. I then did something I haven't done in years. I gave her a hug. "I'm glad they picked you, Mom."

"I am too, honey," she said. "You're a handful, but I wouldn't trade you for the world."

Friday, 27 July 2046

We fled San Francisco. I choose the word "fled" intentionally. We were not able to make careful plans or even pack.

Around two weeks ago, in the middle of the night, Yenner and Beth came by and said we had to leave right at that moment. The group had intercepted communications between the American organization, possibly the one that had previously tried to kill us, and its operatives here in Pacifica. Not only had I been targeted personally, but multiple sites in Pacifica were going to be hit as well.

I grabbed my pads and some clothing, locked the door, and left our apartment. Mom left with Beth, supposedly for Vancouver. Yenner and I are in New Dearborn, one of the new cities in the SoCal desert. We've been here for about a week. The only news I've heard about Mom is that she is fine. She has been told that I am fine. I don't think either of us knows where the other really is. This disturbs me greatly, but I am forcing myself not to spin about it too much.

I am glad Yenner is with me or I would be truly lost. Mom has been the one constant in my life since day one and not only is she far away, but I don't know where. Yenner is with me. I have to focus on that.

We took the PacLink again. It was, as Yenner described once we got here, an E-ticket ride (I had to look that up. An E-ticket used to provide one with access to the best rides at Disneyland).

The PacLink reaches a top speed of 500 kph, although it is technically possible for it to go faster. I read about how the system works after our trip to LA:

It uses magnetic attraction to allow the train to hover above the track or "guideway." Stators are mounted along the bottom of each side of the track and support magnets are mounted on top of the section of the train that wraps under the body of the train, cradling the guideway. Onboard batteries, which are charged by the motion of the train, power the magnets that pull the train up toward the stators, thus lifting the train one centimeter off the track. Guidance magnets keep the sides of the wrap-under section of the train's body from hitting the guidance rails.

Propulsion is provided by a synchronous longstator linear motor stretched along the underside of the guideway. It uses an alternating current to generate a magnetic field that moves the vehicle without contact. Speed can be changed by varying the alternating current frequency. Braking is achieved by reversing the direction of the traveling magnetic field.

Although lift is electronically controlled by an onboard computer that is in continuous contact with the operations center by radio, everything else is controlled by operations.

There is no onboard operator. All of this is important to understand because of what happened on the way down.

We were about halfway to LA when Yenner's mobile chirped. I was exhausted but couldn't sleep, unlike Yenner who was passed out next to me and snoring softly. As dawn broke, I watched the lights outside streak by and worried about Mom. His mobile chirped again. He woke up and pulled it out of his pocket. He answered in Turkish.

I could hear another voice speaking but was unable to make out the words. He then looked briefly at an image on the mobile's screen. "I understand," he said in English. "Stand by."

He looked at me. "We have an unwelcome guest," he said as he scooted by me and into the aisle.

"They have someone on this train?" I asked anxiously.

"Worse. There's a crawler on the roof," he whispered. "It's on the seventh car and moving this way. The group has been unable to contact PacTrans operations so we are on our own."

We were in the fifth car of the eight car train.

“We have to evacuate the last three cars,” Yenner added as he ran to the back. “Stay here.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked. “I want to go with you.”

“You have to trust me, Rabiyya. I need to check something out. You are safer up here.” He pulled an object out of his bag as he disappeared through the airlock between the cars.

I looked around nervously. There were about 50 other people on the car. It was about half full. Many people heard what Yenner had said and were looking at me questioningly. I just shrugged my shoulders. A few minutes later, passengers from the rear cars began hurriedly filing through the car and toward the front of the train. The passengers from the rear were telling us that an Internal Security agent ordered the evacuation of the rear of the train. Naturally everyone was speculating that there was a bomb.

Yenner returned. “I need your help.”

He led me into the now vacant sixth car then turned to face me. “The crawler is carrying a bomb that probably will not detonate until it reaches the second car. PacTrans is unavailable so I need you to tell the computer to release the last three cars.”

I shook my head. “That won't work. We are being propelled by the guideway itself. Even if I could break into the operating system and disconnect the last three sections, they would still be pushed along with us.” I looked at the display at the front of the car. We were traveling at 480 kph. There would be no jumping out of this to save ourselves.

“Okay, Mr. Know-it-all, do you have another idea?” Yenner asked.

He knew and I knew that if the crawler sensed that it was threatened it would detonate immediately. Even if we were traveling slowly we still wouldn't be able to approach it. If we fired a weapon at it, it would go off. And I guessed that if the train slowed significantly enough to make it possible for us to get to it, it would go off too.

“How much time do we have?” I asked. I had an idea.

“It will be on our car in about 5 minutes.”

I ran toward the back of the train.

“You're going the wrong way!” Yenner called after me.

“There's no time for me to fight my way to the front!”

It took about ten seconds for the Al-Hurriyah supplied pad to break the lock of the cockpit door. Yenner stood outside the cramped cabin. “What are you doing?”

“What you asked me to do, disconnecting the last three cars.”

“You said it wouldn't work.”

“I'm also deactivating the levitation. The friction with the track will slow us down so the rest of the train can get ahead.”

“Slow *us* down? What about *us*?”

“I'm saving three hundred lives, okay?”

“Your life is more important. You are going to save a lot more than...”

“Not now, Yenner,” I interrupted. “Are you going to stay or get out of here?”

“Can you set a delay?”

“God, I hadn't thought of that.” I looked at my watch. We had about one minute left.

I raced through the operating system to see if a delay was possible. It looked like I could construct one for segment disconnection, but not levitation. I disabled the safeties and set the disconnect for 30 seconds. “We have 30 seconds to get back to our car,” I said. Then I thumbed what I hoped was the mike. “Attention everyone, please hold on. There may be a strong jolt.”

I killed the levitation in the last three cars.

Our maglev trains do not have wheels, even as a backup source of lift. They have skids that are used to stop the train in emergencies, but only when the train is moving at 10 kph or less. The last three cars of our train were suddenly being dragged along the guideway at 480 kph. The abrupt deceleration threw us forward. The train shuddered and protested. My unspoken fear that the sudden drag would tear the train apart proved unfounded, but the shrieking from beneath us was not comforting. Yenner grabbed me and bolted toward the front.

The display at the front of the end car read 440 kph as we passed by it into car seven. About ten seconds later we passed the display of the seventh car as we reached car six. It read 420 kph. As we ran through the sixth car I knew it would be very close. And there was the possibility that the crawler would detect a problem and detonate before we made it anyway.

I could see the airlock for the fifth car. It became the focus of my entire existence. Yenner had already reached it and had grasped something inside. His body was just this side of the airlock, his arm reaching back for me. Over the scream of the train's drag I could hear and feel the mechanical locks release.

I leapt, throwing myself as far as I could, reaching for Yenner's arm. As the magnetic locks released I felt his hands, first one, then both, and the rear of the train vanished behind me only to be replaced by a vortex of air that pulled at me without mercy. The breath was sucked from my lungs and my ears popped painfully, but just as I thought the vacuum would win, Yenner pulled me into his arms. Someone else sealed the airlock. Other than my ringing ears there was sudden silence. I clung to Yenner and gasped for air.

Then we heard the bomb explode, but we were racing away at over 400 kph.

Tuesday, 31 July 2046

Once the other passengers on the train figured out what had happened, they gave us a standing ovation. Yenner, still playing Mr. Internal Security agent, stood and motioned for everyone to hold their applause and sit back down. I remained crouched on the floor in front of the airlock. I was shaking. This was nothing like the time we had to jump out of the car and into the river. I was terrified beyond belief. As I write this I am breaking into a cold sweat at the memory of hanging between the separating cars in the howling wind with Yenner's powerful hand gripping my forearm. He saved me from oblivion.

"You saved my life," I said once I was breathing normally.

I pulled myself back into my body and Yenner helped me stand up. "I'm so proud of you," he said.

I looked at him, puzzled.

"You were ready to sacrifice yourself. *You saved us.*"

"What else was I supposed to do?" I asked. "Anyone would do the same."

"If they could." He said, then paused. "I'm not sure. But anyhow, it was nice to see." Then he added, "just don't do it again. You are more important than you know."

"Stop it with that! I don't need that kind of pressure. If I hadn't been on this train then they wouldn't have needed saving."

He sighed, but didn't say anything. However probable, my comment was still conjecture.

"Besides, we have larger concerns," I said.

"What?"

"If no one is able to reach PacTrans, who is controlling the train?"

“Isn't it programmed?”

“Yes, but I separated the back sections. Now that I think about it, shouldn't that trigger a shutdown of the system?”

“I don't know,” Yenner said.

“Well I do know, and something isn't right.” I looked at the speed indicator at the back of the car - 500 kph. I pointed it out to Yenner. “Why are we still accelerating? I remember during our trip down here last time we never exceeded 480 clicks.”

“Can you control the train's speed from here?”

“No.”

“That's ridiculous.”

“Well, I'll try, but I don't think the train is communicating with operations anymore, and the computer at operations controls the power to the guideway, which determines the speed.”

“Can you hack into their webspace?”

“Systems like that aren't online,” I said. “They are isolated to prevent unauthorized intrusion from ...”

“People like you,” Yenner interrupted.

I hesitated. “Yes,” I agreed. I looked at the display again: 510 kph.

At the same time that I considered getting my pad out of my pack, my one remaining pad since I had left the newer one in the end car's cockpit, and checking out the news, my eyes fell on one of the vid panels mounted on the back of each seat. I moved closer. The woman watching it offered me her headphones but I turned them down. I didn't need the audio.

In the past hour, there had been explosions at two desalinization plants near San Diego and the Inglewood Behavioral Health Clinic where I had met Cara, power and web network collapses in Seattle and the San Joaquin Valley, and the partial destruction of a PacLink maglev train en route to SoCal. We had already made the national news. I watched for news about San Francisco but there was nothing.

The fear that had been burning in the back of my head for the past few months returned. Someone had killed or was trying to kill Cara. This could not have been a coincidence. She and I had been targeted for one or more reasons. I wondered about Subject 3. Was he still alive? If so, where was he?

I struggled to control my emotions. I bit my tongue as hard as I could without piercing it. I was not going to cry. I had come to think of Cara as a kind of sister to me and had hoped to develop some kind of relationship with her. We were not related, but then we were.

The metallic taste of blood filled my mouth. I relaxed my bite.

The woman I was squatting beside pulled off her headphones and looked at me. "They said contact has been lost with PacTrans control but they didn't know anything else yet," she said. "I wonder if all of this is related?"

I swallowed. "I don't know," I said simply, but I believed otherwise. I was certain that it was related. Although I know more of the story now, when we were still on the train I could only guess. Was someone manually controlling our train or had the central computer been damaged or infected? Was the train's operating system itself infected?

"We're speeding up!" I heard another woman yell. I looked up at the bulkhead display: 550 kph. We were passing Bakersfield. If we continued accelerating at the same rate I estimated we would reach the end of the line at the Mexican border in around 45 minutes.

Yenner handed me my pack then donned his Internal Security hat again to lead me to the front car of the train. He motioned toward the cockpit. It was unlocked, which I thought was interesting. "Do what you can," he said simply.

I took a look at the view ahead and my heart skipped a beat. We really were flying along the ground. Although the guideway was elevated several meters above grade, the speed at which we passed cars and buildings and other objects was astonishing. It was also surreal because our travel was so smooth. The onrushing vista was hypnotizing. I opaqued the windshield.

I shut the door behind me. Even as we approached 600 kph the train was nearly silent. It seemed counter-intuitive even to me. Magnetic propulsion: silent. No wheels: silent. The only friction: air. I heard Yenner making an announcement to the passengers but I didn't pay any attention. I was too busy trying to figure out how to slow down or stop a train with an external propulsion source.

If I were outside, the answer would be obvious. Kill the power to the guideway. The problem with that solution is that the guideway also stops the train by reversing the traveling magnetic field. No power, no braking. Of course if power were cut I could just shut off the train's levitation and the train would grind to a halt, hopefully in one piece.

I realized that I could try that anyway, but I didn't know if it would be enough to stop us. *The electromagnets lift the train above the guideway*, I thought to myself. *I wonder if I can manipulate them into pulling us into it?* I looked at our speed: 625 kph. My options were limited; I decided to try it.

I started to open the door to tell Yenner my plan but at that moment I heard raised voices. I locked the door instead and tried not to panic. *My job is to stop the train*, I told myself. I decided to do it one car at a time beginning at the rear. I reasoned that would be the least stressful to the train's structural integrity.

More loud voices. I killed the lift to the fifth car. The cockpit shuddered but the train remained intact. I could feel the vibration of the skid plates against the guideway. I killed the lift to the fourth car and the train shuddered again. The shrieking of the skid plates became audible. Our speed was holding at around 625 kph.

Someone began banging on the door but I ignored it and turned off the third car's lift. Then the second car. Then the lead car. The train began slowing down. It was shaking violently but it was slowing down. 565 kph.

I quickly figured out how to operate the train's internal monitoring system and looked for Yenner. He was outside the door. I let him in.

"What in the hell are you doing?" he asked. "Everyone is panicking."

"I'm trying to stop the train!" I paused and listened. "I heard people yelling outside," I said, changing the subject.

"Don't worry, I have everything under control."

"Oh, you do, do you? Are you stopping the train?"

"I meant the passengers."

I found it easy to believe he had them under control. Other than his rather convincing Internal Security agent act and his unflagging self-confidence, his size alone was enough to intimidate anyone that didn't have a weapon of some kind. I realized at the time that he actually looked bigger than usual, but I didn't say anything until later. He returned to the passengers. I locked the door again.

I flew through the train's engineering plans and design manuals trying to see if I could reverse the attraction of the lift magnets. I was now desperate to stop the train, if only to silence the screaming skid plates. My ears hurt. It took me a few minutes, but I found it. In another few minutes I had re-programmed the magnets to pull us into the guideway, increasing the resistance. I reactivated the lift magnets at 10 percent and gradually increased the power. The high-pitched scream beneath us began to deepen to a groan.

400 kph. We were minutes from the Santa Clarita station. My goal became to not only stop the train, but to stop it there.

350 kph. I increased the power to 50%. As I watched our position approach the station on the map, I tried to finesse the controls to bring us to a stop at a point where we could get

off. It wouldn't do much good for me to stop us if we were several meters in the air. I had to stop the train at the platform.

250 kph. I suddenly remembered to make the windshield transparent again and did so. We had just emerged from a tunnel into a broad valley. I could see the station up ahead.

200 kph. We were still coming in too fast.

I increased the power to the magnets to maximum. The lights dimmed briefly but our rate of deceleration increased and the train skidded to a halt with the first half aligned with the platform. I smiled to myself, returned my pad to my pack and jumped up. Yenner was banging on the door again. I opened it.

“Open the doors!” he yelled at me.

“What?”

“Open the doors! No one can get out.”

I cursed myself and went back to the controls. *Shouldn't there be emergency releases?* Ten seconds later - it seemed an eternity - the train doors for the three cars that were in the station were open. I stood up but remained in the cockpit doorway.

“What are you waiting for?” Yenner asked impatiently. The exit was right next to him.

“Everyone to get off,” I said. I didn't tell him why.

Thursday, 2 August 2046

I just realized that my birthday is in six days. I'll be 22. But back to the story.

About two-thirds of the passengers had gotten off the train before it lurched forward. I grabbed on to the cockpit doorway. Several people fell down. There were screams and cries of surprise. The doors began to close on their own. I returned to the controls.

“What's happening?” Yenner yelled.

“The batteries drained. They can't maintain the pressure against the guideway anymore.” I pulled up more information. “The power being supplied to the guideway has increased as well.”

People panicked and began forcing themselves through the closing doors even as the train accelerated. I looked back into the car. It was a mistake.

A PacTrans security officer tried to force his way onto the lead car. He attempted to hold the door open but it closed on his arm. He was being dragged along. *Why didn't the door re-open at the resistance?* "Do something!" I yelled to Yenner.

But there was no time. Just as Yenner reached the door, we left the station and passed a support beam. The man slammed into it. Blood splattered across the door and windows. His arm remained in the door.

A man was killed right before my eyes.

Several people became hysterical. I was one of them. "Oh, God, Yenner. I killed him. I killed him!" I collapsed to my hands and knees.

Yenner seemed angry. "Get a hold of yourself, man! You did not kill him! He was killed by terrorists, not you! Understand?" I stared at him in shock. He was genuinely sparking off at me again. Then he turned to the remaining passengers, many of whom had gathered in the lead car and were yelling at him. "All of you will return to your seats *NOW*," he bellowed. "This is *not* the time to lose control!"

And they did. I stood back up and watched their faces. The men became as docile as puppies with their tails between their legs. I looked back to Yenner. His face was red.

"What are you looking at?" he asked me angrily. "Don't you have a train to stop?"

I didn't say anything. Then scream of the skid plates stopped. The lift was active again. The silence was shocking. I returned to the control panel.

In that short time period, the batteries had recharged enough to allow the train to levitate again. What was worse was that someone had not only wiped out my hack, but also locked me out of the system. I tried to get back in but it was sealed. I slammed my fist into the Flexiglass panel and stood up. Yenner was walking up and down the aisle like a commander, telling everyone to stay put until they were needed or given permission to move. *He does it so naturally*, I thought.

I walked into the passenger compartment. He saw me. "What in the hell are you doing?" he asked. He was actually hostile.

"I'm locked out. All of the access points are gone."

"Get back in there and figure it out," he ordered.

"I can't, Yenner," I yelled back. "I'm not a magician!"

"Then who can? You're one of the most intelligent human beings on the planet. We have a problem. Solve it."

Faces turned from Yenner to me. I imagined that everyone was thinking *who in the hell is this kid?*

I returned to the cockpit and slammed the door. I couldn't stop the train. I couldn't stop the train *yet again*. I can't do everything. Why was he piling so much pressure on me?

This side of Yenner was ugly. Abusive. I couldn't believe the way he was treating me. As if I were some unfeeling robot. I spun about that until I found myself staring at the speed indicator. 645 kph. The urgency of our situation slammed back into me.

If only I could slow us down again. It's all about time.

I was pulled to the left. The guideway was making a gentle curve to the right as we raced through the San Fernando Valley. Then as we plunged into a tunnel through the Santa Monica hills I heard a different screeching - the side guide rails.

Yenner opened the doors. "What's going on?"

I shoved aside the pain he was suddenly causing me. "We hit the side of the guideway. The train is moving too fast - it's operating beyond specifications."

"Can you drop us again?" His voice was more gentle.

"No. The system really is sealed. I wish I could just pull the plug."

We stared at each other. My eyes widened - that was the answer. He smiled slightly. "Can you?" he asked.

"Let me find them." I pulled up the design schematics again.

"Sorry I was so hard on you," he said. "It was just part of the act - mostly."

"Mostly?" I asked while I navigated the engineering diagrams. "You are training me to work under pressure?"

"Something like that," he answered.

I found the diagram I needed. I showed it to Yenner. "See this access panel in the floor? Just cut the cabling here. See?"

He nodded his head then looked at our ETA for Tijuana. "Twenty-five minutes," he said.

"Less actually. That is based on our instantaneous velocity and we are still accelerating."

"If you say so," he said.

“Yenner?”

“Yes?”

“I have to tell you something since our odds don't look good right now.”

“You don't have to.”

“Yes, I do. It's so hard for me but we don't have time.” I took a deep breath. “I love you, Yenner.”

“You've told me that already.”

“No everything. I haven't expressed how I really feel. I haven't told you, Mom, anyone. I don't even write about it in my journal.”

“Go on - just hurry,” he grinned.

“I think about you all the time. I lose sleep sometimes. You make me happy, and I haven't been happy in so long. So long. You've given me happiness again.”

What I told him is true. My unborn child gives me happiness too, and Mom, of course. But Yenner has changed my attitude in a way that I am just now realizing. He is the magician.

“Let's get to work,” he said. “You can finish telling me how great I am later.” He winked.

We ran to the last car and located the access panel - beneath seats that were bolted to the floor.

“Shit!” I yelled as I inspected the seats. “We need an Allen wrench.” I hate Allen wrenches. Everything takes one and there is never one around when you need it.

“I need volunteers,” I called out. People actually looked at Yenner to see if he approved. I envied his ability to generate respect. He nodded. I asked several people to search for a tool kit and ask other passengers if they had an Allen wrench.

Meanwhile, Yenner was trying to yank the seats out of the floor. Sweat was pouring down his face. He was sweating faster than the fibers of his shirt could disperse the water into the air. The oversized t-shirt became damp and hung from his enormous shoulders and traps. The muscles in his arms exploded with relief. *He is bigger*, I thought. I noticed several people staring at him.

“God ... damned ... Germans!” Yenner cursed. “They have to God damn over-engineer God damn everything!”

The chairs pulled out of the floor. He had stripped the bolts. "*Alhamdulillah!*" I heard a man near me exclaim. He said something else in Arabic that I didn't understand, but his accent made me think of you. I looked at him. "Are you from Saudi Arabia?" I asked.

We stared at each other for a moment, cognizant of the incalculable loss, then he said he was from Jiddah. "You?"

I shook my head. "My Abuyah. He was at the Last Hajj." He flinched as he struggled to maintain his composure. "*Yarhamohu Allah*," he said.

"Rabiyya," Yenner said gently, pulling my attention back to the task at hand. He had removed the panel. "This trunk of cables?"

"That's it," I confirmed.

He put his big hand around it and yanked. The car slammed into the guideway. I could hear the mechanical locks holding the cars together groaning over the scream of the skid plates and looked at Yenner. "We have to move quickly."

As we ran into the next car a woman stopped Yenner. She called him "sir." This still seems funny to me. She told him that she knew this segment of the PacLink well and that we were about to hit the Long Beach turn. She explained that after leaving Lawndale station the train maintained 200 kph to make the relatively tight turn east toward Anaheim and then another turn to head back toward the south-east.

We were exceeding 700 kph.

Monday, 6 August 2046

An Asian guy, perhaps Korean, had found an Allen wrench and was already unbolting the chairs in the fourth car that were covering the access panel. I looked at our position on the monitor and guessed we were about two minutes from the turn.

"Inglewood station, next stop," the computer announced. That just validated what I already knew - the operating system was seriously compromised.

"I don't think so," Yenner said in response.

"Everyone needs to strap themselves in," I said to Yenner. We ran up to the cockpit. As I sat down I could see Inglewood station a few kilometers ahead. Buildings and palm trees were flying past as we hurtled toward it. Yenner was standing behind me. I pulled my eyes away from the hypnotic rush in front of us and turned on the microphone. "Will everyone please make sure your seat belts are fastened and that all loose objects are secured, we'll hit the Long Beach turn in less than a minute."

I turned to Yenner. "Will you please go sit down?"

He was staring out the windshield and pointed to a column of smoke at about 2 o'clock.

"The clinic?" he asked.

"I think so," I said as I mapped out its location in my mind.

We were almost at the station. "Oh, God. Here it comes!" I yelled, but before I even finished we had flashed through it. Even Yenner flinched. We were traveling at 200 meters per second. "I think I'm going to be sick," I said.

"It's actually kind of exciting," Yenner said.

I looked at him as if he were insane. "Please go fasten yourself in," I said. "It isn't going to be exciting when we are all turned into chunky salsa."

"What's your gut feeling?" he asked. I knew he was asking about the train.

"I think it will hold together," I said before twisting around to look at him. "Now go sit down!"

"Here's to German over-engineering," he said. He left and closed the door behind him.

My response really wasn't true. I had no idea if the train would stay intact. Although the body of the train hugged the guideway, the train could still tear itself apart and send us flying into Torrance or Carson and that would be the end of that.

"Lawndale station, next stop" the computer said. The station announcements were surreal.

The drag created by the fifth car was slowing us slightly. I remember wondering if it would really be that bad. Maybe the train took the turn relatively slowly because it had just left Lawndale station? Maybe the turning radius was large enough. I had no time to look it up, however. A few seconds after Yenner closed the door, the breath was knocked out of me as I was pushed against my restraints. We were decelerating rapidly, as if someone had slammed on the brakes. The train leaned to the right, forcing the support magnets along the left side of the train to grind against the stators on the guideway. The bottom of the right side of the train scraped against the top of the guideway. The roar of the various materials grinding against each other was deafening.

The initial jolt was more powerful than I had expected. I wondered if everyone had put on their seat belts.

I was terrified. My heart hammered against my ribs. The train was vibrating slightly at a high frequency, but it's desire to travel in a straight line - obeying Newton's first law of

motion - seemed to keep it from shaking too much. It pulled to the right as if it were desperately trying to twist itself free of the guideway.

The seconds ticked by. Our speed stabilized. The screeching continued. The frame creaked and groaned, complained and protested, but it held. About half-way through the turn I allowed myself a sigh of relief and relaxed slightly. I wondered if this was how it felt to be on a roller coaster. They have some out in Martinez.

I was nauseous. The guideway arched through Torrance (it doesn't actually reach Long Beach). Buildings and palm trees, roads and other elevated tracks flashed by faster than I could focus on them. I had to look away before I threw up.

Yet we were still alive and several seconds later we were out of the turn, though the train still seemed to be dragging a bit. I realized that the support magnets along the left had probably been damaged. The good news was that our speed had slowed considerably. That would give us more time to disable the power to the support magnets before the end of the line at the Mexican border.

The Anaheim turn came up next and this time we were pulled to the left, though it was somewhat of a non-event since we had slowed considerably and its curve radius was much larger. I jumped up and ran back to find Yenner, who was already checking for injuries and visible damage. No one was hurt. All of the Flexiglass windows were intact. The connections between the cars seemed secure. The train was still pressure sealed. "Don't tell anyone, but I love German engineers," Yenner whispered to me.

We were traveling along Interstate 5 south at around 500 kph. Our speed continued to slow after the Korean man, his name was David, dropped the fourth car. At the time I wondered what material the skid plates were made of. They certainly could not have been designed to take so much friction. Eventually they would wear away to the bare metal of the train's body.

I looked at the map. We were about 25 minutes from the border. I asked Yenner to try to contact the authorities. If they could shut off the power to the guideway, I could stop the train.

"I just tried," he said. "I can't connect to a network." He looked worried.

No network. That was supposed to be impossible. I knew better, but it was still very bad news. The most likely possibility was internal sabotage. While David worked to remove the chairs in the third car and Yenner struggled to pull out the seats in the second car (he couldn't, his hands hurt too much), I went around asking if anyone could check the news from the outside world. The train's satellite feeds were not operating. There were no broadcasts from Pacifica. Everything seemed to be down.

Pacifica was under attack and we were stuck on a runaway maglev.

I returned to the front cockpit and looked up at the morning sky through the windshield. Aside from a few SkyScooters there was no air traffic. No fighters were scrambling. No antimissile activity was apparent. The sky looked normal. Placid. Blue.

I looked ahead. A dark cloud of smoke filled the sky in the direction of San Diego. *The desalinization plants*, I guessed. The deep blue of the Pacific Ocean stretched to the western horizon. Multi-million dollar homes climbed the landscaped hills to the left.

We were passing through Oceanside when the third car hit the skids. Our speed began to drop more rapidly. We were below 400 kph now. I had formed a habit of re-estimating our time to the border every time our acceleration curve changed and I looked down to check the distance. When I looked back up I saw a flash on the horizon and small mushroom cloud rising into the sky.

Another one.

Another one.

My body released a new burst of adrenalin. We really were under attack. My heart slammed against my ribcage.

I ran back to find Yenner and pull him back up to the front. He looked at the brown clouds climbing into the atmosphere. His face and neck flushed noticeably but didn't immediately respond otherwise.

"Ten kilotons you think?" I asked.

"Probably less. Those are ground bursts. It looks like they are targeting SoCal's water supply rather than population centers. This is some kind of strategic move."

"To show us what they can do," I guessed. "Who are *they* anyway?"

"There are a few new but surprisingly powerful groups in America that might be behind this," Yenner explained. "Most just hate us. They consider us traitors. But there is at least one, they call themselves the Reunification Army, that desires to destabilize our government with the hope that American troops can eventually occupy the country."

"That's ridiculous," I said. "Our military could easily repel such an effort."

"Oh, really? They haven't seemed very effective against this one. This isn't an old-fashioned war like your War of Secession. This is terrorism. And as America discovered, it's not easy to fight it without destroying what you stand for."

"But you don't know for certain this is the work of this Reunification Army."

“No. That’s just a guess. It could be other groups that are not directly sponsored by the American government.”

America would never openly attack us. The international response would be devastating and it was still recovering from a decade of economic and diplomatic sanctions, repeated strikes by category six hurricanes and the drain of its ongoing occupation of so much of the Middle-East. But this didn’t rule out its indirect support for organizations that would. We have enjoyed relative peace for the past ten years. I now wonder if that is over.

Our route was taking us more-or-less along Interstate 805 and we passed within kilometers of the burning rubble of the desalination plants. The sky was blackened with soot. As I watched the smoke billowing into the darkened morning my chest began to hurt. The familiar squeeze was back. I felt as if everything that had happened was a personal attack against me. Yenner later told me the same thing. “I wasn’t born here, but it is my home,” he said to me a few days later.

The train slowed even more after David and Yenner had disabled the magnetic lift to all cars. The power to the guideway failed shortly thereafter and the train abruptly and unapologetically skidded to a stop. We were at grade, between a dry riverbed and 805. The operating system reset and I opened the doors. There was about a two meter drop to the bare rocky earth.

We were in Chula Vista, about 10 clicks from the border.

Yenner and I grabbed our packs and jumped out of the train. I could see a shopping mall a short distance to the east, across the dry river. I was hesitant to leave everyone, but as Yenner said, they were safe now and we couldn’t afford to be celebrities. He began to march across the riverbed and away from the train and highway.

“Where are you going?” I asked as I tried to keep up.

“Northeast. We’ll buy some water, find a place to hide, and then wait for dark.”

“In the hills?” We were surrounded by a city, but I knew there were hills to the east.

He turned to me and smiled. “Don’t worry. I’ve done this before.”

Wednesday, 8 August 2046

I am 22 years old today.

In the past year, I have fallen in love with Yenner. I have made Katia Nasr pregnant. I have graduated from the University of Pacifica at San Francisco. I have narrowly escaped death twice. I have semi-voluntarily agreed to help an armed resistance organization end

the American occupation of the Middle-East. I have been shown that my American father is still alive. I have made plans to go visit him in America. I have met one of the other NextGene children. I have learned that I have been genetically enhanced.

I have left home. I have unwillingly abandoned my best friend, who unknowingly taught me that even the most humble person can find happiness. I have unwillingly abandoned Katia and my unborn child. I have left your best friend, Jamal, my only link to you, behind.

I have learned that no one is perfect. I have, perhaps a little, begun to accept myself. I have learned that I can exist without mood stabilizers and anti-depressants. I have learned that I can fall in love. I have learned that someone can fall in love with me. I have learned that I have a choice between a life of self-pity and acceptance of the way things are. I have learned that a gift ignored can be a curse.

I have been separated from Mom. My mom. The woman who volunteered to carry me and I'm sure has continued to carry me far longer than she ever planned.

I wish I could tell her how much it hurts to be so far away from her. I wish I could tell her how much I love her. I am surprised by how much I miss her. I know what it means to take someone for granted. Despite the loss of you and Dad, I took her for granted. She was always there for me. Always.

Once we get settled here I will find a way to reach her. I hope she is not too worried. I am safe here in this strange city of Mexica-Pacificans and the Muslims and Arabs that were able to flee America and the Middle-East before it was too late.

When I walk among them I just blend into the crowd. I am surrounded by dark-skinned people with black hair. Although most have distinctive facial characteristics, a few do not. Unless I pick up on cues from dress or speech I can't always tell Arab from Mexican. Muslim from Catholic. Many Muslim men do not wear a taqiyah. Many Muslim women do not wear a hijab. And then others look like they just stepped off the plane from Arabia in thobe or abaya.

Most of the children speak a mixture of Arabic, English and Spanish with each other and their parents' native tongue at home. The adults call it Arablish. I have learned some of it already, the grammar is very easy. I like to tease Yenner with it.

New Dearborn is in the SoCal desert east of Apple Valley. It is a dry and dusty city. The destruction of so much of our water infrastructure has forced SoCal and NorCal to increase water conservation efforts. Rationing is strictly enforced. It will be almost a year before a new desalinization plant come on line. Years before they are all replaced.

It is dusty. Brown dust covers everything. I've even experienced my first dust storm and bought my first pair of dust goggles. Fortunately, the thousands of solar nano-panels that generate so much of our energy are self-cleaning.

It is hot. The temperature has been over 40 every day since we arrived. Everyone has air-conditioning, but somehow the heat only keeps people off the streets in the afternoon. Most people go home for a mid-day nap and back to work in the evening. Few shops are open in the afternoon.

The city is white prefab and stucco buildings. An incongruous mixture of high-tech and primitive. People pull hand carts home from the souq or mercado beneath the PacLink's elevated guideway that runs through the city center. Buses and bicycles are the main transportation - private cars are rare.

It very different from home.

I have shaved my beard off again. They changed my eye pigmentation to dark brown. It is shocking to look in the mirror, but not as shocking as seeing my irises change color while I watched. The green/hazel color slowly spreading outward from my pupils, replacing the blue, darkening, and the brown following behind it. The entire process took about an hour. The effect should last around two years. It is the beginning of my new identity.

Yenner and I are living in a duplex in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood in the southern part of town. Although there is some integration between cultures and little tension, residential areas tend to be self-segregating. Adults cross cultures when they have to for commerce or municipal administration. The kids pay no attention to culture. I imagine they will create their own.

Yenner rarely leaves the building except at night. I can blend in. He can't.

Everything has changed, but I think I'm adapting to it okay. It's almost like living in another country. Like starting a new life, which I guess I am.

I was right about Yenner appearing bigger. When we returned from the Sierra, I became so wrapped up with Katia and her pregnancy that he felt like I had brushed him off. I didn't, of course. Not on purpose anyway. But as usual I was only thinking of myself. I am not used to worrying about someone else. I am not used to thinking about anyone but me. I am not used to having a partner.

Partner. That was very strange to write. Anyway, he killed time and compensated for my apparent lack of interest by working out as hard as he could. He said it helped him work off stress. He is 10 kilos heavier. I told him he is too big. He laughed at me but promised that he would lose weight.

He has some kind of surprise for me. I admit to being very excited. I can't wait to see what Big Bear has planned tonight.

Thursday, 9 August 2046

Yenner made me a cake. German chocolate with real eggs. I had no idea he could cook. We also had real milk and ice cream, which I hadn't had since before the war. The milk tasted strange, but the cake and ice cream were delicious.

I tried not to think about the saturated fats.

Cow's milk is commonly available, but it rarely comes from an actual cow. It is produced in large vats of mammary gland cells that were cloned from dairy cows. I prefer soy milk, but it was still a fun surprise. I also realized to my shame that I didn't know when Yenner's birthday was.

"You've never said anything about it. Did I miss it?" I was cleaning up the dishes in the small kitchen of our one room apartment. He was sitting on the old fashioned sofa bed. I hope to buy a better one this weekend. Yenner can't sleep on this one.

He smiled. "Nope, it is in just a few days."

"When?"

"August 19th."

"We are so close together! Why didn't you say something? Do you want anything? Why don't we go to dinner?"

"Birthdays weren't important in our family," Yenner said. "I've never really celebrated mine."

Your family was the same way. You didn't celebrate birthdays. Mom told me that you didn't even know when your parents' birthdays were.

"I don't need you to do anything for me, Rabiyya - I mean Paco." He grinned at using my assumed name.

Now that I am living on a tight budget it changes things, but I'll think of something. I can't access our accounts, but now that I am working we have some money.

I have a part-time job at New Dearborn's largest employer, uncreatively named New Dearborn Fabrication. NDF is the world's largest supplier of custom, pre-fabricated buildings. It got its start after the war by creating strong, lightweight, easy to assemble and transport structures. It was a pioneer in advanced materials fabrication and now fabricates everything from storage sheds to skyscrapers to highways.

I work in system development. I'd rather do hybrid materials research, but Jorge claims I would draw attention to myself there. He is probably right.

I am not employed as myself. I have assumed another identity. I am Paco Covas. Paco is short for Francisco. I'm getting used to it.

Speaking of Jorge, he has been teaching me the Spanish used in Mexican universities and Tejano, which a dialect of Mexican Spanish common in Texas. I have "between six and twelve months to become convincingly fluent," Jorge claims.

I'm pretty sure I can keep that schedule. I spend several hours most days with Jorge and I find it very easy.

I'm working tomorrow so it's time for bed. I didn't think I'd be able to adapt to a new routine so easily, but I did. I'm even beginning to enjoy it.

Saturday, 18 August 2046

Yenner took me to see the barrier early this morning. We drove out 10 East in an ancient fuel-cell converted truck borrowed from one of Jorge's friends. We were driving almost directly into the rising sun and even with my sunglasses the glare was painful. The windshield of the old truck was non-dimming.

I recently learned that many here call the highway east of Indio "The End" or "El Fin" instead of "The 10." After passing through the urban sprawl of Palm Springs, Palm Desert and Indio, I can see why. East of Indio and the solar energy farms, there is little other than desert littered with abandoned cars and equipment that is apparently not worth recycling - relics from people fleeing to and from California during and immediately following the war.

The security barrier between Pacifica and America runs along the SoCal-Arizona border, mostly just this side of the Colorado River. It is actually two walls running parallel, a smaller one built by America to prevent emigration and a larger one built by us to reduce terrorist attacks. The barrier connects to the border wall along the Mexican border that America built decades ago. It also seals off what is left of the Colorado River from our use, thus cities like Blythe are mostly abandoned. No water, no irrigation, no agriculture - no business.

Blythe was gutted by the end of the war but enjoyed a brief recovery during the three-year construction of the barrier. It filled with a few hundred thousands of refugees and others who assisted with rock mining, component synthesizing, transportation, assembly and support services.

The barrier stands 7.5 meters tall. The base is three meters thick. The top, one meter. It stretched as far as I could see, both north and south, but is not physically continuous. It runs north on and off until the mountains east of Death Valley and south to Mexico. Around 600 kilometers. However, the entire length is electronically monitored and

protected, even the physical sections like the one we were near. The freeway literally runs right up to it, but the last few hundred meters have been reclaimed by the desert. They are covered with sand.

After driving through Blythe, which other than the military base is almost a ghost town, we turned north onto 95 and followed it for several clicks. Yenner then turned off the highway and followed a dirt road to the foot of a low ridge. He stopped the truck. The dust from our passing overtook us. I could see nothing but dust, dirt and rocks.

“You know who built the barrier, don't you?” Yenner asked as we hiked the rest of the way up a rocky hill north of town. The sun was still climbing into a cloudless sky but the heat was already blistering.

I removed my hat, wiped the sweat from my brow and looked at him. “The company I'm working for.” There were photographs of its construction in the office.

He nodded. “It was the first large-scale use of the synthesizing technology.”

I knew this already, of course. We were surrounded by the raw materials they would have needed. The rock was crushed, separated from salt and other weak water-soluble minerals, and the remaining crystals stimulated to grow together until they became a slab of solid rock of the required shape and density.

I stopped and looked east. For the first time, I could see to the other side of the barrier. I could see Arizona. America. The border was a few kilometers away. I resisted the impulse to hide. “They could see us here, Yenner,” I said. It made me nervous.

“Let them.”

“Someone could shoot us.”

“They can try.” Yenner turned and looked across the border too. He took my hand. “I can't believe you are going through with this.” He was referring to my planned trip to America to meet Dad.

“I have to go.”

“No you don't. You choose to go.” He released my hand, took a drink from his water bottle and wiped his mouth.

“If you had the chance to see your father again, wouldn't you?” I asked him.

“I can't see my father, Rabiyya. They killed my father.” His face became hard and he stared into the east. “They killed my family.”

Yenner then did something I had never seen before. He began to weep. "They were tortured." A pause, then in a broken voice that grew louder: "They were tortured. And for what? Why?!"

Tears were suddenly streaming down his face. He picked up a rock and threw it toward the barrier. It flew an astonishing distance. "Fuck you!" he yelled at America as he threw another rock. "FUCK YOU!" Then he fell to his knees and continued to cry. "I miss them so much. They're all gone." His face contorted into expressions of pain I would have never believed possible from him. "Oh, God it hurts," he whimpered.

I stared at him, stunned. My Yenner that was always so strong and confident was on his knees in tears, right in front of me. I didn't know what to do. He had comforted me for so long that the sudden change in dynamic left me confused. Finally, I knelt down before him and put my right hand against his stubbly cheek. "I'm sorry, Big Bear. I'm sorry. I wish there was something I could do."

"You could stay here. I don't want to lose you too," he said. "Please."

We were silent on the walk back to the truck, but the voices in my head wouldn't shut up. I am being selfish for planning this trip? This mission? It scares me to death yet I know I will try it. The opportunity to see my father - the opportunity to bring him back despite everyone telling me that is impossible - is too important to me.

Is that selfish? *Yes.* Is that fair to Yenner or Mom? My unborn child? *No, but I'm going anyway.*

Monday, 20 August 2046

Yenner's birthday was yesterday. I bought him a self-inflating mattress that is strong enough to support his weight. He had been sleeping on the floor because he found the old sleeper-sofa so uncomfortable, but he liked the new mattress.

He apologized for losing control of his emotions during our trip to the barrier on Saturday. I didn't tell him so, but in a way it was a relief to see that he can become so upset - that I'm not the only one. It makes him a little less larger-than-life and a little more human.

"Remember when we were at Faisal's house and I told you to accept yourself for who you are and where you came from?" Yenner's inhumanly muscular and naked body was splayed out across the new mattress.

"Of course," I answered. "But it's difficult to have a serious conversation with you displaying yourself like that."

“Do you think about sex every time you see me naked?” he asked.

“Yes. I'm a 22 year-old male. What else do you expect?”

The truth is that I think about sex every time I see him. He doesn't have to be naked. He doesn't have to be shirtless. He just has to be within my field of vision and I want to jump on and drown in his scent while I caress and kiss him from head to toe.

He ignored my question. “The anger and guilt I felt after the war, anger at the Americans, guilt at abandoning my family, very nearly destroyed me. About a year after the war, I was approached by a group - I'll call them a former fragment of Al-Qaeda - and they ... they ...” He paused for a few minutes. “They were looking for suicide bombing candidates,” he finished quickly.

“Obviously you turned them down,” I said.

“No. I didn't turn them down. I accepted. It was perfect - I could end my own misery and take a few hundred Americans out with me.”

I didn't respond.

“Remember, I was just around your age and had experienced several months of hell at the hands of the Americans.”

“You don't have to defend yourself to me,” I said. “You must have reconsidered or you wouldn't be here now.”

“At the same time I was training with them, someone I worked with, I was doing construction, told me about a refugee support agency. Its philosophy was based on learning from, accepting and working with adverse life events rather than fighting them or seeking revenge.”

“When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.”

He chuckled. “Yes, but a bit more sophisticated than that. Anyway, they had a support group that I went to every night that I wasn't training with the Al-Qaeda cell. You probably aren't familiar with Taoism.”

“No.” He was right, I wasn't. I had only heard of it.

Yenner told me that according to a Chinese philosopher, Lao-tse, the earth is essentially a reflection of heaven, and thus it is run by the same laws as is heaven, rather than the laws of men. These laws dictate everything from the movements of the planets and stars to the activities of animals and the properties of rocks. According to Lao-tse, the more humans interfered with the natural balance produced and governed by these universal laws, the more distant harmony and peace became. The more forced, the more troubled. All things

already have their own nature built-in and these inherent attributes cannot be violated without creating difficulties. Once arbitrary human rules were imposed, struggle was inevitable.

“The basic Taoism they focused on was just a certain way of appreciating, learning from and working with whatever happens in life,” Yenner continued. “To a follower of Taoist philosophy, the natural outcome of such a harmonious way of living is happiness.”

“And this philosophy saved you.”

“Yes. Yes, it did. But I still fail sometimes. I don't like it when allow myself to react the way I did at the barrier.”

“It sounds like New-Millennial hocus-pocus,” I said.

He sighed. “Look, Mr. Genius, just think about it, okay? I knew you would say something like that, which is why I haven't brought it up until now. But as smart as you are, you don't know everything, so I just want you to think about.”

“You quit the al-Qaeda group,” I said, changing the subject.

“I turned them in. The new government was terrified of rogue groups attacking America from here - they didn't want to give the Americans an excuse to strike back.” He paused as if considering what to say next, then grinned. “The government offered me a different job.”

“A job ... in ... Internal Security?” I asked, putting the pieces together. “You are an Internal Security agent?!” It was half-question, half-exclamation. It explained his demeanor and role on the runaway train, though it didn't explain his most recent job or his participation in Al-Hurriyah.

“Technically I'm a reserve now, but yes.”

“Any particular reason you didn't tell me this earlier?”

“Not really,” he said. “I'm telling you now.”

Neither of us said anything for a while, then he broke the awkward silence. “Care to join me on this new heavy-duty mattress you bought?”

It seemed like a distraction, but if so it succeeded. However, I still plan to bring this up again. I've also been thinking about this Taoist philosophy of his. If it helped Yenner overcome, or at least manage the demons in his past, there might be something to it.

Sunday, 25 August 2046

The earthquake began immediately following the noon call to prayer yesterday. Yenner and I were hiking up to a peak about 600 meters above the valley floor. We were about half-way up when it struck.

The landslide began several seconds later.

I was about 20 meters ahead of Yenner (I discovered that my endurance at least was much greater than his) and turned back to check on him. New Dearborn sprawled across the valley behind him, brown and white beneath a hazy but cloudless sky. The sun blazed overhead. His hat and t-shirt were soaked with sweat.

He paused in his tracks and looked at me uncertainly, then crouched onto all fours. "Get down!" I heard him yell over the roar of the shaking earth. He was pointing uphill. I turned to face in the indicated direction but the heaving earth caused me to lose my footing. As I fell, I saw a rock, perhaps the size of a baseball, flying directly at me.

The mountain was no longer moving, but I remained flat on my back on the parched hillside. My camelpack, filled with water, had landed across my chest. I could feel that I was coated with dust and dirt. A few sharp objects - rocks or dead scrub - dug painfully into my skin. My head throbbed. I tried to call out for Yenner but my mouth refused to operate. In fact, I quickly realized that the only thing I could do was breathe. I was paralyzed.

With my eyes closed, all I could see was the red glare of sunlight filtering through the translucent flesh of my eyelids. The distant cry of alarms and sirens floated up from the city. Something told me that Yenner was still alive, but what if he were injured? No one knew where we were.

As I contemplated death by exposure and dehydration, my mind filled with panic. My body filled with useless adrenaline. Then I heard your voice.

At first, it seemed to be very distant. I could not understand the words, but it was unmistakably you. You were repeating something and with each repetition the phrase became clearer and clearer, louder and louder. You were rapidly approaching as if flying toward me across the valley.

Am I dreaming or hallucinating?

You seemed to hover immediately above me. "Listen to me," you said. But you weren't only speaking English. At exactly the same moment, you said, "*escúchame.*" At exactly the same moment, you said "*asmaa nassiHatii.*" It was as if there was a chorus of you, simultaneously demanding the same thing of me in a hundred different languages.

I could smell you and the panic dissipated. The pain dulled. "Listen to me," the chorus of your voice repeated. "*Escúchame / asmaa nassiHatii.*"

"Speak / *habla / atkalam,*" you directed.

"Abuyah," I said. My jaw opened. My tongue moved. My lips parted. I could hear my voice. *I am not paralyzed. I am dreaming.*

"Listen to me, Ibnii," you said. And the chorus of your voice began to tell me a story.

A black void, then another voice. Female with British accent ... a reporter. A major earthquake in South California.

An earthquake. A landslide. Your voice. *Yenner.* I sat up but the blinding pain in my head immediately sent me back into the pillow.

"Yenner?" My voice was a croak.

I heard movement in the dark. "I'm here," he said from my left. A drinking straw against my lips. "We're at home." I emptied the water glass. I kept my eyes closed.

Home. Our temporary home in the desert. I knew that already. The familiar scents of the darkened room gave it away.

"You carried me down the hill," I said.

"Yeah, and drove you to the clinic." *Yenner* told me that they did a few quick scans, diagnosed me with a mild traumatic brain injury and pronounced me stable. The PA provided a portable monitoring device and sent me home to rest. I reached up with my left hand. Several leads were attached to my scalp. An egg-sized lump, presumably where the rock hit, felt attached to my skull. "Do you remember what happened?" he asked.

"My head got in the way of a rock?"

A soft chuckle. "Pretty much. It was actually a big clod of dirt. Do you remember what happened after that?"

The next thing I remembered was the voice of a female Brit. "No."

"They said there may be some temporary memory loss."

"That's common with MTBIs," I said. *Thirsty.* "Can I have some more water?"

I opened my eyes and watched Yenner walk over to the sink by the light of the media panel. None of the lights were on so it was the only source of illumination in our apartment. He had muted the audio. I watched the light, changing in color and brightness, play across his body.

The wires pasted to my head led to a small white box on the end table to the right of the sofa bed. I was tempted to disconnect it but instead performed a quick self-examination, stretching and moving my arms and legs, fingers and toes. Yenner had returned and was watching me with a soft grin on his face. "Everything's still there," he said.

"My back hurts."

"Your backside is pretty badly bruised. You fell flat on your ass."

Yenner handed me the glass of water. I emptied it again. "Are you hungry?" he asked.

"No, just very sleepy. I have to pee though." After he helped me to the restroom, I fell asleep immediately.

My memory was back this morning, but not entirely according to Yenner. He told me:

"Most of the landslide was to our south, but some stuff was still falling around us. Between that and the swaying mountain, I couldn't get up. Once the shaking subsided, I ran up to you. You were ... talking, but not to me. You kept saying 'abuyah,' so I think you were dreaming about your Arab father."

"What was I saying?"

"You still don't remember?"

I hesitated. I did remember talking to you, or rather you talking to me. You told me a story, but I don't think you finished. I'm not sure, because I can't recall what it was about. Only that it was very sad. I shook my head slowly (it still hurt). "No. What did I say?"

"I don't know." Yenner's brow furrowed. "You were speaking in Arabic."

Monday, 26 August 2046

"This is a waste of time," I said as I pushed away from the round table near the center of our apartment. "I can't speak Arabic."

Yenner, Jorge and Isaac, an Arab-speaking acquaintance of Jorge's, remained seated. Deep amber light fell limply through the front blinds. The sun was dimmed by the smoke

from the cat 3 forest fire up at Big Bear. Other than the sound of the air conditioning compressor laboring to maintain a tolerable temperature in the afternoon's blast furnace, the room was quiet. I walked over to check the air filter.

Isaac is Christian Lebanese. I guessed him to be around 40 years old. Although his family is Eastern-Orthodox, they were still persecuted enough during the height of the anti-Arab hysteria that they came to Pacifica.

Yenner had called Jorge earlier that day and told him he heard me speaking Arabic. After church, he showed up with Isaac and an idea.

"You spoke several sentences in Arabic," Yenner said. "Quite fluently."

"It's just a harmless experiment," Jorge said.

"Nothing involving Arabic is harmless," I said blandly as I examined the filter. I had changed it when we occupied the duplex, but it was already dark brown. I fetched a new one from the kitchen and replaced it.

"Would you please sit down and relax?" Yenner asked impatiently.

"Okay." I returned to the table. "Fine. What do I do?"

"I want you to tell Yenner a short story," Jorge began. "It doesn't have to be interesting or clever. Just something you did last week. From work, maybe."

"Well, I've been pretty busy at work."

"But non-technical," he added. "You'll understand why later."

I actually understood then. I suspected that Jorge wanted me to tell Yenner the story in English, him the story in Spanish, then repeat the story in Arabic. Technical jargon can be notoriously awkward to translate. As it turned out, I did have a story. An interesting one about a co-worker's experience coming to California during the war. I started to relay it to them.

Her name is Carol Martinez and she works in system development. I began working with her on a project last week. She knows her way around the OMR better than anyone else at NDF.

"What's the OMR?" Yenner interrupted.

"The Open Module Repository," I told him. "It's a on-line database of open-source modules designed to be used like pre-fab building components, except for software systems."

“Probably too technical,” Jorge said softly.

Yeah. Well, he asked. Anyway, she was born in Santa Fe, New Mexico and was ten years old during the war. Her family was Mexican, Catholic, and thus a target (Jorge whitened visibly at that. I asked him if he was okay but he merely motioned for me to continue.)

Her parents packed her and Oscar (her older brother) into their old off-road tribrid and joined the flood of “traitors” fleeing to California. As they neared the Arizona border, the freeway...

“I-40?” Yenner asked.

Yeah. The freeway became a parking lot. The car was an old Toyota four-wheeler with new batteries and solar plate upgrades, but it still used gas. As they sat on the freeway losing sunlight, her dad realized it wouldn't take many vehicles running out of fuel to effectively shut down the freeway. He took them off-road near Gallop.

Although the military had scrambled America's GPS system, the Toyota's nav system could pick up Japanese GPS sats and they made it to highway 264 and crossed into Arizona. Her father's decision to turn off the freeway proved to be a good one. Minutemen had blockaded 40 at the border and weren't allowing westbound traffic through. The last of the sporadic radio reports they received claimed they were killing people - mostly Mexicans and Arabs.

Highway 264 was more or less clear to Tuba City, which is roughly halfway between California and New Mexico, where they were lucky enough to find fuel. But there they had some decisions to make. West cross-country? The Grand Canyon was in the way. North to 15, which would take them to Las Vegas? Back south to 40?

At the gas station in Tuba City, a trucker told them that he heard via his CB radio the area near Las Vegas was literally a war zone. If true, 15 was no longer an option. They took highway 64 south to the interstate and resumed the push west.

Fuel was hard to come by. Some fuel stations had already run dry. Others would only sell to people traveling in the “correct” direction. Owners and clerks wouldn't ask directly, but just for ID. Trying to buy gas in Arizona with a Texas ID? You might be out of luck.

Travel, which was made difficult enough by the volume of traffic and shortage of fuel, was further impeded by the war itself. Although there was no military activity in the area at that time, the fighting reached down to the individual level. Soldiers or civilians, Americans were now killing each other.

Sometimes they had to maneuver around a stationary car, windshield shattered, interior blood-splattered. Sometimes they found clusters of bullet-ridden cars, the killers, presumably heading east, long gone. In other places they passed bodies set off to the side

of the highway. She later found out they had been executed as traitors by pro-American vigilantes.

Carol witnessed the fighting first-hand. In the middle of their third night on the road, gunfire dragged her unwillingly into consciousness. A man just behind them on the eastbound side of the highway was standing in the bed of a pickup, screaming and firing an automatic weapon into the river of California-bound headlights. She couldn't parse what he was yelling, if he was saying anything at all, and they shrank into their seats until someone finally took him out with a single shot. She couldn't tell which side of the freeway their savior fired from, but it didn't matter. More gunfire began to erupt from the eastbound side of the divide. Cars, including theirs, scattered off the highway. Her dad took them off-road again.

They continued west, headlights turned off and apparently alone, along a road that paralleled highway 68 out of Kingman. They drove slowly in darkness through a basin to the north of the highway, but could easily see the lights of two lines of cars. Both lanes were moving westbound. A fuel tanker truck was also on or just off the highway but stationary. Oscar looked through the binoculars and announced that it was refueling vehicles. Someone was either selling or giving away fuel. Oscar kept the binoculars on the truck as the Toyota crawled west.

The truck was on the horizon behind them when it silently vanished in a blinding flash and was replaced by a flaming ball that climbed into the early morning sky. The distant roar of an explosion followed, at about the same time Oscar saw a military helicopter flying low above the highway. He soon realized it was firing at the vehicles.

The relatively orderly lines of cars transformed into in a cloud of rapidly dispersing vehicles. The copter made a return pass through the now random beams of headlights, still firing, but disappeared into the east. They didn't see it again.

By the time they and several other vehicles that survived made it to the Colorado River, the bridge across to Laughlin was impassible. The crush of cars driven by people panicked by the helicopter attack blocked the road. However, the nav system revealed a set of service roads toward another bridge and Carol's father led his accidental convoy north toward Davis Dam.

"The bridge near the dam was still open," I finished. "That's how they made it here."

For several seconds the sound of the A/C again dominated the room. It was Jorge who finally spoke. "Catholics are barely tolerated in America now."

"You have family there," I said. Given his previous reaction I seemed likely.

"Yes."

We were silent again, each of us lost in thought. Jorge was doubtlessly thinking about his family. I imagined Yenner was remembering his own adventure to reach California. And I was wondering how effectively I'd be able to tell the story in Spanish after only a month of lessons.

Tuesday, 27 August 2046

It turned out that telling the story in Spanish was easier than I expected. I stuck to the verb tenses that I knew, and Jorge only had to help with vocabulary a few times. Telling the story in Arabic wasn't easy on anyone.

Jorge later told me that Yenner suspected I was subconsciously blocking my knowledge of Arabic. Assuming he was right, the logical question was how to remove that block. Jorge's answer was to drug me. He stood from the table, casually walked around to me and quickly pressed a redy-ject into my deltoid. About two seconds later, Yenner slammed him against the wall. His feet dangled in mid-air as he struggled to breathe.

"Explain NOW," Yenner ordered.

Isaac backed away.

"It's just a mild barbiturate to help him relax," Jorge said between gasps. "I couldn't very well hit him in the head again."

"You gave him a *truth serum*?" Yenner asked incredulously. His face was angry and red. Saliva sprayed from his mouth. He slammed Jorge into the wall a few more times. "What the hell are you doing with a truth serum anyway?" Jorge kept trying to speak but Yenner continued to cut him off. "You dragged us down into this arid wasteland and start shooting up the only person I've been able to love in years?" He yelled. "Why?" Again he slammed him against the wall. "WHY?"

"You're hurting me," Jorge managed to choke out. I looked back at Isaac, who was silent but visibly distressed.

"Yenner, stop!" I said. I stood up go to Jorge's defense in some way. I understood his motivation. I understood his approach. It wasn't the class of drug I would have chosen, but it was obviously all he could get at the time. I tried to take a step but began to feel light-headed. I dropped back into my seat. Yenner noticed.

"Are you okay?" he asked. Yenner seemed suddenly aware that he and Jorge were not the only people in the room.

“Getting a bit woozy,” I said. “It’s okay though.” I watched his face. The rage seemed to dissipate, but he continued to hold Jorge against the wall and off the floor - something he seemed to be able to do indefinitely.

Isaac helped me over the sofa. “How do you feel?” he asked.

“Strange,” I said.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know he was going to do that.”

“Jorge or Yenner?”

He almost laughed. “Jorge.”

“It’s okay.” I believed him.

Yenner and Jorge’s voices seemed to retreat into the distance as Isaac made small talk with me. I felt myself falling into a trance-like state as I zeroed in on his face. Very handsome but haunted somehow. His skin was quite fair, his eyes dark and expressive. He had short salt and pepper hair behind a retreating hairline. I suddenly felt a great fondness for him - a drug-induced effect, I knew.

Jorge had administered the drug intramuscularly. I was surprised it was already taking effect.

“Can you tell me how Carol arrived here again?” He asked after we had been talking for a while. “I just want to make sure I have the details right.”

I repeated the story to him.

“Your father was from Mecca,” he said once I had finished.

“Yes.”

“That’s very interesting. Your accent is distinctly Jiddawii, not Meccan.”

“My accent?”

“Rabiyya.” I heard Yenner say. “You can stop now.” He and Jorge were seated at the table normally, facing Isaac and me as if nothing had happened. I had forgotten they were in the room.

“Stop what?”

“Speaking Arabic. You’ve been doing it ever since you sat down on the sofa.”

In Jiddawii. Jorge and Yenner think it is some kind of miracle. I'm wondering if I have more suppressed memories from childhood. What do you think, Abuyah? If you didn't teach me Arabic, who did?

Sunday, 16 September 2046

It's been two months since we left San Francisco. I miss it. I miss trees and cool air and watching the fog flow around Twin Peaks in the late afternoon. I miss our simple but modern flat and riding through familiar streets. I miss hanging out with Mark and visiting Jamal and biking to Yenner's apartment in the Marina.

I really miss Mom. I am not certain of why they separated us. I have been spinning about it a lot recently. Yenner hasn't provided a good explanation, though perhaps he doesn't know himself. I've asked Jorge if I can speak to her live - I could set up a secure connection myself - but he keeps putting me off.

I have nightmares that I can't find her.

My life has settled into a routine. I work three days a week - Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday - then have Spanish and Tejano lessons Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Jorge is Catholic - very Catholic - so we don't meet on Sundays. I seldom work from home, mostly to give Yenner some privacy since he rarely leaves the duplex and it is stressful for us to be together in this room all the time.

During the several weeks that I've been working, I have designed and implemented a new project costing application, redesigned the operations interfaces to be more efficient and robust, and read every white paper on NDF's smart materials products I could find. The latter is my own personal interest, but my boss is so impressed with how fast and accurate I am that she has stopped paying any attention to what I am doing.

"Are you certain you aren't an android?" she asked me. I know it was meant as a humorous compliment, but it stung.

I find that I enjoy working. Solving problems in class was fun sometimes, but creating solutions that are actually used is particularly rewarding. This makes me look forward to the future, assuming there will be a future, which is something I usually avoid thinking about.

My relationship with Yenner is so different now. Living together has changed so much. I don't know if I am falling more deeply in love with him or if I am transferring some of my attachment to Mom onto him. Maybe both, but I think about him whenever my mind is idle, and when he is near me I can't take my eyes off of him. His insanely massive body, which I thought somewhat gross at first, now fascinates me. The swirls of thick

brown hair on his chest, arms and legs - so soft when I touch them - are hypnotic. I can't get enough of him. He's supernatural.

Of course, being genetically modified does make him supernatural.

He has taught me to look at myself in a different way. I had convinced myself that there was something intrinsically wrong with me and he has somehow broken through that. I can't say that don't still feel like a freak sometimes, but maybe being a freak isn't so bad. Yenner is a freak, or at least very unusual, and he is completely comfortable with himself. But then he did agree to the selective gene replacement therapy. I had no such choice. I was designed this way.

Does it really matter that my genes came from two men? Does it really matter that I have sequences engineered into me that don't occur naturally in humans? When I start to doubt myself I try to remember what Yenner said to me: "You have a choice." That simple statement made so much sense. I can either fight what I am and be miserable or I can accept it.

For all my mental horsepower I couldn't think of that for myself. He is a miracle.

Friday, 28 September 2046

Last night, Yenner showed me the final draft of the Internal Security report on the July terror attacks. The report, which is several hundred pages long, is still confidential. I didn't ask him how he got hold of it. It doesn't matter.

I scanned much of it.

Within a few hour period in mid-July, five desalination plants off the SoCal coast were destroyed from the inside by tactical nuclear weapons, the clinic in Inglewood where I met Cara burned down in an unsolved case of arson, all wireless networks in the country failed, other networks such as the web and power distribution failed in several locations, the PacLink was attacked, and our communication satellites were temporarily disabled.

Other than two events that did not seem to fit in with the rest, the attacks were confined to our water, power and communication infrastructure and were performed by insiders. Pacificans. Several have been arrested.

The attack on our train and fire at the clinic were anomalous and the investigators were unable to determine a purpose. In fact, although the report gives a probability of 50% that the clinic fire was not related, I believe otherwise. They don't have all the facts.

The good news about this is that the government is apparently unaware of me and Cara. The bad news is that Yenner's suspicions were right - the Reunification Army of America

was responsible for the attacks. Worse news is that Pacificans are cooperating with the RAA to bring down our own government.

It makes no sense. Our standard of living is much higher than America's. We enjoy far greater freedom of expression, travel, education and religion - in fact religion is not permitted in our government at all so that one religion can't dominate another. Our economy is larger, despite having one-third the population. Our violent crime rate is a fraction of America's. I don't understand why a Pacifican would want to reintegrate the two countries. What's in it for them?

The report explored a few possible reasons. Some people, mainly in SoCal and the Central Valley, were opposed to the idea of secession from the beginning and would like to see America made whole again. According to them, "the left coast's arrogant and cowardly secession" removed its moderating influence from the rest of America and allowed it to descend into extremism (as if it wasn't extreme before the war?). Although currently unworkable because of the economic, political and social difference, reunification is not inconceivable if America swings back from its current far right-wing Christian government and returns to a secular democracy.

Others support reunification for various emotional and personal reasons such as seeing their family members again, being able to return home, or just wanting to have the United States back again.

The report considers RAA's threat to Pacifica "real and distressing" but considers the possibility of it successfully destabilizing the country "unlikely."

After the attacks - and I saw this myself - Pacificans expressed overwhelming support for their government and country. If anything, the attacks had the opposite of the "apparently intended goal."

Apparently intended goal. "Apparent" because no one here is certain of the intent behind the attacks. Was it vindictive in nature? A warning? A strategic move? Could there be more and larger ones to come? The three most likely reasons presented were:

1. the attacks were demonstrative in nature - that is to show what they were capable of
2. the attacks were intended to destabilize the country
3. the attacks were some type to test. They were to "feel us out"

The report listed several recommendations for increasing our already high security and preventing similar attacks, but I do not think they will be effective. The next time the RAA attacks, I suspect it will be in a very different way.

Monday, 1 October 2046

It has been so hot that we've started rationing power in addition to water. It's not miserable, but it's close. Even though we are surrounded by solar power farms and many of the buildings in the Los Angeles area generate their own electricity, thirty million people seeking relief from the heat generates a lot of demand.

It is too hot to go outside, so we have just been sitting here talking and reading. In one conversation I explained my theory of how the messages were transmitted into our floor cleaner. In another conversation Yenner claimed that I don't know as much as I think I do.

The messages. In my quantum physics class, my instructor presented the theory of "Remote Particle Manipulation," in which by taking advantage of certain properties of one or more Higgs fields, the properties of existing sub-atomic particles in one physical location can be altered from another physical location. At the time she claimed that this had never been successfully demonstrated, but she was also confident that it was possible.

This is how I think the message-embedded viruses were "sent." Physical or electromagnetic access was not required. Someone with an extraordinarily accurate mechanism rearranged enough electrons to alter part of the floor cleaner's system code into a virus. If I am right, and a hostile party does possess this technology, the implications are horrifying.

There are holes in my own theory. I assume that for al-Hurriyah or a contracted group to transmit the messages as they claimed, they must have access to RPM technology. If this is true, they could use it to defeat the Israeli-American defense system in Jordan. Yet that has not happened.

Yenner. I complained to him that Jorge was not available on Sundays because he spent so much time at church. "It's a waste of his time," I said.

"Jorge doesn't think so."

"He believes in something for which there is no evidence."

"So do you," Yenner said.

"What do you mean?"

"Jorge has faith in the existence of God."

"Exactly," I agreed. "Faith."

"And you have faith that God does not exist."

“Yenner, the default condition for the existence of anything is skepticism. The burden of proof rests on the person asserting that something is real.”

“But it is still faith.”

I sighed. Yenner is right. I do not believe in God, yet there is no evidence that God does not exist. I can't prove that God does not exist, but using probability calculus I could demonstrate that he is highly improbable. I'm not sure I could explain this in terms Yenner would understand, but it wouldn't make a difference if I could.

It was highly improbable Katia would become pregnant, but it happened.

It seems highly improbable that I can speak Jiddawii Arabic, but I can.

Friday, 5 October 2046

Katia has disappeared and taken any remaining sense of serenity I possessed with her. I am again a ball of anxiety, only this time I do not have drugs to help me through. Jorge appeared at our door this morning and delivered the news in person. They think they know who has taken her and where she is.

“When did this happen?” I asked.

“Three days ago, though they only contacted us yesterday. They want you in exchange for her.”

“We have to go after her,” I said. “She's carrying my child!”

“She's carrying your child?” he said slowly, in disbelief. His eyes moved from me to Yenner and back again. Yenner nodded.

“Do you mind if I sit down?” Jorge asked, then walked to the sofa and sat down without waiting for a response. He looked at me. “*Eres un hombre muy interesante, Señor Covas. ¿Por qué no me dijiste?*”

“Because I thought the fewer people that knew, the safer she would be,” I responded in English.

“*Eso no es un buen plan.*”

“*Creo que debemos hablar en inglés alrededor de Yenner,*” I said, telling Jorge that I wanted to stick to English near Yenner.

“*No estoy hablando a Yenner. Te estoy hablando.*”

“Do you mind?” Yenner said finally. “Let’s get to the point - what’s the plan?”

“The plan is,” Jorge began, “there is no plan.”

“Then we’ll make one,” Yenner said. He went to the closet, pulled out his backpack, and turned to Jorge. “Let’s go.”

“Wait a minute. I’m going too,” I said.

“No,” Jorge said emphatically. “That is what they want. And besides, we really need you here. We are ready to put you to work on our little Middle-Eastern problem.”

“It’s my baby!”

“I’ll bring her back,” Yenner said.

“How?” I asked. “You? Alone? They will see you coming before you even know where you are going!”

“I can handle this.”

There was Yenner’s self-confidence again. He has reason to be confident, but I worry that over-confidence will get him killed.

“Handle what? You don’t even know what you are up against!”

“I spent ten years with Internal Security. I’ll tell you about it sometime. I know the risks. I know what I’m doing. Besides, I’m bored as hell here.”

I looked at Jorge. “No one can know that it is my baby. She will be a lot more than a hostage then.”

Yenner told me that he loved me. I told him that I loved him. Jorge told me to meet him at his house at noon. They left. I remained standing facing the closed door. The room was quiet. The kitchen was to my left. Papers and printed books about smart materials and advanced system security were in a pile near the table to my right. The sofa was behind me, Yenner’s inflatable mattress rolled up next to it. I wondered if he would ever use it again. I resisted the impulse to run after him.

I turned to the table. Yenner’s breakfast - a frozen blueberry, soy milk and protein concoction - was half-finished. Suddenly I could hear the kids across the road playing out front, screaming and laughing, oblivious to the fact that I am now completely alone.

I did meet Jorge at noon today, but I could not concentrate. I peppered him with questions about Yenner’s plan but he wouldn’t discuss them. “*No te preocupes, Paco. El te entrará en contacto con pronto,*” he said, telling me that Yenner would be in touch with me soon.

This did bring some relief, but I am still alone.

Saturday, 20 October 2046

Yenner has been gone for two weeks. I received one message from him last weekend. He sent it via smagent. The message was brief:

It is more difficult than I thought to write. I must be careful, but I know where I am going.

I love you and can't wait to have you in my arms again. I will write again next weekend, hopefully with good news.

Yours,
me

It is now "next weekend," Saturday night to be specific, and no message yet. I am unable to sleep without being heavily sedated. My heart rate has been rapid since he left. When I lie in bed I hear it pounding instead of the soft purr of Yenner's snores. When I wake up the panic seizes me again.

I have tried to visualize him in the act of rescuing Katia and I fail. I do not know where they are holding her. I do not know how he plans to get access to her. I do not know how he plans to get her back here. Her and our baby, which is due in only six weeks.

I feel very helpless. I am unable to contact any of the ones I love. I am unable to help any of the ones I love. All I can do is work, learn and worry.

Sunday, 21 October 2046

It is Sunday night and there is still no word from Yenner. I hate this. I hate not knowing where he is, not being able to help, not knowing if he is even alive.

I wish I had demanded to go with him. At least we would be together.

Today I talked to the mother of the two kids across the street. She had been walking home from el mercado at the same time as I and recognized me. She is from San Antonio. We spoke Spanish the entire time and she asked me if I was from Monterrey, Mexico because of my accent. A close friend of hers from Texas was from Monterrey. I told her that my parents were. The truth, of course, is that Jorge is from Monterrey.

Although the conversation was fairly short and covered a limited range of topics, her question makes me believe that I can really pull this off. I was apparently convincingly fluent and can accurately reproduce the accent that Jorge is teaching me.

Her husband works for NDF as an on-site installation manager and thus is away from home fairly often. She did not ask about Yenner and I did not volunteer anything about him. I don't know if she has ever seen him and the more people that think I live alone here the better.

She asked me over for dinner tomorrow. I think she is lonely. I told her yes.

I haven't really tried to get to know anyone here outside of work. Although Jorge did not explicitly warn me against socializing, I have been trying to keep a low profile. But now that I am alone, really for the first time, I find myself seeking company.

Friday, 26 October 2046

I walked to Jorge's yesterday morning as I have every Thursday, Friday and Saturday for the past three months. I passed the elementary school and el mercado. I avoided looking at the fuel cell station as I have each day since Yenner left. I crossed under the PacLink spur to the side of town where he lives as I have done three days a week for three months.

Jorge lives in a mostly Arab neighborhood. I asked him early on why he chose to live there rather than with other Spanish speakers. His only response was, "Exactly."

Today we continued working on irregular verb conjugations as we have for the past few days. We took a lunch break at the noon call to prayer like we always do. He made the same facial expressions, spoke Spanish with his now-familiar cadence, and cleared his throat in his peculiar way. Everything went just like it always has, and then...

"There's something that I want to show you," he said while putting on his hat. "Grab your bag and let's go."

"What is it?" I asked.

"It has something to do with our Middle-Eastern problem. You'll see."

It was now mid-afternoon and the streets were fairly empty. The sun was hot but not unbearable. We walked into a small clothing store.

"*Salaam*, Fuad!" Jorge called to the clearly Arab shopkeeper. He was on his knees arranging cans of something when we entered, but then stood up.

"Jorge! *Salaam! Kayf al-Hal?*" he said, querying about our condition.

“*Bien, Alhamdulillah, y tú?*” Jorge responded, mixing his languages. After months of listening to kids speak Arablish on the street, it seemed perfectly natural to me.

“*Mumtaaz, Grácias a Díos.*”

He walked up and looked at me. “You must be Paco. Jorge told me that he has *mucho trabajo* for you.”

“He keeps me pretty busy,” I said hesitantly. A Pakistani woman wearing a hijab walked up to the counter. He noticed her.

“You go ahead,” he said while motioning us to the back. “I’ll see you soon.”

We passed through the store into the back room and closed the door behind us. I looked around. There was a door to the right marked “Restroom.” Unlabeled boxes were neatly stacked against the far wall. The wall on the left supported shelves of canned and boxed food from floor to ceiling. Jorge approached the shelves and twisted a can, apparently at random, then released it. He walked to the other end of the shelf manipulated something that I couldn’t see. Suddenly, a two-meter by two-meter section of the concrete floor began rising and revealed itself to be the top of an elevator. The doors folded open.

“After you,” Jorge said with a broad smile.

It was difficult to estimate how far down we were when the car stopped and the doors opened again. We were at one end of a dimly lit corridor. There were closed doors on opposite sides about halfway down, then another set of doors at the end.

“It’s an old American military bunker,” Jorge explained. “We’ve re-purposed it.”

The lights brightened as we stepped into the hallway. “Is anyone else down here?”

“Not right now. This is where we’d like you to do your work.”

The first door on the left was labeled “5.” Jorge called this the lab. Inside were several generations of computer equipment. The oldest appeared to be from the beginning of the century, the newest was state of the art. “It all works, if you’re curious,” he said.

To the right was an open doorway that led into a smaller room lined with various forms of removable storage media, most of which I had only seen in books and vids. Rows of magnetic and optical discs lined one wall, flash cards and nano-cubes were on another, and the third held ...

“Paper magazines?” I asked.

Jorge shrugged his shoulders.

“What is all this?”

“Information,” he replied unhelpfully. I didn't pursue the subject.

The door across the hall was labeled “4.” This room housed an array of exercise machines, four large lockers and a shower. A set of shelves held two sizes of neatly folded white towels, bar soap, shaving cream and several bottles of shampoo. There were also razors, a few electric clippers and scissors. I didn't notice the washer and dryer until later.

The doors at the end of the hall were labeled “3” and “2.” Behind door 3 was what appeared to be an apartment with four bunk beds, an entertainment center and small kitchen. “It's fully stocked,” he said.

I turned and looked at him. “You intend for me to stay down here,” I said.

Jorge hesitated for several seconds before responding. “They know you're here. You need to stay below the radar for a while.”

We stared at each other for some time. Finally, I asked “how long were you going to wait to tell me they had Jenner?”

At the time I asked the question, I was not certain that I was right. There are several ways they could know that I was in New Dearborn, but the fact that I hadn't heard from Jenner in so long made me suspicious that he had been captured. Or worse.

“About five more minutes,” Jorge said. “After I showed you this.”

He led me back into the computer room - there is a door connecting it directly to the apartment - and pulled up a livesat view of the NorCal border with American Oregon. He zoomed in to an area between a large lake and what appeared to be a dry lake bed. “This is where they were,” he said.

“Were?”

“Look more closely. This area is very mountainous.” Jorge continued to zoom in until we could see individual trees. He indicated a point on the screen with his finger. “See this smudge? Two days ago there was a building here.”

I couldn't speak, so I just nodded. Before my eyes teared up I could see a plume of smoke drifting toward the east. My vision blurred. I squeezed my eyes shut.

“This image was taken about 24 hours after the building exploded.” Jorge was saying something else but I wasn't paying attention anymore.

I managed to choke out a few words. “Are they ... did they?” *Are they alive?*

“We’ll know soon,” he said. “You’ll know as soon as I do.”

When he left I was kneeling on the concrete floor, sick to my stomach. I didn’t move for some time.

Saturday, 27 October 2046

Despite my fear and anger, I managed a few hours of sleep last night. The bunks in the “apartment” behind door three are very comfortable, but the absence of real windows makes it impossible to forget I am trapped underground.

Yenner would tell me to find the opportunity in being stuck in this bunker. I have been trying to do that, but my mind would prefer to generate worse case scenarios. Yenner would call this unproductive speculation.

In an attempt to distract myself, I’ve been exploring my new environment. Although it is mostly utilitarian, a few people could comfortably live here for an extended period of time. Pretty much everything a person needs can be found behind doors three, four, and five.

But Jorge did not open door two. Unlike the others, it does not have a doorknob. There is no obvious way of opening it from this side, nor can I determine if it is a pocket or hinged door. As far as I can tell, door two is hermetically sealed.

That is one mystery. Another is, where is door one?

The elevator seemed the logical choice, but when I went to examine it I saw it was marked with a faded but large “6”. I also noticed that there was no call button. Given the numbering sequence and arrangement of the doors, door one should be at the opposite end of the hall as the elevator, yet that appears to be a dead end with no markings at all. It is perfectly smooth concrete, like the rest of the hallway. If there was a door there at one time, all traces have been removed - or covered up.

I don’t know where to begin in the lab. The discs and other removable storage in the closet are each labeled with a 16-digit number, which implies the existence of an index file that I haven’t looked for yet. The paper magazines are mostly decades old and cover apparently random subjects. The computer equipment ranges from a 40 year old Mac Pro to the latest high-end Lenovo minicomputer. I haven’t examined any of it yet.

Other than surveying the gym again I haven’t spent any time in there. I should probably take a shower soon, but I’m resisting for some reason. I haven’t even eaten or cleaned my teeth.

I haven't eaten, but Jorge was right, the kitchen is well stocked. The entertainment area is as well. I can choose from 100 years of music and movies. I haven't watched or listened to anything yet.

So far I've just walked around looking at everything. There are a hundred things I could be doing, but I'm not.

Wednesday, 31 October 2046

Yenner would tell me that all I can do is make the best of this situation.

I've been down here for a few days now and have not heard from Jorge. I have been eating, though not very much. As I went through the pantry and refrigerator, I estimated there was enough food to last one person a year. I refused to speculate about the reason for this.

I washed my clothes this morning. While I was waiting for them to dry, I began to wonder where the power came from. Was it from the grid? Did the bunker have a dedicated power source? Both? Was there an emergency generator or batteries? That made sense, but if so, where?

Where are the environmental controls? Other than a few desk lamps in the computer lab and a bed lamp in the apartment, I can't even control the lights. If I stop moving for long enough or leave the room, they dim. If I move enough, they brighten.

There are three illumination panels behind what appear to be windows that brighten at sunrise each morning and dim in the evening. Two in the apartment and one in the gym. I can't tell if the light is piped down from the surface or if it is artificial. I keep the blinds drawn so I can at least pretend to be on the surface.

It was more out of frustration than a sense of duty that I decided to begin familiarizing myself with the lab and storage library. I found the index to the library on a cube labeled '0000000000000001'. The index by itself is 9 Gb. The amount of information in the library is tens of thousands of terabytes. Some of the data is date-stamped as recent as six months ago, but most is a decade old or older.

I began to wonder why someone wouldn't store this online, then I realized - this must be off-line back up. I looked more closely at the doorways leading out of the library. One leads to the lab and the other into the apartment. There are no doors, but in the floor and ceiling of the doorway I can see what appear to be 10 cm thick blast doors. Someone wanted - or wants - this room protected.

More speculation.

Something else has been growing in the back of my mind. Jorge and the storekeeper may be the only people that know that I'm down here. If something has happened to them, there is no obvious way for me to get out.

Thursday, 1 November 2046

Our baby is due in about a month. If Katia is still alive.

I found a Spanish tutor in the library and have resumed my lessons. There is even a Tejano tutor, though the vocabulary is over 10 years old. Still, it's better than nothing, and it gives me something to do. Spanish has gone from something I had to learn to something that interests me.

Everything in the Spanish tutor was consistent with what I had learned from Jorge, but some of the Tejano vocabulary differed from what I'd been taught. I intend to run the differences by him when he returns. Colloquial language changes quickly and he may not even be current.

I had been wondering when I was going to get my first peek at the defense network they want me to disable when I heard the message chime on the Mac. I paused my lesson and walked across the room to read the message.

Paco:

I am sorry to disappear and leave you there without notice. Events are progressing rapidly and I have been called away.

I also regret having to contact you like this, but this is the only option I have at the moment.

I wanted to let you know three things:

One, that our friends had left the building. We don't know where they are, but we are trying to locate them.

Two, look at '0000000048151623'. It will have everything you need for your project. Be aware that it is not available online.

Finally, I don't know when I'll be back, but you are safer there than here.

Regards,
Jorge

I surprised myself that I did not become angry. I just stared at the words on the screen and then attempted to reply. The reply bounced back.

The bounce annoyed me, but his claim that Yenner and Katia were not in the building when it exploded helped ease some of my anxiety. Buildings don't have a habit of exploding unless someone causes them to, and I wondered if its destruction was related to an escape attempt.

I robotically walked to the library, retrieved the referenced cube, and snapped it into the reader on the minicomp. The cube contains a version of the defense network's operating system from last year, a development environment, and a simulation environment.

I'm going to start on it in the morning.

Saturday, 3 November 2046

While I was getting dressed this morning, putting on the same pants and shirt I wore when I came down here, I found myself wishing that I had the rest of my clothes. Was it too much trouble for Jorge to bring the few things I had at home down here?

Then I thought to check the chest of drawers between the two bunk beds. Sure enough, it has a few changes of clothes - pants, shirts, running shorts, tank-tops, socks, even a pair of house slippers. And everything fits.

Someone has gone through some effort to prepare the bunker for me. It appears as if my living here has been planned for some time. So why didn't Jorge let me know beforehand? If he was telling me the truth, he didn't expect for me to have to live down here until the Reunionists discovered I was in New Dearborn. *Yet if he didn't expect me to live down here, why all the clothes?*

I've been trying to link into the web for the past few days with no success. This is troubling as Jorge was able to access a satellite image to show me the location where Yenner and Katia were being held. He was able to send me a message, yet I couldn't reply. It is as if I've been deliberately blocked.

I should get back to my analysis of the defense OS security.

Wednesday, 14 November 2046

I've fallen into a routine over the past few weeks. I eat a small breakfast then go to the gym and stretch before working out. I use the resistance machines for about an hour each

day. They are old, but effective. This is really the first time I've used equipment to work out - I've always stuck to exercises I can do with my own body and a chin-up bar.

I usually finish with a 30 minute run on the treadmill. The exertion feels good, but I miss my bike.

After a shower I either practice with the Spanish tutor or work in the lab. I have lunch, take a nap, then work until dinner. After dinner, I usually explore the contents of the library before forcing myself to go to bed.

I find the routine comforting. It is the only way I can exercise any control over my life any more. Mom, Yenner and Katia are constantly on my mind, I don't know where Jorge is, and I can't leave, though I haven't really tried.

At first I couldn't wait to get out of here, but now it is becoming familiar. At some level I am also afraid to leave.

Thursday, 15 November 2046

I spent most of the day researching the bunker and looking for a way out. I found a blueprint in the online library that is an excellent match - if I allow for a few modifications.

In the plans, where the hypothetical door one would be, there is a door that leads to a larger section of the bunker. This answers one question, but raises more - what is the larger section used for and who is in it, if anyone? Why were the two sections sealed off from each other?

There is a large space beyond yet-to-be-opened door two which leads to several smaller rooms. Even in the diagram there is no hint of its original purpose. What is it used for now? Why is it sealed?

Two elevators appear in the layout: a freight elevator in the larger section and the smaller one that Jorge brought me down. This means that door one was sealed off after the larger equipment and furniture was brought down. It would not have fit on the small elevator.

I tried to overlay the blueprint on my memory of the city, but I am not familiar with this part of town. I have no idea what is located at the top of the freight elevator's shaft.

I'm going to try to find a recent map or satellite image of New Dearborn in the library.

Tuesday, 20 November 2046

The elevator serving the other section of the bunker is conveniently located beneath a distribution warehouse on the next block behind Fuad's store. Someone could easily ferry people and materials to and from the other bunker without being noticed. This is yet another question to ask Jorge the next time I see him.

After several initial setbacks, I've begun to make some progress in developing an effective soft-weapon against the defense OS. The weapon will be designed to:

- * perform an on-the-spot analysis of system security and vulnerabilities
- * mislead the OS security into not detecting a problem
- * mount a multi-pronged attack aimed at permanently disabling every node of the defense network

My weapon of choice is a viral swarm. Swarms have a high rate of success against this type of network. The biggest hurdle working against it is delivery, but I'm working on that as well.

Wednesday, 21 November 2046

When I am doing development work I always lose track of time. I forget to eat and even sleeping becomes an inconvenience. I have not been into the gym or worked on Spanish over the past week and I think I've taken only two showers. I've been designing, coding and testing 18 hours a day.

I am making excellent progress though, and in a few days it should be ready to deploy. Of course I have no way of notifying anyone of this.

Our baby is due in a few weeks. I don't know where Katia is. I don't know where Yenner is. I don't know where Mom is. Month after month passes and I continue to be swept along by currents I cannot control or resist. I don't know what to do. There is nothing I can do.

How can I have so many skills yet be so helpless?

Sunday, 25 November 2046

Down here, where I have no interaction with anyone, it doesn't matter that today is Sunday.

I studied my face in the mirror this morning. My face is drawn and pale and I have dark circles under my bloodshot eyes. My hands are shaking. I look as exhausted as I feel.

The weapon is ready, but I've decided to continue refining it by patching the weaknesses in the defense OS and retesting. I'll start this tomorrow.

All I can think about right now is eating and going to sleep.

Monday, 26 November 2046

I was half asleep when I heard Jorge's voice calling my name early this morning. At first I thought I was dreaming, but as he entered the lights automatically brightened and chased the shadows of sleep away.

"You look tired," he said. He was smiling but wore an apologetic expression on his face.

"You look happy," I said as I sat up in the bunk. "Good news?"

"Yes. We have located Yenner and Katia. They will meet us at your place tomorrow. You will be pleased to know that Katia and the baby are fine."

"What about Yenner?"

"He will be okay, but ... he does not look good." Jorge looked at the floor. "He was ... questioned."

I stood up, forgetting I was naked. "What do you mean questioned?" My lips began quivering. "They tortured him?"

"You might want to get dressed," he said. "And yes, they ... he will be okay though."

"Oh, God," I said as my eyes began to tear up. "If I had never met Katia for lunch she would be safe, she wouldn't be carrying my child, and Yenner wouldn't have run off to bring her back..."

I quickly dressed as he surveyed the various rooms of the bunker. "You're a good housekeeper, Señor Covas," he said, ignoring my angst. He liked calling me that for some reason.

"There are several questions I'd like to ask you," I said, walking to meet him in the lab. "For one, what is..."

"I'll answer them after I ask you one," he said, cutting me off. "How's your little project going?"

"It's finished." I was annoyed that he interrupted me so I didn't bother to express my interest in continuing to work on it. I had planned to fine tune the weapon based on the vulnerability patches and detection systems that were likely in place now.

He put his hand on the cube in the writer. "Is this it?"

"Yes."

"It's ready to be deployed?"

"Yes," I confirmed as I walked up to the minicomputer. I showed him the files in the cube. "It's self-launching. Want to watch it in action?"

I created an instance of the test environment and launched the defense OS. It appeared as a network of green disks connected by yellow lines. "As you can see, system status is nominal. Now watch."

I introduced the viral swarm into one of the nodes, which immediately turned yellow. The nodes directly connected to the compromised node then turned yellow. The originally infected node turned red and the links that connected the red node to the yellow nodes vanished. This process quickly repeated itself across the network until all of the nodes were red and all of the links were gone.

"That's it? Complete failure in three seconds?"

"If it is 100% effective, which is uncertain. But no one will know the system has been compromised until the damage is done."

"You are not only an interesting man but a dangerous one," Jorge said with some wonder. "I'm glad you're on our side."

I ended the simulation. "So when can I go see my father?"

"Next year, which isn't far away," he said as he pulled the cube out of the writer. He slipped it in the pocket of his guayabera and began walking to the elevator. "I have to run, but I'll see you tomorrow."

"Wait!" His abrupt departure surprised me. I ran after him. "You haven't heard my questions!"

He turned and smiled as he entered the car, "tomorrow, I promise. I have to give the team the good news!"

"I want to go with you," I said and leaped into the elevator as the doors began to fold shut. "I can't stay down here..."

Immediately, I was greeted by the sole of Jorge's boot slamming into my chest. I fell back against the now closed doors and slid to the floor of the elevator car, stunned and gasping for breath. Jorge pulled out a gun and pushed the open door button. He looked down at me, his face completely transformed. The familiar warmth had vanished. He looked very hard.

"I was hoping to avoid this unpleasantness, Rabiyya, but you're not going anywhere anytime soon. You're a good kid and I don't want to have to kill you. By the time you escape, and I have no doubt that you will, it will be too late."

"What are you doing?!" I croaked as I crawled back from the sudden stranger that Jorge had become. "Too late for what?"

He kept the gun pointed at me as the doors began to fold shut. As they closed, he held up the cube with his other hand and an unreadable expression covered his face. "Too late to stop reunification, of course."

In that instant I understood everything. Jorge, if not the entire group, had betrayed me into giving the Reunionists the ability to bring down our own defense network. I had unwillingly betrayed my own country. A wave of horror flooded my body

"I trusted you!" I managed to yell twice before vomiting onto the polished concrete floor.

Later, after I cleaned up the mess in the hallway, I realized that everything was uncertain again. Where are Yenner and Katia *really*? Where is my mom *really*? How accurate were the facts and conclusions in the Internal Security report *really*?

How deeply entrenched in Pacifica is this pro-reunification group *really*?

Tuesday, 27 November 2046

Jorge didn't explicitly say that I had to escape to warn anyone of the threat against Pacifica's defense network, but he may as well have. This told me that the lab is not only isolated from the web, but there was no way to connect to it. I should have discovered this already.

Had I checked before yesterday, I would have found that the e-mail message and its routing was faked, sent from within the network at a predetermined time. The livesat imagery was stored on the network. Had I examined the hardware, I would have discovered that there was no interface to the outside world.

All of this would have taken four minutes to determine. I know this, because I did it this morning.

I have to keep telling myself that I had no reason to suspect deception. I trusted Jorge completely because Yenner did. Because the other members of the Al-Hurriyah did. Because Yenner loves me. Because they saved my life. I have to keep telling myself that I had no way of knowing that I would be deceived into betraying my home.

But does Yenner love me? Did Beth and the others really save my life? Nothing seems certain anymore. I am re-evaluating everything.

Was Jorge spending time at church every Sunday or was he actually meeting with the Reunionists? Yenner appeared to believe that Jorge was at church - or was Yenner part of the con? Was he a refugee from Texas as he claimed? Was he really captured or did he simply no longer need to pretend to be my partner?

I can't trust anyone right now, but I will not be paralyzed. I will find a way to warn the government - and I will find a way to escape.

Thursday, 29 November 2046

The most obvious escape route - the elevator - appears to be a dead-end. I can find no way to call it from down here and there does not seem to be any way to open the doors to the shaft. Similarly, the sealed-over door one and apparently sealed door two do not seem to be options.

I have not been able to find a hidden route out either. The walls, floor and ceiling appear seamless. I was able to remove the light panels in the apartment and gym but there was just more reinforced concrete behind them. The air ducts could lead to the outside or more likely air recyclers, but that didn't matter. They were far too small for me to enter.

By the time you escape, and I have no doubt that you will, it will be too late.

Did Jorge's words mean that it would be very difficult for me to figure out how to escape? That I would have to wait until someone came down here before I could get out? Neither of these makes sense. Who would design a bunker to be inescapable? Did they turn this place into a well furnished and supplied prison or trap? What if there were an accident of some kind?

My pad is not able to "grab band" as the kids here in New Dearborn say instead of "get a signal." I tried using the plumbing, ventilation and power conduits as electronic links to the surface without success. The inability to connect to the web is more claustrophobic than any other aspect of my being here. I am not able to link into that evolving universe of information and roam at will.

There is also a vast amount of information in the computer lab, however, and maybe the way out is on one of those shelves of storage media.