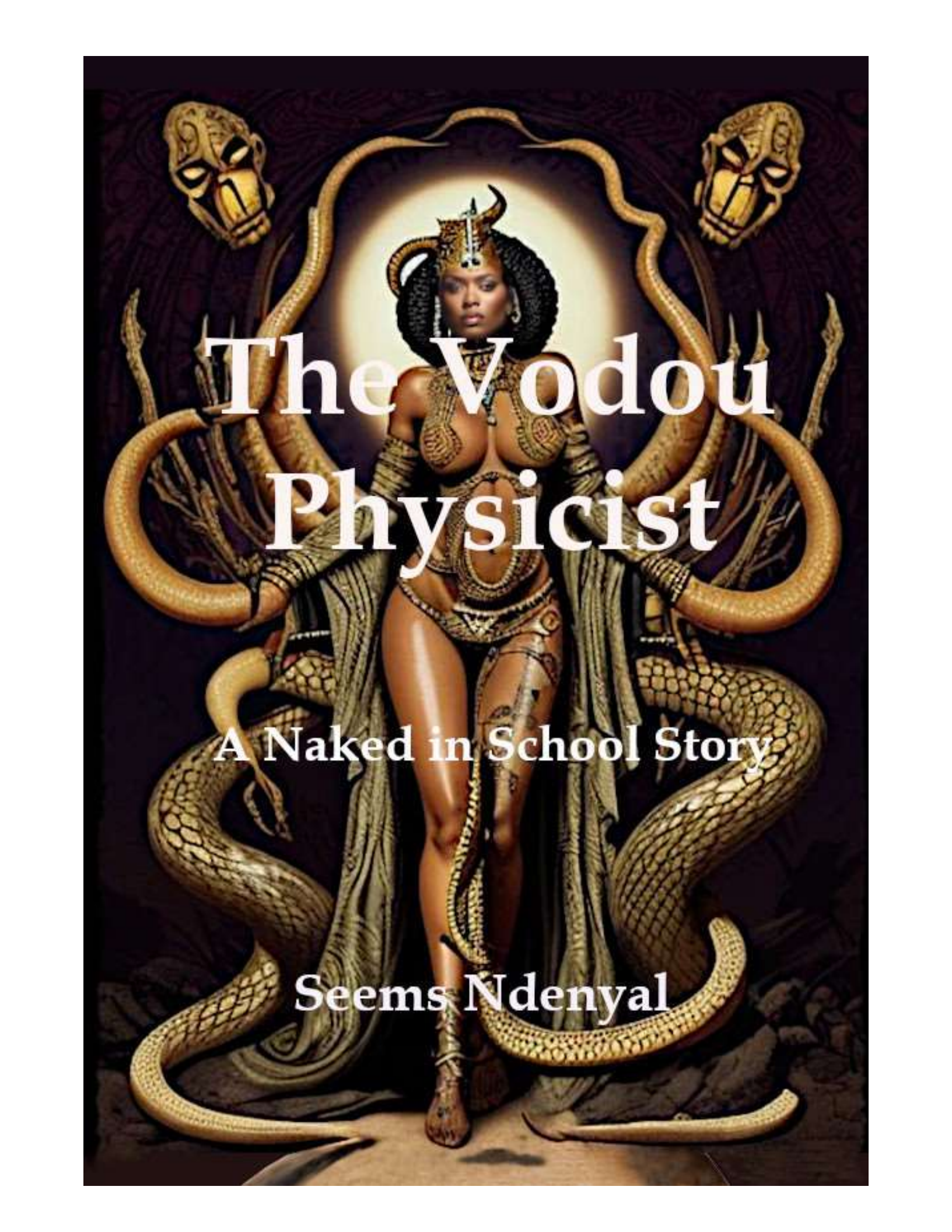


A woman with dark skin and long black hair is the central figure. She wears a golden headpiece with horns and a small cross-like ornament. Her body is adorned with intricate golden jewelry, including a large necklace, armlets, and leg bands. She is surrounded by several large, golden snakes that coil around her. Two golden masks with large eyes are positioned at the top corners. The background is dark with a glowing circular light behind the woman's head.

# The Vodou Physicist

A Naked in School Story

Seems Ndenyal

# The Vodou Physicist

## A Story in the Naked in School Universe

Hate the idea of students having to be Naked in School? Or kids being Stripped in Florida? Well, so does our heroine and, watch out, folks, she knows voodoo! Not the Hollywood version, she practices the real thing—the Vodou religion. Join her in this fantasy as she uses her abilities to confuse and confound the authorities (and other people too). Warning, there's physics ahead. And math. Other sciences too. Don't say you weren't told.

Reading the earlier stories in the Kevin and Denise series is strongly recommended because this story has many references to those that come earlier. There are many spoilers here too. The suggested order is *Kevin and Denise*; *Roger and Cynthia*; *The Exported Rebellion*; *Tom's Troubles*; and *Emma Comes in from the Cold*.

This story is published as adult entertainment and contains material of an explicit, sexual nature.  
If such materials offend you, please do not read any further.

All characters and events portrayed in this story are completely fictional; any semblance to real people or events is entirely coincidental. The author does not necessarily endorse any of the activities described.

This story may not be reproduced or published in any form, free or for profit, without the written permission of the author.

Copyright © 2023-4 Seems Ndenyal. All Rights Reserved.

# The Vodou Physicist

## Contents

|                                                        |     |                                                             |     |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-----|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Preface. . . . .                                       | 3   | Chapter 47: Psychic Vigilante. . . . .                      | 441 |
| Chapter 1: The Queen . . . . .                         | 4   | Chapter 48: Viking Spirits Too . . . . .                    | 451 |
| Chapter 2: Rejecting Black Magic . . . . .             | 12  | Chapter 49: An Unexpected Offer. . . . .                    | 462 |
| Chapter 3: Disaster . . . . .                          | 17  | Chapter 50: Planning Changes and Changes in Plan. . . . .   | 472 |
| Chapter 4: The Hospital Ship . . . . .                 | 23  | Chapter 51: MRI Experiments. . . . .                        | 483 |
| Chapter 5: American Embassy . . . . .                  | 29  | Chapter 52: A Startling Proposal. . . . .                   | 494 |
| Chapter 6: Recovered Artefacts. . . . .                | 37  | Chapter 53: Recalled to Service . . . . .                   | 504 |
| Chapter 7: Air Evacuation. . . . .                     | 45  | Chapter 54: Investiture . . . . .                           | 514 |
| Chapter 8: Getting Settled. . . . .                    | 56  | Chapter 55: Making Friends and Influencing People . . . . . | 525 |
| Chapter 9: Honoring a Warrior . . . . .                | 66  | Chapter 56: Energy Device Rollout. . . . .                  | 535 |
| Chapter 10: A New Home. . . . .                        | 76  | Chapter 57: After-action Reporting. . . . .                 | 546 |
| Chapter 11: Unstripped in Florida. . . . .             | 87  | Chapter 58: Beach Trip . . . . .                            | 555 |
| Chapter 12: Troubles and Challenges . . . . .          | 99  | Chapter 59: Honors . . . . .                                | 565 |
| Chapter 13: Beginning High School . . . . .            | 108 | Chapter 60: Back to London . . . . .                        | 575 |
| Chapter 14: Unstripping, High School Version. . . . .  | 117 | Chapter 61: Disappearing Act. . . . .                       | 585 |
| Chapter 15: A Naked in School Program . . . . .        | 127 | Chapter 62: Sharing Emotions. . . . .                       | 596 |
| Chapter 16: Using a New Tool . . . . .                 | 138 | Chapter 63: Blackmail. . . . .                              | 606 |
| Chapter 17: Program Problems . . . . .                 | 148 | Chapter 64: Intelligence Reaction . . . . .                 | 617 |
| Chapter 18: Finding a College Program . . . . .        | 158 | Chapter 65: Slowing Time. . . . .                           | 627 |
| Chapter 19: Waging War Against Nakedness . . . . .     | 165 | Chapter 66: Sharing a Gift. . . . .                         | 638 |
| Chapter 20: Turning the Tables. . . . .                | 175 | Chapter 67: More Converts . . . . .                         | 647 |
| Chapter 21: Payback can be Sweet . . . . .             | 184 | Chapter 68: History Revealed . . . . .                      | 658 |
| Chapter 22: An Old Threat Returns. . . . .             | 196 | Chapter 69: Buried Treasures . . . . .                      | 669 |
| Chapter 23: Scholarship Examination. . . . .           | 207 | Chapter 70: Financial Revelations. . . . .                  | 679 |
| Chapter 24: College Interview. . . . .                 | 215 | Chapter 71: Resort with New Friends . . . . .               | 689 |
| Chapter 25: A New Experience. . . . .                  | 226 | Chapter 72: A Naturalist's Philosophy . . . . .             | 700 |
| Chapter 26: Unexpected Troubles. . . . .               | 236 | Chapter 73: Program Redux . . . . .                         | 711 |
| Chapter 27: Prom and Graduation. . . . .               | 246 | Chapter 74: Kouche. . . . .                                 | 721 |
| Chapter 28: Motherland . . . . .                       | 255 | Chapter 75: Rescue Detail. . . . .                          | 731 |
| Chapter 29: University . . . . .                       | 263 | Chapter 76: Sharing Stories. . . . .                        | 742 |
| Chapter 30: More Power to Her . . . . .                | 273 | Chapter 77: Making History . . . . .                        | 753 |
| Chapter 31: Natural Exposure. . . . .                  | 283 | Chapter 78: Guardianship . . . . .                          | 763 |
| Chapter 32: Psychological Damage. . . . .              | 293 | Chapter 79: Family Thanksgiving . . . . .                   | 774 |
| Chapter 33: Mastering the Brain . . . . .              | 304 | Chapter 80: Honoring a Scientist . . . . .                  | 784 |
| Chapter 34: Letting Go . . . . .                       | 313 | Chapter 81: Holiday Festivities . . . . .                   | 794 |
| Chapter 35: The Great Reveal. . . . .                  | 323 | Chapter 82: Planning for the Future . . . . .               | 805 |
| Chapter 36: Resort Preparations . . . . .              | 333 | Chapter 83: Mindspeak . . . . .                             | 815 |
| Chapter 37: A Discovery and a Resort Visit . . . . .   | 344 | Chapter 84: Gaining More Nudism Converts . . . . .          | 824 |
| Chapter 38: Coming Clean . . . . .                     | 354 | Chapter 85: Hunted . . . . .                                | 836 |
| Chapter 39: Slippery Session . . . . .                 | 364 | Chapter 86: Ambush! . . . . .                               | 846 |
| Chapter 40: Volleyball Master . . . . .                | 374 | Chapter 87: Cleaning Up. . . . .                            | 856 |
| Chapter 41: Philosophy, Nudist and Religious . . . . . | 383 | Chapter 88: Nudity in School . . . . .                      | 868 |
| Chapter 42: Crimestoppers . . . . .                    | 393 | Chapter 89: Media Interview. . . . .                        | 879 |
| Chapter 43: Playing and Passion . . . . .              | 403 | Chapter 90: Into the Future . . . . .                       | 889 |
| Chapter 44: Counter Surveillance . . . . .             | 412 | Glossary and Abbreviations . . . . .                        | 898 |
| Chapter 45: Crime and Punishment. . . . .              | 421 | Cast of Characters . . . . .                                | 903 |
| Chapter 46: Back to School and Off Again. . . . .      | 432 |                                                             |     |

Cover art: *Ayada Wedo*, the “Rainbow Serpent” *Iwa*

# The Vodou Physicist

## Preface

Does the term “paranormal” really mean “outside of normal,” whatever “normal” actually means? Paranormal events are generally thought of as events that are not scientifically explainable. We have all heard about instances of events which seem to imply that telepathy exists (such as one’s sense that a loved one is in trouble, resulting in a phone call) or premonition (for example, someone cancels a trip because of a bad feeling and then an accident occurs on the scheduled transportation). There even have been occasional reports of people experiencing precognition (knowledge of a future event). We’ve all encountered people with compelling personalities, presences so strong that when that person enters a room, all conversation stops and everyone turns to see who entered. Are these examples of the “paranormal”? Perhaps they are. But people accept such things as normal; although they might be considered to be just a wee bit on the strange side of normal. In writing this story, I decided to explore these fringes of normality, using a generally unknown and widely unfamiliar religion, Vodou, as the vehicle for the exploration.

This is a coming-of-age story, but it’s also more than that. This story also has connections to the *Naked in School* universe of stories, but that connection forms only a small part of the story. There’s romance here, some challenges, some violence, some humor, lots of science, and a very utopian story line—in some ways it’s a modern version of the “Adventures of Tom Swift” stories of the early twentieth century, where the main character always prevails while coming up with inventions thick and fast. This is the story of the journey of our protagonist, who grows up in a world completely different from that of her early childhood, and whose ancestry has given her certain gifts, abilities she’s inherited from her forebears. These abilities aren’t recognized by Western society as anything but superstition or charlatanism, but in truth, some people are known to possess similar, but less potent, abilities.

Our protagonist is the descendant of many generations of priestesses of the African-Haitian Vodou religion and she comes to learn that her knowledge and abilities are useful to help other kids in her schools when she finds out that they are being mistreated by parents—and the government too. Her abilities set her on the path to learn the scientific explanation for how she’s able to do what she does. You’re invited to join her on this path of discovery and I hope you enjoy the journey.

All of the science mentioned and medical descriptions in the story are accurate as of the writing of the story. The single fictional departure is that a room-temperature, superconducting molecular structure has been discovered, and I let my imagination extend modern physics principles to explore the ramifications of such a discovery, if nature allowed such a molecular structure to exist.

A cast of characters may be found at the end of the book; also at the end is a glossary of many foreign-language terms used in the story, a list of abbreviations, and a description of the Vodou *lwa* which are mentioned in the story.

## Notice

This story is set in a fictional parallel universe very closely related to our Real World. In this story, the names of some characters, organizations, localities, events, and references to publications or movies, which resemble those found in the Real World, are used to establish this story’s world setting. All of the identifying names and descriptions used which are similar to any real people, locations, and organizations, exist in this story’s universe too and their use here is for strictly fictional purposes, to provide context and reality for the plot. Their use here does not imply that any events described as occurring in those places represent depictions of events involving any real organizations or characters. And of course, any similarities between any real person and any character appearing in this story are purely coincidental and unintentional.

## Chapter 1 - The Queen

### *Carrefour, Port-au-Prince Arrondissement, Haiti*

“Madam, you wished to see us urgently?”

“I did. Enter.”

He was a hard-faced, burly man who moved with cat-like grace into Vanessa’s study, followed by three other men who also moved with watchful purpose, showing that they too possessed similar skills of advanced martial arts.

“Malory is delayed, my lady. He’ll be here in an hour or thereabouts.”

“It is well, Vincent. I don’t entirely trust Malory; he does too much of, well, I’d call it ‘freelance’ work. Too much of his collateral damage can affect my goals. Please give Malory the instructions I shall give you gentlemen and impress on him that he must be discreet. None of his brutality! And for the rest of you, too. Do not call attention to my project by being brutal in your work. Remember!”

The men all nodded obediently.

“I called you here because I have an urgent mission. If it is fulfilled, I will be able to advance my project by several years, so your success will be greatly rewarded. But know that I will not tolerate failure.”

She spoke for several minutes more about her vision. Then she continued.

“Last night I was communing with my patron *Iwa*. *Lord Kalfou*, and he showed me that a strong power is newly arisen. I have had several faint hints of this power during the past few years, but those hints have been feeble and fleeting. Now, *Kalfou* has helped me to sense that our long-missing *manbo* may indeed be alive, yet very distant from here. If she is alive, I want her back here to serve me and to help me get our chosen monarch placed as Haiti’s leader. My missing *manbo* has grown strong in her power; yet I am stronger; with *Kalfou*’s guidance, I can overcome any resistance she might present and have her serve me.”

“Who is this of whom you speak, my queen?” asked Vincent, the spokesman for the group.

“You knew of her as Cassandra Bernard, the *manbo* at Aubry, but if she faked her death, she may have changed her name. Official records showed that she perished, but it is her power which I have sensed,” Vanessa said, and gave them a few more details.

“Even though I do not know where she currently may be, I expect that with her abilities, she will feel compelled to continue as a *manbo*.”

Vanessa gave them some further directions and then finished her instructions.

“I want her found and brought here. But I again stress to you to use *no* methods which will call the attention of authorities to us. We cannot allow errors which would result in revealing my plans, now that we are so close to their fulfillment. Now come close, all of you, and look deeply into my eyes, and I shall seal these instructions to your souls.”

They did, and after a minute, they again became aware of their surroundings.

“We shall do as you command and shall succeed, my lady, have no doubt,” Vincent assured her, and with bows, they departed.

By herself now, Vanessa mused, *It would be good—no, really essential, to have Cassandra here to serve me. If I could control her abilities, I will become the queen of the manbos in reality instead of having to hide here on my*



*compound.*

About an hour passed and then several women tapped at the door for permission to enter the room.

“Enter!” Vanessa called.

Three women entered.

“Ah, good. Helene, you three are here to report. How go your studies?” Vanessa said.

“We are progressing. We are getting stronger every day. We are now able to compel the slaves to do our bidding almost every time,” Helene told her.

“That is good, but you need to be sure that they are being compelled, not that they are doing your bidding out of fear.”

Another woman answered, “My queen, we are giving their directions only using the methods and the amulets you taught us to use.”

“That is good, then. You three are to be my closest aides when your full training is done. You already know my ambition to be queen over all of the *manbos*, the priestesses of our Vodou religion, here in Haiti. Now I shall tell you more of the plan, as you are making satisfactory progress.

“You know that we have assembled a group of talented *manbos* who have shown the ability to persuade others, either directly or by coercion, using the skills I have learned from *Kalfou*, and have instructed them about their use. My ambition is this: With these *manbos*, and with those of the *oungans* who have joined our enterprise, we will be able to achieve the restoration of the Duvalier regime in the name of... no, that part is yet secret. But I, as queen, will be the power behind the regime, and you *manbos* will be beside me for support and strength. This is my vision.”

“And we shall help you in reaching your goals,” the third woman assured her.

“That is good. Return to your duties now,” Vanessa dismissed them.

***Aubry, Arcahaie Arrondissement, Haiti: four years earlier***

Cassandra Bernard entered the little concrete block building next to her home and looked around its interior appraisingly. This room was her *ounfò*, her temple, and she was the *manbo*, the priestess, there. She would be initiating a new priestess that evening and was expecting a crowd.

“I need you to help me move some tables and chairs for Meriama’s fourth *kanzo* rite this evening,” she told her husband, speaking in French.

Her husband Jonas, who had followed her in, asked, “Do you expect a crowd?”

“She has a large family and many friends coming. You do remember that this is her final *konesans* to be recognized a new *manbo*?” she asked him.

“Of course. You must be excited, your first *manbo* confirmation,” Jonas said. “She’s been advancing through her *konesans* for what, three years?”

“Yes. She wants to help in a larger *ounfò* in Gonaives. Part of her family lives there.”

They began moving tables when a small voice piped up, “I guess I need to move, huh?”

“*Mon Dieu!*” Cassandra yelled. “Fabienne! Don’t scare me like that.”

Jonas was also startled at what looked like the sudden appearance of his eight-year-old daughter, who was

sitting at a table in the middle of the room, smiling brightly at them.

“I can’t help that you don’t see me, *Manman*,” Fabienne smirked. “I was just making myself be ‘little,’” she went on, referring to her uncanny ability to be invisible while apparently being in plain sight. “I just do that when it needs to be quiet for me.”

She gestured to a number of textbooks scattered on the table in front of her. She had one open and was writing in a notebook next to that book.

“Okay, sweetheart, please pack up the books and help us set up the chairs for a service,” Jonas told her.

While Fabienne was helping to carry the chairs, she asked about the evening’s service.

“*Manman*, I only know about what you do from watching you, but I don’t know *why* you do those things,” Fabienne told her.

“Well, I guess you’re old enough, so when we finish here, we’ll sit and I’ll tell you. We have some time before dinner.”

Jonas broke in, “Let me finish making the meal so you two can talk.”

“Thank you, *renmen anpil*,” Cassandra replied.

“You know,” Jonas remarked, “we’ve been married some nine years now and I still haven’t gotten used to *Kreyòl*. I know it’s the official language, and what you said means *chérie*, or ‘dear’ in English, but we always try to speak French or English, not *Kreyòl*. I spoke French with my mom growing up.”

Cassandra sighed. “But your parents were from the Haitian upper crust. My *manman* wasn’t. I know I promised that I’d try to use only French, but I slip sometimes. I like that you teach me and Fabienne to speak better English too.”

When they finished setting up the room, Cassandra had Fabienne sit next to her and began.

“You know, my darling, that I’m a priestess, a *manbo*; priests are called *oungans*, and our religion, which came with our ancestors from west Africa, is called Vodou?”

“Sure, and this room is an *ounfò* and Meriama is a *kanzo*, it’s like apprentice, and the *konesans* are the learning she has to do to be a priestess, a *manbo*, like you. Right?”

“Exactly. And the main area in here, the sacred space in the *ounfò*, is called the *peristil*. So let me tell you a little about Vodou beliefs—*vodou* is an old word, it’s a Fon language word from Dahomey in Africa—that part of the old country where our ancestors came from is now called Benin—the word ‘vodou’ means ‘spirit’ or ‘deity.’ Let me know if you don’t understand something, *bien*? First, we believe that there’s a single and supreme spiritual One, an unknowable creator of everything, who is sovereign over all of the universe. We call the Supreme One ‘*Bondye*.’ Do you know where the name comes from?”

“Sure. It’s *bon Dieu*, the good God. Isn’t he the *Gran Mèt*?”

“That’s the *Kreyòl* name, but the same God, dear. The Grand Master. Now then, we who practice Vodou believe in just one God, but we also believe in spirits, called *lwa*, and I guess your Catholic friends would think of them kind of like angels or saints as they relate to *Bondye*. We, that is, the way I learned, have a chief *lwa*, *Atibon Legba* or *Papa Legba*. He’s the ‘guardian of the spiritual crossroads’ and is a benevolent *lwa* who goes between the *lwa* and people where he permits or denies to people the permission to speak with the other *lwa*. We believe he speaks all human languages and for us, that is, in my own *nanchon* or nation, the *Rada*, which originated in Africa, he is the greatest speaker. We call to him at the beginning of all of our ceremonies.”

“So you mean that Vodou is like the Catholics? We have the *lwa* and they have the saints? Is that why lots of the churches around have ‘saint’ in their names? My school too?”

“You could look at it that way. Vodou is a folk religion from Africa and has a lot of things added to it from the Christians. We both believe in one God; but they have a Trinity and saints and we have the *lwa*. Maybe they are really both the same thing, only with different names.

“We believe that the *lwa* populate the spirit world—the unseen world—the *lwa* are also known as *mystè*, ‘mysteries’ or *anvizib*, ‘invisibles’ and we believe that the spirit world is where the souls of our ancestors reside and where those who recently died go. We call the land *Ginen*, it’s the ‘African heaven’ and it’s also inhabited by the *zanj*; those are the angels.

“Anyway, here’s what Vodou teaches. We believe that all existence is one single unity and not separate worlds. Our sacred and our common existence—that’s our spiritual and material worlds—are one. We believe that both the world of the departed and the world of the *lwa*, *Ginen*, are one with the world of the living. The worlds exist side-by-side, so to speak, and our souls can move between them when we venerate the *lwa*. And we also believe in a strong moral system—you know what that is?”

“Um, maybe... doing right and wrong stuff?”

“That’s as good as we need. So our Vodou beliefs regulate the behavior between people, how we work together socially and as a community. We have a very strong commitment to service and justice, treatment of those who need help, respect for elders, and forgiving wrongdoing where the offender shows true repentance. That’s just the same as other religions. Understand so far?”

“Uh huh, but I don’t understand the ceremonies you do. People look like they are in pain sometimes.”

“Ah. I guess I didn’t realize how perceptive you can be. We connect with our *lwa* using things like dance, music, and chanting. Each *manbo*—or *oungan*—has a personal *lwa* who he or she venerates most strongly and has the greatest affinity for. And the *manbo* or *oungan* tries to help the *serviteurs*—those are the devotees or adherents—to become people who *sèvi lwa*, or serve the *lwa*. When that happens, they can feel all kinds of emotions, and that can look like they’re in pain. What you saw during our rites was people trying to get into a mental state where their own *lwa*, their own personal spirit, can enter them. Some people think of this as a ‘possession’; it’s not really, but achieving that state of mind is an important part of Vodou worship and it’s the least understood part of our religion. I’ve learned that some Christians do kind of the same things and can get into similar emotional states during worship, so that happening isn’t unique for Vodou.”

“So the spirits can take over someone then?” Fabienne asked nervously.

“Well, I’m of a more liberal belief than others about that. Conservatives, especially those from the more intense *Petwo nanchon*, which started up here in Haiti, believe they do, but I feel it’s more of a connection to the spirit than a possession. In our formal ritual worship groups, called *sosyete*, or congregations, the worshipers are known as the *pititt-caye*, which means ‘children of the house,’ and the leaders are the *manbo* or *oungan*. In larger congregations, there are under-leaders, the *ounsi*, these are people who have made a lifelong commitment to serve the *lwa* and help the *manbo* or *oungan*, particularly during the parts where ‘possessions’ occur. *Ounsi* is Fon and means the ‘spouse of the *lwa*.’

“In possessions, we think of the *serviteur* as the *chwal*, the horse, and the *lwa* as ‘mounting’ their *serviteurs* to communicate with them and to answer questions which the *serviteur* may have which causes them to feel bad about themselves or their lives. When we’re in touch that way, the *lwa* will praise us, chastise us, and guide us. If we really feel like we’re one with the *lwa*, they can help with healing and energy flow in the body. If someone has an unbalanced energy flow in their body, it’s called being ‘blocked’ or ‘tied,’ and the *lwa* helps to remove



those blocks. The people of east Asia have some beliefs just like that, helping the energy flow in the body by meditating and using other ancient techniques. The ‘mounting’ of the *lwa* for a person might be along the same idea. Do you see how that can work—letting a spirit help you feel better?”

“Yep. Oh, then no one is taking me over. Good. But when I don’t feel good about something, I try to think about good things and that helps me feel better. Maybe a spirit helps me do that. Is that what you mean?”

“That’s wonderful, darling, that’s kind of like what we try to teach.”

“Yeah, that’s where I think I learned it.”

Cassandra smiled. “I wondered how much you soaked up, sitting in your corner during our rituals. Now you need to tell me something, miss. I’ve noticed that when you’re here during our ceremonies, most of the *serviteurs* are extremely receptive to being mounted and they have an excellent experience; it’s much less so when you’re not here. Can you explain this?”

Fabienne wrinkled her nose. “I... um... you won’t be angry? ‘Cause you don’t like when I make myself ‘little.’ It’s like when I do that, but... different somehow. When I’m ‘little,’ I don’t want to be bothered, so I’m thinking ‘don’t see me.’ But it goes the other way too; people give out something I can ... um... not feel or see... there aren’t words...”

Cassandra looked at her sharply. “Do you know the word ‘aura’?”

“Um, no...”

“It’s an invisible energy field that supposedly surrounds everything—living things, that is. Some people can sense them. *Manman*—my mother—could. She had a very strong sense of auras.”

Fabienne nodded slowly. “Maybe that’s it. People’s feelings have a kind of... um, taste... to me. Bad feelings are bitter and good ones are sweet. Happy and sad ... they’re all different tastes. Sometimes I taste a rotten flavor, so maybe that’s a very bad person. I don’t even need to see the person to know how they feel. But sometimes I can turn some of the tastes around and send them back to a person too, and when I’m here, I try to make people feel good.”

“Amazing,” Cassandra sighed. “Fabienne, you must have a *pwen*—perhaps you are the embodiment of one.”

“What’s that?”

“*Pwen* is a kind of spiritual or magical focus. The initiation rite, the *kanzo*, which we will finish doing later, is the biggest *pwen*. *Pwen* can also be the personal power of non-initiates, like you might have. You seem to have a strong spiritual focus, my dear. I can sense something in you, a kind of spiritual strength. Listen, it’s almost meal time. Go get ready. We’ll need to talk some more about this, okay? And no, I’m not angry about your ability; I’m just in awe. Go wash up, I need to help your father now.”

They hugged and Fabienne ran off to wash up and Cassandra went to the kitchen. She had a lot to think about and a lot to discuss with Jonas.

~~~~~

Later, after dinner and the ritual, and Fabienne had gone to bed, Cassandra and Jonas began talking about their daughter.

“Jonas, let me tell you what Fabienne told me. I was stunned...”

Jonas interrupted. “Wait, before I forget. Did you see the books she was reading? I looked. She was using a frikkin’ high school physics book. And she was working the problems in it.”

Cassandra sighed. “Okay, let’s talk about her books first, then. You’re not home a lot so you don’t see what she does. She *always* has a book and her nose is in it. The teacher in her school, not the college—her grade school, Institution Saint Dominique, told me that Fabienne’s just about gone through their entire library so they got permission for her to use the one at the college, the Universite GOC. She’s over there at least twice a week now, and I don’t even understand the names of most of the subjects she likes to read about. They’re mostly sciences but she reads fiction stories too, literature. The fiction ‘classics.’ Her school just lets her go at her own pace since that lets the teacher work with kids who need more help.”

“I’ve seen her with all the books, Cass. I didn’t know she was so far ahead of kids her age. But how is she socially?”

“Well, the other kids call her a nerd, but it’s in fun. She’s okay socially and has a few girls who get together to do whatever the girls here like to do. I find them here doing schoolwork together pretty frequently, but there’s a lot of giggling going on too.”

“That’s good, then. She’s not being a hermit.”

“No. But let me tell you about our conversation. You know how she suddenly seems to appear when we thought nobody was around?”

“Yeah. She did that again today. She called it ‘making myself little’; so she does that a lot?”

“Yes. Seems to pop out of nowhere. And that’s only the beginning. I thought about that trick of hers a lot this afternoon and I’m both excited and worried for her—because that trick is only part of what it seems she can do.”

“This sounds serious.”

“It is, especially if she uses her ability improperly or other people find out about it. Let me back up. *Manman*, my mom, as you know, was a very powerful *manbo*, and influential people frequently sought her because she could persuade just about anyone to come to her point of view. Myself, I could never get away with anything when I was growing up; *Manman* always seemed to know what I tried to hide. She also could see people’s auras; she said that they were like colors around people and I got the feeling, as she was training me as her *kanzo*, that she could influence those people’s auras in some way.

“Then, before I became a *manbo* and went out on my own to set up my own little *ounfò*—this was several years before we met and I was in school—I heard that another *manbo*, a *caplata* actually, had visited *Manman* and shortly after that, she disappeared.”

“What’s a *caplata*?” Jonas asked. “I haven’t heard that term.”

Cassandra sighed. “This is part of the evil side of Vodou; it’s the part that gives our religion such a bad reputation among people who don’t know about us very well. A *caplata* is a witch, basically. This is a woman who uses her *manbo* status to influence the *lwa* to harm others. A magician or sorcerer is called a *choché*. These are people who we say *travaillant—ou sert—des deux mains*—that is, ‘they work, or serve, with both hands.’

“The *lwa* they serve are called *baka*, these are bad spirits that are typically thought of as taking animal form. These magicians or witches are called *bòkò* and the *lwa* they summon are known as *lwa acheté* or ‘bought *lwa*,’ and are called that because they’ve been spurned by the good *lwa*. What I learned about the *bòkò* is that they can try to get the dead to act against someone to cause their illness or death. A deceased human who is summoned by a *bòkò* is known as a *zonbi*, or zombie. The *bòkò* may also make an object which they claim contains supernatural properties; that’s called a *wanga* and it’s supposed to cause bad luck and illness. A number of these *bòkò* are known to curse people so that they can extort them to pay for an exorcism of the bad *lwa*.

“One of the ... um... services I learned to provide during my *kanzo* is to reverse the curse of a *bòkò* by working

with the person through invocations for the intervention of the protective *lwa*. I learned to do baths and massages of the person who was cursed to remove the curse.”

Jonas nodded. “Yeah, I hear my shop customers talk about their fear of getting on the bad side of a *vodouist*. The idea that a magician can make a zombie terrifies them. Some say they bury their hair cuttings and nail clippings too. What’s that about?”

“Most of the conservatives in the religion, and most common people too, believe in the supernatural—not just the *lwa*, but also the bad part. They believe that supernatural forces—like zombies, for example—can be used to cause harm or to make a person’s problems worse. So by appealing to the evil *lwa*, many common folks believe that the *bòkò* can harm them or force them to do things, if the *bòkò* can get access to their hair cuttings or nail clippings. I’m not an ignorant country *manbo*; you know that. I was well trained by my *manman*; I took many courses at university too, and *Manman* had me read about many other cultures during my time as a *kanzo*. Belief in such supernatural things and how they can affect a person is called ‘sympathetic magic’ by anthropologists.

“You know that my guardian *lwa* is *Papa Legba*, the guardian of the crossroads. Well, twinned with Papa Legba, his *Petwo nanchon* opposite, is *Kalfou*, who also controls the crossroads. But his is not the center, the heavily-traveled parts of the crosswalks. *Kalfou* is associated with the edges of the crossroads, those parts that are off-center or in between the well-traveled ones. In my beliefs, *Papa Legba* brings the benevolent spirits of the daytime, while *Kalfou* is said to control the malevolent spirits of the night. So, by calling to *Kalfou* in Vodou rites, it can allow the crossing into our world of deliberate destruction, misfortune, bad luck, and injustice.

“Enough talk of evil. Just thinking about it and the *manbos* or *ougans* who call to that *lwa* and his ilk, makes my skin crawl. We really need to talk about Fabienne. We got off that topic.”

“Right. You said her abilities concerned you.”

“Very concerned. I later learned that the *caplata* who visited my *manman* was named Vanessa. She only uses that single name; I never heard her last name. The area where she has her greatest influence is around Carrefour—oh my goodness...” she stopped in shock.

“What... what is it?” Jonas asked.

“*Kalfou*... another name that *lwa* is called by is ... Carrefour! That’s where Vanessa’s home is located, I’ve heard.”

“As a Marine, I learned that there are no coincidences,” Jonas told her. “Just different ways that reality manifests itself.”

“I would definitely agree with that idea. And from what I’ve heard about her, I think she has an ambition to be some kind of queen of the *manbo*. I also heard rumors that she’s supporting some kind of opposition to the government.

“I believe she learned of my *manman*’s abilities and was either afraid of them or wanted to use *Manman* for her own purposes; anyway, since *Manman*’s been gone for more than twelve years, she must be dead. I think Vanessa had her killed because she refused to help in whatever that witch planned.

“That’s why I’m so afraid for Fabienne. I inherited a bit of *Manman*’s abilities. I know that I can project my aura a little; it’s enough that it helps me during our ceremonies. But Fabienne must have all of *Manman*’s abilities and maybe even more. Having such *manbo* skills isn’t uncommon, but having them to Fabienne’s extent is rare. They do tend to run on the female side, mostly skipping generations.”

“What is it that Fabienne can do? Apart from becoming invisible, that is.”

Cassandra told him the details of what she had said to Fabienne at the end of their earlier conversation.

Then, “So I think her ‘invisibility’ is a result of her projecting a kind of ‘negative aura’ which suggests to people near her that they shouldn’t notice her. She told me that she projects what she called ‘good feelings’ at my rites when she’s in the room and I’ve noticed a positive difference in people when she’s there. Having those abilities, if that becomes known, she’d be in danger, like *Manman* was.”

Jonas sighed. “That’s ... ugh. Not what I want to hear. We ... maybe you should ... talk to her; try not to scare her. She’s only eight, for God’s sake. Tell her not to talk about what she does and maybe tone it down some.”

“I plan on doing exactly that, *mon chéri*. I need to be alone now to get these bad thoughts out of my head before I can sleep. I’ll go to the *ounfò* and be back soon.”

Both Cassandra and Jonas spent a restless night after their discussion.

## Chapter 2 - Rejecting Black Magic

*Aubry, Arcahaie Arrondissement, Haiti, two years later*

“Fabienne, I got a call from the Universite this afternoon asking if I want to continue to allow you to work in the electrical engineering lab there. Can you tell me what you’re doing?” Cassandra asked.

“Sure, I was in the library and heard a guy talking about a circuit he was building and it wasn’t working. So I went over and asked if he could show me the diagram. The kids there are funny; they call me their ‘mascot’ ‘cause they say I bring them good luck. That’s ‘cause when they show me their work, and I look at it, suddenly they realize they have to make changes and take it away to fix. When they show me again, I see there’s nothing wrong. They know if I look at their science work, they get good marks.”

“Do you tell them what’s wrong?”

“No, *Manman*. I *see* the wrong things and think that they need fixing. When I do, maybe the kid sees what I saw and goes to fix it.”

Cassandra shook her head. Her daughter’s increasing abilities never ceased to astound her.

“So what about that lab?” Cassandra asked.

“Oh yeah. He showed me his diagram and it had some parts in the wrong places. You mustn’t put a resistor and capacitor in circuit like that when you’re using a transistor as a driver...”

Cassandra thought, *She might as well be speaking Russian—or Chinese, for all that means.*

Fabienne was still explaining, “...so he asked me to go to the lab and show him. He had breadboarded the circuit so it was easy to switch things around and then it all worked. Then the professor came in and asked what we were doing. The guy told him how I had fixed the project and the teacher didn’t believe it. So he showed me another circuit breadboard and asked me if I knew what it was and if it looked okay. It was a basic superheterodyne receiver with a radio detector IC input and a low-power speaker output. I told him that, and showed him that the transistors in the amp section were the wrong ones to use in that circuit ‘cause they were overloaded. When he looked, he saw that I was right. That must be when he called you. He wants to work with me in the lab.”

Later, Cassandra called the professor. After they introduced themselves, she told him that Fabienne could work there if she wasn’t being a distraction.

“Oh, goodness, no,” the man replied. “She’s somewhat of a prodigy, actually, and seems to understand electronics intuitively. She told me some of the books she’s used to learn what she demonstrated to me and many of them are texts our university seniors use. I want to show her some more complex things, the kinds of integrated circuits that are used in computers and other electronic gadgets.”

“All right,” Cassandra told him. “If she becomes a bother, just send her back to the library. I doubt she’d complain about being exiled there,” she chuckled.

He laughed and they disconnected.

~~~~~

Several days later, when Jonas arrived home from work, Cassandra had some distressing news. She had had an unwelcome visitor that afternoon.

“Vanessa was here.”

Jonas tensed. “What happened? What did she want?”

“Me. She wants me to join her group of *chochés*. I told her no.”

“Anybody see her come here?” Jonas asked.

“No, I was alone. She must have been watching the *ounfò*, since there’s almost always someone visiting; you know how they come to get my herbal medicines or get counseling. At first I didn’t know who she was, actually.”

“You never met her?”

“Never even seen her before, actually,” Cassandra told him. “She has an enormously powerful presence and when she spoke to me, it appeared that she was trying to use her voice in a deliberately hypnotic manner. I realized that an unsuspecting person would come under her influence quite quickly.”

“Did she have any effect on you?”

“Actually I found it abrasive and annoying; first it seemed like she was addressing me like a child; then I saw that she was trying to do a kind of verbal hypnosis. That angered me, so rude. Then I realized that this must be Vanessa.”

“What did she talk about first?” Jonas asked.

“It was mostly trivial questions. How many people were in this congregation, what services I provided, did I also do faith healing and sell amulets. Some questions about the area too. I answered those questions; they’re mostly normal when one *manbo* speaks to another. But I got alarmed when she began asking about my family. At that point, I told her that those questions were inappropriate.”

Jonas scowled. “How did she react when you shut her down?”

“With a very ill-concealed anger. She said that *manbos* needed to be open and communicative with each other. Then she began talking about the ‘old days,’ and that turned into a tirade. Apparently the ‘old days’ were during François Duvalier’s regime, his rule, really, and she wants Haiti to return to a government with a king who holds power by divine right. She told me that Duvalier was a person of ‘real power’ and she can help bring back a strong political figure to rule; then, she said, the *oungans* and *manbos* will have real political power because everyone will worship them like they do the ancestor spirits and the *lwa*.

“Jonas, you know that if there’s anything in my religion that approaches being sacrilegious, it’s that idea. The very thought that the *oungan* and the *manbo* should be worshiped is simply preposterous.

“Then she went on to tell me that I had real power; she could tell that I had great strength and would be a natural *choché*. She said that she would teach me and she would rule as the *manbo* queen with me at her side. I insisted that I could never *sert des deux mains*; that my patron. *Papa Legba*, would not allow it either.

“She scoffed at that and said she could fix that. Dealing with my patron *lwa* wouldn’t be any difficulty for her and that she could exorcize any *lwa* easily. I was trying not to show my anger, so I told her that I’d never consider going against my beliefs. That’s when she said that she’d give me three weeks to decide and that if I didn’t join her, she would make me wish I hadn’t rejected her offer. She told me that she knew where you worked and where Fabienne went to school and that she would be sorry if she heard that something had happened to someone in my family.”

“Damn!” Jonas exclaimed. “Maybe I need to visit Vanessa myself.”

“No, Jonas, don’t face her directly. When she left, I watched her get into a car and she had two evil-looking men



with her. I've heard that her compound in Carrefour is heavily guarded."

"Okay; I'll just check her out. I promise I won't confront her."

~~~~~

The following day, Jonas drove to Carrefour and located Vanessa's compound. Cassandra was correct, it was heavily guarded, and whenever Vanessa left the grounds, she always had two men with her. With a Marine's eye, he watched to see if she could be shot from a distance; Jonas had some sniper training, but the house wasn't very visible from outside the compound walls. But Jonas quickly dismissed the sniper idea; he realized that such cold-blooded killing felt repugnant to him now. This was not combat; neither was he an assassin.

Jonas wondered what he could do to protect his family. With no evidence, going to the authorities wasn't even worth a thought, not to mention that the authorities were unreliable, corrupt, or in league with Vanessa. Or probably all of the above.

During the following week, Jonas was still pondering what to do about the Vanessa situation, when he got an excited call from Henri, his boss, soon after he had left the shop for the day.

"Jonas, you gotta come over now. Rafael was doing a job in Carrefour and he got a recording of Vanessa talking about Cassandra."

Jonas quickly drove back to the shop. Henri was there with his younger son Rafael.

The three men went into the shop and Rafael pulled out his phone.

"I was working at this estate in Carrefour. They had a van that had an electrical problem. You know the place, off RN-2; we've done work for the owner a lot, so they like to use us. They let me come in to do repairs without watching me, like many of the other rich people do. When I got there, someone pointed to a big garage where it was sitting.

"I pulled my truck into the bay next to the van; there was lots of room there. I got out my tools and began to look for the problem. I was lying on my back, working under the van's dash, and using the light from my phone to see, when I heard someone pull into the other bay, right next to the van. There was talking; I could hear it through the open window. Then a woman's voice mentioned Cassandra. That's when I turned the phone recorder on."

He played the recording.

Man: "...know where she lives. Raymond was your driver when you went there that day, right?"

Woman: "Yes. I want you and Ricardo to start staking out the girl's school. She goes to Institution Saint Dominique, but several times a week she walks over to the Universite GOC. Watch for the next week to see any change in patterns. Also, keep tabs on Cassandra. If I feel like it would be to my advantage, maybe I'll have you grab her too. We'll aim for the second week from now, a week from next Tuesday for the snatch date, and if there's no one around to see, do it. The fallback days will be Wednesday and Thursday. I'll make up my mind by next week about taking the woman.

"But it's really essential that no one sees you."

Inaudible: "Mumble mumble."

Woman: "Right, she walks across a farm field there, then crosses Route 1. It's only about a kilometer and a half walk for her. After Route 1, she's on a road where some sections are overgrown and you'd be hidden from view there."

Man: “Do we need to knock her out?”

Inaudible: “Mumble mumble.”

Woman: “Ricardo’s right. Use the heavy van, the gray one. The walls are insulated, keep sounds in. Don’t hurt her.”

Then there was the sound of the door opening and closing.

Second man: “Greetings, Vanessa. Sorry to delay you. Some business came up...” *A phone buzzed.* “Just a second, a text... says to wait, some papers are being faxed. Vanessa, we can do what you want. We can fix up a secure place for you on your compound to assemble your *chochés* and train them in your magic.”

Vanessa: “I need rooms that can be locked or cages to secure those who are reluctant until they are convinced to participate. We might have several of those people.”

Second man: “How many people are we talking about?”

Vanessa: “I have eleven loyal followers right now; eight being recruited, and so far, two extremely strong *manbos* who’ve refused so far, but I will make sure that they will be changing their minds very soon now.”

Second man: “So you really want to become queen of the *manbos*?”

Vanessa: “I actually already am. No one is more powerful than me, and I have the backing of ... you know the person who we picked to lead the new regime. The Duvalier family will take its rightful place again, and with my powers and those of my trainees, we can assure you that Haiti will soon be a kingdom. Also...”

There was a knocking noise.

Second man: “A moment. Here are the papers.” The noise of a car door opening and closing sounded. “A whole satchel? Oh, the guns you wanted are in here too.”

Vanessa: “Can we go? Good. David, let’s go.”

There was the sound of an engine starting and the vehicle moving away; then the recording stopped.

Rafael continued his narrative. “I was scared as shit. I closed up as fast as I could, just throwing my tools into the truck, and hauled my ass outta there.”

“Who do you figure was in the car besides Vanessa?” Jonas asked.

“Yeah, that was the estate owner who got in; it sounded like his voice. He’s a government minister. The other two must be Vanessa’s muscle.”

With the information from the recording, Jonas was able to make some plans. First, they made sure that Fabienne was never alone. Next, on the first date that had been scheduled for the kidnapping, Jonas, Henri, and his sons kept watching for a gray van, and sure enough, they saw that it was parked at an isolated corner where Fabienne would pass. The van was parked there the two following days as well. The same gray van was also seen driving slowly around the area of Jonas’ home.

On Saturday, the compound was busy and Cassandra had many people who wanted to talk to her or to buy herbs. During a lull in the activity, two women went into the *ounfò*. One stood at the door and the other went to Cassandra, who was putting some bottles away.

“Oh, I didn’t see you,” Cassandra said. “May I help you?”

“This is a message from your visitor of two weeks ago. She wants you to know that she’s been watching you

and next Wednesday, you will be contacted, and you will follow the instructions.”

With that, both women hurried out, met two men at a car in the driveway, which then drove away.

Cassandra phoned Jonas, who was working at the shop, to tell him what happened.

“I’ll be right there, I need to get Fabienne, she’s in Emanuel’s house with his kids,” he replied.

When he got home, Cassandra told him of the women’s visit.

“So we need to something drastic before Wednesday. Let me see about driving to the D.R. on Monday afternoon or Tuesday to buy us more time. I need to go with Henri to Port-au-Prince first thing Monday to get some parts. I’ll pick up a Dominican Republic eTicket then,” Jonas told her. “... so we can enter the country. Do you have anyone watching you and Fabienne on Monday?”

“Yes, it’s Robert. He can handle any problems if they happen.”

“All right. I certainly hope that we don’t have any more problems next week.”

They had no idea about what kind of problems that the following week would bring.

### Chapter 3 - Disaster

Monday at just after noon, Jonas and Henri were returning from Port-au-Prince where they had picked up a contracted-for shipment of second-hand auto parts from a broker. They were riding in Henri's truck and heading back to the shop to unload and then go on to Aubry, where he intended to drop off Jonas at his home. Jonas had gotten the D.R. E-Ticket and planned to bring his family over the border to safety on Tuesday morning. Henri was at the wheel and they were close to Henri's shop and home, about ten minutes away from Jonas' home, when the truck lurched wildly. Henri twisted the wheel to keep the truck on the road.

"*Mèd!* What was that?" he shouted.

The truck lurched again and he stopped while some shaking continued. "Earthquake!" he yelled at Jonas.

They could both see nearby structures collapsing and clouds of dust rising into the air; then the ground settled.

Henri stepped on the gas and raced on to his shop. Jonas looked around as they drove into the driveway; he didn't see much damage here and Henri's shop building appeared as if it hadn't been damaged. Henri stopped in front of the shop as his wife, Julianna, was running out of it.

"Henri, the shop and house are mostly okay and so are our sons' houses," she called.

One of Henri's sons yelled to them, "Papa, the shop's good. Some things fell down, but nothing major! Everyone's outdoors now!"

There was a brief shaking again.

"Damn, we need to get to Aubry and my wife and kid!" Jonas shouted.

"We'll leave the truck! Get in the shop van!" Henri called and they raced to get into the van.

Henri drove there as fast as he could. They pulled into the courtyard of the *ounfò*. The small block building had mostly collapsed, and the little house next to it was also heavily damaged. Smoke and flames were coming out of one side of the *ounfò*. A small figure lay on the ground just outside the *ounfò*'s doorway. They saw that it was Fabienne and she wasn't moving. Jonas rushed over to her. Part of the door frame lay next to her and she had a gash in her scalp, oozing blood, but she was breathing.

"Henri, we shouldn't move her without supporting her back," Jonas said, his thoughts reverting back to his combat training. "Her breathing is strong. The bleeding's mostly stopped. See if there's a board or plank we can use. But I need to find Cassandra. There's a fire somewhere in the *ounfò*, so I better check there first."

Jonas leaned into the collapsed doorway in the *ounfò* and could hear faint cries for help, but fallen, twisted roof panels were blocking the way into the structure. Jonas noticed the window at the back corner of the building had been partially broken out, and the wall there was still standing. He hurried over to it and leaned through it into the structure.

"There's a fire inside and I hear Cassandra crying in there!" he shouted to Henri.

Henri rushed over to him with a pair of leather gloves. "Here, take these gloves! They'll help if there's more broken glass inside—also protect your hands against the fire!"

With a broken chunk of concrete, Jonas knocked out the remaining window glass and the wooden frame and climbed through the opening. He took off his shirt and wrapped it around his face to try to keep the smoke from choking him. Keeping low, below the smoke, he felt his way to the sounds of Cassandra's crying. As he reached her, he could sense that the flames were coming close to her legs. Feeling around her legs, he found a wooden beam lying across them. With a mighty tug, he lifted the end of the beam pinning her leg, propping it up on an

overturned chair, and then was able to pull her away from the spreading flames.

He could see that most of the fire's smoke was pouring out of holes in the metal roof, which the quake had twisted and ripped apart. Then, through the haze of the smoke, he could dimly see a figure lying under the middle of the beam he had lifted; he saw that it was Robert, the member of Cassandra's congregation who had agreed to watch her while Jonas was away. The fallen beam had crushed his chest. Jonas leaned over the body and felt for a pulse in the neck; it was clear that Robert wasn't alive. Keeping low and dragging a wailing Cassandra behind him, he scuttled back to the window and shouted for Henri. Then he looked at his wife, checking her for any bleeding.

"Cass, I've got you now; you'll be safe. Can you tell me where you're hurt? Can you move your legs?"

She whimpered, "Oh Jonas, it was awful. I hurt all over, my legs burn. I can move them but I think the left one must be broken. Oh *mon Dieu*, where's Fabienne?"

"We've got her. She's knocked out but seems okay otherwise. Hey, I'll need to get you through the window here, so this'll hurt some, but then we'll be safe."

Then Jonas noticed a folding table near the window.

"Here's a little table. I'll get you on the top and we'll slide you out the window," he told her.

He shouted for Henri while he folded up the table's legs. Henri climbed through the window and together, they carefully slid the table under Cassandra and hoisted it onto the window sill. After some twisting around, Henri had enough room to slip past her to get outside and the two of them were able to slide the table the rest of the way out. They carried the makeshift stretcher/backboard over to the van and slid it into the rear door. The ground shook with another aftershock and a little more of the two ruined buildings settled. By now the fire had enveloped one entire side of the *ounfò*, but since most of its outer walls were concrete block, there wasn't much more structure left to burn.

Henri had found a narrow door lying on the ground near the Bernards' house; it had broken out of its frame when the wall that it was in had fallen. Together, they slid the door under Fabienne and pushed it into the van next to Cassandra.

"Check them, Henri—see if there's bleeding. I need to see if I can get any of my stuff," Jonas said. "I got some emergency gear. It's in the bedroom over there and the wall there looks intact."

"Be careful, my friend. There could be another shock."

"Right."

Jonas broke out the window in the wall and slid in. He quickly located the strongbox he kept under the bed and then pulled a backpack and duffel bag out of a wardrobe. He found Cassandra's handbag and then recalled that she kept her personal documents in a wooden desk in the *ounfò*; surely by now, the fire had burnt everything in that building. Stuffing what he could find of importance into the duffel, and grabbing his backpack "bugout bag," he clambered back out of the window and looked around. There was devastation everywhere; the walls of his home had virtually collapsed and the *ounfò*, built mostly of concrete blocks, was a smoking, almost leveled ruin. His little truck had been crushed by a fallen wall. Almost eleven years of building a new life here were gone.

*Maybe this is a blessing, in a way, he mused. Maybe we can disappear now and get away from Vanessa.*

He ran back to the van and checked on his family. Cassandra was moaning in pain but Fabienne appeared awake now but she was very groggy. Jonas dug through his backpack and pulled out a bottle of oxycodone, took a

bottle of water from his pack, and gave Cassandra two capsules. Henri looked a question at him.

“It’s something I learned to do in the Marines. This is my ‘bugout bag.’ I keep emergency supplies in it if I have to go somewhere quick with no notice. Let’s see if we can find medical care.”

“There’s nothing but the two clinics along Route 1 near here, you know,” Henri said. “They can’t treat injuries like these. We’d have better luck in Port-au-Prince. Let’s hope that they’re not jammed—fat chance that’s not happening, anyway. I’ll pick up Julianna at home on the way; she knows a bit about nursing.”

They stopped at Henri’s home and Julianna ran over.

As she got into the van, she told Henri, “We’re pretty much okay. A lot of things fell over, fell off the walls, there’s some broken dishes too, and Emanuel said there wasn’t much damage to the boys’ houses or shop. I was outside when the shaking began, so nothing falling hit me, but Maureen hurt her arm when a shelf fell on it as she ran out of the house. She’s okay, it’s just a big bruise. Our grandkids were playing outside so they were safe. Let me look at Cassandra and Fabienne.”

She checked on them. Cassandra was sleeping fitfully; the medicine had knocked her out. Fabienne was complaining softly that her head hurt really badly.

“There’s a number of hospitals in the Morne a Tuff and Bois Verna neighborhoods in Port-au-Prince,” Julianna suggested. “Maybe we can get help there.”

Before any more time passed, though, Jonas knew he had to take care of Cassandra’s burns and immobilize her broken leg. Recalling his Marine training and remembering the aid he had seen his corpsman perform on men wounded by IEDs, he took what Julianna could give him to treat the burns and improvised some temporary dressings. He even had a few packets of antiseptic powder in his bugout bag.

Then, it was a stressful and hectic drive getting into the city. The roads were clogged with people and vehicles and, in places, filled with rubble from damaged structures. They had to find gas for the van as well, some food too. There were places where the roads were impassible; they were so blocked that they had to wait until they were cleared, or backtrack if clearing them wasn’t possible. It was about twelve hours after the quake that a weary Jonas and his companions arrived at the closest hospital, close to dawn, only to find that it was jammed with people seeking care. Jonas fed Cassandra another pain capsule and got her to eat a piece of a veggie wrap and an energy bar and take some water. Julianna was helping Fabienne with eating a little. Jonas went to see how long it would be to get care when he heard from a policeman that a field hospital was being set up near the port.

“Let’s go now! It’s in the National Port Authority and port parking area,” Jonas told Henri, “that’s just two clicks away.”

They left for the port immediately. When they approached the parking area, they saw several crews working on setting up two large tents. They were stopped as they tried to enter the port area but then the guard quickly motioned them to proceed into the parking lot. With its official-looking markings on its sides reading “National Recovery Services,” the name of Henri’s repair service, guard assumed that Henri’s shop van belonged there and they let him pass; everything was so disorganized anyway. There was a jumble of cots and gurneys in one part of the parking area where they could see ambulances arriving and departing, so Henri drove over to that area and parked as close to it as he could. The two men took four folding sawhorses out of the van, set them up, and began unloading Fabienne’s and Cassandra’s makeshift bodyboards onto them.

“Ugh,” Jonas grunted as he helped slide Cassandra out. “Not used to going without sleep for so long. I’m really getting tired... so glad it’s not hot, now that summer’s over.”

Henri wiped his brow. “So true. Whew!”

A nurse saw them and came rushing over.

“This area is for critical ... oh my, what are their injuries?” the nurse asked in French, seeing Cassandra’s lightly bandaged legs and the makeshift splint on her leg.

Jonas replied, “The woman, my wife, she has second or possibly third degree burns and what looks like a broken lower leg. My daughter’s injury looks like a skull fracture. There’s not much external bleeding but her skull looks wrong at the laceration.”

The nurse checked. Her scrubs bore an MSF patch, showing that she was from the *Médecins Sans Frontières* organization, and from her marked nasal French accent, Jonas realized that she was a Canadian.

“Hmmm...” she murmured as she examined both. “You appear to be correct. And I see that you used an improvised body board too. Do you have medical training?”

“No ma’am, just U.S. Marine combat first aid and a lot of combat experience treating my wounded buddies,” he replied.

“Oh, you’re a U.S. citizen?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Wait, let me get someone over here.”

A few minutes later, a woman, presumably a doctor from how the nurse was speaking to her, hurried over. She did a quick exam on both, spending much more time on Fabienne. Then she turned to Jonas. She was speaking French in the Marseille accent; Jonas switched mental gears.

“*Comprenez-vous la française?*”

“*Oui, allez-y,*” Jonas replied.

She continued, in French, “The girl is seriously injured; her skull has a fracture and there can be internal bleeding. Is it your daughter? How old is she?”

Jonas nodded. “Fabienne’s ten. When I found her right after the quake, she wasn’t conscious and that scalp laceration was bleeding. It stopped after we applied a little gentle pressure but I could tell she must have a fracture there. How serious is it? Can you treat it here?”

“No, we don’t have that ability in the field. She has what’s called a depressed skull fracture and it can be serious if there’s active bleeding under the skull. Sadly, we don’t have the facilities to do even emergency treatment for that but there’s a Navy hospital ship on its way. She’ll need a CT scan to assess her cranial bleeding and probably a neurosurgeon to treat her, but her prognosis should be good, considering how she responded to my exam. I’ll arrange for the chopper to get her there. There’s one coming, in a few hours I think. Is this one your wife, then?”

“Yes ma’am. She was in a burning building; I pulled her out.”

“It may look ugly, but you did a good job on her burns. You had combat first-aid training, I’m told. She’s got a simple tibia fracture and I’m glad to see how you splinted it to avoid the burned areas. I’m going to start IVs for nutrition and to get some antibiotics into them; cholera and other infections can be a big problem in earthquake disasters. She should be in a lot of pain, though and I’m not seeing that. Did you give her something?”

“Yeah, I have an emergency go bag. Marine training. She’s been on Percocet for... um... fifteen hours? Yeah.

Gave her a double dose at first, then one every four, maybe five hours. Last one was two hours ago.”

“Okay, that works. I’ll order analgesic in the IV too. Stay here; someone will come by to tell you what to do. I need to see more patients.”

“Thanks so much, doc,” Jonas said.

She waved her hand in acknowledgment as she hurried away.

A nurse and orderly came over wheeling ambulance-type gurneys and they transferred the two injured victims over onto them; then the nurse started their IVs. Soon a man, looking harried, rushed up to Jonas and asked to see his ID information.

“What’s that for?” Jonas asked.

“I was told you were U.S. citizens. The U.S. embassy needs ID for the hospital ship.”

From the strongbox in his backpack, Jonas pulled out his birth certificate, Florida driver’s license, and Marine ID card and the man used his phone to photograph them; then he left. About an hour later, an official-looking sedan pulled into the parking area and a new man emerged. He came over.

“I’m looking for the Bernard family,” he told them. “They mentioned to look for this van.”

“That’s us,” Jonas responded. “You are...?”

“Charles Devlin, consular affairs, from the U.S. embassy here. I’m told that a U.S. citizen is seriously injured and needs medical evacuation.”

“Right, I was told that was being arranged.”

Devlin nodded and reached to shake Jonas’ hand. “Mr Bernard, you’re retired Marine Corps, I’m told. Thank you for your service. You’ll be happy to know that the USNS *Comfort*, a Navy hospital ship, is en route and will arrive in port in about a day. Your daughter’s injuries need to be seen quickly, though. The ship is sending a chopper here to fetch a dozen or so seriously injured folks, including your daughter, to get them into treatment before the ship arrives in port. They want to get more immediate treatment for your wife’s burns too so she won’t be permanently scarred.”

“Thank you. Is there a chance I can hitch a ride with them?” Jonas asked.

“They’re sending two choppers. A medevac for stretcher passengers and the other is bringing some medical crew over to help with triage here at the field hospital being set up. I’m thinking you can ride on the return trip with some folks going back to the ship. I have some papers from the embassy which you’ll need at the ship; they’re to show that you’re authorized.”

Jonas noticed that a crew was roping off and marking out a makeshift helicopter landing area in the parking lot and roller-painting a large “H” symbol on the pavement.

Another hour or so passed and then Jonas heard the sound of an approaching helicopter in the distance. To Jonas’ trained ears, he could tell that it was a heavy bird. When it landed, Jonas was amazed. The bird was indeed huge. A crew had gathered to meet the aircraft, to unload dozens of cases of medical supplies, and to load the patients on it. Jonas found out that it was an EH101 and was equipped to carry up to sixteen stretchers.

After saying goodbye to Fabienne and Cassandra, telling them that he’d see them at the ship, the crew loaded them and the aircraft left. Fully loaded with people, it sounded very different as it flew away to the west.

Jonas asked the ground crew chief, who wore Navy CPO insignia on his fatigues, about his own transportation.



“When’s the other bird coming? Is it as large?”

The chief glanced at his watch. “Just about fifteen minutes, looks like. Nah, the next one is set up to seat ten plus cargo. It’s a Marine H-92 Superhawk. They’re also ferrying in a lot of medical supplies.”

“Okay. I’m supposed to hitch a ride on it to the *Comfort*. How do I set that up?”

“Yeah, we do got some folks going back to the ship on it. Do you have your papers?”

Jonas handed him the papers from the embassy.

The chief looked them over. “This’ll do. Stand by here and the others in the returning party should be... okay, here they come now.”

Jonas went over to the van and spoke to Henri and Julianna.

“I don’t know when we’ll see you—we need to go into hiding from Vanessa, you know all about that crap. We can’t come back as long as she’s around. I want to thank both of you for everything you’ve done for me and my family. I’ll miss you guys. I hope you can get things back on track after this disaster.”

Henri smiled. “We’ll be okay. My sons are good mechanics now; you taught them well. And there’ll be lots of work fixing up broken vehicles now. We’ll be fine.”

They all hugged each other and Jonas waved to them as their van pulled away. Suddenly fatigue set in, just like he remembered happened after a difficult mission in-country. With his reduced stress level now, Jonas began to feel the effects of being awake for more than thirty hours. He was exhausted.

After the Marine chopper landed and he boarded, he fell asleep for the seventy-five-minute flight to the *Comfort*.

## Chapter 4 - The Hospital Ship

The change in engine sounds woke Jonas from his brief nap and he tried to clear his groggy thoughts.

*That catnap was nowhere enough*, he mused. Then the thought struck him—*how would he find his wife and daughter?*

Fighting his almost frantic concern about their safety and how he would be able to find them on the ship; he tried to think of who to contact to locate them. And then his mind cleared. Hospitals have patient wards, even when they are in ships. No problem.

As soon as the aircraft touched down, a number of crewmen ran up and helped the chopper's passengers out while a CPO checked their IDs. When he got to Jonas, he looked at a clipboard he was carrying and then motioned a hospital corpsman over.

"This here's Mr Bernard. He has family who came in on the EH. They both went straight to surgery. Can you make sure he's squared away and knows the gouge?"

Jonas recalled that the word meant "situation."

The corpsman nodded. "Aye aye, Chief. That's what they sent me up here for." The corpsman turned to Jonas. "If you can follow me, sir. Your two ladies are in surgery now and I'm told there's no immediate problem for them so you can relax as best as you can. I was told to show you to the waiting area," and then he led Jonas to a lounge-like area. "They said to tell you to try to relax. A lot of patients came in on the EH so it might be an hour or two's wait. There's coffee, tea, hot chocolate, and bottled water there. Just down that passageway is the head. The chairs recline so you can sack out if you need."

Jonas thanked him and sat in a comfortable chair and, despite his anxiety, he quickly fell asleep. The exertion of rescuing his wife and daughter plus the extended time being awake had exhausted him and not even the nagging pain from his leg, with its implanted surgical rod, kept him awake.

A nurse awakened him several hours later.

"Come with me, sir. Your wife and daughter are out of the post-surgery unit and in the patient ward. You may visit with them briefly."

She led Jonas through several passageways and they entered the ward, brushing back a curtain which surrounded two wheeled hospital beds. There lay Cassandra and Fabienne who, on seeing him, both smiled happily.

"My hero," Cassandra said as she stretched out an arm to him. "Ouch," she complained as the movement disturbed her legs, one of which was in a cast.

"Papa," Fabienne called. "Everything was shaking and *Manman* screamed for me to get outside, but the doorway fell on my head. It really hurt. We're going to Miami to fix it. You saved *Manman* and me."

Jonas went over to her and hugged her carefully, then kissed her cheek, avoiding touching the large bandage around her head.

The nurse was standing by. "She has a protective cover over her head wound to keep away any further pressure there," the nurse said.

"I love you, sweetie, and we'll make sure you're good as new," Jonas told Fabienne.

Then he went to Cassandra's bedside. "You must hurt pretty bad, *chérie*. Those burns looked nasty."

He bent over and kissed her.

“Not as bad as they could have been, the doctor here told me. You and Henri must have done the right things for first aid, he told me. Do you know what happened to Robert? There was all that shaking and a ceiling beam must have fallen on us. I was knocked out and woke up when I felt the fire. Then you were there like a *lwa*, my guardian spirit.”

“Unfortunately the beam hit him full on and he didn’t survive. I’m really sorry.”

Tears welled up in Cassandra’s eyes. “Oh, I’m very sorry to hear. He was a good, decent man.”

“He was. The quake was terrible; Henri and I saw destruction everywhere. Julianna, the family, and their home and shop are okay though, but a lot of Aubry was badly damaged,” Jonas said.

Cassandra nodded. “I would love to be able to take care of my people, but Vanessa...”

“Right. We can’t go back, Fabienne would be in great danger too. We’ll have to go into exile in the States, I guess.”

Cassandra leaned back and closed her eyes. Fabienne had already fallen asleep. The nurse cleared her throat.

“You’ll need to leave now, sir. They need their sleep to recover.”

Jonas yawned. “I do too. I only got maybe two hours’ sleep in the last 32 hours.”

“We’ll get you a berth. You can’t see the surgeon today anyway; he’s been busy with everyone who came in earlier. He told me that he’d see you at 0800 tomorrow. We’re about twelve hours out from port and it’s almost 2000 hours now. When did you eat last?”

“Huh. I guess I *am* hungry. It’s been too long to remember when, other than a snack and a few energy bars.”

“Let me call a corpsman. He’ll show you to chow and then your berth. Let him know if you need anything for this evening, like toiletries and stuff.”

“I’m good there. I was able to save some personal items from my wrecked home.”

“So sorry about that, sir; I hope things go better for you going forward.”

“Thanks.”

The corpsman led Jonas to the ship’s mess where he had a quick meal. As a hospital ship, food was kept prepared and was available the entire day. Then a crew member brought him to a compartment and showed him a berth there.

~~~~~

Jonas woke at 0600; his military training wouldn’t let him sleep if there was a mission to be done, and saving his family was his current mission. He showered and went to the mess area. After eating, he found his way back to the ward where his family was located but a corpsman stopped him.

“You’re not supposed to be here, sir,” the corpsman began.

“My family is in there,” Jonas responded.

“Ah. The Bernards? Okay. Your wife is having her burns treated now and your daughter is getting a CT to follow up on any possible further internal bleeding. They should be fine, though. Wait over there; a nurse will get you when the surgeon is ready to talk to you.”

After an hour passed—a long tense hour—a nurse appeared and brought Jonas to a small office cabin just as a doctor wearing surgical scrubs appeared at the door.

“Colonel Haskins, this is Jonas Bernard,” the nurse spoke to the doctor.

“Hello, Mr Bernard,” he nodded to Jonas, “and have a seat and relax. Your wife’s burns are being treated now and she’s doing okay. She obviously had top notch first aid and that helped enormously. We expect that she’ll recover with hardly any scarring. Your daughter’s injuries are somewhat more serious; she has a skull fracture which I hear you know about. That caused bleeding under the membrane lining the inside of the skull. The medical term is ‘subdural hematoma.’”

“But how is she... can you fix it?”

“She’s stable now and her first CT shows that the bleeding’s stopped and the one we did this morning looks okay too. But we don’t have the facilities on board for the delicate neurological surgery she needs to repair it, to look for any remaining blood vessel damage, and remove the pooled blood. There might be too much for the body to absorb it all. I’ll be arranging a medevac flight to Miami for her; we have about a dozen other seriously injured patients, three U.S. citizens, scheduled for that flight.”

“Um, sir, I’m a citizen and so is Fabienne.”

“I heard that, but is your wife?” Haskins asked.

“No, but...”

“Not a problem. I’ll get my master chief in here to talk to you about that. He’s had some experience with mixed U.S. and foreign dependents.”

Haskins punched a number into the desk phone. “Master Chief? Got a patient with a citizenship waiver issue. Need you in 2043 ... roger.” He turned to Jonas. “Be just a minute.”

“Thanks, sir... ah, you’re a colonel? This is a Navy ship so I thought only Navy docs...?”

Haskins chuckled. “Army light colonel. I’m in the reserve and on TDY from the University of Florida medical school for this disaster relief effort. The Army, Air Force, and Navy have doctors.”

“Ah, I think I knew that. Army docs in Germany rebuilt my leg. I’m Marine; medical retired; wounded in Afghanistan...” Jonas began, and then the cabin door opened and a big man in a Navy corpsman’s uniform appeared.

The newcomer glanced at Jonas and then did a double-take, his eyes widening and jaw dropping. Jonas looked at the man and gasped.

They both spoke at once: “...Jo...Jonas? What...?” ... “Bert? Damn! Is it you?”

Haskins looked from one to the other. “You guys know each other?”

The two men approached each other for a man-hug.

The man referred to as “Bert” looked at the colonel. “Yes, sir; this jarhead saved my sorry ass in A-stan. Jeez... must be fourteen years now. I was attached to his company and we saw a lot of combat together. This guy was damned good; really took care of his squad and even helped me treat some Marines when they got hit. He learned about giving field first aid like a sponge.”

Haskins grinned. “So I guess introductions are *not* in order, but for the sake of protocol, Mr Jonas Bernard, this is Master Chief Gilbert Bronson.”

Jonas looked at Bronson's insignia, three chevrons, arc above, with a superimposed eagle and a pair of stars. "You've come up in the world, man. Made a master CPO? Two stars above the eagle is a master chief, right?"

Bronson chuckled. "Hey, they think I'm good, so they promoted me a bunch, but it's probably because the higher I went, the less damage I could cause. Aye, I'm a master chief hospital corpsman now. How come you're on shipboard here? And how's that leg? Give you any problems?"

"I live in Haiti and my family got hurt in the earthquake; got sent here. Yeah, the leg. I set off the airport alarms when I flew. And I can forecast rain all the time too. But it's okay; only when I'm tired, I feel it and limp a bit."

Haskins looked at the master chief. "His wife and daughter, both should be okay," he said; then he looked at Jonas. "How were you wounded, Mr Bernard?"

Bronson was looking at Jonas and saw him flinch. "Doc, I know he doesn't like to talk about that. We spent time together in Landstuhl recovering from our wounds from his final combat mission and he hated to discuss that last battle. Let me tell you what this dumb grunt did.

"As I recall it, our Marine company was attached to an Army battalion combat team operating close to the Pakistan border near Ganjgal, Kunar Province; we were supposed to be guarding the approaches to a village where the U.N. had set up a field hospital and food distribution center. The Army battalion commander ordered Jonas' company to be split up with just one platoon monitoring the approach road from the east. Jonas told me that his company commander had objected to dividing his forces like that, especially since his company was under strength."

Jonas broke in. "Right; the skipper got overruled and was royally pissed. I was an E-5 and the first squad leader, but since my platoon sergeant had been wounded a week earlier and we hadn't gotten a replacement for him, I was now the platoon's senior sergeant. I was made acting platoon sergeant so I got to go to the skipper's meeting at battalion HQ with the other officers and noncoms and heard the full mission plans plus the rest of the unofficial scuttlebutt about the mission. Then we had to hustle to get our unit into position. Our skipper got us set up on a rocky bluff overlooking the approach road to the U.N. camp; we were in the closest position to the border of the rest of the company. The LT, our platoon leader, deployed us but we were awfully spread out."

"I remember we were under strength, but I think it was by a fair amount, right?" Bronson asked.

"Yeah. A lot. My platoon, the one you were attached to, we were short by eleven, down from full strength. That's only about three-quarter strength. We did have a weapons platoon detachment that had two M249 SAW teams — light machine guns — and two 60 mm mortar teams. We were humpin' it to get ready and got into position none too soon because the Taliban came calling the next day. Damn, I don't like to talk about this shit."

"That's okay, I remember what went down," Bronson said. "That next morning, it was cold and foggy. I was with the radio guy at first, remember? We heard vehicle noises coming from the east. Pakistan was only about 14 clicks away east. There were lots of trucks and those effin' Toyotas the T-men love and obviously their target was the U.N. encampment. From the number of trucks, there were maybe 200, maybe 250 men. We could see their heavy mortars and rockets in the backs of the open trucks. They would have wiped out the whole effin' village and the U.N. camp too.

"When we saw them start to deploy the rockets, the LT gave the signal to engage, but he was nailed by a machine gun burst when he tried to signal to some exposed Marines to get to cover. Jonas took over then and with only maybe 37 Marines, he repelled that whole damned T-men attack. I heard there were 96 enemy known killed on the slope in front of our position and another hundred or so on the road, then more trying to retreat when air support arrived. We lost eight Marines, six, I think, in close-in combat. Also, twice Jonas left his covered position to pull an exposed, wounded Marine back to me to get treated. And he continued fighting even

after a round fractured his tibia; that was after shrapnel from a mortar took a chunk out of his thigh. I personally saw him kill maybe seven T-men using his M4 and the LT's nine-mil—and this really nasty knife he had—before his leg got hit.

“Just after he took the round in his leg, he had two T-men rushing him, got one with the nine-mil and one with that damned blade of his. And a minute later, he just about beheaded a T-man with the knife; only the guy's spine kept his head on. He also nailed a T-man who rushed us on my blind side when I went to give him aid. So he alone accounted for eleven in near and close combat and saved my frikkin' ass too. Hey, Jonas, that goddamned knife you had—I still remember that sucker—looked like an effin' samurai sword—a katana? But shorter. Guess you didn't like the Marines' Ka-Bar?”

Jonas shrugged. “Hell, I won't touch a Ka-Bar. My uncle was in the Brit Royal Marines and he gave me this Fairbairn-Sykes he carried in Korea. It zips through kevlar like paper and 'cause it's thin and double edged, it won't get caught between someone's ribs like the Ka-Bar can.”

“You were like a demon with that thing. Anyway, while I was trying to clean and tape up Jonas' shrapnel wound, he had his M4 propped up in front of us and was goddamned still firing it, keeping the T-men down. Just as I finished gettin' him taped up, the birds arrived and they sprayed the area with ordnance and soon the shooting stopped. While I was finishing up splinting him, a dustoff bird landed and we got medevaced. I had a bullet hole in my thigh, so I got pulled out too.

“We were both hauled off to Landstuhl since my leg wound was pretty close to the artery. But him, the docs had to rebuild that lower leg for him. So this grunt's cojones plus his leadership got that attack stopped. Got the Navy Cross for that; the brass awarded it to him at Landstuhl and a few of the other wounded grunts in his unit got decorations too. I was able to get back to duty after my surgery and rehab but I heard that Jonas was gonna be medically retired. They needed to put a metal rod in his leg. And say, Jonas, maybe a year or so after you left Landstuhl for the States, a Marine colonel contacted me and I had a really intensive interview about that battle. He wanted every bit of scoop I could recall. He said they were verifying your decoration info.”

Haskins looked at Jonas. “That's quite some story, Mr Bernard. How's your health been since then?”

“I do okay, sir. I've been working as a mechanic. The leg limits me some, and I have some eye and hearing issues. The VA gave me an initial 50 percent disability rating, service connected, but I don't get to use it much in Haiti. I'm doing way better than the 50 percent now, but having that rating will be useful in the U.S. for medical care.”

“Speaking of that—let's talk about your family now,” Haskins said. “I know a highly regarded neurosurgeon at University of Miami's Miller Medical School and that's who I'll be referring your daughter to. And the master chief here can smooth the way to remove any bureaucratic nonsense you might get. I'll leave this in his hands. I'm going to check on your family now and the nurse will tell you when you'll be able to see them again. I gotta run now, it was really an honor to meet you. Ooo-rah, Marines!” he said and strode out the door.

Bronson turned to Jonas. “I checked before I came up here; your family—didn't realize it was yours—is gonna be on the air evac to Miami in two days. Okay, what do you need from me? The doc mentioned some citizenship issues.”

Jonas explained that his wife wasn't a citizen but her life was in danger from a political situation in Haiti and about the threat of kidnapping that he heard about his daughter.

“Now that one's way above my pay grade. I'll bring in someone who can help with that, much better than I can,” Bronson said, as he picked up the phone and dialed. He spoke for a minute and told Jonas, “Okay, she'll be here in a few.”

They chatted until there was a tapping on the door.

Bronson opened it. “Jonas, this is Lt Commander Jayne Sterling, she’s our chief community relations officer. Tell her what you told me.”

They shook hands and Jonas repeated his story about the threats to Cassandra and Fabienne.

When he finished, Sterling shook her head. “That’s awful; you certainly need to get out of there. Let me contact the U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince; we can arrange to get an emergency visa for Cassandra. Do you have any papers for Fabienne? No? We’ll do something for her too.”

She called the embassy and was on the phone for ten minutes, pausing to get information from Jonas. While she was on the phone, Bronson spoke to Jonas.

“You know, if they’re in that much trouble...” Bronson began.

“They are. My father was assassinated by Duvalier loyalists when I was a toddler in Miami, you know. I’m thinking that these people now must be involved with the same group that’s trying to take over Haiti again. I’m guessing we’ll have to go into hiding in the States now.”

They chatted for several more minutes, Jonas telling Bronson a little about their problem.

Sterling hung up. “Mr Bernard, you’ll need to get to the embassy. We’re just about ready to dock in port right now so you can get a shuttle from the pier. I’ll get you some ID so you can use Navy resources. Come, I’ll show you to Security; then I need to go along with you to the embassy. I need to coordinate the ship’s visit with the military attaché there.”

The nurse popped her head in then. “Doc said you can see your family after 1800 hours. They have some treatments and tests up till about then.”

Jonas and Bronson said their farewells and promised to stay in touch. As Bronson was leaving the stateroom, Sterling was making some notes on a pad. She looked up at Jonas.

“We’ll go to the security office and get a temporary ID for you and then I’ll need to vouch for you at the embassy. You have your IDs, I hope?” she asked.

“Whatever papers I could save I have in my backpack here. They’re all of my official docs. As a Marine, I never quit keeping my ‘go bag’ ready in case of emergencies and this is sure as hell the worst one imaginable for my family.”

“I hear you. Let’s move out; there’s lots of stuff to do.”

## Chapter 5 - American Embassy

Jonas and LtCdr Sterling arrived at the embassy just before noon. Sterling had gotten him an appointment with the political officer, Roger Grant. Grant welcomed them and had Jonas sit.

“I’ll leave Mr Bernard in your capable hands,” Sterling said. “I told you about his family’s problems with the current regime’s unrest. His wife will need an emergency visa.”

“Plus she doesn’t have any kind of passport and most of her docs were burnt in the fire in our home,” Jonas added. “I do have her national ID card, though.”

Grant nodded and said farewell to Sterling, then turned to Jonas. “Okay then, let’s start with your own situation. You’ve run afoul of the government somehow?”

“No sir, not the government; my wife was threatened by a powerful—witch, I guess you’d say—not only a priestess—that’s a Vodou *manbo*, but in Vanessa’s case, she’s a *caplata*, or what we call a *choché*, a servant of the bad spirits. She’s a Vodou priestess who wants to be the queen of priestesses, but she’s got influential associates and I guess she’s tied into a group trying to take over the government. We were lucky to get a recording of when she met with her ‘hit squad,’ I guess you’d call them. Do you know French? They’re speaking French.”

“Yes. I’m fluent.”

He played the recording.

Grant sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Hmmm... We’d heard that there was something brewing but we have nothing that’s concrete. This is terribly useful info. May I have a copy?” Jonas nodded. “Thank you. Now, I assume you have your own ID?”

Jonas opened his backpack and took out a packet. He then laid out a Haitian passport, birth certificate, Florida driver’s license, high school diploma, Marine ID card, and DD-214. Grant examined them. He picked up the DD-214.

“Marines, Afghanistan combat. Oh my, Navy Cross, Silver Star, Bronze Star with ‘V,’ Purple Heart, and Defense Meritorious Service Medal. Medical retirement as E-6 staff sergeant,” Grant said as he read the official discharge document. “So you’re a highly decorated Marine, I see. Thank you for your service. I’m guessing that’s why you have the slight limp.”

Jonas grinned wryly. “Metal rod in the leg. I’m not as spry as I was as a teen.”

“All right then, no U.S. passport?”

“Ah, now that’s quite a story. After I completed my physical therapy and was mustered out, I decided to return to Miami. I actually didn’t have anywhere else to go and I was born and grew up there. My mom and dad were Haitian, they were asylum seekers who had to flee Haiti to get away from Baby-Doc Duvalier. This was during the time of the Cuban Mariel Boat Lift. Both of them were politically powerful but they were trying to push for a more representative government. Baby-Doc’s hitmen tracked down my father and assassinated him when I was maybe two or three.

“Mom had a half-brother who lived in the U.K. and worked for a security company. He got a gig through his company to work a job in Miami, so he lived with us for seven years or thereabouts before he had to go back to England to take another job. Before his security job, he was with the British Royal Marines and served in Korea and his Marine stories fascinated me. I kept in touch with him for years, but maybe eight years ago, I heard that he died, he had diabetes like my mom, his sister, did.



“When I was in junior high, I met a kid whose dad had a junkyard and shop and I talked to the mechanics there—long story short, I restored a junker back to operation and got real handy with cars and tools. But just before I was graduated from high school, my mom died from diabetes complications, so when I was graduated, being a U.S. Marine was an obvious choice for a career. When I was wounded and after I was separated, I checked and found that the shop where I worked at in high school was still in business. It had a new owner, but they said the old timers remembered me, that I was good, and I could have a job there, filling in while I looked for something more permanent.

“While I was living in Miami, I discovered that I hated the noise, traffic, all the people. I was still jumpy and hyper-alert from my combat tours. I needed quiet—so I decided to try to see if I had any Haitian roots left. I searched for possible relatives both by computer and talking to the old folks in Miami’s Little Haiti. I looked using my surname and Mom’s maiden name. It took time but I did find a third, maybe fourth cousin and he actually owned an auto shop! You know, mechanics are important there because the absolute poverty in the country needs people who can keep cars running as long as possible.

“So, how to get to Haiti? I didn’t have a U.S. passport but anyway, Haitian law only allows for a max of 70 days on a tourist or visitor visa. There are no business visas. And I didn’t want to spend the time for all the procedures necessary to get an immigrant visa.”

Grant nodded. “That’s correct. So what did you do?”

“Well, I did have my father’s Haitian one; I guess I had kept it for sentimental reasons. It was also my link to my heritage, I guess. Dad’s picture looked so similar to the way I looked and we had the same first names but different middle ones. So what the hell; I went to the General Consulate of Haiti office in Miami, paid the guy a bribe, and got a new one issued for my dad’s month and day of birth but the year I chose made me ten years older. I kept my father’s middle name.”

“That was ... I don’t know ... absolutely audacious! How did you convince the consular officer?”

“It was Dad’s name. When he saw it and looked at me, and the photo, and back at me, he couldn’t believe that I had come back from the dead. You know, Vodou is strong among Haitians, even the nonbelievers. Apparently, Dad was a big cheese there and people still remembered him and his assassination. So I played up on this guy’s superstitions and uncertainty and after a bit of a scare and a small bribe, he got me a new Haitian passport and I could stay here as a citizen. I was anyway, as a child of Haitians. Seems my folks had even registered my birth with the Haitian embassy—that’s probably how the hitman found him.”

“That all makes sense, in a twisted way,” Grant sighed. “Anyway, let me check to see what the folks back Stateside have for any of your records.”

He typed at his terminal for several minutes, stopping and reading the screen periodically.

“Okay, the stuff I found checks out but let’s see what this ‘Alert’ link on your record says... holy shit! Damn, excuse the French. Hell, man, the Department of Defense has been trying to find you for six... no, almost seven years. Holy Mother of Je... um, again, sorry, this says that you’ve been recommended to receive the Medal of Honor!”

Jonas was flabbergasted. He felt lightheaded, like he was almost detached from himself, almost in a dream state. He shook his head hard.

“How’s that possible? I already got the Navy Cross...”

Grant interrupted him. “Let me read what this page says.

“Alert. Department of Defense to Departments of State, Health and Human Services, Treasury,

Education, Veterans' Affairs, Homeland Security.

“Subject: Jonas Alexandre Bernard (USMC, Medically Retired)

“Date: (The date he read was from about four years prior.)

“Text: The subject has been recommended to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life, above and beyond the call of duty.

“Action: If any representative of a federal department knows how to contact subject, please inform...”

It went on to give the contact information for the DoD representative.

Grant looked at Jonas. “Can I make the call?”

Jonas shrugged, still in a bit of shock. “Sure. But, more importantly, we need to get my family squared away.”

“To be sure. And even more so, given this incredible news. It’s certainly been an honor meeting you, Mr Bernard.”

Grant made the call and quickly reached a person who apparently knew about the hunt for Jonas. He spoke on the phone quickly, and then turned to Jonas.

“I’m putting this on speaker,” he said. “This is Under Secretary of the Navy Robert O’Rourke. Mr Secretary, Jonas Bernard is with me, sir.”

“At long last, Staff Sergeant Bernard, it’s an incredible honor and pleasure to finally get in touch with you,” O’Rourke said.

“Thank you, sir. I don’t know what to say...”

“Well, first, please tell me how you went off the radar so completely. Maybe a year after you separated, you were gone, vanished without a trace.”

“I went to my parents’ birth home. Haiti.”

“Ah. That explains part of it. They are so isolated there, culturally, socially, financially... whatever. But we checked passport control, airlines, credit cards, social media, VA facilities, banks. The account where you sent your Marine pay was closed but where the money went is unknown; we tried everything we could think of. Nada. I’m thinking the CIA should get pointers from you.”

“I gradually withdrew the money in cash. I didn’t want to use U.S. banks while in Haiti; I wanted to appear like a poor local. Someone I knew from the shop where I worked knew how to get money out of the country to the Cayman Islands for a small fee. Then I set up an account in the Dominican Republic when I got to Haiti. Those places were safer than Haiti. I had saved most of my Marine pay, so in Haiti, I guess you could say I was well off, but never acted like anything other than just a poor auto mechanic.”

Jonas described briefly how he had gotten a Haitian passport and traveled under his father’s name.

“But how did I come to be recommended for that medal? Getting the Navy Cross was an incredible honor, but why the Medal of Honor, sir?” Jonas wondered.

“The request for the review of your heroism came from outside the military, Sgt Bernard, not through the channels which recommended the Navy Cross. One of the Marines you risked your life to pull to safety and to get medical aid was the son-in-law of a senator. The son-in-law gave a complete accounting of that combat operation and both he and the other Marine you pulled to safety described how you risked your own life to save them. They were in exposed positions and wounded so badly that they couldn’t move. They also saw you in

combat, how you directed the Marines in your unit and how you personally accounted for a dozen or so enemy in close combat. Also, the rapid response and effective blocking action your unit achieved under your leadership undoubtably protected the U.N. encampment and the Afghan village too, saving hundreds of lives, and it was due solely to your leadership that your defensive mission succeeded.

“Senator Carlson of Maine requested that your commanders review your actions and have testimony collected from as many witnesses as could be located. All through the chain of command, the recommendation for the honor was sustained. They completed the review about eighteen months or so after your separation, but lo and behold, you were nowhere to be found. Your final records showed that your last known location was in Miami but you seemed to have no permanent address.”

“Yeah, the shop in Miami where I had a temp job had a little room behind the office, I put a mattress in it and they let me use it till I got myself straight. They paid me under the table too. I was there for just six or seven months. When I got my flight to Port-au-Prince, I used my dad’s updated passport.”

“I see. No wonder you slipped away from sight. Now, there was a possible timing issue too. There’s a requirement that a Medal of Honor needs to be presented within five years of its authorization. But that requirement was neatly sidestepped by Senator Carlson. He introduced a resolution in Congress that suspended that requirement in your case until you could be found. Now, we need to make arrangements for you to receive the honor from the president.”

Jonas interrupted. “One second, sir. I’m here at the embassy trying to arrange to get my family some medical treatment in the States; they both were badly injured in the earthquake here. Can we hold off discussing that until after they get surgery or whatever they need? My wife doesn’t even have a passport; she’s Haitian and never needed one.”

O’Rourke exclaimed, “Hell, we can fix that. Mr ... um ... Grant, I want to get emergency diplomatic passports issued for Sgt Bernard and his family. Do I need to get State to authorize that or can your ambassador do it?”

“Sir, it’s best from the State Department because of the developing political situation here,” Grant replied.

“Okay, please get whatever ID you can for them ready in high-quality electronic form. Someone from the State Department will be in touch later today,” O’Rourke said. “I’m calling the secretary’s office as soon as we disconnect. Sgt Bernard, it’s been an honor and pleasure talking to you. Many thanks for your service to our nation and your heroism on our country’s behalf. I look forward to meeting you in person when you’re able to get to D.C. I hope all goes well with your family. And think seriously about that job with the CIA,” he joked as he disconnected, chuckling.

As soon as the phone was free, it buzzed and Grant answered.

“...”

“Yes, word gets around here very fast,” he spoke into the phone. “He’s here, and his family needs to get out of Dodge, like yesterday.”

“...”

“I know. You heard from the Navy commander what this is about?”

“...”

“Well, we just found out he’s been recommended for the Medal of Honor too.”

“...”

“Absolutely true. Come talk to us. He needs to hear that.” Grant hung up and turned to Jonas. “That was our diplomatic security special agent, William Cowley. We call him ‘Wild Bill’ because he’s Texan and likes to wear ten-gallon hats. He’ll be here momentarily and needs to talk to you.”

A few seconds later an imposing body filled the door frame, followed by an imposing, booming voice, drawling out, “Weel-a, Ah gues congrats are in orda, Mr Bernard, for yoar honoa...” then he chuckled. “So I’ll skip the Texas drawl and talk like a cultured Foggy Bottom feeder. Seriously, I think your problem has come looking for you.”

Jonas looked at him in alarm. “Vanessa’s people, you mean?”

“We don’t know who’s behind it, but there are people going through the field hospitals, showing these pictures...” He displayed photos of Cassandra and Fabienne. “They’re asking to have this phone number called if anyone sees them or can tell them where they can be found.”

“This is bad,” Jonas said quietly. “We were really only seen at that field hospital at the port authority while they were setting up. Would anyone there be able to identify them?”

“With the number of people they treated, and the very brief contact, it’s highly unlikely...” Cowley started, and then the phone buzzed.

Grant answered. “It’s State. They want images of your docs. I’ll be right back; going to the secure comm room.”

Jonas asked Cowley, “What do we do now? We need to disappear... hey, here’s a thought. Can we make it look like they died in the quake?”

“Now there’s a whoppa of an idear!” Cowley exclaimed, almost lapsing into a drawl again. “Sure... we have secure medical staff with the Navy ship here, plenty of cadavers, probably with no one to claim them... let’s do this! I’ll call Commander Sterling and get the Navy on board with it and we’ll make arrangements with the field hospital over there at the airport. They’ve been getting some of the worst victims. Do you have anyone local who can keep their mouth shut and do the burial arrangements? Do you have a burial plot?”

Jonas stopped to think. “Well, our practices are complicated. Normally I, as the senior family member, would plan the funeral. After it, we observe a mourning period for seven to nine days with rituals to honor the dead person and there’s a lot of socialization of family and friends. On the ninth day, when we believe that the soul is free from the body, there’s an observance similar to the funeral. Clearly, we can’t do most of that now, especially with this disaster.

“We have no family, either close or distant, except my friend Henri Benoit who I work for. We share the same two-greats-grandfather. The town where I lived was virtually destroyed; most of the buildings there are damaged, I heard. My friend’s shop, where I worked, had minimal damage, it’s in Lafiteau, maybe three clicks south of my home. Cassandra has no family at all. I think Henri and his wife can organize a funeral and try to gather Cassandra’s *serviteurs*—ah, she’s a Vodou priestess—as mourners. I’ll give him the money for it. I think he can make it look real. And, you know, we’ll need to make believe that I was hurt bad enough to need to go to the States, which would explain my not organizing the funeral.”

And that is how the deception actually was carried out. With the assistance of U.S. Navy medical staff, two unclaimed bodies were quickly located, that of a woman and a girl, both burned too badly for recognition. Both Jonas and Henri signed certifications for their identification and Henri took the documents to the official registrar, where it actually took more than two months before death certificates were issued. By that time, of course, the family had long been in the U.S.

~~~~~

When he finished up at the embassy office, Jonas' mind was whirling. *Medal of Honor? Couldn't be happening; I'm not a hero.*

He was just doing what his training required. "Until they are home, no man left behind." That was the Marine imperative, and it applied even more strongly to the men he was responsible for leading; they were his brothers.

As Jonas walked through the lobby to the exit doors, he heard a loud, "Detail! Ten-HUT! PRE-sent HARMS!"

It was all he could do to keep from coming to attention himself, even after all those years. He looked at where he was headed and saw four Marines standing at attention next to the doors, saluting. He looked around; there appeared to be nobody of particular note behind him. Then a gunnery sergeant from the detail dropped his salute and quick-stepped over to him and resumed his salute.

"Gunnery Sergeant Severopolis and detail, SIR! We honor your service to our nation and honor to the Corps for your heroism in saving the lives of our brothers in arms, sir."

Jonas returned his salute and said, "Thank you, fellow Marines. You can stand at ease. I'm honored more by your recognition than any piece of metal can convey, regardless of the ribbon it's attached to..."

He was interrupted by, "Ooo-RAH! Semper Fi!" by the group.

Jonas motioned them again to stand at ease.

The sergeant said, "Sir, we're on duty..."

People had begun to fill the lobby when they heard the loud voices and had come to see what was happening; several men came over to the Marine detail, two in military uniform.

One of the men, who was wearing an Army uniform with a lieutenant colonel's silver oakleaves, and an Army major, came up to Jonas and saluted him, then they shook his hand.

"Our heartfelt congrats and thanks for your heroism," the colonel said and the major echoed him.

Then the colonel said, "It's okay, Gunney Sev, this is important. We'll cover your security detail while you greet your comrade."

"Thank you, sir," he responded, and the four Marines came over, shook hands as they introduced themselves, and gave their own personal congratulations.

Then they excused themselves to return to their duties while the rest of the crowd in the lobby greeted and congratulated Jonas. It was an hour later that he was finally able to leave; the embassy even provided a ride back to the ship. Before he boarded the ship, Jonas tried his cell phone to call Henri and after his making several attempts, the call was finally connected.

"Henri, it's Jonas. How are the arrangements going?"

"I dropped off the body ID statements with the records department. Who knows how long they'll take to do the official certificates of death. How's the family doing?"

"I saw them yesterday. About what you'd expect. Fabienne needs surgery to fix her fracture and Cassandra needs a number of treatments to heal her burns and time for her broken leg to heal. Fortunately the burns aren't bad enough to need any grafts. So it's okay for now."

"Good. I got the money that you transferred to my bank—it was way too much..."

"It's all good. Keep whatever you don't use and fix up any of your shop's damage with it. Hear from any of Cassandra's congregation members?"

“Julianna has been spreading the word. She told me that maybe twenty people were known to have died and about ten still haven’t been located. We’ve told everyone that you’ve already been taken to the U.S. for medical treatment. The funeral itself is in two days. There won’t be much of a celebration of life and everyone agrees with that. We’re also doing an in-ground burial—against the custom, I know, but we need to keep sneaky digging hands away, if you catch my meaning. It’ll be like an in-ground mausoleum, actually. Their grave chamber will have a three-metric-ton cement slab on top. Plenty of those around after the quake. We’ve already arranged having that done.”

“Can you check our compound for anything salvageable? The *ounfò* looked like it was flattened, apart from one corner and the fire probably took care of the insides, but Cass had personal stuff in there. Look for any Vodou artefacts, if they survived. Also check our home, if it’s safe to look. I don’t care about furniture, clothing, or other stuff that’s replaceable. It’s the personal things we need. Oh, and Richard LeFontaine died in the *ounfò*; please see that he gets a proper funeral too.”

“Certainly. We were out at your place already. The fire at the *ounfò* is out but the concrete is still too hot in a lot of places. Listen, when the guy moves the slab for the graves, I’ll get him to go over there and shift some rubble around to see if I can locate anything personal, okay?”

“You’re a great friend, Henri. Thanks so much. Send love to Julianna. Our flight leaves tomorrow. When we know where we’ll be at, I’ll send you the info. Good bye for now, my friend.”

“*Pòte ou byen*, Jonas.”

He disconnected.

*Dang Kreyòl*, he thought. *Pòte ou byen? Must be from “porte tu bien”? Ah, sure, “farewell.”*

There was nothing more that Jonas could do in Port-au-Prince, so he walked over to the ship gangway, checked in with security, and boarded. With time on his hands until 1800, he went to mess for lunch and decided to see if he could find Bronson. He saw an ensign at a nearby table so he walked over.

“Excuse me? How can I get in touch with Master Chief Bronson?”

“Ah? You know the chief?”

“We go back a lot of years, Ensign.”

The young officer peered at Jonas carefully.

“Sir, you have that look. I’m guessing a Marine?”

“Got it in one, Ensign,” Jonas grinned. “Does it show a lot?”

“I’m from a family of jarheads and sailors. Something shows in your eyes, your body. Always alert, your eyes never stop checking around you. Your posture is like you’re ready to move in an instant. The body never forgets that training. Yes, I think it shows.”

“Well, thank you, I think. Anyway, the master chief?”

“Sure. I’ll make a call; if he’s free, he’ll meet you here.”

The ensign went to a wall phone. A minute later, he turned. “Master chief said, be five minutes. Nice meeting you, Mr Bernard.”

Jonas grinned. “You were pulling my leg all along, weren’t you?” he chuckled.

“Actually, I knew your name only because the master chief just told it to me when I described you. You truly

have the ‘look of an eagle,’ as my people would call it. A warrior. I’m a native American.”

He walked out with a parting wave while Jonas shook his head with disbelief.

*What’s going on here? He wondered. First the Marines at the embassy, now this ensign, all treating me like—I don’t know, some kind of superman? I sure don’t feel like one...*

## Chapter 6 - Recovered Artefacts

Soon Bronson came into the mess and the men greeted each other.

“So how did your meeting at the embassy work out? All squared away?” Bronson asked.

“Goddamn, round, oval, rectangle—any shape you want except square—that shape is my head after I keep banging it to be sure I’m not dreaming,” Jonas muttered.

“Shit, is everything okay? I thought that there’d be no trouble.”

“No, sorry to mislead you. I’m still in a daze. Here, the embassy officer gave me a printout of what he found in my DoD file.”

Jonas passed him the copy of the “Alert” message and Bronson read it with wide eyes.

“No effin’ shit! This is ... wow. Hey, no wonder they grilled me a year or two after you left Germany. They must have been vetting you for this.” He shook the paper. “So when are you having the presentation? I’d love to be there if I can.”

“I’d like that too but I need to get the situation with my wife and kid settled.”

“Of course,” Bronson agreed.

“So, for what happened during the rest of the embassy trip, I found out that people are still hunting for Cassandra and Fabienne. It’s fortunate that we never checked into a hospital or got any medical aid in Port-au-Prince, other than from people at the port who didn’t get our names and only saw us briefly, so we didn’t seem to leave any trace of my family. Just some embassy people know and I think that they won’t talk. Long story short, then, for a deception to keep Vanessa away, we’ve pretended that they died in the quake...”

“Yeah, I heard something of that from one of my corpsman who assisted; he said the whole thing was to be kept hush-hush and since I was the NCO in charge, I needed to know what his section was doing. Didn’t know you were involved though.”

“Right. And my friend Henri is setting up the funeral and burial. At least the poor unknown souls whose bodies we’re using will get a proper spiritual sendoff and I hope the *lwa* will forgive our intervention with the spirits.”

“Say, you’re into the Haitian religion a bit.”

“When your wife—and your mother—both are priestesses, it’s hard to avoid the influence. But the practices and celebrations kind of make sense to me. I was nominally a Catholic and most of the Vodou religion has many Catholic elements. For example, the spirits I referred to—their Catholic counterparts are the saints. I kind of view Vodou as Catholicism with folk overtones. Hey, enough proselytizing. We never got to talk about your life since Germany. Is there a Mrs Bert?”

Bronson laughed. “Yep, and four little Berts too. Three girls, God bless ‘em, and a guy.”

“Let me guess. You kept trying till you made a boy, right?”

“You know me too well, my buddy-in-arms,” he laughed.

“How old are they now?”

“Doris is twelve; Iris and Ivy, twins, they’re nine; and Jonas is six.”

Tears sprang to Jonas’ eyes. “Don’t tell me—your son is named after me?”

“Sure is; he wouldn’t be here if not for you.”



Jonas got up and hugged him.

“Shit,” Jonas muttered, “the honors keep coming.”

Jonas went on to tell him about the Marines at the embassy. They chatted for a while and then Bronson told him that he had to get back to duty. He gave Jonas his shore contact information and waved good bye; then Jonas left the ship’s mess and found his way to an outside deck to relax for an hour or two.

Jonas was about to take a brief nap on a chair there when his phone buzzed. It was Henri. He answered.

“Hi Jonas. Some good news, I guess. We were able to get some personal things out of the *ounfò*. There was a metal box filled with Cass’ papers; some were a bit singed but only on the edges. Her birth certificate was there, Fabienne’s too, and a marriage document. A lot of important-looking stuff. There was a bunch of photos, too.”

“Wow, that’s excellent!”

“There’s more. A lot of her ceremonial items had been put away in a cabinet in one corner of the room—near where we broke the window out—and the fire didn’t reach there. Most of the wall hangings—the *vevé* symbols—didn’t burn either, like the *Papa Legba* one survived, all but one of the others did too. We rolled those up. Everything we found fit in an old duffle bag I had and my son Emanuel has to go to Port-au-Prince to pick up some parts. He can go now or tomorrow and can drop off the duffle. Since my call went through, I guess you haven’t left Haiti and you’re still at the ship?”

“That’s great news, Henri. Yeah, I’m here till noon tomorrow; then the flight leaves. If Emanuel could drop it off today, that would be best. Cass will be so happy. She treasures the relics in that cabinet.”

“Oh, and I found a bunch of books too. They look like college texts. Mostly in English.”

“Oh my. Must be Fabienne’s. I’ll bet they’re from the Universite GOC library. Was the school damaged much?”

“I don’t think so; I haven’t been up that road since the quake, but that area seems not too bad.”

“They’ll be happy to get them back. Fabienne borrowed their books all the time.”

“Okay. I’ll do that. It’s too dangerous to get anywhere into your house other than your bedroom so we need to wait for the front-end loader; that’ll be after the funeral in two days. I’ll send Emanuel with the duffle now. The roads are much better, so he should get there in about an hour.”

“Wonderful. I’ll be at dockside. He’s in the shop van?”

“Right. I never thought how official it looked until we used it after the quake,” he chuckled.

“Thanks again, my friend,” Jonas said.

“Till we speak again,” Henri replied.

Forty minutes later, Jonas went down to the pier and a half hour after that, the shop van drove up and Emanuel hopped out with a battered but serviceable duffle bag. Jonas hugged him.

“Thanks so much, buddy; this is a treasure for Cass,” Jonas said.

“Yeah, Papa told me that. Glad we could pull that stuff out for her.”

“What about anything else left?”

“Zip. Nothing left except what’s in here. The drums didn’t survive. They got crushed when the wall fell on them. That one whole side of the building is gone; just the one corner where the cabinet stood survived. And strangely, almost all of the *lwa* tapestries survived too. Just one got burned.”

Jonas shrugged. “Maybe that’s a sign?”

Emanuel crossed himself. “The saints sometimes protect their own. I think Cass is blessed.”

The men hugged again and Emanuel left.

Of course Jonas had an interesting time bringing the duffle bag through the ship’s security station and Jonas had to involve Bronson, who involved the ship’s XO, and then, since religious objects were involved, the chaplain had to become involved too. Finally the XO declared that these were personal religious folk objects and not cultural artefacts and therefore not contraband, so they could be allowed.

That got Jonas thinking. What would happen with the duffle bag at the airlift aircraft and how would U.S. Customs react? Instead of boarding the ship with the duffle bag, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed Grant at the embassy.

“Mr Grant? It’s Jonas Bernard again.”

“How is your family doing? Everything okay? The medical flight is arriving tomorrow at around 0815 and will unload supplies. It’s still set to leave at 1200.”

“That’s good news. The family’s okay so far. I won’t see them until 1800 today but I need to ask something about bringing our personal effects, what little we have, to the States.”

“There shouldn’t be any problem bringing in personal items.”

“Okay, so the problem is the nature of the personal items.”

Jonas went on to explain what happened with the ship’s security personnel and the XO’s ruling.

“So how can we avoid someone confiscating them as contraband?” he asked.

“Are you on the pier now?” Grant asked. “The cultural attaché’s office is right next door to me and she’s there, as we speak. I’ll send a car now. It should take 20 minutes. Bring your artifacts.”

“Thanks, sir.”

“No problem. See you soon.”

Fifty minutes later, Jonas was in the cultural attaché’s office, being introduced by Grant.

“Mr Bernard, this is Janice Richman, our cultural attaché.”

Jonas shook her hand and began laying out the items from the duffle bag. He began to explain what each item was and how it was used in a Vodou ceremony.

“I haven’t seen some of these items used before,” he told her. “But I know that many of those are folk talismans; these,” he pointed, “are called *travay*. I think some of them are known as *pwen* when they become a spiritual or magical focus. And these bunches of wrapped bundles are called *pakèt* or *pakèt kongo* and are talismans as well. They’re used in healing rites. This little gourd wrapped in decorated cords with the attached bell is a kind of rattle. It’s called an *asson*, and it’s a symbol of position that’s given to priests and priestesses by their teacher when they reach the highest level of achievement. It’s a treasure for Cassandra, because having the *asson* allows the *manbo* or *oungan* to invoke and approach the *lwa* to which they’ve been initiated. Many of these items have been in Cassandra’s family for many generations and these two here, these *gris-gris* amulets, came from Dahomey in western Africa when slaves first came to Haiti and they’re among Cassandra’s most prized possessions.

“The smaller items are used to prepare herbs for bathing or lotions for massage. The tapestries are *vevé* symbols

of the saints. This one is for *Papa Legba*; he's... it's like Cassandra's patron. The others, I'm not sure... um... wait, yes, I know their names: this is *Ayizan Velekete*, *Ogou Feray*, *Azaka Mede*, *Erzulie Mansur*, *Baron Samedi*, *Granne Erzulie*, *Manman Brigitte*, *Agwe Tawoyo*, *Damballah Wedo*, and *Ayida Wedo*. They all correspond to the saints venerated in Catholicism and occupy the same purpose in our observances."

He looked into the bottom of the duffle bag; there were several other items down there. He reached in and pulled out a doll, two stuffed animals, and a few other little toy girlie figures. He put them on the table and grinned.

"And these are my daughter's religious and cultural artefacts, also rescued from our burned temple."

Richman chuckled. "Most important possessions too, I assume."

"Assuredly, since these must have been found where Fabienne spent most of her free time reading and playing. I'm guessing that these are precious too. She'll be delighted that they were saved."

"I'm sure she will. I have a young daughter and artefacts like those are her precious possessions too."

Jonas nodded and went on with his appeal, smiling. "I'm sure that Cassandra will want to continue to follow in her ancestors' steps and continue as a Vodou priestess and these, except the last few items I took out, are some of the tools she needs to do that. These aren't museum artefacts, despite some of them being quite ancient. They are her family's possessions and heritage. Can you help her keep her possessions?"

Richman nodded her head. "Thanks for that tour of this amazing collection and your explanation of the items. May I photograph them? It would give me a wonderful background in understanding your culture and religious practices."

"Certainly. I know Cass wouldn't mind. There's nothing secret here. These are treasures, but only to her."

"I can definitely give you an official letter certifying that these are personal possessions of a religious nature, the property of a clergy person, and not cultural artefacts being improperly exported from Haiti. I'll also explain that with the current emergency, there are no Haitian officials available for the certification. That should satisfy the Customs people. Many times, merely mentioning 'clergy' is the key. Let me photograph these and you can pack them as I finish."

She did the photos and then went off to dictate the authorization letter. A half hour later, she returned with an imposing letter on State Department letterhead with several embossed seals and the ambassador's signature, followed by the ambassador himself.

"I wanted to stop in, introduce myself, and offer my own congratulations for your honors from the military and Congress. I never had the honor to meet a recipient of the Medal of Honor, so I want to give you and your family the best wishes from the Department of State and thank you for your service and heroism," Ambassador Molina gushed.

Jonas shook his hand. "Many thanks, sir. I should point out that it hasn't been presented to me yet."

"A mere technicality. I spoke to the president yesterday after I heard of your visit here and he is quite looking forward to meeting you and your family for the presentation. I know they're getting medical treatment so the presentation will need to be deferred a bit, but I trust you will receive your honor soon."

*Just like a diplomat*, Jonas thought, grinning to himself.

"Thanks again, sir, and thanks for the wonderful hospitality your embassy staff has shown to me. I couldn't have received more professional and competent help than they have given me." Jonas replied as he thought, snickering, *Yes! Two can play at that game!*

The ambassador glowed at the compliment, shook Jonas' hand again, wished him and his family good luck, and took his leave.

Richman looked at Jonas and winked.

"Is he always like that?" Jonas asked.

"Pretty much. He lays it on kinda thick, doesn't he. Anyway, that letter should be your 'get-out-of-jail-free' ticket. If there's any trouble at Customs and Immigration, there's a contact number on the letter that goes to the deputy secretary of state's office. I don't think you'll need to worry."

Just then, Mr Grant rushed in. "Good, you're still here. If we missed you, we would have needed to find you at the airport. I have your passports. Please sign these forms for receiving them, sign your passport here and sign for your daughter here. Cassandra can sign hers when you see her. These are diplomatic passports, so that should take you straight through Immigration Control. Cassandra needs no visa and she'll be on a fast track for citizenship. Of course Fabienne is automatically a citizen after living one year in the U.S., since you didn't register her birth at the U.S. embassy at the time. That's just the rule, but we consider her as a citizen anyway."

Jonas looked at the passports and the expiration dates. "These are for ten years. I thought they'd be a one-time use."

"Well, the department, in their wisdom, decided to give you their own honor. Someone from the department will meet you in Miami and tell you more about why you're getting them. These passports allow travel to most countries without hassles or any costs in getting an entry visa. There's some other great perks, too. They also allow speeding through Customs and Immigration and avoiding annoying TSA checks. Be careful about not abusing them because they're not supposed to be used for extensive private travel. It's a great perk though. You'll get your standard passport too, after you get to Miami. The others, when their citizenships are confirmed. Again, congrats, and best wishes to your family."

Jonas shook both officers' hands and left for his ride back to the ship. He had just enough time to catch a meal before he could get to see his family again.

After dinner, he found his way, after several false turns, to their ward, and no one stopped him this time. He got a huge greeting this time; both Cassandra and Fabienne weren't groggy this evening. Both had just finished their dinners. Jonas hugged and kissed both and asked how they were doing.

"Papa, they don't have any books for me!" Fabienne complained. "All they could find were a few magazines and some paperback junk. Ugh! Where are the books I had at home?"

"Sweetie, the earthquake ruined the house and everything around it. Henri found the books but they belong to Universite GOC, right?" She nodded. "So he'll return them. They'll be happy to get them back, I'm sure. If you let me know what the books were, when we get to Miami, I'll find them or something close. Okay?"

She nodded quietly.

"Also, Henri found some things of yours, sweetie."

Jonas took out the doll and the stuffed animals and handed them to her. Her delighted squeal brought the nurse running.

"What happen... oh!" she said when she saw Fabienne hugging the doll.

"You brought my Emily! And doggy and kitty. Thank you, Papa!" She reached out for a hug. "I was so sad; I thought they were lost when *Manman* told me our home was gone. Thank you so much!"

Cassandra was watching, her eyes filled with tears.

Jonas turned to her. “And for you, my darling, *Papa Legba* sent you a special gift.”

He pulled out two of Cassandra’s prized talismans and gave them to her as her tears overflowed and she began to sob.

“Honey, everything that was in your special cabinet is safe right here in the duffel bag. So are the *lwa* wall hangings—the *vevé* symbols. It seems *Papa Legba* stood between the fire and your treasures.”

“I always knew he watched over me. Now I have the proof of his being my personal guide,” she sobbed.

“Your strongbox is safe too, honey. Your papers and pictures are there and they’re okay. Henri said that nothing else of real importance was left in the *ounfô*. I saved your handbag from the house, which is almost collapsed. I think there’s just one major loss, the drums. They got crushed. Henri’s going to see if he can find anything personal in a few days when he’ll have someone with a machine to move the walls.”

Cassandra was nodding as Jonas spoke; she was hugging the talismans and whispering to them. Then she looked up.

“The drums weren’t special; they can be replaced. And *Papa Legba* approves everything of what you are doing, Jonas, even of how you are substituting those two unfortunate souls for Fabienne and me. He says they will be honored in the spirit world.”

Jonas’ mind went numb. *How in the nine hells did she know that? I never had a chance to tell her of those plans, did I? Well son-of-a-gun, looks like Cass has her own abilities too. I knew she spoke to the lwa, but really? Really speak? I should be a better believer.* The thoughts roiled Jonas’ mind.

Cassandra grinned at him. “Yes, but *Papa Legba* tells me you *are* becoming a better believer. You also knew what almost all my treasures were used for when you spoke to that nice lady. He only had to help you a little, though—prompting you with the names of the *lwa*.”

Jonas had to sit down. He was almost in shock. “You... you... *actually* talk to the *lwa*? Not figuratively?”

“Darling, I’ve told you. *Papa Legba* is the *Speaker*. He speaks to all who would open their hearts to hear him, but he usually speaks to guide to the correct paths. Yes, I can hear him sometimes, like now, because his gifts made me so emotional and filled with love for him. That’s how we connect with the *lwa*. He spoke to you too—how did you know the names of the *lwa* on my tapestries?”

“I... damn. Huh. Oh God... sorry, *Papa Legba*. Wow, you’re right. The names suddenly popped into my head as I looked at each one. And saying each name filled me with a feeling of great contentment.”

“Then you were connecting with each *lwa*, sweetheart. In saying their names, you gave them reality in the human world, so they rewarded you for that acknowledgment. I know you’re a believer; it’s part of your heritage, but you’ll only get better, according to *Papa Legba*.”

Jonas was stunned, almost too stunned to reply. He thought he should turn the conversation to a safer topic until he could assimilate what Cassandra had just told him.

“So... um... our flight to the States is tomorrow, noon. We have a tentative appointment at the VA hospital, when we get there, for Fabienne to see the neurosurgeon. Both of you will be at the hospital for your care, actually. I have passports for everyone and everything needed for the government officials—it’s all arranged.

“When we arrive, I’ll find a place to stay near the hospital because Fabienne will need physical therapy after her surgery, I was told. You’ll most likely be an outpatient for the burn treatment. Your leg fracture will need at

least six weeks in a cast with putting no weight on that leg.

“When everyone’s well, we’ll look for our new home. Miami has a district called ‘Little Haiti’ and I remember it being very much like Port-au-Prince. They even speak *Kreyòl* there!” he joked. “There are more Haitians around Miami than anywhere else in the world except Haiti, so we should feel comfortable there.”

Cassandra yawned. “That sounds very nice. Do you think I can be a *manbo* there too?”

“I’m sure you can. When I lived there, there was an *ounfò* on every other block.”

The nurse made an appearance to check vitals and then shooed Jonas out. When he walked out of the ward, a corpsman signaled to him.

“You’ll see your family again tomorrow, sir. They’ll get breakfast at 0730. We’ve got nine stretchers going to the airport; two need to be flown down there for their safety. The medevac bird is a C-130 Hercules and there will be 31 medevac patients and I don’t know how many ambulatory U.S. citizens are scheduled to go back on that flight. More and more keep arriving from the countryside and need a flight home. Haiti is closed to domestic flights still.

“Your two gals will be shuttled last for their security. I’m told that the fewer outsiders see them, the better. You should get to the airport by 1130 hours. There will be a shuttle leaving here at 1030 with a fifteen-minute stop at the U.S. embassy. The ambulance with your family will be there no later than 1145.”

“Can I be with them on the flight?” Jonas asked.

“That’s up to the flight crew, but probably yes. The more critical patients will be lying flat in a separate area. Both Cassandra and Fabienne should be on gurneys that can tilt up the backs to sit a bit more upright. I believe there are ambulatory seats in that section of the 130 too.”

Jonas thanked him and went to find his berth. He sacked out after showering but had a hard time falling asleep. He had been shocked to his core by Cassandra’s ability.

*Someone must have told her about using those bodies, he mused. But who? Only about three or four people knew the whole story, so that’s not it. He tried to think of other ways she could have learned about the plan and couldn’t come up with anything. And what about my knowledge of the names of those lwa tapestries? he wondered.*

He could come to only two conclusions: Cassandra could read his thoughts, or the *lwa*, and the spirits, really existed. While he was musing about his realization of the reality of the *lwa*, a feeling of great contentment came over him and thoughts began forming in his mind, unbidden.

*Tamara’s spirit calls to Emily.*

*Huh? Emily? Who’s that?* Jonas wondered what thought meant. Then:

*Fabienne must become Tamara.*

This thought scared Jonas. That was Cassandra’s mom’s name! Then another thought:

*Cassandra becomes Nadine.*

Now Jonas was really confused; that was his own mother’s name. A feeling of maternal safety and peace filled him, a feeling he hadn’t had since his mom had become ill, and with it came the thought:

*Tamara is Ayizan Velekete’s.*

Oh, this was something Jonas almost understood now. He recalled that Cassandra would call on *Ayizan* after

invoking *Papa Legba* in ceremonies and he recalled her to be his consort.

*Was this message to mean that Ayizan would be watching over Fabienne? And where did Cass' mother, Tamara, come in?*

The feeling of peacefulness gradually overwhelmed him as he finally fell asleep.

## Chapter 7 - Air Evacuation

The next day was hectic, even more than the previous two. Jonas was at the airport at the proper time and saw the aircraft. He had seen several variants of the C-130 while on active duty, but the size of the aircraft still impressed him. A ground crew member instructed him to wait in a secured area with a small group of people, whom he learned were also traveling back to the U.S. They watched litters being carried into the craft as one ambulance after another drove up and was unloaded. Then an Air Force sergeant came over and asked to see their papers; Jonas presented his. The sergeant led the waiting group closer to the craft and then he gestured Jonas forward and summoned a ground crew member, who grabbed Jonas' duffle bags, tagged them, tore off the tag stubs, and handed them to Jonas.

"Are you traveling with any injured family members, sir? We have a couple ambulatory passengers who are," the crew member asked.

When Jonas replied that his family members were supposed to be on the flight, the crew member called to a medic at the rear loading ramp.

"Got one here, doc!" Then he turned to Jonas. "Go see him, sir," and pointed.

Jonas went up the ramp and the medic led him past two rows of litters stacked vertically, each with a person lying in it. Most seemed sedated and several nurses and medics were tending to them. Then they came to a section which had gurneys strapped to one side of the aircraft and seating, which looked similar to passenger airline seats, on the other. All the gurneys were occupied, but the two closest ones held the people Jonas wanted most to see.

"Papa!" Fabienne called to him, holding out her arms, and he went over.

"Hi there, precious," he greeted her. "This is exciting, right? How's your head feel?"

"It still aches a little, but the nurse said it would be better soon."

He squeezed her hand and turned to Cassandra and kissed her.

"How are you doing now?" he asked.

"It feels better each day, I think," she replied. "But this is terribly uncomfortable."

A passing crewman—Jonas recalled that his insignia meant he was an Air Force med tech—stopped and looked at Cassandra's restraints.

"These are a bit tight. I can loosen them, but not too much. Don't want you sliding down the aisle when we lift off," he smiled.

Then he looked at Fabienne. "Are your straps okay?"

"Uh huh," she answered.

He smiled at her. "Is this your first ride on a plane?"

She answered that it was, and so did Cassandra.

"Well, it can be exciting and fun to feel us go up when we take off. In the air it might get a little bumpy but everything's safe. It's too bad that this bird has no windows so you can't see out. Hey, I see they're buttoning up now, so I need to go. We'll be flying in the air for a bit over two hours—see you when we're up!"

He patted Fabienne's hand and she smiled at him. Then he turned to Jonas.



“Grab a seat over there and strap in, sir,” he said as Jonas heard the engines start and felt the massive plane shudder.

The med tech rushed aft and began checking the racks of litters located there. They took off just a few minutes later. When they were in the air and in level flight, Jonas got up and stood beside Cassandra and Fabienne, talking to them. The med tech stopped by several times during the flight to check on them, but it was an uneventful two hours before someone else on the crew came around again, making sure all was secure for landing. Soon they were on the ground with a little bump and a roar of engines, and they felt the vibration of the craft as it taxied to a parking spot. Jonas unbuckled himself and went over to hold Fabienne’s hand. She was wearing an anxious expression.

“It’s okay, precious. The flight’s over and we’re on the ground. Soon we’ll be outside.”

She nodded and gripped his hand tighter.

Then the med tech stopped by them and told Jonas, “You guys need to wait a bit until we get the more critical patients out, okay, sir?”

Jonas watched as a well-organized team quickly unclamped the litters from the racks, set them on gurneys, and wheeled them out using the aft ramp of the aircraft. Meanwhile, a crew member opened the side ramp of the craft and the flight deck crew came out of the cockpit and walked down the ramp; then the ambulatory passengers followed them out. Finally, several corpsmen wheeled most of the gurneys out and Jonas was left with just his family and a woman who was standing next to a gurney which had a man lying on it. A ground crew member came over.

“Okay, they’re ready for you two accompanieds now,” he said, addressing Jonas and the other woman, and began unlatching the remaining gurneys.

Several additional medical personnel arrived and began rolling the three gurneys back to the cargo ramp and Jonas followed. He was met by a crew member, who examined his baggage tickets and handed over his duffle bags. Jonas noticed that the aircraft had been parked on a wide expanse of concrete and off to the east, he could see a large terminal building with aircraft parked all around it. A number of tractor-trailers were lined up near the 130 and forklift trucks were unloading pallets of shrink-wrapped boxes from them.

*I’m glad it’s autumn now and not hot here. It’s much cooler than home, Jonas thought. When I lived here, this time of the year Miami was mid-70s to low-80s. We’re gonna need jackets for the winter; they won’t be used to low 60s.*

A white panel van with green crosses on its sides pulled up and its doors opened. It was a medical transport vehicle and Jonas saw that it had space for four gurneys and there were several passenger seats inside too. The vehicle’s driver came over to Jonas as the gurneys were being loaded, motioning to the woman to also come over.

“If they didn’t tell you, this is Miami International, but we’re not going the regular passenger route through Customs and Immigration. You still need to be cleared, so we’re stopping by the general aviation terminal’s FBO office and there’s a Customs agent there to handle the private traffic. The agent will come out to the van, so please have your papers ready. You can board the van now.”

“Ah, what’s FBO? Not that it matters,” Jonas asked.

“Fixed Base Operator. That’s just the name for the outfit that manages the general aviation terminal. All set? Let’s go.”

They drove for a few minutes and then stopped; soon a man in a light grey uniform with a CBP patch boarded.

He spoke to the woman and her husband first.

“Passports, please?”

She handed them over and he looked at them, then scanned them with a device he was carrying and nodded.

“Do you have your baggage?”

“No,” she said softly. “All of our luggage was lost in the quake in Haiti. We were lucky to get out of the hotel alive.” She squeezed her husband’s hand.

“Sorry to hear that, ma’am. So you have nothing to declare on your persons? No? Okay, better luck in the future, I hope.”

She nodded and the agent went to Jonas, who handed the agent their black-covered passports.

The agent’s eyebrows went up. “Diplomatic, I see. Baggage?”

Jonas pointed to the duffels and his backpack.

“I don’t need to examine your property but I have to ask if you have anything to declare... oh, you have a 6059B. May I?”

Jonas handed the Customs document over and remarked, “We’re relocating to the U.S. from Haiti. We lost everything in the earthquake and our only possessions are in those bags. At the embassy I was told we didn’t have to value our personal items.”

The agent nodded, said, “That’s correct,” and then scanned their passports; then he put the 6059B declaration and the scanner into his pouch.

He looked up. “It’s okay; you’re cleared. Welcome to the United States and to Miami, folks,” and then he left.

Jonas was mostly happy but also just a tiny bit disappointed that he didn’t have to use his State Department authorization letter.

Another man poked his head into the van, looked around, and went to Jonas.

“You are Jonas Bernard? I’m FBI Special Agent John Norris from the Miami field office and want to welcome you to Miami.”

He flashed his badge.

He continued, “They’re taking your family and the other two people to the VA hospital and we’ll have someone meet you at admitting to let you know what’ll be happening now. And thank you for your service and congrats on your military honors.”

He shook Jonas’ hand and left the van.

Cassandra looked up at Jonas. “What was that all about?”

“Long story, honey, lots happened in the last few days and I’ll catch you up when it’s quiet and we’re alone.”

### ***Veterans Affairs Hospital, Miami, Florida***

After Jonas finished with the admitting routine at the VA hospital, a man and a woman approached him. The man gave him a business card.

“We’re FBI special agents. I’m Andrew Johnson and this is Sarah Wilkins, on special assignment from D.C. The card has my contact number. When you get settled here, call me. Everyone is interested in talking with

you—the Justice Department, which we represent, State, DoD, and even the CIA.”

“Why all the attention?” Jonas asked, concerned.

“First, your Medal of Honor, and congrats on that. Then the threats against your family. Your status with the State Department. And the CIA wants more information about the Haiti situation you found yourselves in.”

Jonas nodded and headed for the room where the staff had taken Cassandra. Fabienne was now in Pediatrics and her surgery was scheduled for tomorrow. He checked in with Cassandra first.

“I hate you’re in different rooms now,” he told her. “Maybe there’s a way for you to be together after her operation. I’m gonna go see her now; then I’ll be back.”

When he went to Fabienne’s room, he found that she had a roommate, another ten-year-old girl, and the two of them were talking animatedly. He interrupted them.

“Hi, sweetheart, just checking on you,” he said.

“Hi, Papa, this is Noreen and she has to have neck surgery. I was telling her about the earthquake.”

“Hello, Noreen. I hope you get better quick,” Jonas told her as the two began chattering again, ignoring him.

Figuring that he wasn’t needed, Jonas returned to Cassandra’s room. She was alone in it, and Jonas was happy about that because he had a lot of questions about the almost-dream of the previous night.

“Hi, sweetie. Fabienne’s okay; she’s got a new friend in her room and they’re talking up a storm. How are you doing now?”

“My burns are really starting to itch now,” she commented.

“I think that’s a good sign. The skin must be healing and the nerves are starting to work.”

“Can you tell me what I’ve missed? I think you must have gotten a lot of things done because everything’s happening so quickly.”

Jonas was about to begin when there was a tap at the door frame and a doctor walked in.

“Good,” he said, “they told me that both of you were here now. I’m Doctor Walter Beauford, a neurosurgeon at the Miller Medical School at U-Miami and on the consulting staff here. My friend, Doug Haskins, referred your daughter. I’ve reviewed her chart from the *Comfort*, and she’s going to our imaging department to get a CT scan right now.

“Here’s what we have, and stop me if you need anything explained. Her EEG from the ship shows a high amplitude activity; that’s unusual but there’s nothing that has an epileptic appearance. It’s an unusually strong activity but it follows the normal profile, so that simply means, most likely, that her brain’s activity is at a higher-than-normal level, but still within the normal range. The tracings show no sign of epilepsy, a tumor, having an ischemic event caused by a blocked vessel, or any other neurological condition, other than the bleeding she experienced under her dura mater, but that blood pocket is quite small now, some blood’s already been absorbed.

“She has what’s called a subdural hematoma, a pocket of blood under the skull, caused by the depressed skull fracture she incurred in the earthquake. She needs surgery to remove the blood there, check to be sure all the blood vessels in the region are intact, and repair the fractured area of her skull. It’s in an area of her brain which controls the left leg, which showed weakness during my exam. The MRI and CT from the ship didn’t show any detached bone fragments but we look for them anyway. It’s about a two-hour procedure using computer-assisted surgery and has little risk, given her current condition, and that she’s alert, not in a lot of pain, responds well to a

neurological exam, and is otherwise very healthy.

“Also, I want to look at the blood flow in her brain with fMRI; her elevated mental activity looks intriguing and I’m curious. It will also help me to visualize the blood flow around the injured area. It’s just like a regular MRI but takes a bit longer. I assume you’re okay with my doing that?”

“You didn’t stop me so I assume you followed all that?”

Cassandra replied, “My English is not the best, but, yes, I followed you. The doctor on the ship said many of the same things, so nothing was new. Thank you.”

Jonas agreed to the fMRI, and then asked, “So the prognosis is good? And post-surgery treatment?”

“Well, we’re obviously not gods here, but given her condition and the fact that I’ve treated several hundred similar cases, I’d say that she’ll do well. For recovery and afterward, she’ll need to protect her head from bumps while the area heals. We use helmets, but there’s a new lighter weight shield available that’s held in place by a beanie. That’s much more comfortable for the patient, especially a kid. All okay? I’ll talk to you again tomorrow after I see her latest CT and the fMRI that I’ll order.”

He left and then Jonas returned to bringing Cassandra up to date on the events of the past few days.

“First, though,” Jonas said, “I need to tell you what happened last night after I left you. My discovering that *Papa Legba* was really communicating with you shook me up, but I was even more shaken by what happened later. I was falling asleep when that comforting sensation washed over me again and, in my thoughts, came the words, ‘*Tamara’s spirit calls to Emily.*’

Cassandra gasped.

Jonas said, “Tamara’s your mom but who’s ‘Emily’? What does that mean?”

Cassandra picked up her talisman and stroked it. “*Manman* must be communicating to Fabienne through her doll somehow. Fabienne named her doll ‘Emily.’ No wonder Fabienne is so perceptive about some things I didn’t think she’d know about.”

“There’s more,” Jonas went on. “I was wondering about that first thought when this one came: ‘*Fabienne must become Tamara.*’”

Cassandra clutched the talisman and whispered some *Kreyòl* to it. “Jonas, we need to change Fabienne’s name! It’s urgent! Vanessa will try to find her using her name because she doesn’t believe we really died!”

Jonas went on, “So that explains the next thought I had. ‘*Cassandra becomes Nadine.*’ That was my mom’s name—are you to change your name too?”

“Wait,” Cassandra told him. “I know that you must have heard other things too, am I right?”

“Yes. Just before I fell asleep, I had this wonderful peaceful feeling, along with the thought, ‘*Tamara is Ayizan Veleketé’s.*’

Cassandra began crying. “*Ayizan* is... was... *Manman*’s patron. She will be Fabienne’s and Fabienne will be Tamara. *Manman*’s spirit will watch over her granddaughter. This news is a wonderful gift you bring to us, Jonas. *Ayizan* is *Papa Legba*’s consort and is the *lwa* of the *manbo*. She offers protective energy to her followers to keep them safe. She is also the guardian of human morality, and she’s chosen Fabienne. This happened without her even being *kanzo*. I have *Manman*’s talisman here; it’s the other one from Africa that Henri saved. When we are all together again, I must talk with Fabi... Tamara about this and her Emily. Emily is sacred now. Jonas, we have to start thinking of our daughter with her new name. It’s important!”

“Okay, I’ll look into seeing how to legally change her name—yours too, and... mine too? I guess that’s part of our disappearing too. Okay, so lots happened this week so I’ll start from when you got to the ship. Do you remember the ride in the bird?”

“The helicopter? Yes, but I was really groggy then and hurt all over.”

Jonas told her about his reconnecting with Master Chief Bronson, then learning about the Medal of Honor (that brought a gasp), the fate of her Aubry congregation (that brought tears), the funeral arrangements (that brought a nod), saving her artifacts (that brought a smile), and finding Tamara’s books (that brought chuckles). He told her that they’d get to go to Washington to meet the president and that brought an “Oh, my!”

He had to elaborate a fair amount on the Medal of Honor part for her.

Jonas looked at her. “Did they tell you anything about your treatment yet?”

“Just the nurse spoke to me. They want an x-ray to make sure the bone is in place after all the traveling and make sure the cast is proper. They need to change the dressings, be sure there’s no infection and clean any dead skin. In a way, the fallen beam kept the fire away from the broken leg so it escaped from being badly burned.”

“That’s good. I need to arrange a meeting with the FBI people and the others who want to see me. Fab... Tamara’s surgery is tomorrow, so I’ll tell them I can meet on Monday. And I need to look for an apartment nearby where we can stay during Tamara’s recovery. I’ll do that on Saturday.”

“I feel bad that I’m not able to be with her,” Cassandra sighed.

“I’ll tell her that. Hey, visiting hours are almost over and I want to tell her good night,” Jonas said. “I’ll send a kiss from you.”

He kissed her good night and hurried to Tamara’s room. Her roommate was asleep but Tamara was awake and whispering to her doll.

“Hello, sugar,” Jonas said. “*Manman* sends a kiss and her love.”

“Hi, Papa. Yes, I could feel it even this far. Emily says I need a new name.”

Once again, Jonas had to catch himself to keep from falling.

“She told you that? When?”

“Last night. I was falling asleep, hugging her, and she whispered it to me. I like *Granmanman*’s name—*Manman*’s *manman*. It’s Tamara. Can you and *Manman* call me that? It’s a pretty name.”

Jonas pinched himself. This was verging on the supernatural... no, this was *really super*-natural. Even though he had been brought up learning his mother’s traditions, Jonas had a sound U.S. educational background which emphasized the sciences and western philosophy. What he was seeing in the last two days violated almost everything he thought he knew.

“Yes honey, *Manman* and I spoke about that. She told me that *Papa Legba* agrees with that name. So, yes, from now on, we’ll call you Tamara. But it will take a little time for the people here to hear about your new name. Is that okay? If they say it wrong, please don’t be sad.”

“Papa, I won’t be sad. I think they will know my right name.”

*Hmmm, Jonas mused. Interesting times ahead, I think.*

Aloud, he said, “Tomorrow morning is when they will do the surgery to heal your head. I’ll be here early to be with you before you go see the doc. Please don’t be afraid tonight. The doctor is good and he knows how to help

you heal.”

She nodded. “Emily says she’ll watch over me to keep me safe, Papa. Will you hold her when I go to the surgery?”

“I would be delighted to, sweetie.”

“Good. She wants you to be safe too, also *Manman*.”

The nurse stuck her head in. “Five minutes, sir.”

“I’m honored by her care for our whole family. Tell Emily that we’re grateful. And I need to go, so good night, my dear,” Jonas said softly, then kissed her.

He left, wondering if his world would ever be the same as it was last week.

Jonas checked at the information desk for lodging and discovered that the nearby VA Fisher House had a room reserved for him while his family was being treated at the hospital. He had missed that piece of information when he was completing all the admission paperwork. Someone on the hospital ship had been very thorough. He got directions to the building, got his room, and prepared to go to sleep. Thankfully, there were no dreams that night.

~~~~~

Early the next morning, Jonas got breakfast and went to Tamara’s room. She wasn’t there, but he was startled when he noticed that the name on the room’s nameplate read “Tamara Bernard.” A nurse, passing by and seeing his puzzled expression, asked if he was looking for someone.

“My daughter,” he said, pointing at the room.

“Oh. Tamara went to pre-op. That’s in room A-022. Second bank of elevators, then get off at the bottom level.”

“Um, this says ‘Tamara’ but we checked in as ‘Fabienne.’”

“Huh. That was on the afternoon shift. I’m morning. Let’s check on what happened.”

They went to the nurses’ station and the nurse spoke to someone, who came over to Jonas.

“Hi, I’m the charge nurse. Your daughter’s record somehow got the name wrong, but that’s okay. We got it all fixed up so all of her records agree. Even the referral had the wrong name. It’s strange how that happens sometimes, isn’t it?”

Jonas agreed, but his mind was awirl. *What kind of black hole did I fall into, anyway? How did Fab... Tamara get that done? I’d better check her passport. If the name’s changed there too, I’m in deep shit.*

He hurried to get to the pre-op ward, checked in, and someone showed him to Tamara’s bed. She greeted him with a complaint.

“They didn’t let me have breakfast and I’m hungry, Papa. But Emily said I shouldn’t eat so I won’t,” she grumped.

“And a good morning to you too, sugar,” Jonas grinned. “How’s your head?”

“A little hurting still and it itches!”

“Ah. Must be from the bandages. Listen, sweetie, they might need to shave some of your pretty hair, but it will grow back. And you’ll have a cute cap, a beanie, to wear as your head heals afterwards. I saw some pictures, and you get to pick out the beanie you like best.”

Just as Jonas finished explaining the need for shaving, a nurse came with some shaving supplies and explained the whole thing again while Tamara rolled her eyes.

*She's getting pretty good at that, Jonas mused. Getting good practice for being a teenager.*

Then came the parade of medical people, vital signs, surgical permissions, nursing questions, IV-line check, BP cuff, monitoring wires, anesthesiologist, and finally the surgeon appeared. He picked up Tamara's paper chart, did a double-take, logged into the computer and read the screen; then he checked her wristband. Shaking his head, he turned to look at Jonas who was valiantly trying to maintain a poker face.

"Mr Bernard, Tamara... I'm certain that wasn't her name when I saw her yesterday... I can't really recall what it was but I'm certain it wasn't Tamara..."

Tamara piped up, "Tamara's my name, Doctor. Maybe you were thinking of someone else."

"Hmmm. Probably. Well, Tamara, your imaging from yesterday looks like it hasn't changed from when they did it on the ship and that's really good. There's no more bleeding, so the surgery should be simple. We just need to get the extra blood out of there to relieve the pressure, fix the bone that cracked a little, make sure no little pieces are left behind, and check that the tiny blood vessels in there aren't broken anywhere. We use a tiny microscope to look through some little holes I'll make, check you out, stick some scotch tape and glue on it, and we're done! Okay?" He grinned at her and wiggled his eyebrows.

Tamara giggled. "I followed you till you got to the tape and glue part," she chuckled. "I'm sure that isn't part of the current medical standards of care, is it? I thought they used band-aids with rubber bands now. Work better."

Beauford barked a laugh. "Just how old are you anyway, young lady? That was really funny. There's nothing wrong with your head that a little fixin' of the headbone won't hurt. I'll see you inside, but you might not remember, 'cause you'll be close to being asleep. You'll be fine, dear."

He grinned at Jonas and shook his hand warmly. "She's a delight," he whispered. "But watch out when she's older!"

Jonas nodded.

"I heard that!" Tamara piped up.

"Hearing's fine too," Beauford laughed.

A few minutes later, a nurse came in, read the monitors, disconnected some cables, and pulled out a syringe.

"This'll make you a little sleepy, honey. It might tingle a little in your hand at first, but it won't hurt."

She slowly injected the anesthetic into the IV port.

"Okay, time to give the dolly to your dad. She can wait for you with him."

Tamara kissed the doll and handed it to Jonas.

"Emily will take care of you now, Papa."

Jonas could barely keep his eyes from tearing up.

"Say 'bye now," an orderly told Tamara as he unlocked the bed's wheels and rolled it out into the corridor.

Jonas kissed her and the nurse told him, "The doctor should be finished about 10:15, but check the monitor in surgical waiting. He'll talk to you in a consultation room near the waiting area."

Jonas had an idea; perhaps he could get Cassandra in there too. He went up to her floor, found the nurses'

station, and asked if Cassandra could be allowed to go for the brief post-surgical meeting. After some consultation and a phone call, they agreed. Cassandra was delighted when Jonas told her.

“Gotta tell you something, but first, I need to call the FBI office.”

He made the call and got a Monday afternoon appointment. The field office was in Miramar, so they agreed to send a car to pick him up.

Then he turned to Cassandra. “She gave Emily to me to protect me and somehow I know she’s not joking about it,” Jonas said, handing her the doll.

Cassandra took it and gasped. “*Mezanmi!* There is power—spirit power—here!”

She pressed the doll in a few places and a carefully folded piece of fabric slipped out from between two seams. Cassandra unrolled it to reveal a small amulet, intricately shaped, on a silver chain.

“*Bon Dieu!*” she exclaimed again, “this was *Manman*’s. I forgot all about this one. I gave it to Fab... Tamara when she was five and told her it was precious and magic, that she must carefully take care of it. I must restore it just like it was.”

She got it folded up in the fabric again and pushed the little packet back between the seams in the doll.

“That explains a number of things about our precious daughter,” Cassandra said. “She is being guided, probably by the spirit of *Manman*. But maybe even by *Ayizan*. Oooo, I can’t wait to set up our own *ounfò* so I can make proper inquiries.”

Jonas grinned. “She never fails to surprise. Another *huge* surprise is that somehow all of the hospital records here seem to have her name as Tamara now. Even the surgeon was confused when he examined her before she went to the OR.”

“Really?”

“Yup. She told me last night, when I visited her. First, she said, ‘Emily says I need a new name.’ Then she told me, ‘I like *Granmanman*’s name—*Manman*’s *manman*. It’s Tamara.’ She wants us to call her that.”

“Oh my goodness...”

“Or goddess. Sorry. But even more, when I told Tamara that not everyone would call her Tamara at first and that she shouldn’t let that make her sad, she said, ‘Papa, I won’t be sad. I think they will know my right name.’

“Well, this morning when I went to her ward, her name on every record had been changed. The charge nurse apologized to me for it being wrong; she said mistakes like that were very rare.”

Cassandra chuckled wryly. “Jonas, this is a sign of things to come. What she does is simply another extension of her aura abilities. She’s following in *Manman*’s very footsteps and has her as a guide too, it would appear.”

Soon it was time to head to surgical waiting. They sent Cassandra in a wheelchair with an orderly, apparently not trusting Jonas to push her. They didn’t have to wait long; at fifteen minutes earlier than the projected two-hour surgery time, a volunteer called them to go to a consultation room.

The surgeon came in beaming. “Hello, Bernards. Your daughter is a piece of work. No sooner than we stopped the anesthetic, she began to awaken, and then kept the recovery room staff in stitches with her snarky comments. And she’s only ten? God bless. She’s smart as a whip.

“Anyway, excellent news; there was no brain damage shown in either imaging or by gross examination. We cleared the hematoma; it was well encapsulated in the membranes. There’s no trace of capillary leakage. The



fracture itself was an easy reduction. No trace of any bone fragments. There was ... um... bruising, you could say, but more like a compressed area on the brain itself right where the hematoma was, but that's normal in such cases and it self-corrects now that the blood pocket is gone. That area enervates the motor nerves for her left leg, so she'll need PT for maybe six weeks, depending on her recovery response.

"Now to something interesting. The fMRI—that's a functional MRI, looking at the brain while it's doing some defined activity as opposed to just getting a scan of the organ in its resting state, indeed showed no structural abnormalities anywhere but it did suggest very unusual blood-flow activity in her mid-brain. That indicates a very high level of neurological activity.

"I've read about this before and it shows up in people who appear to have extraordinary empathic abilities and in people who are highly charismatic too. This is fascinating to me because it suggests that the empathic people are *receiving* some kind of emotional signal from others while charismatic folks are *projecting* something, perhaps an emotion, to others. In your daughter's case, her brain activity at that location is at the highest level reported in the literature.

"We showed her a series of pictures with varying emotional content. One, where a baby was crying, her brain activity reached an incredible level. Other sad scenes caused a similar response. When we showed her a slide of a math problem and asked her to solve it in her head, areas in her prefrontal cortex fired and again, there was an unexpected surge of neurologic activity.

"In short, what I'm saying is that your daughter may very well be at the highest level of intellectual abilities. Her brain is ... well ... supercharged. Looking at how quickly the anesthetic was cleared from her brain is an indication of that elevated blood flow, too. I would love to work with Tamara on mapping the areas of brain function since her fMRI results are so sharply defined. Knowing what the parts of the brain do will have an enormous impact on treating neurologic health conditions. I have a grant to study brain function and we'll be getting a new superconducting MRI with innovating coil assemblies. The coils are made with superconducting circuits, not only the magnets themselves. This allows extremely high resolution and makes the exams go faster too. This device was developed by a team of engineers working out of Johns Hopkins and we're excited to try the device."

"We've noticed that Tamara has unusual abilities," Jonas told him as Cassandra nodded. "She's reading college texts now, and... Cass, what did the school say her reading level was?"

Cassandra thought for a few seconds. "In French, grade 12, but in English it's university level. All the science books she gets come from our local college, and they're all in English."

Jonas thought for a moment. "When she was eight, I noticed her using an 11<sup>th</sup> grade physics textbook and she was doing the problems in it."

"Well, that fits with what the fMRI shows. A very high cognition level," Beauford told them. "If we can work with her, we'll take care of her medical costs and monitor her recovery from the fracture. We'll cover the cost of her physical therapy and get tutoring for her as well. This would all be through the University of Miami. The med school is here and the university is in Coral Gables, maybe eight miles south of here. Of course we'd never publish her identity. That's against federal HIPAA laws."

Cassandra asked him, "Can we think about this? We'd like to discuss it with Tamara too."

"Absolutely. She has to be willing to help, of course. Here's my card. You can call anytime and a secretary can get me a message if I'm in surgery or whatever. Oh, right. Please go back to the waiting room and check in; the volunteer will tell you when Tamara will be out of recovery and in her room. I hope to hear from you guys. Working with Tamara would be a joy. Bye for now."

They shook hands and he left.

Cassandra sighed. “I suppose I need to return to my room now; this excursion exhausted me. I guess I have a way to go.”

“You’re getting there, though, honey. Let me call the patient transport person for you. I have strict orders. I won’t bring up Tamara working with him till we’re all together. Oops, I need Emily back.”

He called, and as Cassandra was wheeled off, he gave her a kiss; then went back to surgical waiting. An hour later, he was back at Tamara’s room where he heard her voice; she had a new roommate. Jonas waited outside, out of sight, until there was a lull in the chatter a minute later; then he heard her voice.

“Papa, you can come in. You don’t have to wait outside.”

Jonas shook his head. *Damn.*

“Emily missed you,” he said as he returned the doll.

She was wearing a little helmet.

“No, silly, she was watching over you and *Manman*. She knew *I* was safe.”

She whispered to the doll.

“Oh, I see that *Manman* found Emily’s amulet. She touched it so now I can feel her closer.”

Jonas thought, *This is getting deeper and deeper. I need to change my frame of mind to understand this better.* As he formulated that thought, a wave of satisfaction washed over him. *Huh. I guess the lwa approve.*

“Many of the spirits do, Papa. Just open your heart.”

“I’m learning, sugar. I’ll keep trying.”

“Good.”

“How does your head feel now?”

“The achy throb I had before is gone, I think, but the nurse told me I’d know better after six hours, when the anes... thetic all wears off. It feels strange when I move my head. The bandages feel itchy and this hard cap I need to wear is clunky.”

“I’m sure, now that your surgery is done, that you’ll start feeling much better soon. And you’ll get a much more comfortable cap to wear. It’ll look nicer too.”

They chatted for a few minutes longer, then Jonas told her he needed to get back to Cassandra. They kissed and he left, still wondering about the rabbit hole he had fallen into.

## Chapter 8 - Getting Settled

Back in Cassandra's room, he discovered that another patient had been moved in and was asleep. The curtain had been drawn around that bed, so they spoke quietly.

"My doc was here and told me that I should be ready to leave on Monday. My burns are mostly closed up and the seeping's stopped. Their worries about infection are mostly over. He said that was because of the very good initial care you did. They're using these... um... impregnated gauzes so they don't have to be changed so often, which is good..."

A nurse had bustled in and took her blood pressure and checked her temperature.

"Okay, sweetie," she told Cassandra, "Your IV can come out now. We stopped your antibiotics twelve hours ago and it looks like you're clear of any systemic infection. We just need to watch for any local infection now. We'll keep observing you for two days, and if there's no change, we can release you to outpatient care. Tomorrow we'll get someone from Physical Therapy to work with you to show you how to get around with crutches. You need to keep any weight off that left leg for probably six weeks. The doctor put in your chart that if there's no change, he'll release you on Monday. Mr Bernard, will you be able to check and possibly change her dressings between outpatient visits, if necessary?"

"I can."

"Someone will show you what to do on Monday, then. I'm so happy you've done so well here, Mrs Bernard. I'll be checking back later, just before the end of my shift."

Five minutes later, another nurse came in and disconnected the IV apparatus and pulled the catheter.

Jonas looked at his watch. "Say, since you're getting out, I should get a head start on looking for an apartment while you're an outpatient and Fab... Tamara is recovering. Would two bedrooms be enough? In the U.S., most standard apartments will have a kitchen, sometimes a separate dining area, living room, bedrooms, one or two bathrooms, and sometimes even a laundry area."

"That sounds like a palace, darling," Cassandra told him. "Whatever you think is good and yes, two bedrooms. That would be better than the little house we had in Haiti."

Jonas left and the first thing he did was to go to the closest bank. He needed to open an account immediately. He got one set up and had some funds transferred electronically from his bank in the Dominican Republic. He decided to leave the Cayman Islands account untouched. Then he got a temporary debit card. He had an adequate nest egg, he thought, but getting a job soon was essential.

Then he stopped by a real estate office to check on temporary apartment rentals in the medical center area. He found several very close by which were in his price range, so he made an appointment to view them on Saturday. He and Cassandra could continue to stay at the VA family house while Tamara was still an inpatient.

~~~~~

Monday morning was hectic. Cassandra had been cleared to check out. Jonas decided that having her at the FBI meeting was important, so he arranged with his FBI contact to have the meeting at the VA hospital instead of at the field office and they were given the use of a conference room.

When the meeting time drew close, the attendees began arriving. They were Andrew Johnson and Sarah Wilkins from the FBI, Evan Masters from the State Department, and Wilbur Zane from the CIA.

The FBI agents took the lead in running the meeting.

Wilkins began. “The reason our agency is involved with this case is that we have a number of unsolved crimes in Miami and New Orleans, and two in New York City, which all seem to have a common association with someone or someones from Haiti. Going back some 36 years, Mr Bernard’s father was shot here in Miami and we know that this was a political assassination, ordered by the Jean-Claude Duvalier administration in Haiti. There were other murders of expat Haitians which occurred roughly during that same period in cities with a large Haitian population. These murders always involved people who had requested political asylum.

“Now, most recently during the last year, there have been a few murders which again seem to be targeting Haitians living here, but these crimes seem to also be targeting religious figures, practitioners of the Haitian Vodou religion, plus of politically connected people. We’re hoping, from what we have heard about Mr and Mrs Bernard’s situation, that they may be able to give us some leads to the possible perpetrators.”

Then Masters spoke. “This ties into information we’ve collected from Haiti’s current political situation, so let me play the recording which Mr Bernard provided to our attaché in the U.S. embassy there. They were speaking French, so I have a transcript if you need it.”

He passed out the transcript and played the recording.

The CIA agent, Zane, spoke after the recording finished.

“This shows that there’s an effort being mounted to organize some kind of magical assault to either take over or supplant the current government. But how can magic actually work to do that? I’m sure that the idea of voodoo dolls and zombies and such can’t induce educated people to become influenced by threats of magic.”

“That’s where you’re really wrong, Mr Zane,” Cassandra told him. “First, most Haitians, despite their education, have a deep-seated respect for their ancestors and Vodou is their ancestral religion, although Catholicism has, in large, replaced it. But for most Haitians, their Catholicism is heavily overlaid with the folk practices which make up many Vodou beliefs. And despite their education, superstition still affects many people’s beliefs and behavior.

“Second, as the recording showed, Vanessa and her followers or supporters are trying to recruit people who have a certain skill, one which has been bred into a number of my countrymen and women over the many generations since our ancestors were brought to the New World as slaves. Our Vodou rites are based upon getting our adherents to attain a certain state of mind where they can become one with a spiritual figure with whom they identify. You probably know that many Catholics say that they have an affinity for, or hold a special attraction to, a certain saint. A ‘patron’ saint, as they believe.

“During our ceremonies, worshipers can become very susceptible to suggestion or psychological manipulation by a skilled priest or priestess. Some of these practitioners may be so skilled that they can influence other people’s thoughts or behavior, or even both. Some religious practitioners may even use their skill to influence the believer that they are ill, in pain, in danger, or will have bad fortune. This is a dangerous power to hold over someone, if used improperly.

“I have seen examples in my own practice of how powerful psychological suggestion can be, especially when the worshiper is a devout believer. I know that I myself can commune with residents of the spirit world. They give me guidance and support. How does my ability differ from that of the Catholic priest who says ‘Jesus answered my prayer and gave me guidance’? We all worship the One God, and God manifests God’s self in many different ways, according to the beliefs and cultures that the believer was raised in.

“My mother was an extremely powerful priestess and could influence a person to do whatever she wanted them to do. I personally saw her power. She was approached by Vanessa, perhaps twelve years ago now, and was probably asked, or perhaps forced, to join her. I’m sure she rejected Vanessa, so she was killed. I no longer feel

her presence in this world, but have seen convincing spiritual evidence that she now resides in the spirit world.

“So you must not denigrate the skills and power of people who wield such abilities because it first, damages your reputation among those who know that these abilities are real, and second, discounting an opponent’s abilities and power is a sign of your own weakness.”

The group was listening to her raptly and sighed when she apparently finished talking.

Jonas looked around at their shocked faces and remarked, “Right. What she said.”

They all chuckled, but nervously.

Jonas went on, “You see why I wanted you to meet Cassandra. You might think she’s just an uneducated Vodou practitioner, but she’s actually a highly educated, brilliant analytical thinker and an astute student of human relationships.”

“That was ... was ... an incredible presentation, Ma’am, if I may say so,” Zane remarked. “I had no idea...”

“... that Vodou wasn’t some kind of new age magick—with a ‘k’—for tourists and movie plots?” Cassandra smiled.

“Err... exactly, Ma’am. So how come people associate voodoo with dolls stuck with pins and that nonsense?”

Cassandra nodded. “Nonsense, exactly. In the New World, Vodou has basically two main traditions. Mine is obviously Haitian. West African people were brought to the Caribbean as slaves to work in the sugar plantations, mainly by the French. The French also brought their slaves to Louisiana, New Orleans, to tend sugar and cotton crops, and when the Haitian slaves revolted during the period of 1791 to 1803, many Haitian planters fled to New Orleans with their slaves. But what most people don’t know is that the idea of using pins to stab dolls comes mainly from medieval Europe, not Africa.

“I studied the history of France and learned that, in the French court of the thirteenth century, the practice of putting pins into wood or wax dolls was well known and was being written about. The best known work describing the practice was by a French courtier who was a protégé of Catherine de Medici. It was an example of European folk magic—a sympathetic magical attempt to harm or kill the king or the barons and had been practiced throughout Europe for many years. Other examples of this practice actually exist in cultures throughout the world.

“In fact, many of the magic and sorcery practices attributed to Vodou and Africa actually were exported from France with the colonists who came to the Caribbean and then to New Orleans in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The colonists were mostly from the Berry, Picardy, Limousin, and Normandy provinces—they’re in central and coastal France. Some of those European magic practices were adopted into Haitian Vodou, but there appeared to be little interest in the doll-and-pins practice. That idea never took hold in the New Orleans Vodou branch; many of their other ritual practices differ from the Haitian ones.

“When pro-slavery activists began slandering the black citizens of New Orleans in the early nineteenth century, fearing that they would foment a slave revolution in the South in a manner similar to what had happened in Haiti in 1791, those pro-slavery people began slandering and sensationalizing Vodou, claiming that its practitioners held orgies, engaged in cannibalism, and stuck pins in dolls. Those were only a few of the false claims that were made about the religion. Then, beginning in the late nineteenth century and even to the current day, Vodou is being commercialized by people selling these trinkets and producing horror movies. But the pin-in-doll practice doesn’t even exist in New Orleans; in Haiti we sometimes saw it. But basically, the practice is a historical artifact from medieval Europe.

“Oh dear, I got carried away. I’m so sorry for the lecture...”

“No, no. That was extremely interesting and very informative,” Zane responded. “Could I be so bold as to ask if the CIA could call on you when we have an issue in understanding your culture and belief system? If that’s not against your religion, that is.”

“Ditto for the State Department,” Masters interjected.

“Hmm. I’m afraid that the FBI probably couldn’t use guidance like that, Ma’am; Our methods are somewhat more direct,” Johnson said with a grin and the others chuckled.

“I’d be delighted to help in any way which shows my beliefs in a positive way,” Cassandra agreed.

Wilkins looked around at the group. “Mr Zane, is the CIA satisfied with the information that Mrs Bernard provided?”

“Absolutely. I took notes and I’m going to have the section do some intensive research on Haiti, its history and culture, and Vodou itself. I’m sure we’ll come up with questions that we’ll ask Mrs Bernard about?”

“Certainly,” Cassandra replied.

“Then there’s no further need for me here since the rest of the meeting is internal U.S. and we’re not supposed to poke our noses into internal stuff,” he grinned, picked up his papers, and left, shaking hands as he came around the table.

“What kind of details can you give us about your experiences with this ‘Vanessa’ or her associates that the recording didn’t provide?” Johnson asked.

Cassandra nodded. “She came to my *ounfò*—temple—one day when I was alone. She must have been watching until our compound was unoccupied, since I have at least one person visiting, all during most days. I’m a faith healer and provide herbal folk medicines to my congregation; I do religious and spiritual counseling too.

“I didn’t know at first who she was but she had an enormously powerful persona and her speech seemed to me to be deliberately hypnotic. An unsuspecting person would have come under her influence quite quickly, I thought. She asked me trivial questions about the area and my congregation but I became alarmed when she began asking about my family.

“Then she began talking about the ‘old days,’ when a person of ‘real power’ was Haiti’s ruler and the priests and priestesses had real political power because the people of Haiti worshiped them like the ancestor spirits and the *lwa*—they’re spirits who correspond to the Christian saints. If there’s anything in the Vodou tradition that’s sacrilegious, it’s the idea that the priests and priestesses should be worshiped.

“She told me that she could tell that I had real power and should join with her so that I could learn—you’d call it black magic—and learn to commune with the *baka*, the malevolent spirits. I told her that I could never do evil, that my guardian *lwa*, *Papa Legba*, would not allow it either. She told me that wasn’t any difficulty and that she could exorcize any *lwa* easily.

“When I further refused, she threatened my life and family. She said that she’d give me three weeks to decide; if I didn’t join her, she would make me wish I hadn’t rejected her offer.”

Jonas looked at the notes he had prepared.

“When Cassandra told me about the threat, I checked Vanessa out. She has a very secure compound in a city just south of Port-au-Prince in an area where the wealthiest Haitians live. I thought possibly with my Marine training I could... well... since I left the Marines, I’ve become somewhat of a pacifist and deliberately harming someone would be repugnant. But if there was a direct physical threat... whatever.

“That recording. We were very lucky getting it. The son of the guy I worked for was doing a repair for this rich person on an estate just south of Port-au-Prince, not far from Vanessa’s compound. He was on the floor of a van inside a garage, doing some electrical repairs under the dash, when someone pulled into the garage. Vanessa was in that car. They began to talk and when the mechanic heard Cassandra’s name, he started the recording. He had his phone out and was using its flashlight. You heard what they all said. He said he got almost everything they said, up to when their car pulled out.

“My boss’s son packed up his stuff and hightailed it back to his home and my boss called me. We got the recording onto my phone. You heard the three voices on the recording and the fourth, which was too low to make out, but he didn’t say much. The son thinks that the people were, besides Vanessa, the estate owner, who’s a government minister, and two of Vanessa’s muscle.

“Using the info from the recording, we watched our daughter carefully, since they had cased us and knew our travel patterns. On the date they had planned to do the kidnapping, we watched, and sure enough, they had a van stationed at an isolated corner where she would pass. They were there the two following days as well. They also drove into our compound where we lived on those second two days and looked around. Then it was the weekend and our own compound was busy. The earthquake hit on that following Monday.

“Finally, when I was at the embassy getting the official paperwork to come to the States, the security officer told me that my wife and daughter were being searched for by some men who had their photos. That’s when I had the idea to fake their deaths. Later I heard from my boss there, that men had been seen in Aubry, our town, and asking about the funeral.”

“Listening to that and knowing the past history of Haitian violence to its expats, clearly you’re all in danger,” Wilkins told them.

“I think we need to set up a variant of a witness protection scheme here,” Johnson said.

“Agreed,” Wilkins replied. “Mr Masters, we’ll need help from the State Department.”

“We can do that,” Masters agreed.

Jonas and Cassandra looked from one person to the next. “Do what?” Jonas asked.

“We need to change your identities,” Wilkins said. “Name changes, record changes, whatever. Fortunately instead of three histories, we need to change just one: Jonas’. The others just need new records created.”

Johnson asked, “You get to pick new names. How cool is that?”

Cassandra jumped. “That’s what she told us!”

“What?” Wilkins asked.

“Um... well, seems our daughter already thought of that because she has a new name for herself and one for Cass.” Jonas told him.

“Oh... Okay... Bright kid?” Wilkins wondered.

“Believe it,” Jonas sighed.

~~~~~

Actually, changing Jonas’ name was complicated by his award of the Medal of Honor. So they had to involve the Department of Defense, since the honor was awarded in his original name, but he would be receiving the award under his new name. That took a bit of anguish and teeth gnashing, but a solution was proposed:

Jonas had enlisted under a false name because he was underage.

All of Jonas' military records had to be altered, including the DD-214 and award citations, but obviously people's memories couldn't be, so that was the best choice.

For Florida, the FBI got a judge, *in camera*, to authorize the change of Jonas' birth certificate and the old driver's license records were "lost." So were all of his school records. A Florida marriage certificate was issued in their names. Then a cohesive past history had to be constructed for him, showing that he lived in Florida (because involving any more states would have made the project much more difficult) for the past eleven to twelve years. This entailed a search for recently closed auto shop businesses in rural areas throughout southern Florida and several were found. One likely one was chosen and the official copies of its old business records were altered to show that "Wilson Alexandre" was a past employee. Federal and state tax records needed to be constructed.

The county records were fixed to show that the Alexandre family lived in a trailer on a site not far from the shop. That local school district recorded that one Tamara Alexandre was registered as a home-schooled student. A birth certificate and other documents were created for Cassandra. Creating a whole new set of identities for three people is a huge undertaking.

A new Social Security number was issued and the State Department re-issued their passports. The Veterans Affairs Department issued a new ID and changed Jonas' Compensation and Pension records. They had to get the VA hospital records changed too. Making a name change at the bank presented only a small problem compared to the other changes.

When it was all completed, Jonas was now Wilson Alexandre and his wife and daughter were named Nadine and Tamara, just as Tamara had said it should be. She did allow them to give her a middle name but insisted that it must be "Nadine."

~~~~~

Wilson had also heard from Henri about their former home. Henri had the man with the heavy equipment shift some of the rubble on the site and Henri had recovered some of their personal possessions, enough to fill several large cartons.

Henri used email to contact Wilson who responded with a phone call. Calls from Haiti to the U.S. were usually expensive through traditional services, but Wilson located a service for Henri to use that had a reasonable cost.

"Hi, Jon... er, Wilson. Hard to get used to that. We pulled some stuff out of your house. Some furniture wasn't damaged. There was undamaged stuff in the kitchen too. The clothing was okay. You had some boxes of paperwork. Tamara's room had books too."

"Okay, we won't need any furniture to be shipped. We could replace it here for what that would cost to ship. Same with the kitchen ware. You can sell that stuff or donate it. Say, how is the earthquake recovery progressing?"

"Really slow. But we've got no complaints personally and business is booming for us. I'm looking at hiring someone, in fact. Not to replace you—finding someone with your skills is nigh on impossible."

"Okay, Henri, cut the crap. You can ship clothes—have Julianna check on Nadine's and Tamara's to see if they're worth sending. I think I can use most of my own stuff. Tamara would love to get her books. And those papers—send them too."

"Okay. I'll check with my import broker for shipping arrangements and costs and let you know."



They made the necessary arrangements and then disconnected.

***Miami, Florida: one month later***

A month after the family had been christened with their new names, they had finally settled into somewhat of a routine. Wilson (he was still trying to get used to the name) had tried contacting the shop where he had worked years ago, but it had been sold and now an apartment building stood on its site. Nadine (she took to her new name easily) was now down to weekly outpatient visits for her burns and her leg fracture was healing well. And Tamara? (No question there: “That’s my name!”) She was still avidly reading.

On one visit to the hospital early on, Wilson was looking at a community bulletin board in the lobby while he was waiting for Nadine, when he saw a job posting for Miami-Dade County. The position was for a mechanic for light and heavy-duty vehicles. The posting indicated that preferences would be given to veterans. He quickly called and got an interview date.

At the interview, it turned out that the supervisor was a Marine too; he had served in Iraq, and they wound up swapping war stories, but then they turned to business. Wilson had his diploma (in his new name) and a number of paycheck stubs (no name appeared) from Henri’s shop in Haiti and ones from the closed shop to verify his work history and a reference. He was able to easily show that he knew his way around anything with wheels or tracks and an engine, so the only remaining step was verifying his reference.

The following day, the supervisor called him to offer him the job.

“We had a bunch of applicants, but they missed out because they either didn’t have the skills, their references weren’t okay, or they didn’t pass the background or drug check. Your former boss had nothing but good things to say about you. Don’t get a swelled head, but you must have been a magician to keep sixty-year-old cars and trucks running with the repair parts you could find.”

“Yeah. Lots of improvising and back-yard engineering.”

“Well, welcome aboard. You need to stop at the county office to go to personnel to get all signed up. Lots of paperwork to fill out. We’ll start you working this coming Monday. Will that work?”

“Sure. And thanks.”

“Okay, report to the heavy equipment repair shop on 87<sup>th</sup> Avenue SW, where I interviewed you. That’ll be your home base for now, but our mechanics may go to all of our locations based on available work and special skills. And we need to trade more war stories. Semper Fi, you grunt!”

Wilson got signed up for the job. The pay wasn’t the best, starting about \$30 an hour, but the health insurance and other benefits were excellent.

*Hmm, He thought. Nadine will need to get a job. My pay isn’t quite enough to get by here. She’s open to that, she told me, but she also wants to have her own congregation. Oh, right. There’s the stipend for the Medal of Honor too and all my pay will be exempt from federal and state income taxes. That’ll help.*

They had found an apartment to lease near the medical center complex, the one that Wilson had found on their first weekend in Miami, and Tamara (of the “that’s my only name” persuasion) had agreed to participate in Dr Beauford’s research project.

Wilson recalled that meeting at the medical school with the doctor with wry amusement. He had called Beauford’s office to set up an appointment for the family.

The secretary asked for their names, so Wilson answered, “Tell him it’s Tamara. He’ll remember.”

“Okay. Last name?”

“Just Tamara, okay? He will definitely remember her.”

Standing next to him, Tamara giggled.

When they met with Dr Beauford, he was delighted, but was puzzled when Wilson mentioned his name and Nadine’s.

“I’m certain that those weren’t the names I have in my notes from the surgery,” he mused. “I need to check.”

He opened the computer hospital patient file and saw that it read, “Patient: Tamara Alexandre. Father: Wilson. Mother: Nadine.” Then he grabbed his hand-written notes and saw that he had written “Tamara Bernard to contact me about MRI study.”

He turned to them. “I have Tamara’s last name different in my notes,” he looked up at her. She peered back at him with a tiny grin. “... but clearly I must have been distracted when I wrote this. Sorry for being so sloppy,” he finished.

“Well, Dr Beauford, Tamara is doing better on strengthening her leg, as you can see,” Nadine said. “It can almost support her weight now. She’ll need the crutches for another three or four weeks. So she says she’s ready for your MRI project and since you’re meeting with us, we assume that you’re still interested.”

“Oh, certainly. We can do the paperwork for it when we finish here. In fact, the new machine is here and it’s almost finished being installed. Why don’t we go see it? Then you’ll get an idea of what Tamara will be doing.”

They entered the MRI room and looked at the machine.

“Oh, it’s like a throne,” Wilson observed. “Not a tube that you roll into.”

“Right,” Beauford replied. “It’s an upright MRI. They had uprights before, but this one is completely room-temperature superconductor-enabled. The Johns Hopkins engineers developed electromagnets which don’t need liquid helium to cool them. The regular MRIs use so much current that the magnets would get too hot to work unless they’re kept extremely cold; these stay around room temperature, despite their high current load. We’ll be using a special head coil—Princess Tamara, would you mind sitting on your throne there?”

She giggled and hoisted herself up onto the seat. Beauford took a helmet device off a rack and brought it over to her.

“Can I slip this over your head, dear? I’ll be careful not to bump it.”

Tamara smirked. “Well, your scotch tape fell off last week but I think there’s still some glue left holding things together. Told you band-aids with rubber bands work better.”

Beauford almost dropped the helmet; he was laughing so hard.

“Oh, I’m gonna love working with this imp,” he snorted as he collected himself. “Anyway, this space helmet goes over her head; it generates radio waves which wobble atoms in the body and collects the signals that are produced, and those go to the computer which turns the signals into pictures of the organs we’re scanning.”

“Like an x-ray?” Nadine asked.

“X-rays are in the same family as radio waves, but their frequency is many orders of magnitude higher. They can injure body tissues if they’re too frequently applied or misused. The radio frequency waves that this device produces are harmless; like the signals your cell phone makes. When we do the tests, Tamara, we’ll show you things on the screen right here. For some tests, you’ll do arithmetic, for others, you’ll read the screen aloud.

We'll even have tutors come and work on school lessons with you while you're in here. Now this contraption is very rude and makes a lot of noise when it's running, like the other MRIs you've been in, so you'll have earphones so you can hear the person talking to you. And every once in a while, we may want to inject a dye into your arm to be able to see inside your brain better."

"That won't hurt, right?" Tamara asked.

"Remember in the hospital, you had blood drawn from inside your elbow, right?"

"Uh huh. That was just a poke."

"That's the same as getting the dye."

"Um, okay."

"Do you have any questions, any of you? No? Okay. While we're doing the study, we'll want to meet with you parents every two weeks or thereabouts, so we can give you progress reports. We'll cover the healing of her injury and also anything else of interest we might learn. Okay, let's go down to the scheduling nurse. She'll have all of the permission forms plus the materials which cover Tamara's care and benefits for the study. Oh, right. Don't think Tamara's the sole guinea pig here; there are seven others in the study. Several are college students; also there's a teen and a geriatric volunteer."

~~~~~

Nadine was working at trying to put her life together again, now that she was living in a strange environment. She understood the need to find employment. Watching the health care personnel at the hospital at work, and with her own experience in folk healing, she decided that was a very appealing job, so she began to look into a health-care job. At one of her outpatient sessions, she asked a nurse about it.

"Sweetie, yes, we're always short of people. A quick way of getting into an entry level job would be by becoming a certified nurse's assistant. The American Red Cross has a program, it's for four weeks, and then there's a state exam. You can look into that. The local community colleges also have courses and there are a few which are taught on-line, but you always need to do some clinical training in person, whatever course you take."

Later, Nadine asked Wilson about her taking the course and he agreed that she might enjoy helping people in a very personal way.

~~~~~

Now that Tamara was a little more mobile, her parents began thinking about school for her. She would be getting tutoring while in the study, but that wasn't the answer. The answer actually came from a random meeting of someone who lived in their apartment building. The building had a small fitness room which contained two treadmills and some other exercise equipment. One day Tamara was using a treadmill to strengthen her leg while Nadine sat and watched; it would be several weeks before her leg cast would come off.

A woman entered and began using the other treadmill and the two women began to talk. The newcomer, Susan Gilson, was a retired electrical engineer who had returned to college to get certified to teach high school. Now retired from that second career and having moved to Miami with her husband who had retired from his, she had been getting bored with retired life. In talking with Sue, Nadine mentioned the predicament that schooling her daughter was presenting, since Tamara was so advanced in science but not as much in other subjects, and Sue was intrigued.

"Where is she in school now?" Sue asked.

Nadine laughed. "Where isn't she. Well, when we stopped home-schooling her, she was reading classic

literature in English and French using high-school texts. I'm not sure about her writing skills or general studies like history and similar subjects..."

"You mean social studies?"

"Yes. In science, she's at ... college level? We've seen her working with college physics texts. Oh, and she apparently knows electronics..."

Nadine described Tamara's electronics lab incident, placing the locale at a Florida community college.

"So we don't know what to do about school. She's ten, eleven in two months. She'd be bored silly in grade school and is much too young to be put into high school, let alone a college."

Tamara finished on the treadmill and hobbled over.

"Hey, Momma, have you been talking about me? You know I can tell," she smirked. "You say something and then look my way."

"Yes, smartie, we were talking about school for you. You're really advanced in some things but not in others. What do you think we should do?"

"Well, can the school teach me the ten-year-old stuff and I can do the really interesting things in physics, like I'm doing electromagnetism now, on my own? I was doing that at home, just before we left, but got stumped by Maxwell's equations. They use integral and differential calculus—Gauss' law, Faraday's law, and Ampère's law do, and I haven't learned calculus yet. I can figure out basic circuits 'cause they use Ohm's and Joule's laws," Tamara complained.

"You know what...?" Sue said. "I'm very impressed. Tamara, you're ten?"

"Uh huh."

"Well, I'm at loose ends with myself now and, Tamara, you sound like you love to be challenged. Tamara, I used to be an electrical engineer. I designed integrated circuits and circuit modules for industrial process control systems. I can teach you calculus and how to apply Maxwell's equations. If you think you'd like to work with me, I'd be delighted to help you. Nadine, would you allow her to work with me?"

"Ah, we can't pay much..." Nadine started.

"No, we don't need any money; we have everything we need. My husband sold and retired from his private medical practice and works part-time as a doc-in-a-box now just to keep occupied. Your daughter is every teacher's dream and I'd love to be able to guide her."

Nadine and Wilson met with Sue two times to discuss her tutoring suggestions and they contacted the school where she last taught; the school principal spoke highly of her skills. Sue would work with Tamara for four hours each day, whenever she wasn't in rehab or at the medical school study. Sue even agreed to drive Tamara to her appointments, which freed up some of Nadine's time and allowed Nadine to sign up for a version of the nurse's assistant program which was mostly on line.

Life in the U.S. for the Alexandres was beginning to take shape.

## Chapter 9 - Honoring a Warrior

No sooner than her MRI study had begun, Tamara showed her scientific aptitude. Dr Beauford was doing some baseline work, still using the standard MRI because the installation of the new system wasn't quite finished, when Tamara came into his office carrying a sheaf of papers.

"Uh oh," Beauford said warily. "What trouble am I in now?"

"We'll see," Tamara grinned. "The engineer working on the new MRI gave these pages to me."

Beauford saw that they were mostly circuit schematics.

"I was asking him about the machine's theory... how it gets pictures of inside the body..."

### *Earlier that day*

Tamara wandered into the room with the new MRI because she heard someone inside there working.

*Maybe it's almost ready?* she wondered and went in.

A man was working in an electrical panel outside the control room.

"Should you be in here?" he asked.

"I'm one of Dr Beauford's guinea pigs—I was just in the old MRI room with him and when he finished, he told me, 'Now go make yourself useful.' So here I am. I thought learning about the new machine would be useful."

"Ah. You must be Tamara. The doc said to watch out for you, you're scary smart, but to answer your questions. What can I help you with, miss?"

"I have a basic idea about how MRIs work, they shoot radio waves into the body and some kind of detector receives a return signal and a computer turns that into a picture."

"Exactly. But the details are the fascinating part."

"Uh huh, I know. I understand how radio-frequency waves can be made—they're called RF waves. If you basically just pass a current rapidly through an inductor, it generates an electromagnetic pulse. The pulse's frequency is set by the inductor—the current, number of windings, wire size, things like that. Are those RF waves like the ones in the MRI?"

"You know about this stuff? No wonder the doc said to answer your questions. Let me go over how the MRI operates, okay?"

"Sure."

"The technology is based on the atomic structure of the tissues that the body's made of. Organic matter is mostly made of carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, and hydrogen atoms, with a lot more kinds of atoms in much smaller amounts included. The hydrogen atoms occur in the highest numbers in the body and they're in every tissue. Do you know what a hydrogen atom looks like—how we visualize it?"

"Sure, that was in the chemistry texts. That's the simplest atom. A proton with a single electron."

"Right. So we can think of the hydrogen proton like a tiny ball which is spinning on its axis. It carries a tiny electrical charge, so its spin gives it a small magnetic field, making it behave like a tiny magnet. Normally, the hydrogen protons in the body are spinning with their axes pointing in random directions. Okay so far?"

She nodded.

“Now the main part of an MRI machine contains these huge electromagnets, or sometimes they’re permanent magnets, which generate an extremely powerful static magnetic field, enough to affect the hydrogen protons. When a person enters the magnetic field, all the protons align their spins with the magnetic field. Now, see this helmet thing?”

“Yeah. I need to wear that ‘cause that’s what gets the signals from inside my head.”

“Exactly. Here’s what happens. When the computer program is ready to scan, it activates a circuit which shoots a momentary burst of radio-frequency energy out of the RF coil inside the helmet. That energy excites the spinning hydrogen nuclei, which causes them to slightly change their alignment. When the helmet’s RF pulse stops—it’s just a few milliseconds long—the nuclei return to their original state and realign themselves with the MRI’s magnetic field.

“When they flip back, they release the energy which they picked up from the RF pulse. Now, the RF coil in here not only transmits the RF pulse, it’s also a receiver and the coil acts as an antenna to detect the energy that the hydrogen nuclei emit when they return to their normal state. The coil’s circuitry then transmits the return signal’s source and intensity to the computer, which generates the images. The MRI has some separate electromagnets, called the gradient coils, and those magnets vary their magnetic field at different points in the body part being scanned to allow the computer to calculate the exact location of the source of the returned energy and its intensity. There are also different external RF coils used for other body parts than the head—like the shoulder, knee, wrist, ankle, elbow, for example. Make sense?”

“Sure, but you left out some important stuff. How do you account for parts of the body which have different thicknesses and densities? How do you keep the static magnetic field constant across the area you want to scan? How do you control for the depth inside the body where you want to see the organ? And people’s weights are different too, so how do you deal with that?”

“You thought of all that, did you?”

She nodded.

“I mentioned the external RF coils.” She nodded again. “Well, those are what we call the ‘patient coils.’ There are also shim coils to control for variations in the magnetic field and I mentioned the gradient coils, which are for the imaging. There are other coils involved, too. Say, since you are so interested, let me give you some specifications and schematics for the coils. That will show you what they do.”

### ***Present time***

Tamara finished explaining her visit with the MRI engineer to Beauford.

“So then I was looking at the coils here,” she pointed to a drawing. “The spine coil is built into the back of the seat...”

Beauford nodded, “Right...”

“...and look. See how the transmit and receive detectors are set up? That’s much more efficient than how the head coil is designed. Let me show you the geometry of the RF waves that both coils produce.”

She took a piece of paper and began drawing.

“Wait, Tamara. I need to get Roger here.”

He ran out and a minute later, he returned with the engineer and another man.

“Tamara, you know Roger Gordon, obviously. This is Tim Saunders, he’s our in-house engineer.”

Tamara greeted him.

Beauford said, “Let me show you what Tamara’s figured out. Tell them, dear.”

She went over her drawing and did a few rough calculations.

“I don’t know enough calculus yet to be more accurate, so this is an approximation of the efficiency increase you can get in the head coil, by using the spine coil detector design as a guide.”

Both engineers looked at her notes and Gordon whistled.

Tim exhaled in a great whoosh of breath. “Damn, she nailed that. My god. You’re only ten? God help us; what will you be able to do when you’re older?”

Gordon was thinking; then he spoke. “You know, they weren’t planning on using a head coil on the upright model. The upper part of the spine coil is for the brain, and the machine’s sides near the head contained the rest of the original head coil circuitry. When they converted this design to full superconductivity, they brought back the head coil—but it looks like they used the original design factors without considering the new design’s efficiency. That was an outstanding discovery, Tamara. You know, my company gives rewards for suggestions that improve products. I’m gonna submit this under your name, okay?”

Beauford chuckled. “Tamara, please warn me about this, next time I tell you to make yourself useful, okay?”

### ***Miami, Florida: early December***

It was now more than two months after the Alexandre family had arrived in Miami when the Defense Department official who had coordinated the family’s identity change contacted Wilson. The official wanted to schedule the award presentation with the president and phoned Wilson to see if a date in mid-January would be possible. Wilson agreed, since both Nadine and Tamara would most likely be fully mobile by then, and the dates would work with the family’s schedule. They would be flown to Washington on a Thursday, the award would be presented on Friday, they would get an official tour on Saturday, and return home Sunday. Nadine’s schedule was his greatest concern; she had almost finished her required course work in the nurse’s assistant program and would need to begin the clinical part next, so the Washington trip would work on his selected dates.

Wilson also realized that he would need to replace his Marine dress blues; his uniform had been damaged in the earthquake. On checking, he found that there was a small military base exchange store in Doral, near Miami International Airport, so he visited the store and explained his needs. That’s when he learned that enlisted Medal of Honor recipients get a uniform allowance. He was measured for the uniform at the BX store and the order was placed, along with an order for all of the medals, ribbons, and badges he had been awarded.

### ***White House, Washington, D.C.: mid-January***

On a cold, sunny Friday morning in mid-January, the Alexandre family arrived at the White House by limousine and a White House staff member escorted them inside. But instead of the usual award ceremony, typically attended by assorted dignitaries, including brass from the armed forces and politicians, press, and even prior Medal recipients, the officials at the State Department, CIA, and FBI had insisted that the ceremony be conducted in private. President Inyoue was unhappy about the idea of a small ceremony; truly “secret” ceremonies were never allowed, but an explanation of the Alexandre family situation persuaded him. The award would be announced in the Navy’s general orders, which were public, so the award was not made in secret. Only the Marines whom Wilson had saved and their families had been invited, together with only a few government dignitaries. Master Chief Gilbert Bronson’s hospital ship had been deployed to the Mediterranean, so he was unable to be there.

From the military, the Marine commandant and his deputy were to attend. From the Executive Branch, the

Defense secretary and his deputy, the secretary and undersecretary of the Navy, the secretary of State, an undersecretary, and an assistant secretary, were to be there. Congress was represented by two members: Senator Carlson, who was the official who made the inquiry which resulted in the Medal's award would attend, of course, and he also was the father-in-law of one of the Marine guests. The House representative was from the Alexandres' congressional district.

When Wilson and his family entered a reception room in the White House, his former unit members greeted him. The two men rushed to Wilson to embrace and congratulate him.

"Hey, you lowlife grunt," Jim Emery accused him, "you had to use an assumed name to join the Corps?" Emery had been a lance corporal in Wilson's platoon. "Congrats on your award."

"Thanks. Yeah, I was underage. I had to fake it to get in," Wilson demurred.

"I see you're lookin' good, man. Life treat you well after Germany?" Carter Thompson asked.

At the battle, he was a private first class and had been one of the group of replacements who had joined Wilson's company about two weeks before the battle. He was also Carlson's son-in-law. This had been his first major engagement.

Wilson answered, "Not bad at all."

"Man, every time I think of what coulda happened out there, I still get the willies," Thompson told him. "You were a frikkin' ninja out there, man, swingin' that samurai sword of yours. And yeah, you deserve that medal. I'm glad that Dad pushed for it."

"Thanks, buddy. Don't put yourself down. You exposed yourself when you helped Nichols clear his M249. If we had lost that machine gun, everything would have gone to... big brown cigars," Wilson said. "The Bronze Star with 'V' you got shows your courage."

The senator came over to talk to Wilson then and Wilson thanked him for his sponsorship. After the group chatted together for a while, a woman came to Wilson and took him aside.

"The president wants to talk to you briefly."

He met Inyoue, who greeted him and said he just wanted to get some personal insights before the ceremony and that afterwards, he and the first lady would have lunch with Wilson and his family. A woman was sitting near them while they spoke and Wilson saw that she was taking notes.

President Inyoue chuckled when he saw Wilson looking at her. "She's my memory. I'll use her notes for my presentation."

Then an aide came in and coached Wilson on what to do when he was on the dais. Fifteen minutes later, the president led him to the room where the presentation was to occur.

The presentation was brief. There was an invocation by a member of the Chaplain's Corps and then the president went to the podium. He spoke for a few minutes about Wilson's heroism and then reminded everyone that because of an ongoing critical diplomatic situation, the news of Wilson's award needed to be kept relatively private.

At this point, Wilson was called to the dais and the president went to him; they exchanged salutes, and the two stood side-by-side facing the audience. The Marine deputy commandant walked over to a table behind the podium and picked up the medal, holding it by the ends of its star-sprinkled navy-blue ribbon. He then walked to the front of the dais, holding the medal by its ribbon in front of him. Facing out toward the gathered group, Wilson stood on Inyoue's right and the deputy was on his left.



The Marine commandant stepped to the podium to read the award citation.

“Attention to orders. On behalf of Congress, the president awards Staff Sergeant Wilson J. Alexandre, U.S. Marine Corps, the Medal of Honor for his conspicuous bravery and courageous actions while serving as a platoon sergeant with Alpha Platoon, Charlie Company, 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Anti-Terrorism), 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Division, attached to the Combined Joint Task Force-76, during combat operations near Ganjgal, Kunar Province, Afghanistan, on March 14, 2008. After his commander was killed by enemy fire, Staff Sergeant Alexandre took command of his platoon and directed its defense, which prevented an overwhelming force of enemy from proceeding to their objective. Twice Staff Sergeant Alexandre left his covered position to bring an exposed, wounded Marine to cover for medical treatment. Even after he was seriously wounded, he kept fighting and directing the members of his unit. The effective leadership and conspicuous personal courage that Staff Sergeant Alexandre exhibited allowed his unit to achieve the blocking action assigned to his unit, resulting in the saving of hundreds of lives in the U.N. encampment and the Afghan village they were assigned to protect. Through his extraordinary heroism and selflessness above and beyond the call of duty in the face of an overwhelming and determined enemy, Staff Sergeant Alexandre reflected great credit upon himself and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.”

After the commandant completed the reading, the deputy commandant handed the medal by its ribbon ends to Inyoue as Wilson turned away so that the ribbon could be fastened around his neck.

The small group watching stood and applauded as Wilson turned to face the front and returned the salutes of the president, the commandant and the deputy commandant.

Following the ceremony, some of the dignitaries present gathered to congratulate Wilson and left. The State Department officials told him that they wanted to meet with him and Nadine following their lunch with the president; at this time, though, there would be a brief reception for the attendees.

When Tamara was able to speak privately with Nadine, she grabbed her arm.

“Momma, one of those men who was there when Papa got the medal is really evil. I also saw him sneaking a photo of you earlier.”

“Is he in here now?”

She looked around. “Over there, near that door. Talking to the senator.”

Nadine looked; it was the assistant secretary from the State Department.

“Can you tell why he’s evil?”

“Um, no. I can’t see anyone’s thoughts, but the evil taste increases when he looks at you.”

“When we were introduced, I also had a bad feeling about him, but I thought that he’s just not a likable person,” Nadine said. “What...”

Tamara interrupted. “Can I ‘push’ him?”

“What do you mean, dear?”

“You know, like in the hospital when they changed my name. I just made them think they entered my name wrong,” Tamara said.

“Your dad and I wondered how you did that. What can you do with that man?”

“First, I need to look into his eyes. That works best. I can... um... ‘suggest’ that he’s getting sick but if he tells

why he's evil to... yeah, his boss, he won't be sick. Unless he tries it again. Yeah. I can do that. I know—I'll ask him about the flag pins everyone's wearing."

Tamara walked over to one of Wilson's former unit members who was standing near the assistant secretary and talking to one of the Defense officials. She tugged at his sleeve and asked him a question; then she began to walk away but made a ceremony about stopping in front of her target.

"Oh, Mr Secretary, I just thought of this. Lots of men are wearing little flag pins on their suits. Is that a kind of official rank pin?" she asked as she peered into his eyes with an intense gaze as she softly whispered a few sentences to him.

The man looked back into Tamara's eyes and shivered, then pulled himself together. "Ah... what did you say? Oh! The pins. No, miss. They just show our patriotism and respect for our country. Is that what you wanted... ah, oh ... excuse me, I need to..."

He rushed out of the room.

Tamara went back to her mother.

"Oops," she said, "I might have overdone it," and giggled. "He tasted sooo rancid, ugh. I think I 'pushed' a bit too hard."

Nadine shook her head in disbelief. "*Manman* could never have done anything like that."

Tamara shook her head. "That you know of, *Manman*, I think she could have; maybe she just never tried."

"What happens with him, now?" Nadine indicated the door that the secretary had used to leave.

"He needs to get his boss... ah."

The door opened and the man, looking haggard, entered, ran to the secretary of State, and pulled him out of the room.

Nadine watched them with a look of amazement. "It really worked..."

Tamara nodded smugly.

"Listen, young lady..." Nadine began.

"I know, *Manman*, I should be really, really careful about how I 'push' people. I promise that I won't do bad or evil things with it. *Ayizan* won't allow it."

Nadine sighed. "I worry about you so much..."

"I'm protected, *Manman*. Look into your heart and ask *Papa Legba* for reassurance."

~~~~~

The family had a delightful lunch with President Inyoue and his wife. They were amazed about how advanced in school that Tamara was. They discussed Nadine's expected nurse's assistant certification and got a personal retelling of the family's experience during the earthquake.

After lunch, Wilson and Nadine met with the State Department and CIA officials. They left Tamara in the White House library where she delightedly perused the books under the watchful eye of a Secret Service agent.

Once again, Evan Masters represented the State Department and Wilbur Zane, the CIA.

"Mr and Mrs Alexandre," Masters said after they all greeted each other, "I have strange and disturbing news

about your Haiti connections...”

“Not more bad news, I hope,” Wilson said.

“We don’t know what to make of it. Just as your reception for your award ended—by the way, congrats again on that—Arthur Benson, the assistant secretary for western hemisphere affairs from the State Department, confessed about how he has been collecting information about what the U.S. knew about Haiti, its political situation, and the plans of the political opposition, and passing the information on to the Haitian opposition. Recently Benson heard from them that they were searching for a priestess who had disappeared. They believed that she had been killed in the quake; they had seen both Cassandra’s death certificate and the autopsy report, and that a proper funeral had been conducted. But they wanted firm assurance about those reports.

“So, the Haiti opposition had asked our traitorous official for a list of all Haitians entering the country this past fall; they were looking particularly for one Jonas Bernard, who was said to have been seriously injured and had traveled to Miami for treatment. Benson was to find out the details about Mr Bernard’s arrival and where he could be found.

“We found in Benson’s possessions photos of um, Nadine and you. When he saw you at the presentation, he was startled, but he recovered and surreptitiously took your pictures; we found them on his phone but he hadn’t had the chance to send them to anyone yet. Now the strange part is that he seems to be under some weird compulsion to undo any of the damage that his spying caused. He told the FBI investigating agent that he would never consider harming your family now, that doing anything like it would be unthinkable. When the agent asked what would happen—say if he heard that you had been located—the agent said that Benson turned white and looked like he was becoming almost physically ill.

“Do you know anything of this?”

Wilson shook his head in the negative, but Nadine responded, “Remember our conversation the last time we met? About magic and non-magic and how our Haitian beliefs may seem strange to those who weren’t raised in our traditions? I mentioned to you that someone brought up in our traditions could think that a person who is skilled in manipulating a believer’s emotions could do this to them. Well, I can assure you that neither my husband nor I ‘hexed’ that gentleman, or did anything magical, psychological, or otherwise to him. It sounds to me like he had a severe attack of conscience.”

Mr Zane, the CIA agent, snorted. “Whatever. If you hadn’t humbled me so soundly back in Miami, I’d say there was a voodoo doll involved somehow. But we’ve been doing some research and we’ve learned about the possibility of the use of hypnotic suggestion in some of your rituals. It’s not deliberately done; it’s just the result of the drumming, dancing, and chanting. Not only does this happen in Vodou worship, it’s seen in some Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity services too. My agency is concerned that, under certain conditions, believers can be persuaded to become violent or perform other illegal acts.”

“Ah, Mr Zane, please let me remind you of what happens in riots. Or of the effect of an arousing speech by a highly charismatic person. Such arousal is not limited to religion,” Nadine chastised him.

“You’re right. Once again, I am admonished,” Zane remarked. “We at the agency are concerned about the stability of the current Haitian government and we were wondering if you could give us a list of your priests and priestesses who you believe are nonpolitical or have not associated with the opposition.”

“I believe I can do that,” Nadine replied. “But you won’t do anything which would cause undue interest in them or attract the attention of Vanessa’s minions?”

“Certainly not. We know how to keep a very low profile, and in this situation, as low as possible is in order. Mr Masters, I’m satisfied, so you may continue.”

“Okay, thanks. Having the same information about the Vodou clergy would be useful for State, too.” Nadine nodded agreement to him. “We know many of the Christian clergy, the Catholics and Protestants. It’s useful for the embassy to have such information to give to U.S. visitors when they ask for a clergy person for counseling or prayer services. But we’d like to learn as much as you can tell us about what you’d heard politically in the months before you left Haiti.”

Nadine and Wilson spent the next hour talking about all of their observations, their concerns about the government, and the things they had heard about the opposition. After they finished their meeting, they joined Tamara, who talked excitedly about the books she had seen.

“Some of them were rare history books,” she gushed. “They even have a first edition of the ‘Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant’ there. I had to get someone to take it out of its case and they turned the pages for me, but I want to read the whole thing. She said that modern edition copies are available.”

“Sure. You can check the university library; I’m sure a copy is there, or they can get one,” Wilson said.

“Tamara, we heard that man confessed. It seems he gets sick if he even thinks of harm coming to our family,” Nadine told her, then she briefly explained to Wilson what had happened.

“I’m sorry I didn’t mention that earlier, but it’s been such a whirlwind...” she began.

“Not to worry. Say, you were cute,” Wilson grinned. “What you told them, that ‘neither my husband nor I hexed’ him, was the absolute truth.”

“And Tamara assured me that she wouldn’t use her ability for anything bad or evil.”

Tamara just grinned and nodded.

### ***Miami, Florida: one month later***

Their Washington trip over, the Alexandres returned to their usual routine. Soon after Tamara’s eleventh birthday in February, they met with Dr Beauford. He congratulated Wilson for the award and had some updated information for them.

“We are still seeing unusual results in Tamara’s follow-up fMRIs,” Beauford began. “First, all signs of the fracture and hematoma are gone. Next, her EEGs show the same overall patterns as they had from the ship, but with even greater amplitudes. Tamara’s brain appears to be a powerhouse. When we used contrast agents to increase the MRI image resolution, we noticed a heightened blood-flow activity in the area of the amygdala and hippocampus extending back to the cerebellum whenever we showed her a slide or movie clip with strong emotional overtones. I mentioned in the past that this has been noticed in strong empathes and we’ve observed, in socially interacting with her, that Tamara is indeed quite empathic.

“The amygdala and hippocampus are structures located deep in the brain and have an important function for the processing of emotion. The amygdala is specialized for evaluating the emotional content of a person’s experience and for processing it for storage as a memory. The hippocampus is involved—actually it’s essential—for preparing memories for storage. There are two types of memory and they seem to be stored in slightly different ways. There’s episodic memory—the memory for personal experiences—and semantic memory—that stores general facts and knowledge. Those two brain regions work together to help a person interpret and analyze the emotion and memory so it can be acted on or remembered.

“The high activity of these regions, and how they’re stimulated to a greater degree when she sees images of emotional content, further establishes her empathic abilities. Then, just before you left for Washington, something quite unusual happened. The Wednesday before, we had to bring in a substitute reader for one of Tamara’s sessions. Her usual reader couldn’t be here, and the substitute reader was supposed to read various

poems to her while she was in the fMRI so we could examine the blood flow in her brain while she was processing the meaning of the verses. The young man was a senior in the allied health program here.

“After only two minutes, the reader complained of a splitting headache and left. Then on the following Monday morning, I learned that on the previous Friday, the young man had confessed to a series of sexual assaults involving a few students here. Also that morning, I had been looking at the images from the beginning of Tamara’s session with that young man and noticed a sudden huge increase in blood flow beginning in her brain’s olfactory tract at the bottom of the frontal lobe, followed by responses in the piriform cortex, then the lateral hypothalamus and thalamus. They’re located in the midbrain where the amygdala and hippocampus are located; all the structures I mentioned are part of the limbic system. Two of the jobs that the limbic system performs involve memory—its storage and retrieval—and setting emotional states.

“I don’t understand what I saw, because the olfactory tract is responsible for smell, obviously. Why it became so active and triggered the entire limbic system is a complete mystery, but the effect only lasted a second, maybe two, and then returned to normal. I’ve never heard of anyone seeing a response like this, but this is a new machine and it’s incredibly sensitive. Perhaps we’re seeing a new brain function, but whatever it is, I currently have no idea. There are still lots of things about the limbic system that aren’t fully understood. I want to work with Tamara some more to see if we can identify what’s happening.”

Wilson thought he knew precisely what Beauford had seen but wasn’t about to expose Tamara’s secret.

“Could it have been a glitch or something?” he asked.

“That’s highly unlikely because of the quantity of high-resolution images that were captured.”

“Okay then,” Nadine said, “so you can tell that, apart from that time last Wednesday, everything with Tamara is still healthy?”

“Oh, yes. Totally healthy. Body and mind. She needs several more weeks of physical therapy so that her leg is 100 percent, but otherwise, she’s physically completely normal for her age. Her mind though... Let me tell you; the way she’s into the MRI theory and design... she’d love to take ours apart and reassemble it her way!”

Wilson laughed. “That’s what her dad does, but he sticks to cars and trucks!”

They all laughed.

Wilson went to work and Nadine went home. When Tamara came home from her home-school session, Nadine asked her about the incident with the substitute on that Wednesday.

“Yeah, Momma, he was... icky. You know how a full privy smells? Well, that kinda taste. I ‘pushed’ him so he’d want to leave but I was in the machine and the noise was distracting me so I couldn’t feel how hard I ‘pushed.’”

“You did it hard enough. He apparently was a sexual predator and two days later, he turned himself in.”

“Oh wow.”

“And Beauford has pictures of your brain doing that. If he can repeat it, your ability might become known and put you in danger...”

“...so be careful not to ‘push’ like that again. Right, Mom. Got it.”

“Good.”

“Momma, that’s twice now that I ‘pushed’ someone really hard. I’m feeling different things in my head now; right afterward I get a little headache, but that goes away pretty quick. But now my sensing is changing.

*Granmanman* could see colors?”

Nadine nodded. “That’s how she described it.”

“Well, you know I can... taste ... emotions. But now, it’s almost like I can ‘hear’ people’s colors. Not emotions. Maybe it’s thoughts. Before, with Sue, I could taste a gold sound coming from her. From you too, but your taste sounds louder. I’m guessing you’re thinking of how much you love me because I see that in your eyes.

“Coming back to the apartment, I passed old Mr Green and the sound from his emotions tasted gray. When I looked at him, his eyes were vacant and he barely answered when I greeted him. Gray must be... maybe thinking hopeless thoughts. I have to think more about this and figure out what it means.”

“You certainly do, darling. Please let me know if you do get any headaches, though.”

“I will, Momma. Love you.”

Tamara went to her room. She had lots of things to think about now and wasn’t sure where to start.

## Chapter 10 - A New Home

“Nadine, I found something to look at. It’s in a foreclosure auction,” Wilson said in a phone call in late March.

“Where?”

“The northernmost part of Little Haiti. Where we wanted. The auction is next week so I’m checking to see if we have a chance.”

The following evening, Wilson had more information about the property.

“This place will work for us. The owner passed away; he had no children. The executor is a half-sister out of state. She tried to sell, got no buyers, so she let the mortgage lapse. The bank couldn’t sell it either.”

“Why not?”

“The property is in a residential zone but had a variance for light industrial many years ago. The owner had a custom furniture shop set up in a pole barn and he lived in a double-wide on the grounds. There’s a rickety shed there too, where he stored the wood.”

“Why do you think they couldn’t sell it?”

“One major problem is the frontage on the road. There’s only fifteen feet of frontage for the driveway which goes 150 feet back, before it opens onto the site. There’s another driveway that goes out the back way; it’s even narrower. The site is completely land-locked and can’t be developed into anything that could make a profit for a buyer and it seems that no one wants to live on a site which used to be, basically, a factory.”

“What condition is it in?”

“It needs lots of work. The double-wide needs a good cleaning and repainting. The wood shed, tear it down. The pole barn is mostly empty, has a few built-in workbenches, but any tools are gone. There’s an a/c unit in it that maybe works. That building can be your *ounfò*; there’s room for about a hundred chairs. And it looks like we could park fifty or so cars there after the shed is gone.”

“It sounds like this would be a good place. When can I see it?”

“We’ll go Saturday. If we can get it with a low bid, we’ll have the money to fix it up, but I think we might get a mortgage anyway so we don’t use up our entire savings.”

When she saw the site, Nadine thought the place looked appalling, but Wilson assured her that most of what bothered her was cosmetic.

“In fact, since it looks so bad, maybe that will hold off any speculators,” he told her.

That is precisely what happened at the auction; Wilson’s bid was the only one. They now owned a home site. Through his fellow mechanics at his shop, Wilson found someone who could do the site cleanup and a handyman to do some repairs and remodeling in the double-wide, while Nadine found a housekeeping service for the heavy cleanup needed inside.

~~~~~

Tamara had continued with her home schooling while her physical therapy sessions continued. Now that they would have a permanent home, though, the family decided that they would check into schools for her. At eleven years old, she would normally be a sixth grader, but she was far more advanced than any sixth-grade child. They called the school district and found out that to register, the school would need a copy of Tamara’s home-school record and she would need to be tested. The school they chose was Thomas Mann Middle School; it was the

closest to their new home.

Sue volunteered to go with Tamara and Nadine to register at the school. When they got there, Tamara and Nadine were stunned to see a number of children at the school who were walking through the halls, totally naked.

Smiling at the look of shock on both of their faces, Sue told them, “Obviously you’re shocked at the nudity here. I’m guessing that this is the first time that you’ve actually noticed any naked kids since you moved to Miami, right?”

They both nodded but Nadine said, “A few times I thought I saw what looked like a naked kid a distance away but assumed it was a very brief bathing suit. But when we lived in southern Hendry County—it’s mostly agricultural—we never saw any naked kids there. What’s this weird thing all about, anyway?”

“Something that the state legislature came up with. In Florida for the past few years, parents can force their children to be naked all of the time.”

“Ahh, so *that’s* why there are signs at the VA hospital that say ‘Clothing Required at All Times.’ I wondered about that.”

“Right,” Sue said. “At the hospitals—the universities too, they require clothes. But I assumed you knew about that stupid idea to force kids to be naked; it’s called ‘Stripped in Florida.’ I’ll tell you more later, at home.”

“I’ve only been around the apartment and the medical school,” Tamara said. “There aren’t any kids around and I miss seeing kids my age.”

They went into the office and the secretary sent them on to the principal, who greeted them.

“Hello, I’m Grace Lombard, the principal here at Thomas Mann. Who do we have here?” she asked, looking at Tamara.

Nadine answered, “We’re the Alexandres. I’m Nadine and this is Tamara. And our friend here, Susan Gilson, has been Tamara’s home-school teacher since October, when we moved to Miami for her medical treatment.”

“Oh, goodness, Tamara, are you better now?” Lombard asked.

“Yes ma’am, I had a skull fracture. It made my left leg weak, so I was home schooled while I was healing and having therapy.”

“Well spoken, miss. So you are here to register at Thomas Mann?”

“That’s correct,” Nadine answered. “We’re moving to a home several blocks away, when the place is ready. Should be in a week or two.”

Lombard smiled at Tamara. “Do you have your prior school records, Tamara?”

“Yes, ma’am. Sue has them from before I came to Miami and she has a report of my progress when she was teaching me.”

Sue broke in. “I’m a retired teacher, certified in Florida. My license number is on the report.”

“Oh, good. Let me see...” she began reading the paperwork and then sat back.

“Unusual... no, this is unique. I’m not sure what to make of this. Mathematics, currently studying differential calculus. Science, in physics, postgraduate university; the other sciences, grade twelve, at least—perhaps college level. Language arts—that’s English grammar, reading and writing, spelling, comprehension, et cetera—that varies. Your reading and comprehension are grade 12 plus but the other English skills are closer to... um...



middle-school-age appropriate. Then I see more eighth-grade-appropriate achievements in literature, history, and civics. Tamara, I'm just guessing here... you like to read?"

Tamara and Nadine laughed. "Yes, Tamara is almost never seen without a book," Nadine chuckled. "Even when she just began schooling, she was always reading."

"And you like science, apparently."

"Yes, ma'am. Right now, I'm working on a redesign for parts of an MRI," she told Lombard.

At Lombard's puzzled look, Nadine chuckled again. "That's correct. It's a medical magnetic resonance imaging machine. Tamara's in a study at the U of Miami medical school that's using one and she has her own ideas for its improvement. They've already adopted one of her design changes."

"Huh. Seems fitting her in here will be a challenge, I can see. We'll need to do some testing, Tamara, to see what you need to learn at the middle school level." She flipped some papers. "This is a final exam from a high school physics class that you took and scored a perfect grade." Another flip. "Math, here's a high school senior final. 100%. Chemistry, high school junior, same. Same with biology. There's no point in testing you on science or math."

She looked up at Tamara. "Tamara, tell me what you think we should do here."

"Ma'am, I need to be with kids my age a little before going to high school. Can I just go to school here? I want to learn the social studies topics and get practice in writing too. And if the teachers allow it, I could help other kids learn if they have trouble in classes," Tamara said.

Lombard smiled. "Young lady, what mature and thoughtful suggestions those are. Are you sure you won't be bored if the class is working on something you've already studied?"

"No, ma'am, as long as I have a book with something new to work on."

They all laughed.

"Mrs Lombard, to change the subject, I need to ask if the naked kids here cause any particular difficulties in classrooms," Sue asked.

Lombard sighed. "They do, a fair amount. It's difficult since they are always a distraction, the teachers complain. I'm not in favor, but we have no choice though."

Sue nodded. "That's a major reason why I retired. When they started that nonsense in the Tampa Bay area, it was just a local novelty. Suddenly I had to teach with that major distraction added. Class control became really difficult in my high school classes. I had the opportunity to retire, so I did. But it's grown and become a state program now. I don't envy you."

"Thanks, I think. Well, Tamara, shall we schedule your placement exams? When can you come in to take them?"

~~~~~

After they left the school office, Nadine asked Sue, "So what's this nudity nonsense about?"

Sue shook her head ruefully. "I've got some errands to run now, so I have to leave you. Why don't you stop by my place at 3 o'clock and we'll talk then."

Later that day, all the Alexandres arrived at Sue's apartment and she invited them in.

"I actually assumed you knew about that nudity program in Florida; after all, you lived here while Tamara was

growing up,” she told them.

“Huh,” Wilson began, “I did hear about it...” Nadine nodded, “...but paid it no attention. I... I thought it was something that was happening up there around Pasco County,” he improvised, recalling what Nadine told him about Sue’s comment to Lombard about her teaching in Tampa. “We’ve been so tied up with personal things that Nadine and I haven’t been much for the news here.”

“Okay,” Sue said, “what’s going on here with it is that the state gave parents the authority to strip their kids; when they do that, the kids have to remain naked for their whole childhood.”

Tamara jerked. “Eeep! That’s weird! And stupid! Um, that explains...” She stopped. “Um, Mom, I just thought of something. I’ll tell you later.”

At the same time, Nadine was shaking her head, saying, “Unbelievable,” and Wilson was just shaking his head.

He asked, “Where did this idiocy start, anyway? Do you know?”

“Yeah, I do.” Sue told him. “It actually began in Orange County, but it all happened around the same time in Orange and Hillsborough counties, spreading into the Pasco County area. You know those big theme parks in Orlando?”

“Sure,” Wilson said while Nadine and Tamara looked on blankly.

“So someone in their PR, you know, public relations, or maybe marketing department, got the idea to boost sales by offering a big discount to families who brought their kids there and kept them naked. I heard that the original idea came from the reaction to a large nudist group that rented one of the parks after it closed—they do that to get more money out of the park. The park’s staff saw the naked kids having a fantastic time and thought it was cute. So the PR people thought that they’d try it with mainstream guests. It was a totally weird idea, but they got a bump in attendance, so next, they offered a larger discount if the families could show, with photos, that the kids were naked in public areas for at least three days before they visited their parks.

“I think that it was around the same time that the nudist resorts in Pasco and the surrounding areas got together and got the area counties to allow kids to be naked in public. You know, the Pasco area has the largest concentration of nudist resorts in the country.”

Wilson nodded and the others followed his lead.

“The nudist resorts began encouraging the parents of kids to keep them naked outside of the resorts; they got marketing studies which suggested that they could increase their traffic—get more resort customers—if they did that. In about a year, everyone’s revenues were up, mainly from visitors from out of state. Why this happened is a puzzle, but some newspaper columnists conjectured that it might have been a backlash to a backlash. In all the states north of Florida—that’s the whole rest of the country except Hawaii, there was a developing public backlash against the Naked in School program that’s been going on in a lot of states—oh, you haven’t heard of that either? I see blank looks.”

“I read something in the paper a few weeks ago that mentioned naked kids going to high schools,” Nadine said. “The article said it was a federal program and some schools were starting it. It sounded stupid so I stopped reading it. So that’s a real thing too?”

“Unfortunately it is but it’s not in Florida. So as I mentioned, in reaction to the parts of the Naked in School Program that require public nudity outside school, like requiring kids to go into public places while naked, conservative law-makers were making many public dress codes to become stricter. Then the more ‘liberal,’ I’d guess you’d say, parents who rebelled against those stricter dress codes wound up bringing their kids here where they could visit nudist resorts and have their kids ‘express their body freedom,’ as the promotions were saying.

So tourism in Florida got a big boost.”

“So obviously it didn’t stay just in that local three or four county area,” Nadine ventured.

“No. But as I mentioned in Lombard’s office, I retired because I couldn’t stand the classroom management problems that a bunch of naked kids in the classroom caused. You know, puberty, teens, nudity... take a guess.”

Just then, the door opened and Sue’s husband came in.

“Hi, Sue... ah, hi there too, Nadine, Wilson, Tamara. What’s up, guys?” John asked.

Sue answered, “Hi, dear. You’re home early.”

“Yup. It was light today and Justine said she’d cover.”

“The Alexandres only just found out about the Stripped in Florida—the SiF Act—today,” Sue told him. “I’m telling them some more about it.”

John sighed and dropped into a chair. “Idiots in the capitol. I’m surprised you didn’t know about it.”

Nadine briefly explained about their meeting with the school principal and the family’s past fabricated history.

“Lombard didn’t seem happy about it at her school either,” Nadine said. “Why do you think it spread from the Tampa Bay area?”

John chuckled. “Money, of course. Bad things always seem to happen when a shortage of money’s involved. Some state officials in Tallahassee, or ‘Tall Hassle,’ as some fantasy author from maybe forty years ago called it when writing about Xanth, which was a fictional metaphor for Florida, took notice of the increased tourist traffic, and the urban legend about it claims that they read some on-line fiction stories about a ‘Stripped in Florida’ program. Since the state is chronically short of money, they looked into using those stories as a template to put together a Florida program like that for real, here in Florida. The problem was that many of the features of the program—the things that made it work in those fiction stories—were total fantasy; the plots were pure fantasy fiction. Not even science because the science in them was impossible. The biggest problem the officials faced was how to monitor and enforce the mandatory nudity that the Florida law was based on.”

“Mandatory? But we saw only a few naked kids,” Nadine countered.

John sighed. “Let me go over the stuff as I understand what happened, beginning from when those dim bulbs in Tall Hassle got started down their rabbit hole. In the fiction stories, that program had two parts, one involving tourists and the other, state citizens. Tourists could have their kids stripped naked for a fee while they were here, just by buying a license to do it. When they purchased it, the kid would have to be naked while they were in the state. On the other hand, state citizens would pay for a license too, but the law mandated that their child had to remain totally naked till the child reached 21 years old.”

Nadine started to interrupt but John said, “Let me finish. You were going to ask how they could enforce that?” Nadine nodded. “That’s where moving the fictional story to reality breaks down. In the story, kids who were stripped had an electronic chip implanted behind an ear. Whenever a ‘chipped kid,’” he made finger quotes, “passed a sensor, it would read the chip, a camera would determine if the kid was naked, and if not, an alarm would sound and police would respond and enforce the law. Now tell me how this could work here in real life.”

“In Miami? Non-emergency? Maybe hours? Likely never?” laughed Wilson. “Like the cops have nothing to do other than chase after naked kids—um, should-be-naked kids, that is.”

John nodded. “So true. A second science-fiction-like part of the stories was the so-called nudity detector camera. There’s no technology which can reliably discriminate between a clothed and unclothed person, and

what if the chipped person is in a group? How can the camera tell who in the group has a chip, let alone if that person is clothed or not? Sure, you could have people watching screens. But according to those stories, cameras were at every public building, school, shop, and multiple ones were on every street. How many people would be needed to cover that many cameras? Even then, the detectors are omnidirectional, so picking one chipped kid out of a group is impossible.

“Then the stories had some stupid frills too, one where the kids—boys, that is—were given pills or injections of something like Viagra which made them have permanent erections. Now apparently the state did look into that too. Why, I can’t fathom. Whatever. But that can’t happen. There’s no drug that can cause a permanent erection—or even one that lasts for much longer than about an hour. Back in 1983, a urologist at a medical conference injected his penis with papaverine, a vasodilator, to demonstrate that a drug could cause an erection. It did, but it’s not all that effective. Then Viagra and similar drugs were developed about fifteen years later and they cause an erection but only if there’s active sexual stimulation and even then, their resulting erections last for maybe a half hour, not much more, ever. No drug will cause an involuntary erection, other than drugs like alprostadil, prostaglandin E-1, which has to be mixed from a powder and then immediately injected directly into the side of the penis. An erection produced by the recommended dose of alprostadil lasts up to about an hour, max.

“And no one will ever develop such a permanent-erection drug, either. Erections lasting longer than four hours are actually dangerous for the health of the penis and are considered to be a medical emergency, when they are caused by lack of blood flow. The medical condition’s called ‘ischemic priapism.’ With a forced erection—like too much drugs injected directly, or even when using a constricting penile ring, it produces a tourniquet-like effect on the penis. Blood can’t leave the organ—that’s what keeps it erect, but blood can’t enter either, and blood-starved tissues quickly become deprived of oxygen, so they begin dying after just a few hours. That’s the danger of a tourniquet—if no new blood gets to feed the tissues, gangrene may begin to occur in as little as four to six hours. If priapism isn’t treated quickly, the man will never be able to get an erection again, or even may lose the organ.”

Everyone had a look of horror at hearing that.

“So any story that talks about creating an hours-long erection is complete nonsense.” he finished.

Sue took over the discussion. “Another element of the stories was how long a chipped child was to be naked. In the stories, it was until they were 21 years old. Legal adulthood occurs at 18, after which a child may completely overrule a parent’s decision. That’s a federal standard and states can’t change it. And consider this: even if this is Florida, it still can get cold here. The stories allowed covering with a cape or poncho or something like that if the temps got below 65. First, if you’re not acclimatized to cooler temps, spending an hour naked at 65 degrees can be really uncomfortable, especially if you have a small body like a child. I’ve seen kids shivering at temps below 70 in school with the a/c on. And in Tampa, we had some winters where the temps got down to near freezing.”

“So how did the state change the fiction story—what do stripped kids here need to do now?” Nadine asked.

“Here’s a flyer; I picked it up in Mrs Lombard’s school office,” Sue said, pulling it from her handbag. “You can look it over, but to summarize, first, tourists can enroll their kids. It costs \$75 now; they recently increased the fee. There’s no enforcement done and the parents are responsible for the kid. After all, they paid, so why involve the authorities in keeping the kid naked? Florida got its cash. For state residents, it’s \$150 now. When I was teaching in Tampa, most of the parents who enrolled their kids did it because the kids were supposedly, I quote, ‘too modest,’ or did it as a punishment for something or other. As a teacher, I saw that a lot of kids were horrified when their parents enrolled them, but a much smaller number didn’t seem to mind—at least at first. Then the constant nudity began to get old and most kids wanted their clothes back, but they legally couldn’t get

dressed. In Florida now, it's actually illegal for a kid with a chip to be clothed in public, and it's also illegal for one without a chip one to be naked, but effective enforcement of either of those provisions is difficult, if not impossible. Hey, we all know that there are plenty of laws where their enforcement is impossible. But if a kid violates the law and gets caught, the parents get a hefty fine.

"To try to get the appearance of some semblance of enforcement, the state put up sensors; you can see them at all store entrances, in schools, and also in places where kids like to hang out. The sensors have rudimentary camera systems that can detect clothing but only when it's somewhat loose. If a camera detects a clothed chipped kid, an alarm is sounded. But as you pointed out, Wilson, the cops don't have time to chase chipped kids. John, explain about the chips."

John began speaking again. "So, the chips themselves are the third science-fictiony part of the SiF Act. Everything in the program depends on them. In the fiction stories, the chips were described as being very tiny and self-implanting once they contacted the skin. The chip was in a band-aid and once the band-aid was applied, the chip implanted itself under the skin within a few seconds. In the stories, the site on the body used to put the chip was behind an ear, and a parent could slap the thing onto the kid and bingo, they were 'Stripped' with a capital 's.' Well, that's impossible on two counts. First, there's no artificial solid material known which can burrow itself into the skin like that, let alone do it in a few seconds. Second, the readable range of a chip that tiny wouldn't make it detectible further than a few millimeters above the skin's surface. The laws of physics prevent that, despite the best intentions of Florida's own laws."

Sue broke in. "One of the biggest problems the state had with rolling out the program was, in fact, the chip itself. You know I was an electrical engineer before becoming a teacher. The company I worked for manufactures integrated circuits and I heard that they had gotten an RFP, a request for proposal, from the state—it's sort of a pre-bid process. Other companies got the RFP too. It asked them to propose an RFID tag that could be quickly and easily be implanted under the skin and have at least a 30-foot read range. I'm sure they weren't happy when they got nothing like they expected. No self-implanting chip, no 30-foot read range, and no easy implanting method. In fact, to implant a chip, it has to be done under medical supervision by a licensed practitioner. John can tell you about that."

He nodded. "What they got—what Florida uses now for the SiF program—is an RFID chip which is the size of a half-inch long wooden matchstick. The chip needs a special needle and injector to insert it under the skin, just like birth-control implants are inserted. And because they are inserted into the body, the chips were determined to be a medical device and the chip and its insertion device had to be approved by, and is regulated by, the FDA. The length of a birth-control implant is over an inch but the Florida chip can't be longer than a half inch because it's going into a child. It needs to go into a site with a reasonable skin thickness, so behind the ear is out. Birth-control implants go into the inside of the upper arm, so that's the site that was chosen.

"Finally, the insertion procedure isn't like body jewelry piercing or tattooing, so only licensed medical personnel can do it—and a lot refuse to do it. In my practice, I refused to do the implants, too. The chip has to go an exact depth under the skin so it can't get loose in the dermis and migrate deeper into the body. That's known to have happened with birth-control implants. Refusal to do an objectionable medical procedure is a federal right and the state can't overrule it. Docs at our company clinics—some docs, that is—do the procedure. I won't."

"So you're saying that no one can force us to make Tamara naked?" Wilson asked.

"According to Florida law, only the parents can choose," Sue replied.

"And you're not gonna make me?" Tamara asked.

Both parents said "No!" emphatically and she heaved a sigh of relief.

Nadine asked, “Can’t the parent just get the thing taken out if they change their mind?”

John shrugged. “Theoretically yes, but the state made doing that illegal and a doctor could lose their license if they did that procedure. That’s what I heard. I suppose if you went to another state, a doc there might do it but maybe they’d follow the Florida rules for Florida residents. So, yes, it can be removed if you can find someone to do it. It’s not trivial; it’s a minor surgical procedure. Actually, those chips really must be taken out eventually, once the kid ages out.”

“I was wondering about how radio waves work with those chips.” Tamara asked Sue. “They don’t have a power source?”

“Some RFID chips do. The bigger chips can have a battery. The SiF chips don’t; they’re powered by the radio waves that activate them.”

Tamara got a thoughtful look.

Wilson looked at Nadine and she nodded. “I think we’ll leave you two engineers to discuss some theory,” he chuckled. “I know to run when Tamara gets that look in her eyes.”

When they left, Sue asked, “Okay, how detailed should I be?”

Tamara shrugged. “You can leave out the calcs and stuff. When I know the correct terms, I can work out the number details.”

“Spoken like an engineer,” Sue laughed.

She began. “Let me explain a little about RFID tags. That’s the abbreviation for ‘radio frequency ID’ tags. They’re put on lots of consumer products for tracking and anti-theft devices and on credit cards, passports, key cards, and ID cards too. They’re manufactured by printing the circuit onto a substrate like plastic, kind of like integrated circuits are made, and the chip’s circuitry must have an antenna to work because it’s powered by radio waves...”

Tamara interrupted, “I’ve seen something like that in the MRI detector circuitry I’m studying. They use Schottky diodes to rectify the incoming RF signals and to regulate the transmitted signal.”

“Correct. Now passive tags, like the ones they use in the SiF program, don’t require their own power source to work. Their power comes from an RFID reader or interrogator which uses radio waves which activate the transponder, that’s the circuit in the RFID tag. If those radio waves are at the frequency that the RFID chip’s antenna is tuned to, an electrical current is created in the chip’s circuitry, powering the chip. When the chip is powered, its circuitry sends a signal back through its antenna to the interrogator where it’s translated into the data contained in the RFID chip.

“Now here’s where the problem enters. The range in which an RFID can be read is based, in large part, on its antenna size. Other factors are its operating frequency, activating power, antenna orientation, and interference in the surrounding area or from other nearby RFID tags. The most efficient RFID for best range versus cost is a UHF chip; the SiF chips are UHF and operate around 928 megahertz. You saw in the SiF flyer from the school that those chips are about the length of a short matchstick but a little flatter around. Because of their small size, their antennas can’t be very big; also the antenna needs to be wrapped around inside the chip several times. Now, for the frequency that the SiF chip uses, the ideal antenna length would be about six-and-a-half inches long to obtain its theoretical full range—and that range is about 115 feet under ideal conditions. Ideal conditions would require that the antenna be exposed on a flat surface with the surface fully facing the power source. Now, for the most efficient antenna design, the so-called ‘tip-loaded’ configuration, where the antenna length is folded back and forth on the surface, the SiF chip would need to be printed on a flat surface, about one inch long and a

half-inch wide, and placed on the skin's surface. Instead, the chip's half as long; its half-inch width is rolled into a 3/32-inch diameter cylinder; and it's buried under the skin where the arm and body effectively shields much of any RF wave transmission. That reduces the theoretical range immensely.

"To give you an idea of the resulting range limitation, a one inch by one-quarter inch UHF tag, like they use for anti-theft devices, is activated by an antenna about 2 feet by 4 feet in size and the receiver only needs to see a reflected signal—no data need be sent. Those work ten, maybe fifteen feet away. But the actual range of a matchstick-sized RFID implanted in an upper arm activated by a 24-inch antenna would be only about six inches or so.

"But enter superconducting circuits. Used in the SiF chip, the new technology has greatly improved its RFID range, out to about three feet, but superconductivity hasn't abolished the laws of physics—like the inverse-square law. I'm sure you know that law."

"Yeah, and its application to propagation of radio signals. The power received at a given distance from a source is inversely proportional to the square of the distance between source and receiver. The Friis transmission formula is used to calculate the effective power received," Tamara said. "But an inch-long RFID antenna isn't a point source, which means that the inverse-square law is only a best-case situation. It's more like an inverse-cube law, isn't it?"

Sue went on. "That's exactly right. Also, making the circuit out of superconducting components greatly increases the chip's efficiency in how it *uses* the power it receives, but physics laws can't be violated, so the inverse-square or inverse-cube law still applies. Another efficiency decrease occurs since the antenna's not flat. Rolling the antenna up the way it needs to be done to fit in a chip, reduces its power efficiency by 60 percent for each 90-degree turn. And you can't overcome this range limitation by simply increasing the power of the interrogator unit either. In the U.S., by federal regulation, the transmitted power allowance for UHF devices is four watts. So the SiF chip can be read from perhaps four feet away, max, under totally ideal conditions."

"Okay, then, I guess enforcing it is kinda hit-or-miss," Tamara concluded.

"Correct."

~~~~~

Later, Tamara spoke to Nadine about the thought she had had when they were talking to Sue.

"Momma, when we were in the school and saw the naked kids, it was so weird..."

"I know, sweetie, I thought so too."

"No, that's not what I meant. The tastes I felt and colors I heard and... um, I'll use the 'aura' word but you know I'm not 'seeing' this stuff, right?"

"Sure. I'll know what you mean."

"Okay. Now it was hard 'cause there were so many kids and difficult to tell whose auras I was getting, but there was lots of fear and anger in the kids there. Also lots of ... dread? Maybe. Anyway, that school wasn't a very happy place. If the stripped kids have to stay that way for a bunch of years and the others are scared that'll happen to them too, I can see why everyone was so down at the school."

Nadine nodded. "That makes sense. But I'm sure the other schools are that way too. Do you want to change your mind and stay with Sue—if she'll keep teaching you, that is."

"No, Momma, it's what I said in the school. I need to be with other kids. I want to have friends and be normal, even though I know stuff."

Nadine smiled sadly. “So true; you do know ‘stuff.’ I think that you’re right and I agree. Well, let’s see how this school works for you.”

***Little Haiti, Miami, Florida: Two weeks later***

Two weeks later, the Alexandres moved into their new home. It needed a few more minor fixes but it was the largest space that the family had ever lived in, and Nadine was both thrilled with the space but dismayed by the extra work that all that extra space required to keep clean. The site itself still needed work; the wood shed site and its surrounding area had been covered by asphalt paving and Wilson had laid out parking stripes on it to allow just over fifty parking spaces. The unpaved areas could hold a few more cars if needed, but they were full of ruts and had bare or weedy sections. That fix-up job would need to wait. The pole barn had been touched up, painted, and new lighting fixtures had been installed. They hunted through the local papers and web sites for sales of inexpensive institutional seating and tables.

Tamara was now attending the local school and had been put into social studies classes in the seventh and eighth grade; the seventh grade for basic European-world history and the eighth, U.S. history. Her testing showed she had little background in those areas. She was in an eighth grade English class and was in a combined music and art class. A physical education class rounded out the formal classes in her day. She loved the physical activity of dodge-ball and volleyball, but still was favoring that leg. She decided to do running too; that would help her build the muscle, her therapist had told her. She had some open time and spent that time in the school’s resource room, the modern term for “library,” since it also contained computer stations and audio-visual materials too. During her open time, Tamara hoped that the teachers would send kids to her for coaching.

She couldn’t get used to the kids’ nudity, however. About a tenth of the kids in the school were naked. The ones in her classes didn’t want to talk to her in the classroom; they were uncomfortable with her as a newcomer, and furthermore, she looked so much younger than them. At lunch, at the end of her first week in the school, she waited to go through the serving line until she could see where some of the naked kids sat. Then she got her lunch and went to the one table that she had seen where a few naked kids had sat. They were seventh graders, only a year older than her.

“Um, hi, I’m Tamara. I just started here. Can I sit with you guys?”

Two girls shifted over to make room. Then the six at the table, all girls, introduced themselves. Three were naked.

“I was home schooled till my family moved to Miami,” Tamara began. “I was in an accident and hurt my head so I was in the hospital and had a tutor until last week.”

They asked her about the accident and Tamara told them the family’s prepared history.

“I was really shocked when I heard about this nudity thing,” she went on. “And now I see it. You guys don’t look very happy.”

The three naked girls all shook their heads. “We don’t like to talk about it,” one girl, Sylvia, said. “I hate my stepmother. She did this to me.”

Tamara continued talking with them for a while, gradually learning that most of the parents who had stripped their kids did it out of anger at them or on a whim, thinking that seeing their child naked would be somehow “cute” but eventually came to regret their decision, especially after seeing how depressed or withdrawn their child had become. After all, for a twelve-year-old, that decision would affect the child for another six years at least, the not-clothed-until-age-21 rule being a non-starter.

“So if you could wear clothes again, you would?” Tamara asked.



“In a heartbeat,” Julie, another of the girls, answered and the others echoed her.

“What about your folks?” Tamara continued.

Sylvia said, “My stepmom wouldn’t give a shit, but my dad would allow it. But that law has awful fines if they find a chipped kid wearing clothes and he won’t risk it.”

And that was the key, Tamara learned; the parents were afraid of the penalties they would suffer if they let their children wear clothes again.

Tamara vowed to do something to help them to be able to wear clothes again.

## Chapter 11 - Unstripped in Florida

The following week, Tamara was at the medical school following school, and after her MRI study session, she went to see Tim Saunders, the medical center's engineer. Tim maintained the center's electronic diagnostic equipment.

"Hi, Tim," she called as she went into his shop.

"Hi, short stuff," he answered. "Got a new mod for the MRI today?"

"Ha. You wish. If I invent something, I won't let you touch it. You make circuits that do weird things."

Tim had shown her a little box he had made which had nine LEDs on it that blinked in a random pattern. He insisted the blinking had a pattern but only the most intelligent people could see the pattern. So when he wasn't looking, Tamara popped the box open—it just snapped together—and peeked. It was a simple hack; inside was a tiny counter/display-driver integrated circuit, a timer IC, a couple of resistors, a capacitor, and a 9-volt battery. And the LEDs.

"Still raggin' me about my toy? Tough. I get more positive comments about that thing than anything else I do around here. So how may I help you today?"

"I wanted to see if you had a fourteen-inch length of superconducting #16 or #18 gage wire you don't need. You had some from the MRI coils."

"Sure. What's this for?"

"Tell you in a bit."

She took the wire and took a little cardboard tube about one-and-a-half inch in diameter out of her backpack. She wound the wire carefully around the tube, leaving about two inches free on each end, and taped it to hold its shape. When that was complete, a second trip into Tamara's backpack yielded a cheap disposable film camera with a built-in electronic flash, but Tim could see that the flash lamp itself had been removed. Tamara popped off the camera's back and a little circuit board was exposed.

"This one actually has a decent power IC. I need your soldering iron; I got a larger cap to install."

Tim watched as she replaced the capacitor on the board, then changed the camera's battery holder from a dual AA to nine-volt. Next, she got an envelope from her backpack and dumped a number of components—several diodes, resistors, and transistors, and a few miniature switches—onto the bench.

"I changed the battery but the power IC still needs three volts so I have to add a little circuit for that. The nine-volt battery is better than the double-As for low current and high voltage for this use," Tamara remarked.

She clipped a few components on the camera's power board and soldered several components from her envelope into the existing circuits, then carefully taped them so nothing would make a short-circuit.

"Can you grab me that digital voltmeter?"

Tim brought it to her and she attached the meter's leads to wires on the board and switched on the little camera circuit; Tim could hear the whine as the oscillator began charging the flash's capacitor.

"Now this should charge the main cap to over 400 volts instead of 320 volts, and the fly-back transformer should produce 4000 to 6000 volts when fired."

"What are you doing? A high voltage discharge circuit and superconducting wire coil ... oh shit! You're not building an EMF pulse generator. Please tell me you're not. Girl, that can cause some serious havoc, you know."

“He he. It’s in a good cause. You have a nail or big screw you don’t need and a little flat piece of copper?”

He dug into a box of parts and produced the items.

She clipped one test lead to the nail and the other to the piece of copper, laying it on the workbench. Next, she took the other ends of the leads and clipped them onto the terminals where the xenon flash tube used to be connected, and then used a jumper to bypass the camera’s shutter switch.

She turned to Tim. “I need an insulated needle-nose pliers.” He handed one to her. She looked around the bench. “Oh, good. I’ll use those insulated gloves too. And you might want to turn off any nearby electronics.”

Tim groaned. “Sure. Nothing is on right now—oh, the ‘scope. Okay, it’s off.”

“You sure?” she asked and Tim nodded. “Phone too?”

“Oops,” Tim said and pulled his out to turn off.

“Okay. Here goes.”

Holding the nail with the pliers, she touched it to the copper strip. There was a loud *crack* and a bright flash of light and some smoke as the nail fused itself to the strip.

Tamara gave a little whoop. “That’s perfect. Now to add the coil.”

Before she touched the circuit board, she took a screwdriver and used it to short out the capacitor pins on the board, just as Tim was about to tell her that the capacitor might still have a remaining charge. Sure enough, there was a little *snap* and a spark could be seen. She did it again with no result and she nodded.

Tamara disconnected the test leads and soldered the ends of the coil she had made to the flash lamp connector pins. Then she cut the circuit board’s lead to one end of the coil end and wired it to the camera’s shutter button and the other shutter button lead to one side of the fly-back transformer’s primary.

She told Tim, “The original circuit could have the flash lamp in parallel across the output because it wouldn’t fire until the xenon gas was ionized. I had to bypass that. Gotta put a switch in the charging circuit too.”

She did that.

“Now the test. First, though, some cosmetics,” Tamara said as she took a piece of heavy-duty aluminum foil from her backpack, folded it into four thicknesses, and cut a circle in the center of the foil. She pressed that opening over where the camera lens projected out on the camera’s front. Then she folded the wire coil so it looped around the lens, lying over the foil.

“Electrical tape, please. Oh, it’s right there.”

She covered the foil and wire loop with the black tape.

“Four thicknesses of aluminum should protect the LT3420 power IC. Tim, you have some of those RFID inventory tags? I know you keep a batch here.”

“Is that what you built? A RFID killer? Damnation. Okay, let me get a tag. Hey, do you also have a reader in your magic backpack?”

“No, just a phone app,” she grinned. “It works okay too.”

She turned her phone on and opened the app. She had to put the phone right next to the tag before the app responded.

“Works,” she said, displaying the number stored in the tag. “The phone emits only a tiny amount of RF power

so you have to get it real close to read the chip.

“Now the test. Let me turn off my phone first. I calculated what the range of this setup should be and it’s a max of five meters—little less than 20 feet.”

She turned on the charging switch and the faint whine could be heard; then the ready indicator lit up.

“Here goes nothing,” Tamara said and put the RFID label next to the camera.

Using an insulated screwdriver... “Take no chances” ... she grinned at Tim ... she pressed the shutter button. There was a little *pop*.

“Oooo. No smoke or flame. Good sign,” Tamara said with a smile. “Now to see...”

She turned her phone on and opened the app. When she passed the tag over the phone, there was no response and she smiled triumphantly, “Sweet!”

She tried it on the front and back of the phone and there was no change on the screen.

“Do you have another one? Sitting in your metal cabinet file over there, they’re both shielded and too far away to be affected by this EMF.”

Tim brought one over and she tested it; its number popped right up.

“Tim, can we sacrifice this one? I want to be sure nothing burnt out in the camera itself.”

“Oh, sure; why the hell not?”

Tamara repeated the test and was overjoyed when she saw that the device still worked and that the new tag was dead now.

“Tamara, you aren’t gonna do anything...” Tim began.

“I didn’t make this to do anything evil,” Tamara told him. “I’m not using it to get into trouble.”

He slowly nodded.

Tamara thought, *After all, helping kids feel better isn’t evil, is it? And I certainly intend **not** to get into trouble.*

“Okay, last test. Your RF field detector, you have it down here now—not up in the MRI room?” she asked him and he nodded. “I want to measure the power flux density this thing puts out at five meters, two, and one. Set it to the RF spectrum power analyzer function, please. That’s about five meters where you are right there, good. Ready? Here goes.”

She fired the device and then tried it at the closer distances.

“Wow. Good results. At five meters, only 12.5 watts per square centimeter; two meters, about 63 peak; at a meter, about 250. The pulse length is five milliseconds. So cell phones nearby should be okay and most other electronics too. I wonder how this would affect a RFID reader unit if it’s reading when I pop my device?”

She checked the time. “Oh look, we’ve been having way too much fun here and I have to get home soon now.”

They said their goodbyes and Tamara left the shop.

*Now I’ll need to see how they work on a Florida chip, she mused. But how can I get one? Maybe Beauford... Oh! What a great idea! I wonder if Dr John can get any of the chips from his clinic or if he knows of how to get any—rejects, maybe?*

~~~~~

At school the following day, she saw her new friends at lunch.

“Hey, if somehow your chips stopped working and your parents knew they didn’t work anymore...” Tamara started.

“... then we could wear clothes?” Sylvia finished. “*You bet!* But how can that happen?”

Tamara leaned in close to them. “This is a huge secret, but I think I’m onto something. You can’t tell anyone, right? Until I make arrangements.”

They agreed to keep the secret.

When she was leaving the lab for home the next time that she was there, she recalled that Dr John should be at his apartment now too, and his apartment was close by.

When Dr John came to the door, she asked him, “Is there any way I can get one of those Florida RFID chips, like if you needed to take one out or something?”

John grinned at her. “Sue told me that you’re really against the SiF program. Are you going to try to use them in an anti-stripping campaign?” She shrugged noncommittally. “Well, be careful. Messing with them when they’re implanted is illegal, you know. Just don’t get caught. I’m sure you have a plan. Okay, the chips? We’ve gotten some that couldn’t be used because their packaging was damaged and they weren’t sterile anymore. If we still have them, I’ll bring them home tomorrow.”

Tamara was very happy about that. “I’d think that the state would want to keep track of them?”

“Well, what I heard is that the nurse tells the county office that issues the tags that if their sterility is compromised, they’re destroyed to prevent accidental use. Oh yes. We might have others too. Parents buy them and have to take them to a doc. Then they may get buyer’s remorse before the procedure. Or the kid convinces them not to do it.”

The following day, Dr John brought home three chips; he called her and she went to get them.

~~~~~

The next time Tamara was in the hospital on her way to the MRI lab, she passed a nurse wheeling a medication cart. On the top of the cart, she saw several small metal vials with a screw cap, about two inches long and three-quarters inch in diameter. She stopped and asked the nurse about them.

“We have them in the gift shop. They have a screw cap and are waterproof and can hold pills. Most people who need nitroglycerine caps for angina keep a few in these. They go on pendants or key chains.”

Tamara stopped in the gift shop and saw they came in a pack of two for only \$5, so she bought a pack.

*There goes the rest of my allowance for the week, she thought. But it’s worth it.*

Now that she had the actual chip to test, when she got home, she tried the RFID reader app on her phone. When she brought the chip next to the phone, a string of digits and letters appeared.

*Hmm, just an alphanumeric sequence. They must link it to a central database, she thought. At least they don’t store personal info on the chip.*

Then she put a chip in one of the pill tubes she bought. Her phone app couldn’t read it.

*I don’t want to sacrifice one of my chips to try to zap it. I have a better use, she reflected. I have an idea for Saturday.*

The following day at school, Tamara began her plan. At lunch, she spoke to her friends.

“Hey, can you get maybe six more kids to go to the mall with you? Then we’ll have six in clothing, me, and you three. Being in a large group should shield you from being singled out if the SiF alarm sounds while your chip is still working. Then we’ll see about how to kill the stripping program for you. But secrecy still, okay? Are you gonna go through with it?”

They agreed. Tamara showed them the app on her phone. She held the phone up to Sylvia’s arm and showed her the code that displayed; she repeated that for the other girls.

“So you see how the officials can detect that you’re stripped—they can see the code, using the readers they have.”

The girls looked at her with wide eyes, amazed.

~~~~~

On Saturday, Tamara met her friends and the others as they walked over to the local shopping area. Tamara was carrying her backpack. It wasn’t a true modern mall shopping oasis; it was a block filled with many shops and was roofed over and had several entry doors at each end. It was a favorite spot for the local teens to hang out. All of the shop and main entrance doors had the “Stripped in Florida” scanners and cameras. Giggling to herself, Tamara slipped one of the three chips she had out of its little metal tube as the group passed by the scanner. The alarm went off and there was a frenzy around the door since many people were passing through that area.

Tamara slipped the chip back into its tube and about a minute later, some security guards ran up, one waving a portable scanner. He started pointing it at all the clothed people, not realizing that the scanner wasn’t a truly directional device. After several minutes they gave up. Tamara repeated her stunt at several other scanning stations around the mall and that’s when her three friends began to realize that something was up. The last time the guards came running, Tamara, being careful to be a distance from her naked friends, triggered her “camera” just as the guard pointed it at one clothed girl.

“Damn,” the guard exclaimed as he looked at the device’s display. “The dumb thing quit.”

The other guard came over and they both tried to get it working with no success.

*Good! Tamara celebrated. It knocks out the portable readers. Let me try the ones at the shop entrances.*

She exposed her chip and walked past a shop sensor; the alarm went off as Tamara quickly covered the chip and fired the camera. The alarm stopped in mid squawk.

*Time for phase two, she decided, after zapping about a dozen similar door sensors.*

Sylvia and Julie were still with her, Sondra had to return home, and the other clothed kids had wandered off to somewhere else.

“You guys feel brave now and want to try getting dressed? There will be no consequences at all,” Tamara assured them.

“What do we do?” Julie asked, a little fearfully.

“I have clothing for you to wear. A top and shorts, in my pack. Let’s hit the ladies’ room.”

The restroom doorway was equipped with a sensor too. It made Tamara wonder just how much money had been spent on “Stripped in Florida” infrastructure—it would probably take fifty years or more of registration fees before the infrastructure costs were recovered, she guessed. So much for making money for the state.

Inside the room, the three slipped into the handicapper stall.

“You ready to go through with this?” she asked. “Your chip will stop working soon, so when you leave here, you’ll have to be dressed,” Tamara said as she took two pairs of clothes out of her backpack.

“You really can do that?” Sylvia asked.

Tamara nodded.

“I’m in,” Julie said, and then Sylvia nodded.

“Sit down,” Tamara instructed them and pointed to a bench in there. “Remember when I tested your chips?”

They nodded.

She took her phone out and showed them that the chips were still working. Then she put the phone back into a pocket in her backpack—one lined with some metal foil she had obtained from Tim—as she surreptitiously triggered the camera.

“All done,” she announced as she stood up.

“What? ... “How?”

Tamara took out her phone and waved it over both girls’ arms. Nothing appeared in the display.

“You didn’t feel anything in your arms? No tingle or warmth?”

They both said “No.” Then Julie: “What did you do?”

“Just something I figured out that cell phones can do,” she dissembled as a subterfuge in case officialdom traced her campaign back to her. “But you can’t tell anyone I know how to do it. Did you find out if any kids in the school actually *want* to continue being naked?”

The two girls looked at each other. Sylvia said, “We didn’t actually speak to *everybody*, but enough of us stripped kids know a little something about each other.”

“Yeah, even the kids who liked being naked at first are gettin’ real tired of it,” Julie commented.

“So if on Monday it turns out that everyone’s chip gets zapped, no one would be brokenhearted?”

The two girls looked at each other and both shook their heads.

“Okay, here’s the test now. Put on these clothes and we’ll go out. The alarm won’t go off. If it does or if you’re afraid it might, then just duck right back in here and you can strip again. But you won’t have to.”

They left the restroom and the alarm at the door remained silent. The three girls high-fived one another. Then Julie looked at Sylvia; they grabbed each other’s hands and shouted at each other, “Shopping!” Then they squealed, “*CLOTHES!*”

The girls grabbed Tamara and hugged her. “You’re a lifesaver, girlfriend!” Sylvia gushed

Julie began crying. “I never realized how much my clothing meant to me. It was... was... was how I felt to me... I mean, how I expressed myself. With no clothes, I lost that. It made me feel empty inside. Tamara, thank you for giving me back to myself again!”

Tamara could only nod back happily. She felt a glow of joy.

They went shopping. Tamara had just enough money from her Friday allowance to splurge on a cute top that she fell in love with.

~~~~~

On Monday, Tamara, Julie, Sylvia, and Sondra stood, dressed in their uniforms, at the main school door as the kids filed in. Tamara had zapped Sondra's chip the day before, after swearing her to secrecy.

Whenever a naked kid came by, Tamara fired her zapper. She managed to "convert" almost all of the kids that day. With about 520 students, there were only 47 in the SiF program. She missed just six.

Of course, there was a clamor about Julie, Sylvia, and Sondra being clothed. If they were wearing clothes, the door sensors should have sounded an alert. The sensors at the school door were checked; they were still working. The three girls were paraded through the main doors again and the alarm didn't sound. They tried another door with the same result. Police were called and their portable scanner did not indicate the presence of a chip in the girls. Without knowing the implanted chip code, there was no way to field-identify a stripped child by name. The responsible county official, she was the "Stripped in Florida" supervisor for the county, was contacted. She came to the school and asked that the girls' parents be called.

Tamara found out later what happened. The facts as known were presented by the county supervisor. The girls' parents had signed a permission form which allowed their child to have an identifying chip implanted into her body for the purpose of becoming a "Stripped in Florida" participant and that the form also stated that the parents would be responsible for ensuring that their child would follow the SiF rules. Therefore the non-functioning chip had to be replaced.

Apparently Principal Lombard was not a fan at all. She had disagreed with the supervisor. She pointed out that the agreement gave permission to have *AN* identifying chip implanted and that had been performed. The law did not require that a second chip be implanted if the first one failed. Florida law was clear that only the child's parents could give permission for having a program chip implanted; this had been done and the parents' responsibilities had been fulfilled since their children had had their chips implanted. Despite the fact that the chips were no longer working, the parents could not be forced to subject their children to having a medical procedure performed—having another chip implanted. Federal regulations gave parents the right, in most cases, to refuse medical procedures to be performed on their children.

And while that argument was going on in the principal's office, the word began circulating in the school's classrooms and hallways that the chips of virtually every naked kid no longer worked, and chaos ensued. Word quickly got back to principal's office and the situation of the three girls had to be shelved for the time being; the principal was needed to help control the resulting disorder.

By the following day, the state office which ran the SiF program, alarmed by this situation, arranged to send technicians to the school building to check it for electronic interference issues because obviously there must be some kind of electronic problem in the building which was damaging the chips. And Tamara was happy to hear from her three friends that their parents weren't angry with their newly clothed daughters after they learned that their daughters' chips no longer worked. As Tamara had figured, any novelty for them had run its course.

After school that afternoon, Tamara visited as many places as she could get to on foot, zapping sensors and, whenever she could get close to them, zapping naked kids' chips too. And during the next several weeks, she circulated widely, zapping sensors and kids in random areas, while walking, riding a city bus, and going shop to shop. As the zapped chip bearers began to discover their new status, word spread widely about how it was now possible to get out of the program, but only if you happened to be somewhere in Miami at the proper time. The police had totally given up the job of checking for clothed kids who should be naked, so even those kids whose chips were still active took the risk of dressing, realizing that the police wouldn't bother them.

Outside Miami, it was different. But Tamara had done further testing on her three loose chips. She found that a 1-½ inch-wide band of four layers of aluminum foil wrapped around the arm where the chip was implanted



would block a reader, even if the RFID reader was as close as nine inches. So she prepared a little text document which showed how to easily modify an elastic upper arm band to incorporate the foil layer, and for short-sleeve wearers, the bands were available in flesh colors, and she gave the instructions for how to get the chip-reading app for smart phones to test your own chip. She sent the document by anonymous emails to newspapers in various high schools and to many college newspapers. The instructions were widely copied and re-posted all over the web. Florida officials couldn't do anything about those postings. Free speech is a federal right.

As a result of Tamara's campaign, new sign-ups for the program slowed greatly and even tourist participation dropped. Police departments in most jurisdictions, their officials not happy about the added duty of chasing after clothed children who should be naked, relegated this task to the lowest possible priority.

Tamara was happy. She felt that she had righted a significant wrong.

### ***Little Haiti, Miami, Florida: mid-February***

Tamara had recently turned 12 and was looking forward to the end of middle school. She'd be starting high school in the fall and her friends in grade 8 at Thomas Mann were looking forward with anticipation and a little anxiety too, at starting in a new school. One major cause of anxiety was that the Miami-Dade School Board was still deciding whether and how it would begin the Naked in School Program in the county's high schools.

The school board didn't want to start it in all high schools at once and didn't want to run it in schools which had less than a 95 percent graduation rate; the board members felt that adding a mandatory nudity program on top of the Stripped in Florida program would cause too many issues. They were still trying to deal with the nudity in the schools which had uniforms—all of the K-8 schools in Miami did, and dealing with uniformed kids and naked kids going to school together was an administrative and class control nightmare. Also, adding required children's nudity as part of the state's social culture had actually defeated the prime purpose of requiring uniforms in the schools, which was to minimize any social distinctions caused by the quality and even the manufacturer of the children's clothing.

~~~~~

One day at the end of February, Tamara was summoned to the school office. When she went into the little conference room adjoining the office, she was surprised to see several people there but not Mrs Lombard.

"Please sit," a woman told her. "I'm Mrs Gebbers and I'm an attorney for the school district. This is," she pointed, "Detective Jessert, Miami Police; Mrs Bennett, the county 'Stripped in Florida' supervisor; and Mr Monters, from the SiF program's state office."

Still standing, Tamara asked, "Where's Mrs Lombard? Shouldn't she be here?"

"Principal Lombard isn't in the school today, but she isn't involved with this matter," Gebbers said.

"It's her school and I'm a student here. She should be here. And if a police person's here, I want my parents here, too," Tamara stated.

"I can protect your rights, miss, since I'm an attorney," Gebbers claimed.

Still standing, Tamara shook her head. "Not if you work for the school, you can't. You can't also represent me. That's a conflict of interest and you should know that," she insisted.

"Oohh," Jessert exclaimed. "Watch yourself with her, Claudia," she said to the lawyer.

"Anyway," Tamara told them, "I'll be standing right here until you call my parents. Then I'll speak to you when they come."

Gebbers whispered in Bennett's ear, who nodded and left the room.

"Mrs Bennett's calling your parents now. Please sit down and we'll talk."

After a minute, Bennett came back in and nodded to Gebbers.

"Your parents are on the way," Gebbers said. "And Detective Jessert wants to say something first."

Jessert began, "I'm here about a complaint from the Stripped in Florida administration. There was a problem in this school a few months ago involving a large number of children's RFID tags failing. State law makes it a felony to tamper with them, and SiF officials told my office in the Miami Police Department that you somehow were involved. Also, we were given information that you found a phone app that destroys the tags and I want you to hand your phone to..."

"Wait," Tamara said. "Before you continue, my parents have to be here. Mrs Bennett," she looked at Bennett, then stared into her eyes; Bennett looked away. "Oh, so you never did call them. That was a sham," Tamara accused them.

"Why do you say that?" Gebbers asked her. "She *said* she called."

"First," Tamara enumerated, "she wasn't gone long enough. My mom is working right now and she keeps her cell off. And calling the hospital directly, it takes a few minutes to get through the voice menus just to get to her department. Second, Dad always has his phone on 'Do Not Disturb' at work. The only calls that go through are mine and Mom's. Third, when I looked at that woman, she wouldn't meet my eyes. I know when I see someone trying to lie."

Monsters stood up. "Whatever, we want you to tell us what you know. One of your friends was heard to mention that she knew someone who could turn chips off and thought she used her cell to do it."

Tamara thought for a second. *Must have been Sondra; she moved away after Thanksgiving and was always a bit of a gossip.*

Monsters was continuing. "When we questioned that girl, she said that you were with her and two other stripped kids at your school when all those chips became inactive. And during the previous week, there was a strange incident at that little street mall near here involving a lot of scanners which stopped operating. When we reviewed the mall's security tapes, we saw that you were in the mall at that time."

Jessert broke in. "I insist that you hand over your cell phone."

Tamara shook her head. "I don't have it with me. They're not allowed in school and you'd need a search warrant anyway. None of what you said matters. I'm at that mall lots, and the girls are my friends, so we were always together. You're just trying to cover for... um... a lot of shoddy R-feed things or whatever you called them going bad."

"Mr Monsters and I want to take you with us to our office so we can question you more fully," Bennett told her.

Tamara thought quickly. *Can I 'push' four people at once? Maybe if I can get them confused first.*

First, she "pushed" Bennett, gathering some ochre taste and sending it at her. She whispered to her, "You need to take Detective Jessert to your office, not the girl." Then she said aloud, "I don't care if you want to take Detective Jessert away..." and while Bennett was trying to clear her mind from the mental jumble that Tamara had caused, Tamara turned her attention to Jessert.

*Oooh, ochre taste is just right,* she thought.

She "pushed," using ochre again, saying very quietly. "You're aware of a great danger in the school. Kids are

gonna die,” then aloud, “You need to find the guy with the ray-gun, not me. He’s just outside. He’s who you want.”

Jessert blinked at her, started to say something, but then turned and ran out the door.

Now with Bennett being confused, there were just two remaining people in the room to go and both were looking slightly bemused at the other twos’ behavior. Tamara realized that she needed to work quickly, so she directed her gaze at Monters and spoke his name; he looked into her eyes and shuddered.

She whispered to him urgently, “You hate spiders. Look, they’re crawling all over you, going up your legs and I see some in your hair. They’ll bite you—get them off.” She projected the tastes of fear, dread, and confusion at him.

He began twisting around, slapping at himself, and shouting, “Get them off me! They’re in my clothes! Gotta get somewhere—gotta get them off...” as he ran out.

Tamara turned to Gebbers, who was watching in shock as the people around her were behaving like they had gone crazy. She locked eyes with Gebbers.

And “pushed,” saying commandingly, “You’re an evil, lying, and deceiving person. It’s said that lying and deceitful people should burn, and that’s what’s happening to you. You have the worst sunburn you ever felt and it’s like your skin is blistering. You need to get it treated before your skin falls off. And the next time you lie, it’ll happen again!”

She “pushed” all the tastes, the dark gray of doubt, the bright red of pain, the pale yellow of fright, at the woman, who shrieked and ran out of the room.

Bennett looked into Tamara’s eyes. “What’s happening here? I’m so confused...”

*Hmmm, ochre worked, but there’s something better.* Tamara thought and then “pushed” a greenish-brown taste at her.

“You’re confused because you have no idea why you’re here. You can’t remember anything about chips that don’t work. Anytime you try to think about them, the confusion will return. In fact, any thoughts of RFID chips will make you confused. You should be in your office, right?”

Bennett’s eyes widened. “Oh! I’m late! I’ll miss my appointment!” and she rushed out.

Tamara giggled to herself. *Oooo. I like that greenish-brown one. Yeah. Use it on Monters ‘cause he’ll come back—his briefcase is still here.*

Jessert came back into the room, panting.

Tamara innocently asked her, “Did you catch him?”

“What the fuck’s going on... where’s everyone?” Jessert panted. “What the hell happened here, anyway?”

Tamara fixed Jessert with a stare and let an aura of greenish-brown taste flow out toward her.

“You really hate jobs that involve trying to chase after naked kids. Just the thought of working on those cases makes your skin crawl, doesn’t it? Especially this case, so you will try to never think about it again.”

*Another one down,* Tamara rejoiced as Jessert fled. *Shit, my head feels like it’s gonna explode.*

She sat down and laid her head on the table for a few minutes to try to still the pounding. After five minutes, Monters came back in; his clothes were all rumpled and disheveled. Tamara was nowhere ready, but she forced herself and stared at Monters and marshaled her greenish-brown taste, but it had more of a yellowish taste now.

“You’ll never get rid of the spiders as long as you stay in your job. Every time you want to think of a stripped kid, the spiders will return. In fact, the further away from Florida you go, the further you’ll be from those nasty spiders. And the sooner the better,” she “pushed” before getting to her feet and staggering to the door.

*I need to get to the nurse before I faint, she thought. And I know that yellow-tinted taste I “pushed” just then—it’s fear along with ... not memory loss, but with memory association... But... Whatever... Works.*

That evening she told her parents what had happened.

“And the nurse gave me a couple Tylenol and let me nap for an hour. I told her not to call you, that I got those headaches occasionally after my surgery but not as frequently anymore. That this one was because I got anxious when the police detective was asking questions.”

“That was quick thinking, sweetie,” Wilson said. “Is the principal in tomorrow? Mom and I want to go see her.”

“Yeah, she should be. She was out for an administrators’ meeting. Say, I think those goons knew she’d be away. Yeah, they did know. It was something about how they reacted when I asked why she wasn’t there.”

Early the next morning, Nadine called the school and got an appointment at the end of the day. When the Alexandres arrived, Lombard apologized.

“Sorry about Tamara. That should have never happened. I’ve told my staff that no one, even police, is to meet with a child during school hours without my being there. They had convinced the assistant principal that if a cop was there, that no school official needed to be. No more.”

“Do you know what happened?” Nadine asked.

“Only that they were looking into the events of last year when all those children’s SiF tags failed,” she answered. “And after five minutes or thereabouts into the meeting, some kind of disagreement broke out. One person raced out of the room and started running around the halls—the cop, my staff thought it was. The plainclothes cop. Another ran into the teachers’ men’s room muttering that something was crawling on him and he was pulling at his clothes. A few minutes after that, they began running out of the school, one at a time. It was all very strange. Your daughter went to the nurse then with a headache. We checked on her today and she’s been fine.”

“She was okay when we got home yesterday too,” Wilson said. “Tamara told us that they started to ask questions and she told them that you had to be there...”

“Smart girl...” Lombard interrupted.

“Agreed,” Wilson continued, “or that they needed to call us. Then she said they began to disagree about what to do, as you said you heard, and then everything got so confusing to Tamara that she went to the nurse.”

Lombard nodded. “That agrees with what I was told. And it gets even stranger. The district superintendent called me this morning. He wanted to know if I had any idea why their lawyer quit yesterday, claiming she had an urgent family situation. He also said that he had been recently contacted by the Stripped in Florida county office to inquire if two students who had been registered in this school were still here, and gave me their names. I told him that their families had moved out of state last year and he said that was odd, since the county had reports of their SiF tags being registered as clothing violators by scanners in this area; had they possibly come to the school as visitors, perhaps? I told him no, that they hadn’t come by the school. And, again this morning, I heard from another city school principal, a friend of mine, that the county SiF program supervisor had quit yesterday afternoon with no notice. Both that lawyer and the SiF county person were here yesterday morning. Does Tamara know what they were arguing about?”

“I think that she was wishing she could just get out of there,” Wilson laughed. “That scene really scared her.”

“I can imagine,” Lombard agreed. “No child should be forced to meet adults under adversarial circumstances without proper supervision. I’m just glad she’s okay.”

The couple left the school, and once outside, Nadine hugged Wilson.

“I’m so impressed at how you totally sidestepped Lombard’s direct question without it looking like you were avoiding it, but also not giving anything away, dear,” Nadine told him.

“Hah. You learn that in the Marines. Never reveal anything to a third party unless the third party has a need to know. About this? No one needs to know.”

But someone, in a sense, now knew something was afoot. That person had become alerted when Tamara had begun to unleash the full force of her abilities.

## Chapter 12 - Troubles and Challenges

### *Carrefour, Port-au-Prince Arrondissement, Haiti: the following day*

“Madam, you wished to see us urgently?” a hard-looking burly man asked as he received permission to enter Vanessa’s study. “Malory is delayed. He’ll be here in an hour or thereabouts.”

“It is well, Vincent. I don’t entirely trust Malory; he does too much of, well, I’d call it ‘freelance’ work. Too much of his collateral damage can affect my goals. Please give him the instructions I shall give you gentlemen and impress on him that he must be discreet. None of his brutality! And for the rest of you, too. Do not call attention to my project by being brutal in your work. Remember!”

The men nodded. They were four in number. Stone-faced men who moved with watchful purpose, showing that they possessed the skills of advanced martial arts. They were loyal to their queen: Vanessa, the self-proclaimed queen of Haiti’s Vodou priestesses.

Vanessa began to speak. “I called you here because I have an urgent mission. If it is fulfilled, I will be able to advance my project by several years, so your success will be greatly rewarded. But know that I will not tolerate failure. My plan can be greatly advanced if I can add a powerful *manbo* to our group and that will be your mission now, to help me find a certain person. Years ago, I had found a *manbo* who was sufficiently strong, but she was at first resistant to my orders. Then the earthquake came.

“When the earthquake occurred, I learned that the person who possessed that power had perished in a fire. I had doubts because I could feel the whispers of that power in the spirit world, but the power was not part of the spirit world; therefore it must be still on earth. But all the searching that you warriors performed for me confirmed that the person had indeed died.

“Last night I was communing with *Lord Kalfou*, my patron *lwa*, and he showed me that a strong power is newly arisen. I have felt faint hints of this power during the past few years, but those hints have been feeble and fleeting. Now, *Kalfou* has helped me to sense that our missing *manbo* may indeed be alive, yet very distant from here. If she is alive, I want her back here to serve me and to help me get our chosen monarch placed as Haiti’s leader. My missing *manbo* has grown strong in her power; yet I am stronger; with *Kalfou*’s guidance, I can overcome any resistance she might present and have her serve me.”

“Who is this of whom you speak, my queen?” asked Vincent, the spokesman for the group.

“You knew of her as Cassandra Bernard, the *manbo* at Aubry, but if she faked her death, she may have changed her name. Official records showed that she perished, but it is her power which I have sensed. She is not in Haiti, nor is she nearby in the D.R. My spies there have denied her presence. No, most likely she went to the U.S.; I learned that her husband may have gone there for medical treatment for his earthquake injuries. Another possibility is the U.K. since Bernard had relatives—or perhaps just one relative—there.

“My source in the U.S. State Department has reported to me regularly and faithfully that there has been no sign of a Bernard, nor of anyone having Bernard’s description, entering the country in the two years following the ‘quake. Recently he has followed up on some information he sent me, making corrections, and other sources have verified that those corrections were accurate. So the data from my spy in Washington remains good.

“Even though I do not know where she currently may be, I expect that with her abilities, she will feel compelled to continue as a *manbo*. I want you to go to the U.S., to where the Haitian people in exile have gathered. The Haitian community in New Orleans is one where she would feel the most comfortable and would find it easiest to fit into the community. New York and southern Florida are possibilities also, but unlikely, because those areas are very expensive to live in and Cassandra and her family were quite poor here. I saw that when I visited her *ounfò*.

“I want her found and brought here. But I again stress to you: Use *no* methods which will call the attention of authorities to us. We cannot allow errors in revealing my plans now that we are so close to their fulfillment. Now come close, all of you, and look deeply into my eyes, and I shall seal these instructions to your souls.”

They did, and after a minute, they again became aware of their surroundings.

“We shall do as you command and shall succeed, my lady, have no doubt,” Vincent assured her, and with bows, the four men departed.

***Little Haiti, Miami, Florida: two months later: April***

By April, the Alexandres had gotten the pole barn outfitted with the meager possessions which had been rescued from Nadine’s Haitian *ounfò*. They had hung the *vèvès* and had collected a dozen chairs and a few benches from a few sources. It turned out that even used seating was expensive. Nadine had been spreading the word that her *ounfò* would be open soon, mainly in the evenings, and she could provide counseling and folk medicines too.

May arrived and the school year was close to being over—only five weeks to go. Tamara was excited, her school traditionally held a graduation ceremony. It wasn’t much, just an assembly on the last day in which the achievements of the eighth graders were recognized, but the parents always made a big deal of it.

One morning, a half hour after Wilson left for work and just after Tamara left for school and had crossed the street opposite to their driveway, she noticed a car parked further away, down the street. It was unusual to see anyone parked there, and as she glanced at the car, she sensed a strong, evil aura. She had gotten used to thinking of that term as describing her special sense. She walked a little further until a building blocked her view of the car and then hid from sight; then watched as she saw a man leave the car and walk up to her driveway and turn in toward her home.

As he passed Tamara’s hiding place, she sensed purplish-black waves of evil flowing around him and she tasted something metallic in the color—it was blood! That man had the tastes of pure evil; as she watched him, the sounds of the dull gray taste of a steel knife pierced her ears. Walking carefully and keeping hidden, using her “I’m so little, you don’t see me” projection—she realized that she hadn’t used that in years—she followed him silently and watched as he knocked on the double-wide’s door. There was no response, although Tamara knew her mom was there. Her work shift started later in the day.

The man went to the pole barn and tried that door; it was locked. He peered into a window but then quickly turned and went back to the house.

“I know you’re there. I been watching your place and you haven’t left yet,” he called in *Kreyòl*. “Your phone won’t work. I got a jammer here.”

He started to kick at the door but the door didn’t budge, so he went to a window and broke it, then started to climb in. He didn’t notice Tamara, who had come within ten feet of him and had ducked behind the front porch.

*I can’t see his eyes so this may not work*, she thought. *So I can’t compel him. Maybe confusion?*

She began to “push” yellow and tan, fear and confusion, at him. He stopped with a panicked look, halfway through the window with one leg inside and another hanging out, and acted as if he didn’t know what to do next.

That’s when Nadine came around the side of the house behind him, carrying a shotgun. She was so happy that Wilson had insisted that she learn to use it; they had spent several hours at a range and though her shoulder hurt somewhat after that session, she had seen what 00 buckshot did to a target.

In *Kreyòl*, she told the intruder, “One wrong move and I shoot. This will put a big hole right through the place your heart should be but I doubt you have one. Keep both hands where I can see them, get out of there, and

down on the ground. Now.”

“Lady, I...”

“Three seconds and I pull the trigger. One...”

He just about fell out and dropped to the ground, but his hand was flashing to his belt, out of Nadine’s sight. But not Tamara’s. Neither the intruder nor Nadine had noticed her where she was hidden behind the front porch and out of Nadine’s sight. Tamara didn’t want to startle her mother; she might accidentally shoot at Tamara.

When Tamara saw his hand move, she tasted a flood of red-purple from the man. And something else too. Tamara realized that was an intent-to-harm emotion and the other...? Suddenly she realized that the intruder could “pull,” doing something like the way she “pushed.”

*This could be very dangerous, she realized, but maybe that pull is why my tastes work without eye contact.*

She quickly acted, sending another flood of mostly yellow-tan at him, “pushing” extra hard. The pulse of confusion washing over him made him suddenly forget what he had intended. Then Tamara called out in French, figuring with his thick *Kreyòl* and bad grammar, he wouldn’t understand it very well.

“Mom, I’m here behind the porch. Watch him but *don’t look* in his eyes; he has some kind of ability. He has a gun or something near his waist. I made him get confused, like I told you I did to those people at school. But he’s terribly dangerous and totally evil!”

“I know! I tried calling the police but got no connection. He said he had a jammer or whatever.”

“Heard of them. Blocks cell phones. While he’s still confused, I want to try something new. I get a feeling that it should work against his mental ability but only if he isn’t thinking straight.”

Tamara marshaled some extra strength and then “pushed” a dense fog of pure white at the prone man. As it washed over him, he stopped squirming and lay still, resting on his side.

“What did you do?” Nadine asked.

“I guess it worked. I pushed a kinda ‘sleep’ to him. We need to tie him up ‘cause he’s so evil, this may not last long. My other ‘pushes’ didn’t affect him like it did other people. It must be his evil is some kind of shield or something, or maybe that ability I felt he has. I know, use his belt to tie him. I’ll try. If he starts to wake, hit him with the gun butt.”

Tamara pulled at his waist, undid the belt, and pulled it open. She saw the butt of a pistol tucked in his waistband so she pulled that out, and then noticed a big lump showing in the man’s visible pocket. Throwing the pistol a few feet away, she pulled the belt out of its loops and then, with a little difficulty, pushed the man onto his front. Then she looped the belt around the man’s upper arms, pulling his shoulders back, tightened it, and secured the buckle.

“Mom, we have any rope?” she asked.

“No, I don’t think so. Listen, this has Vanessa all over it. We can’t call the police; they might be involved too; like they are in Haiti.”

“Wait, first that jammer,” Tamara said, and fished the lump from the man’s pocket.

She looked at it and turned it off. “Interesting. I’ll take it apart, see how it works... Oh, Mom, we don’t need rope. One sec though... I’ll call Dad.”

She called Wilson. He answered quickly, her calls and Nadine’s were the only ones that rang through during



work.

“Dad, a guy tried to break in here. He’s totally evil, has a gun. Mom’s got the shotgun on him and we’re trying to tie him up. She says no police ‘cause it’s Vanessa. I put him asleep.”

“Okay, be careful. Tell Mom to just shoot, if he gets free. You stay far away if he starts to wake. I’m coming, calling a buddy too. Should be ten, maybe fifteen minutes. Just be safe!”

“Dad says he’s coming now, to shoot if Mister Evil here gets free. You know those old lights from the pole barn—their wires? Make a good rope.”

The old fixtures had been slid into the crawl space under the double-wide. Tamara dragged one out, ran into the house for a scissor and used it to cut off the wire. She used sections of the wire to tie the man’s wrists and ankles together and finished about a minute or two before he began to regain consciousness. When he did, he began swearing at the two of them, threatening them with death or worse if they didn’t free him.

After a little more than ten minutes later, a county heavy-duty tow truck pulled into the yard and Wilson jumped out. Nadine ran to him and hugged him.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she gasped as she sagged into his arms. “Don’t look into his eyes, Tamara says. He has some kind of ability. I was so scared...”

“Looks to me like you did a pretty creditable job with this scum,” Wilson said, walking over to the struggling and cursing man. He gave the guy a kick in the ribs. “Shut up, scum, or I’ll keep kicking you there until you do.”

The man spat at him so Wilson kicked him harder. The guy shut up. Wilson was wearing steel-toed work boots. Then another big truck pulled in.

“That’s my shop partner, Ray Wilky,” Wilson told Nadine. “I was headed to the motor pool garage when you called so I was closer to here. I called him for backup. So tell us what happened.”

Nadine and Tamara told the two men about the events of the morning and they were very impressed, especially with Tamara’s cool behavior. Tamara had edited her part to avoid saying how she had disabled the invader, saying only that she hit him from behind with a piece of wood framing that had been saved from the old wood shed.

“Hey, Ray,” Wilson told his friend. “Can you watch out to see that no one comes in? This guy may have backup if he doesn’t check in or something. His pistol is on the ground over there. Grab it.”

“Sure thing, Wilson. Call if you need me.”

“Wait,” Tamara called. “His car is down the block. You should get it in here.”

“On it,” Wilky said and started toward the guy.

Nadine told him, “Don’t look in his eyes. He has a kind of hypnosis or something.”

“Okay...?” Wilky said, and then patted the intruder’s pockets, found the keys, and fished them out. “I’ll bring the car in here and watch the driveway.”

“Good. Okay now,” Wilson said. “Time to play twenty questions. Let’s find out who sent this scum.” Then in *Kreyòl*, “Hey, scum, who sent you and what were you doing here?”

“Fuck you and no way am I sayin’ anythin’.”

“Have it your way, then,” Wilson replied.

He backed his tow truck to behind the pole barn, out of sight from the driveway.

“Great trussing job on him here,” he commented to Tamara who was nearby watching as he dragged the intruder closer to the tow truck. “You probably don’t want to see what I need to do now,” he told her.

“No, I need to see it. He was saying he wanted to kill Mom,” she answered. “This is the worst evil I’ve ever seen.”

Wilky pulled the intruder’s car up next to the tow truck and got out.

“Okay, my new friend,” Wilson said to the captive, “you’re in for an interesting experience.”

He raised the truck’s tow boom and deployed a chain with a hook on it. Then the two men dragged the struggling intruder over to the back of the tow truck and snapped the hook onto the leather belt holding the man’s upper arms together. Wilson activated the hoist, retracting the chain so only a fraction of the man’s weight was on the ground. His arms and shoulders were supporting the remainder of his 240-pound weight.

Wilky poked Wilson in the arm. “Don’t go easy on that piece of shit, buddy. If that was my wife who was threatened, I’d tear his balls off and stuff ‘em up his ass.”

“Nah. I need info first. I learned some stuff about getting answers from the enemy when I was in-country with the Marines.”

Wilky went back to guarding the driveway and Wilson turned to his victim.

“Let’s begin,” he said. “Who sent you?”

“Fuck you.”

Wilson spun the chain around, grabbed the man’s right hand, and applied a thumb lock. Unable to move away, he screamed in pain.

“Again, who sent you?” Wilson asked and bent his thumb back again.

“Vanessa... it was Vanessa.”

Wilson continued to use various methods of creating intense pain, and the story gradually emerged. Vanessa had been sensing a feeling or something that reminded her of Cassandra and suspected that Cassandra might possibly still be alive. So she decided to send her soldiers to check on Vodou practitioner priestess in areas where large numbers of Haitians lived to see if Cassandra might be a priestess there.

That was all that their captive would say; he wouldn’t divulge any more about himself or his mission, nor would he divulge his identity or give up anyone else’s name, other than Vanessa’s, despite the pain that Wilson inflicted. Wilson figured that either he had been conditioned to withstand continued pain or the pain just wasn’t working anymore. A search of his pockets found nothing.

“Nadine, look in his car,” Wilson called to her. “See if there’s any ID.”

She looked and found two U.S. passports with photos similar to the man, and a Haitian passport in the name of Malory Leger.

“Can I help?” Tamara asked. She had been watching her father’s questioning. “I think he has a compulsion not to answer about things that happened before coming here on this job, but whoever put the compulsion on him forgot to do it now or maybe wasn’t able to include the recent stuff,” she explained.

“You said that you can’t read minds, though,” her father said.

“I can’t, but compulsions contain emotions and he has something I can’t figure out. But I think that I may be able to ‘push’ a stronger compulsion. I can’t though if he resists and he’s really, really strong. And the evil around him is making me really sick, too. Maybe if he were unconscious ... Not the ‘sleep’ I ‘pushed’ before.”

“I can make that happen,” Wilson told her. “How long do you need?”

“I never did this... wait. Back at school that time, when I ‘pushed’ those compulsions to forget, it was maybe just three or four seconds.”

Wilson nodded. “If I press on his jugular for maybe ten-twelve seconds, he’ll be out for about the same amount of time. That’s the longest; longer might suffocate him. Is that enough?”

“I’ll try.”

Fifteen seconds later, Leger was unconscious and Tamara “pushed” her greenish-brown cloud at him.

“You’ll wake up and have no idea where you are. You can’t remember what happened this morning, but you need to tell the people who are here, why you’re here and who you are working with. Otherwise, hundreds of scorpions will climb all over you and start stinging.”

About ten seconds later, Leger began to wake and suddenly screamed and twisted on his chain.

“Get them off me! I’ll tell you—if I tell you what I know, get them off me!” he shouted.

Nadine came closer. “Vanessa sent you. Who else came here?”

“I’m here solo, but Vincent is in Miami too.”

“Who’s Vincent, and who else is involved?” she asked and Wilson grabbed his cell phone and began recording.

The story came out; Vanessa’s “soldiers” had come to the U.S. using passports provided by a spy in the State Department. Leger gave the names used on the passports and when and where the others had traveled. He told of connections Vanessa and her revolutionaries had with the Haitian embassy and with the consular offices in Miami, New York, and New Orleans. He named the contact persons in those offices, but he didn’t know who the mole in the State Department was.

At that, Wilson nodded. “I think we know who that was,” he whispered to Nadine.

Wilson continued. “Why did you come to my home? You have permission to remember that now.”

“I won’t answ... ow, ow, stop the stinging, pull them off! I... I was looking for *manbos* for Vanessa. The last *manbo* I located said a new *manbo* was here and I came to see if it was the Cassandra who my queen wants. She wasn’t a very good fuck, either.”

Wilson jerked. “What did you say? You forced her?”

“Yeah. I fuck all the women I hunt down.”

Tamara’s face turned white and she ran to the back corner of the yard, where she lost her breakfast.

Wilson grabbed a bottle of water from inside his truck and handed it to Nadine, who ran to give it to Tamara. She rinsed her mouth and drank a little.

“Okay now?” Nadine asked.

“Yeah. I said he was making me sick, but when he said that...” she shuddered.

Wilson slapped his head. “Damn it! I think I know who he raped. Tamara, can you get Ray? Now that we know

this scum has no backup...”

Wilky came over. “What’s up? Find out anything?”

“Enough. We just found out this turd is also a rapist. I heard something about a guy’s sister at the downtown motor pool shop, she’s a priestess and was raped a few days ago. Looks like we found who did it; this guy here.”

“I know who that is. Leon Domingue’s sister was raped. I used to play poker with a bunch of guys and he was one. You don’t know him, do you?”

“Paths never crossed, but I heard the name. Have his cell number?”

“No, but I can get it.”

Wilky made two calls, got the number, and called it.

“Leon, you remember me. Ray Wilky from poker.”

“...”

“Yeah. Hey, here’s the shit. Sorry about your sister, but Wilson Alexandre from the heavy mech shop might have caught the rapist.”

“...”

“Serious. Not fuckin’ around, I don’t do that. Seems the guy came after his wife and she got the drop on him.”

“...”

“I’ll take a shot of his mug, she tell you what he looked like?” He took a few photos.

“...”

“Good. Sending. Call me if he’s the one.”

Several minutes later, Wilky’s phone buzzed. He answered and spoke for a few minutes, then gave Wilson’s address.

“That was Leon. He thought it was the guy and sent the pix to his sister and she confirmed it. He’s getting his cousin and they’re coming here.”

Tamara was quiet, deep in thought. Then, “*Manman*, this man is way too evil and has dangerous powers too. I think he could use them to get free somehow—yeah, he’s already been able to do that at least once, I think.”

“What can we do, then?” Nadine asked. “I don’t think that, um, Leon and his cousin are going to kill him.”

“No, I’m sure that they won’t. Maybe they’ll beat him up first and then bring him to the police. That would be a mistake, ‘cause if they beat him up, the judges may let him out on bail, and you saw what Vanessa can do here with people she knows. I speak to my schoolmates and they say that the judges will let just about anyone out. With Leger’s ability, he’d get out immediately.”

“So I’m sure you have a plan,” Nadine grinned at her daughter. “You always seem to.”

Tamara nodded. “I kinda thought of what to do. When I got scared by those people who came to my school, I did some scary things when I ‘pushed’ them. Scary to me, that is. One of them was bad, the lawyer, but not totally evil the way this one is. I think maybe I can turn his evil around on him, let its emotions fill his mind. That should be much easier than if I try to ‘push’ evil, something that I don’t understand ‘cause it’s not inside me. I just need to figure out the ‘aura,’ or ‘taste,’ of whatever I need, to do it.”

Leger, having told all he could of the job he had been sent to do and of the group who sent him, was still hanging, exhausted, from the hook on the tow truck's boom. Wilky was with him; wearing his work gloves, he had brought the pistol over to get Leger's fingerprints on it, and then went to talk to Wilson to decide where to plant it. They were working out a simple story which everyone could easily recall.

Tamara had waited until Wilky was done and then she approached Leger; she had no intention of getting closer than about ten feet from him, so she came to that distance and stopped, using her special sense to 'taste' the emotions coming from him. They were rancid, putrid.

She marshaled her strength and tried to suppress her gag reflex as she gathered a burst of greenish-gray aura of compulsion and "pushed" it toward him; then with a deep breath, she tried to conjure up the feeling of nothingness, an emotion that would replace Leger's consciousness with nothing but the evil emotions within him, pursuing after him. Using what she had learned from her mother's rites and from her extensive reading, she tried to link the "aura" of nothingness to something she could "push," and suddenly Tamara sensed a visualization of the personification of a totally unfamiliar spirit *lwa*, *Marinette-Bwa-Chèch*, the "she-devil" of Vodou, and as she sensed that *lwa* filling her, a wave of blackness—not the color, but the absence of any sense at all, none of color, taste, smell, sound, whatever—began to form. This void she "pushed" at the figure hanging ten feet from her.

When it enveloped Leger, the blackness shrunk, leaving only a sense of a blood red taste behind, and he began screaming and twisting, pulling at his bonds, and shouting, "Stop, stop! ... what is happening... I can't stand it... No, stop!"

Nadine, who had been watching, came to Tamara, gasping in shock, "That... that was awful ... the blackest magic... oh, *Legba* protect us, what did you do...? Where did you learn that?"

"*Manman*, no. I did *not* do that; *he* did. I just made it possible for his evil morals to become as an emotion, and his own psyche allowed it to occupy his mind. I asked for the help of the *lwa* to do it and the *lwa Marinette* answered..."

Nadine gasped again and cried, "But *Marinette* is unsafe! She's so dangerous that she's never invoked within buildings—she literally burns with rage and can burn down buildings if invoked indoors!"

"I'm aware, *Manman*. But somehow I sensed that I needed those colors, the blackness and the blood, and unbidden, she answered. I know she's thought to be evil, but she really has two sides. *Marinette* can either free a person from bondage or drag a person into bondage. She's created the bondage that Leger is in now, bound to the evil in his soul."

Tamara began crying and Nadine opened her arms and she flowed into them, sobbing. "I never wanted to do such things, *Manman*. It's just that somehow when I think of a great need, it's as if somehow the answer comes to me and I do what's needed."

"Indeed, what your father told me last year about you is true. He told me, and I recall it as if I heard it yesterday, that, I quote, 'Just before I fell asleep, I had this wonderful peaceful feeling, along with the thought, *Tamara is Ayizan Velekete's*.' You are truly beloved of the spirits, darling."

While Nadine and Tamara were talking, Domingue and his cousin had arrived and hauled off the thrashing, screaming, gibbering Leger, and bundled him, still tied up, into the back of his car. Then they drove both cars away.

"I saw Leger's condition," Wilson said after Wilky had gone too. "Was that Tamara's doing?"

Nadine nodded and told him what Tamara had done.

“Sounds like she’s a *manbo* even without first being a *kanzo*,” he said.

“She has more native power than anyone I have ever known of, even my *manman*,” Nadine answered. “But being a *manbo* is much more than simply having powers.”

Wilson nodded. “I guess I knew that. Anyway, Leon promised that they wouldn’t kill him. When they saw his condition, they were actually scared. I intimated that you had done that to him when you captured him. I think they might emasculate him, though. Leon is burning for revenge. They’re coming up with a story. Oh, and I called the FBI and our friend John Norris—he’s the one who met us at the airport—should be coming out here in about an hour.”

Some twenty minutes later, Wilson’s phone buzzed.

“It’s Leon,” he said, and listened a while. “Here’s the scoop for the cops and FBI. So we all have the same story. If it’s not covered by this script, we say discussing is too upsetting. Here goes.”

The story that Wilky and Wilson, plus Domingue for his part, had come up with was that Wilson was headed to the motor pool where Domingue worked, and got a frantic call from Nadine.

Wilson went on, “Someone was trying to break in—oh yeah, we’ll need to clean up the bear spray I shot at the broken window—and the bear spray disabled the guy, but he was able to snatch her phone away so she couldn’t call the cops. Then Domingue and I got here and tackled the guy and that’s when he recognized him as possibly being his sister’s attacker and then the jerk actually admitted it to us. During the struggle, one of us must have kicked the guy in the nuts because his testicles were crushed.

“This next part is true but you don’t have to remember the details. Domingue took Leger, using Leger’s rental car, to his shop to get his own truck and to get help bringing Leger to the police because he was still being violent. While the men were subduing him, somehow a soldering gun was used to write ‘rapist’ on his forehead. The cops wanted to know who did it but no one would say.”

Soon Norris arrived with a police detective in tow and they interviewed Wilson and Nadine. The parents kept Tamara from being mentioned. There was hardly any physical evidence apart from the broken window and bear spray; the shotgun wasn’t mentioned either, but the pistol was “found” under the broken window.

The detective was irritated that the FBI had become involved, but after the recording was played and Wilson mentioned the passports which were in Leger’s possession, the detective relented. This had indeed become a federal case.

### Chapter 13 - Beginning High School

A few days after their capture of Leger, Wilson heard from Evan Masters at the State Department. Masters wanted to relay the FBI's thanks to the Alexandres for their part in solving a number of open cases and that the FBI as well as the State Department were also highly pleased with the information Wilson had gotten in Leger's confession.

Masters said, "I'm able to pass along this confidential information to you because you were personally involved and under the protection of the U.S. government."

"If that's the case, how did someone come so close as to be able to attack my wife?"

"We're still looking into what happened there, but apparently it was because of the two U.S. passports Leger had. We were watching for the one that Arthur Benson, their mole, had issued, but Leger used a different one, that one had been stolen from a tourist and had never been properly canceled. We've been fixing problems like that during the past week."

"Okay. Are we still in danger from Vanessa?"

"Right now, that's still hard to say. Here's what happened as a result of your capture of Leger and the other things that happened when Vanessa's other people arrived here. First, the other person she set to Miami, Vincent Sanon, we had his passport flagged but he was incredibly quick when they tried to detain him. Somehow he had gotten a knife and disabled a Border Patrol agent and a TSA guard. When a Miami cop confronted him and he tried to throw the knife, though, he was shot dead.

"There were two of them who arrived on separate flights in New Orleans. Border Patrol got one at passport control and he's locked up. The other one got through by a slick dodge. They must have heard that we caught the first. We found out the next day that a Haitian consular official bribed an airport worker to watch for the guy at the gate and slip him a Haitian diplomatic passport. The Customs agent was suspicious by the passport and the appearance of the guy, though, and had a TSA agent follow him to the car rental desk and watch while the Haitian embassy in D.C. was contacted. They said that the passport he presented was bogus, so they had a parish sheriff arrest the guy as soon as he drove out of the airport to avoid the possibility of a hostage situation if the guy was armed.

"The last passport was used in New York at JFK. But from the info you got from Leger, we found that guy's real name and the Haitian government helped us learn his banking info and we got his account frozen, so he has no funds other than what he's carrying. Oh yes, the Haitian government has frozen Vanessa's bank accounts and turned off their cell phone and land line accounts. They still have the burner phones though, they're common in Haiti, and that can't be helped. The rogue ministers and assistants that Leger fingered were arrested and the FBI arrested a bunch of diplomatic employees of the embassy and consular offices in Miami and New Orleans; Haiti has waived their diplomatic immunity because several of them were accomplices or were otherwise involved in several assassinations.

"The guy in New York no longer has a support network; the consular office there is all loyal to the current government. The chance of his getting money is small because his Haitian sources have been cut off. The FBI knows his last whereabouts from his last attempt to use an ATM card, in Flatbush in Brooklyn, so there's a manhunt underway there now.

"So for your safety, I'd advise still keeping your head down. Leger's visit was a one-off, a lucky guess, since Nadine's was only the third place he visited. Looks like his approach was to be random. Find one, then the next.

"Oh, and about Leger. I don't know what the hell Nadine did; whatever she told Wilbur Zane from the CIA; she's still fucking scary. Leger is a whacko now, completely out of his mind. Being chased by demons and

complaining of scorpions stinging him. He's being kept sedated now and I have no idea what they're gonna do with him. Maybe send him back to Haiti for them to punish. He's been implicated in some murders there. He sure can't hurt anyone now.

"Lastly, Vanessa's still around and probably remains a threat. A lot of her power base here was taken out and most of her Haitian resources are tied up, but she still has supporters. We think that many of those in government have been flushed out, but there could always be sleeper moles. So remain cautious, my friend, and thanks for your excellent, but unexpected, service to your fellow citizens, both U.S. and Haitian. You do more honor to your military awards than the U.S. can acknowledge."

~~~~~

It took more than a week for the fallout of Leger's unwanted visit to end. The FBI was visiting the Alexandres almost daily—Wilson at his shop and Nadine at home, because she didn't want the repeated interruptions to affect her job with the patients. Most were elderly veterans and she came to really care for them; in some ways they reminded her of Wilson because many were true warriors at heart, were strongly opinionated, but had romantic souls.

They learned that Vanessa's missing thug, the one who had gone to ground in New York City, had been arrested when he tried to hold up a convenience store using a knife as a weapon. The clerk had a pistol and used it, hitting the man in the shoulder when he tried to leap over the counter. Many of Wilson's or Nadine's sessions with the FBI were to see if either had seen any of the identified suspects while the couple was living in Haiti. Wilson thought he recalled several from service work he had done for some of the wealthier Carrefour residents.

But most of those next two weeks were spent with Tamara, whose experience had both terrified and exhausted her. She was having nightmares almost every night and during the day, she was jumpy and irritable. Wilson realized that he recognized the symptoms.

"That's classic PTSD," he remarked to Nadine after five days of observing Tamara.

Nadine had heard of it but was unsure of exactly what it was.

"It stands for post-traumatic stress disorder. In the military in the mid-twentieth century, its name then was 'shell-shock' or 'combat fatigue.' You don't have to be in combat to get it, though. Sexual abuse or assault, living through a disaster or accident—those all can result in PTSD. It's caused by being exposed to repeated bad experiences or to a single major shock, like any experience that threatens your life or someone else's—and that's exactly what happened here."

"She acted so mature and collected, though," Nadine objected.

"That sometimes is part of it. When I was in rehab for my leg, there were lots of soldiers and Marines with severe PTSD. During the event that might have been the precipitating one for them, they told me that when everything seemed to get out of control; they'd get angry at feeling vulnerable, so they acted to try to restore some control. Lots of times that results in incredible heroism but it can come at a terrible psychological price. The body remembers the feelings of fear you had, and given a trigger—sometimes no apparent trigger at all—the body reacts with feelings of panic or severe anxiety. PTSD. Tamara acted collected and mature because that's her nature—to stay in control, but her body was screaming 'fear,' 'danger,' while she was trying force her control over the situation. That's heroism in my book."

"How can we help her, then?"

"The biggie is just getting her to talk about it. Reliving her memories about how she was feeling and what she was thinking about while she was dealing with the situation here would help her process that the bad stuff is



behind her. Talking helps her mind show her body that she's in no danger now, because it's the response of the body to a perhaps random thought that can cause the panic response. We'll talk to her, or you should. You're more sensitive and have counseling experience. Just get her to tell you what happened from her point of view and ask if that part is still scary or bothersome and explore with her why she feels that way. She might have a lot of 'what ifs' or 'I should haves' and working through those ideas is a huge part of the healing."

"Wilson, are you hiding something from me? Are you actually a psychologist in disguise?"

He snorted. "Nah, just a badass Marine who got wounded and washed out of his dream career. I've been down the PTSD route. Got it real bad after my last mission and then I learned I was done in the Corps. And had an amazing doc who worked with me to slay the demons that were killing me inside. I know all—well, maybe not *all*—of the horrors that the mind can create when it starts to tell you about all the mistakes you made. I learned that those were *not* mistakes, they were the *best* possible decisions at the time. Learning that saved my sanity."

It took several weeks of gentle but painful discussions with Tamara about her recollections of that morning, but soon Tamara was almost back to her normal, cheerful self. It was good timing because the graduation assembly was at the end of the week and the summer vacation would begin the next day.

Tamara had already decided that she wanted to study introductory French and Spanish at the local community college that summer, and she had an offer from Dr Beauford to work at the medical school on the MRIs in the imaging unit. She had a project of her own design, building tunable sub-coils to be installed in the machine's external coils to enhance the scanning resolution in small areas of the body part being imaged. Because of her age and the possibility of any radiation exposure involved, she wouldn't be allowed to work on the CT or PET scanners, and she couldn't be paid, but the university gave her independent research credits in electrical engineering and physics. She'd have to write two papers and take two exams to complete the courses.

There was another topic that her parents wanted to discuss with Tamara but put it off because of the stress of the incident with Leger. They wanted to know about her mental and emotional state of mind regarding her "pushing" ability. They were also concerned that she might use her abilities in ways that society would disapprove. And how strong was she now—how close did she need to be to affect another person?

### ***Little Haiti, Miami, Florida: six weeks later***

One evening in mid-summer, Tamara was excitedly describing how one of her mini-coil installations had improved the imaging resolution in tests that day.

"I had used the Larmor equation—which gives the frequency at which the hydrogen nucleus will absorb energy—to do the calcs for my mini-coil orientation. The equation shows that the frequency of precession of the nuclear magnetic moment is directly proportional to the product of the B0 field—the magnetic field strength—and the gyromagnetic ratio, and the design result, when we tested it, matched the theory! Dr Beauford was so happy. He wants me to write it up—he gave me the format to use—because it can be patented and I'd be the sole inventor!"

Wilson was trying to slow her down. "Um, sweetie, you realize that neither Mom nor I have any inkling about what any of that means? Except that you can get a patent, I suppose. That fact we can celebrate with you. So I assume your work is going well?"

"It's great. And I'm enjoying working on the other electronics too. Tomorrow Tim's gonna show me an EEG that's being surplused. He said several channels are getting funky and it's five years old and they don't want to fix it anymore. He said I could quote, 'work my magic on it.' That'll give me the chance to learn about the tiny electrical signals the brain produces. Oh, and I'm still messing around with that cell phone jammer that I 'liberated.'"

“You’re not going to use it to jam phones, right?” Nadine asked.

“Course not. That’s illegal—not that I haven’t... anyway. I’m dissecting the circuit design. Getting ideas about radio wave transmission, is all. It sends an RF signal, like a lot of the things I’m working on, and I like to see how devices that do that work. I set up a little Faraday cage to block its emissions when I test it.”

Mom and Dad looked at each other and shrugged.

“Sweetie, to change the topic, how have you been feeling during the last week?” Nadine asked. “No more nightmares, right?”

“No, *Manman*, and I’m much better since we talked and you helped me work through the bad thoughts I was having.”

“What about your... special abilities? You aren’t getting tempted to ‘push’ people to get them to do what you want, are you?” Nadine pressed.

“Oh, no. Um, I can’t just do that whenever I want, you know. To do that, I need help from... um... this is difficult. I’m not sure how it works. If I have an urgent need, like when those people at the school were questioning me that time, or what happened with that monster, somehow I can get the ability to ‘push.’ That’s only when stuff like that happens, when I need it. I guess... I’m sure Emily helps me. Yeah, she must ‘cause I can’t do the big stuff all by myself. I get the help I need then.”

Nadine looked at her. “Emily? Your doll sits on your pillow all the time now. How...?”

Nadine stopped when Tamara pulled the amulet on its chain out from under her top.

“She’s with me always, *Manman*. I’m sure this pendant links me to *Granmanman*’s spirit, but I felt that calling this pendant ‘Tamara’ too would be confusing.”

“So you can touch the spirit world through that. Amazing,” Nadine whispered.

“Not like that, *Manman*. It’s different; I can’t go to the spirits. Through this... it’s a gateway? Portal? ...the *lwa* seem to come into my mind. Like you told me back when I was... eight? Yeah. That the *lwa* give us praise, scolding, and guidance. That’s what I feel; help comes when I need it. I know that *Papa Legba* is the Speaker of the *lwa*, but *Ayizan*, my protector, is his wife, and a Speaker too. She speaks to me. And when I need help, *Ayizan* brings the *lwa* who can best help me.”

“Tamara, in my studies, I have heard of only one such person with your abilities. When I was little, maybe older... your age possibly, *Manman* told me of a legend of our people, *Manman*’s very-greats-*manman* ancestor, who communed with *all* of the *lwa*. You may well have her spirit in your soul,” Nadine said.

“What about your ‘making myself little’ ability?” Wilson asked.

“Now that I’m older—bigger—that’s not as easy... I’m sure I can’t actually be invisible. That’s probably impossible,” Tamara answered. “I rarely do that anymore, too. When I did it last time, it was when Mr Evil was sneaking up to the house. I was ‘pushing’ an... aura... yeah. It was, ‘you don’t notice me; I belong here’; kinda like that. This is sooo hard to explain,” she sighed.

“How close do you have to be to ‘push’ to someone?” Nadine asked.

“That depends. To do uh... compulsion? No, that’s too strong. I can’t *force* anyone. I do something like a suggestion backed by an emotion. So if they don’t want to have the emotion, like fear, the suggestion keeps the fear away. And people make their own fears—my ‘pushing’ lets them connect the fear to the suggestion. How close? To do that, I really need to look in a person’s eyes, so that’s pretty close. To project auras like confusion,

I can be a little farther away but the farther away I am, the more taxing it is.”

Nadine gave her the ‘serious mother’ look. “Your abilities are unique and remarkable, but scary too. I don’t have to tell you that if someone learns about what you can do; your life, ours too, could be in danger. So please, darling, make sure you never take advantage of someone using them. And if you do need to use your abilities, please be discreet.”

Tamara nodded and hugged her mother, then her father.

### *August*

The summer passed quickly. Tamara completed her French and Spanish classes at the community college and continued with the medical school’s study and her electronics work on the MRI and the other side projects she had begun. And just for her entertainment, she kept her “camera” zapper close by in her backpack, using it randomly on shop sensors and all of the school buildings in her area, getting close enough to the schools’ doors to use it on the RFID scanners there. She also used it near the few naked kids she encountered. She felt that if a kid really wanted to be naked, then the state had no business “branding” them like cattle, by injecting them with an electronic tag, just to allow them to “express their body freedom.”

Also during the summer, Tamara had a growth spurt; she shot up in height as the hormones of puberty began flooding her body, and although she was about two years younger than the typical ninth grader, she was as tall now as the typical high school freshman girl and wouldn’t stand out as being so much younger than her classmates.

~~~~~

Another item that they needed to finalize during the summer was Tamara’s high school. She had three choices—four, if she was to consider a private school.

“Dad, where did you go to high school?” she asked when they were making their plans.

“Even though *Maman* was a trained *manbo*,” Wilson told her, “she was a pious Catholic and co-existed very happily with both traditions. She sent me to Catholic schools—which back then in Miami, were really excellent schools. I’m not sure how they are now. I know the public school quality seems way better here now. I don’t think you’d be happy at a Catholic high school, though. They tend to be pretty rigid; everyone is expected to conform.”

“Yeah. That’s not me,” Tamara giggled. “I’m not that interested in that magnet school, iTech. It kinda has a vocational school feeling to it.”

“And I’m not keen on Tamara having to cross the highway,” Nadine commented. “Which eliminates Northwestern. I know a lot of your Thomas Mann friends are headed there. Would you be okay with Edison?”

“So, that school has lots of poor kids. I guess it’s heavily Haitian. The classes seem small and the student surveys say they mostly like the teachers. You know I like to help kids—so going there, I can get to help the disadvantaged ones. Like I used to do back in Haiti, remember? The girls would sit in the *ounfò* with me and I’d help them.”

Nadine nodded. “Those were happy, carefree times, thinking back.”

“Okay, it’s Edison then,” Wilson declared. “Right? Let’s fill out the forms.”

~~~~~

In late summer, the Alexandres received a letter from Miami Edison High School welcoming Tamara as a new

student. The letter went on to say that, because of her unusual schooling record, the school wanted her to take a series of placement exams so their guidance counselors would know which classes they should schedule her to take. Tamara spent two days taking the placement tests and the following day after her work shift, Nadine found a voice mail message from the school on her phone, inviting the family to visit the school to talk to the counselor about the test results. When they arrived at the high school office, the principal came out to meet them first.

“Hello, you are the Alexandres? I’m Dr Patricia Barelo, the school principal. It’s a pleasure to meet you all. We’ve heard good things about you, Tamara, from Horace Mann, your middle school, especially how you really have advanced in grades. I understand that you told the principal there that you didn’t want to jump ahead any more grades because you wanted to be able to make friends with teens closer to your age—I think that was a very wise and mature choice. When you talk to Mrs Moore, your counselor, she’ll have some suggestions for you about your free time—with your placement scores, you’ll have a *lot* of free time—while you’re attending Edison.”

They thanked her and then went to Mrs Moore’s office. After their greetings and some discussion about Tamara’s educational history, Moore went over Tamara’s exam results.

“We can accept Tamara’s physics and math scores from her home-schooling record and her middle-school placement evaluation, but we need to find the best fit for the other classes she’s going to take here. And Tamara, you’ve told us in your registration materials that you’ve decided that you want the whole high school experience.”

“Yes, ma’am. All through my childhood, I had limited contact with kids around my age and I want to experience a more ‘normal’ time as a teen.”

“That’s an excellent attitude, my dear. Now, your placement exams showed your strong English skills in reading, spelling, comprehension, and knowledge of a wide range of literature. Your testing results in grammar and writing are not as advanced, they showed that you’re at the level for an incoming ninth-grade student, but that’s still an excellent result since it places you at two years above your age-appropriate grade level. Your results in history and civics were at a ninth-grade-appropriate level too, so we’re placing you in the freshman English and introductory history classes.

“In math and science, you’re advanced well beyond high school, so the school period times for those classes are free since you don’t need them. To fill those periods, we have a choice of electives here.” She passed them a paper. “Please pick an elective—decide before the week’s end and let me know. And Principal Barelo wanted you to consider working as an office aide during some of your open time. She likes to pick incoming students with good past school records and grades so that the job won’t interfere with their high school classes.”

“What would Tamara need to do?” Nadine asked.

“There’s a wide range of little jobs like scanning and copying sets of papers for the office and for teachers. There’s running errands and carrying messages. Answering phones when the office staff is busy or on break. Things like that. Most office aides use the time to study when they have nothing to do. You think you’d be interested in that, Tamara?”

“I think so. I’ll let you know when I tell you the elective I want.”

Tamara was thinking, *If I work in the office, maybe I’ll be able to find out how to contact the SiF kids here. They must have some kind of exemption from the school’s dress code like they did at Thomas Mann, so there may be a list of them. I’ll think about this a little more; maybe I’ll get to know more teachers—and they’ll get to know me too. That can’t hurt.*

During the next several days, she discussed the electives options with her parents. After deciding, she notified her counselor of her choice and her agreement to be an office aide, at least for the first term. She'd see about continuing after she knew more about the work involved.

### ***Little Haiti, Miami, Florida: first week of high school***

During her first school week, Tamara had to take off for several hours for an appointment at the medical school for her quarterly MRI follow-up exam. The MRI test wasn't really needed anymore; however, Dr Beauford was interested in keeping track of Tamara's brain activity patterns as she went through the changes of puberty, to see if her unusually high activity continued.

He had told the Alexandres when he had proposed continuing his study, "Her brain activity continues to be at the highest level reported in the literature, and that includes both children and adults. I saw activity increases continuing as she approached menarche and now that she's well into puberty, that increase in activity shows no sign of stopping—it's actually getting greater. So I need to caution you: I don't know what the effect that exogenous hormones would be on her body, so I will strongly recommend that Tamara not be given birth-control hormones.

"I saw an article published in a recent issue of the journal, *Frontiers of Psychology*. It was titled 'The Effects of Hormonal Contraceptives on the Brain: A Systematic Review of Neuroimaging Studies.' It was a well-done study, memorable. The authors reported that... I'll try to quote them, 'Contraceptive substances can alter both structure and function of the brain. We identified structural and functional changes in areas involved in cognitive and affective processing, such as the amygdala, hippocampus, prefrontal cortex and cingulate gyrus.' Unquote. You'll recall from our first meetings that these are the precise areas in Tamara's brain that show such greatly increased activity. Their studies had a reasonable number of subjects but included just one single adolescent. But we already know that the brain undergoes major changes and structural reorganization during the adolescent years. So we have absolutely no idea about what effect hormones will have on Tamara with her unusually elevated brain activity and we'd prefer not to take any chances."

~~~~~

When Tamara returned to school from her appointment, she noticed that the RFID tag scanner unit at the entrance door had been taken apart and a man was disconnecting the wires leading to its antenna loop. She stopped and looked at the parts on the cart.

"Interested in that stuff, miss?" the man inquired.

"A little. What's happening with this?" she asked innocently. Tamara knew that this was the third time that this unit was being replaced since she had zapped the previous two units installed there.

"Taking this damned thing out," he answered. "If you ask me, this whole stripping idea was... well, forget it. We can't keep these miserable sensor things working. Why they want to keep trying to replace 'em is beyond me."

"What happened to it?" Tamara asked, wondering just what her zapper did to the units to make them fail.

"I'm not sure," the man replied. "I'm just a repair tech for the district. I think the whole antenna circuit is fried. There are a lot of bad scanners in the schools in this part of Miami and the district is getting tired of paying to replace them."

"What happens with the broken ones?"

"I've been taking them back to the shop; they're just sitting in a pile there. The school district bought 'em—the state makes the schools buy their own. I can't send them back to the state supply place since they won't accept returns. Just toss 'em, I guess. Got over a dozen bad ones now."

Tamara thought, *Go for it!* Then, “Hey, I like to tinker with gadgets. I know someone at the med school electronics shop and he gave me an old broken EEG to work on. If you’re just gonna toss this thing, could I have it to mess around with?”

The man shrugged. “Sure, why not. The whole tag reader section is toast.”

“Thanks,” Tamara said as she stuffed the circuit board back into its case, wound its wires up, and shoved it into her backpack as she thought, *Ooo, I can’t wait to get this on the bench.*

High school classes ended at 2:30 p.m. so Tamara could get to the medical school, just three miles away, giving her enough time in the electronics shop to do a little work on the reader unit. When she walked in, Tim was working on an infusion pump.

“Hi there. What brings you in—you didn’t say you’d be here today.”

“Nope. Got a new toy. Broken RFID scanner from the school. Guy was taking it out and when I asked nicely, he gave it to me.”

“Uh huh. And you have no idea how it broke, I’m sure.”

“Of course, you’re sure. Actually I want to autopsy it. See what an EMF pulse does to the scanners. So this is an educational investigation.”

Tim snorted. “Right. You keep on believing that.”

Tamara began working on the device and soon found that the section of the circuit containing the comparator IC had been overloaded.

“Hey Tim, this thing’s got a USB port, why? Oh, and this here must be a microprocessor and here’s a RAM chip. This is a data section. Why would a scanner collect data?”

Tim came over and looked too. “Interesting. Let me get the laptop and analyzer.”

They connected the laptop to the USB port and then Tamara connected the scanner’s power leads to a power supply. Up popped a menu on the laptop screen. Tamara looked at the menu.

“There’s a WiFi option? Huh. Let me see...” She selected more options and looked at the laptop screen. “Okay, this thing stores about 100 ... no, exactly 128 tag IDs in memory—maybe the last ones read? And it looks like it sends them to an address... let’s see if the web address is stored in the system... it is. There’s a WiFi setup app here too so maybe it was paired with the high school’s WiFi to use the school’s internet. Tim, can you turn on the laptop’s WiFi and let’s see what it does.”

What the scanner did was to connect to the state’s Stripped in Florida database, and using the scanner’s built-in authentication, allowed the ID which the unit had just read to be transmitted to the state database, if the connected but separate camera module had also signaled that it had detected clothing on that person.

“Hey, I can spoof this,” Tamara said, and pulled out of her backpack one of the SiF chips she had gotten from Dr John. “The ID scanner part is dead but I see a menu option for manually adding a chip ID code.”

She used her phone to get her sample tag’s ID, entered it, and shorted out the “camera detect” input pins on the board.

“Oh look,” she exclaimed, “it’s contacting the database. Oh boy, the whole database is open for reading now. It’s not even encrypted, damn, just a session token. The scanner must have set a session security token on the laptop. Way cool. Let’s see if I can download the whole... yeah, there’s a choice: Excel or csv. ... Big file,” she said after two minutes of downloading.

Tim was back working on the infusion pump, but glanced over at her.

“What you gonna do with that file? It must be really private stuff, you know.” he commented.

“I have an idea for my high school. Most of the kids in the SiF program there hate it. We have sort-of uniforms—clothes like I’m wearing—and then those kids are forced to be naked. That’s terrible for them. I need to help them. This may help me find their names. Oh my...”

“What?” Tim asked.

“Just remembered. My folks found out from talking to my middle school principal last spring that the state gets reports of all sensor detections of clothed but chipped kids. And I used those sample chips to trigger some detectors. Just did this one here. These chips were registered to a kid but were never implanted. Wow, so they try to track down kids if officials can’t grab them on the spot...?”

Tim grunted. “I heard something about that. When they set up the SiF program, the cops in every city insisted that all violation calls would need to go through their non-emergency dispatch, so it looks like the state had to add the tag ID storage and reporting to the system since it would be rare to catch a kid just after a scanner reported him.”

“Ah, so that’s why the scanner works like that. Okay, you got an extra thumb drive I can use?”

Tamara got a USB flash drive from Tim and copied the data file over; then she puttered around a little more with the scanner circuit.

“I’m looking at the RF signal amplifier section of this circuit,” she told Tim, “and I have an idea for my zapper. If I tune it right, I can fry just the scanners’ signal amp sections rather than wiping out the whole IC itself. Then it won’t need as much power to work. The ID tags themselves are much easier to fry. That’ll save on its battery life.”

“Just what the world needs,” Tim muttered. “A more efficient chip killer.”

A bit later, “Hey Tim... borrow your signal analyzer, please? Got a new coil to test here. I think I got the right winding number.”

“Tamara, you *could* be doing something really productive, you know.”

“Hey, I’m helping kids. How is that not productive?”

Tim had no response to that.

## Chapter 14 - Unstripping, High School Version

Tamara was well into the second week of high school now and was enjoying her classes—mostly. She really liked participating in the discussions, but found that her doing so was getting her recognized as a nerd. But her love for learning soon overcame her reluctance to “put herself out there,” so she embraced the “nerd” within herself and didn’t let any name-calling bother her. She wanted to put some of her free time to good use, so she contacted Mrs Moore, her counselor, to tell her that she wanted to help tutor kids in math and science.

“Do you have any preference—like girls only or freshmen only?” Moore asked. “I know you’ve mastered the whole math curriculum and physics too. What about chemistry, biology, and the other sciences?”

“I don’t really teach when I tutor, Mrs Moore. I found the best way to help kids understand the material is to guide them so that they can discover how to learn the material on their own. I show them how to read critically and how to study as we work through their questions. And I have no grade or gender preferences. The kids I want to work with really have to want to learn, though.”

“We get a lot of requests from the team coaches,” Moore told her. “The athletes need to maintain their grades to stay eligible. Can I refer the athletes to you?”

“Sure. Just so they know that I won’t do their work for them.”

Moore added Tamara to the school’s list of tutors. Tamara also had accepted the principal’s offer for her to be a student aide—her plan about how she could help the SiF kids in her school had taken shape nicely. When she first began thinking about disabling the high school students’ RFID tags, she had realized that waiting at the door and using her device there, like she had done at her middle school, wouldn’t work very well here. That was because students could enter the building through more than one door—not to mention that this school had many more students.

The problem of her being able to find out the SiF students’ names appeared to be solved when she learned that one of her jobs was to scan the daily student attendance reports into an office computer. If she simply put a flash drive into a USB port of the computer, she could save a copy for herself. But that wasn’t ethical—possibly not legal either. But her chip zapper wasn’t exactly legal either. Using it very definitely broke the SiF law. Would copying a file be more or less illegal? She needed some advice.

“Mom,” Tamara asked after school that day, “I have a legal question where a number of ethical issues interfere with the law. You know how Dad says that laws address the least common denominator of society—like one size fits all? It’s not possible for a law to consider all cases and situations, so it’s written so broadly that sometimes innocent people can get trapped into violating it?”

“That’s true, but a society without laws is basically an anarchy. What’s troubling you, dear?”

“It’s how to help kids at my school who are in SiF and don’t wanna be in it. I told you what I did at Thomas Mann. I can’t do that here... too many kids, and they have different schedules and there are a lot of doors to cover. A school district tech gave me a broken scanner and its circuits gave me access to the entire state SiF list. They didn’t even bother to encrypt it; shows you how much value the state puts on information security.”

“So what’s your ethical dilemma?” Nadine asked.

“I can use the state list to match names with kids in my school. Then I can contact them, anonymously, and offer to inactivate their chips. But I would need to get a copy of the daily attendance report. I scan them most every day so getting a copy would be simple and no one would know. It’s the ethics that bother me. Is helping the kids higher on the ethical scale than, I assume, doing something which violates a trust issue? No one told me that I can’t copy that info but I’m sure I’m not supposed to.”



Nadine stopped to think. “I should tell you not to do this, you know. But a big concern I have, in all my years of counseling my congregation, is of the power one group has over another. Holding power over someone is a form of coercion, and if exercising that power causes harm, then it’s wrong. However, to react against that power, if that action causes harm, then that’s wrong too.

“Your ethical dilemma seems to fall into a power imbalance situation, so we need to look at its parts...”

“That’s it, exactly,” Tamara interrupted excitedly. “The state with the SiF law is causing harm to the kids, forcing them to do something that they hate or think is morally wrong.”

“Okay then, the state, that’s the stronger power, and it’s causing harm to individuals. We need to look at the remedy you propose to be sure that the remedy doesn’t cause harm to anyone else. Let’s list all of the actors in your dilemma.”

Tamara looked confused. “‘Actors’? Like in a movie?”

“Oh, no, dear. Sorry. ‘Actor’ in the sense of someone taking an action. Like the kids needing to be naked.”

“Oh, got it. Yeah, the kids. Then, the SiF law... so that would be the state—Florida. Individuals? Like the SiF officials?”

“That works. Who else?”

“Um, the school, since I’d be copying a school file. So the principal? Secretary?”

“Maybe the school district officials too and even the school board members,” Nadine amended. “Can you think of anyone else you’d affect?”

“Um, no? Who else is there?”

“How about the parents of the kids?”

“Oh! Right, we need to think of them, of course. See, I knew you were very smart, Mom.”

“No brown-nosing the judge, honey. So you’ve identified the actors. Now, where does any power imbalance occur?”

“Should I list them in decreasing power? Each, um, actor has some power, I guess.”

“Doing it like that would be fine.”

“Okay, at the top are the Florida officials. They made the law and enforce it. Oh, there are police and courts too—are they actors?”

“Well, you can think of them as part of the Florida group.”

“Good. Hey, there are really two, um, strands, here, Mom. The SiF strand and the um, remedy strand, right? They should be separate, right?”

“I’m glad you saw that; very good, dear. Go on.”

“Okay, so Florida officials and then parents and then kids. The officials force the parents to harm the kids, sort of. Anyway, it’s the kids who are harmed. Florida has the power over the parents who have power over the kids. The kids have a tiny amount; resisting if they can, I guess.”

Nadine nodded. “That’s one strand or chain.”

Tamara went on. “Then my remedy would be in the other chain. Florida at the top, since I’d be breaking that

law. Next, the district officials and finally the school officials, because I'd be using school files. Oh, the kids and parents would be in my chain too, I guess. Duh. My remedy affects them mostly."

"So you have the actors now, and their relative power over each member—the links in the chains. Now consider the harm caused to people in both chains."

Tamara frowned. "I mentioned the SiF harm to the kids. My remedy is to fix that and break some laws and rules when I do. In the SiF chain, my remedy causes no personal harm to Florida officials since they or their jobs would not be personally harmed if kids began wearing clothes. Of course, if the SiF program is stopped, some jobs might end, but that's what? A theoretical harm?"

"You could view it that way."

"Good, then comes my remedy chain. I think I need to go up the chain with this one. Using the student list from the school benefits the kids and possibly the parents; the parents don't have to worry about their kid exposing them to a fine for breaking the SiF clothing law. We already know that the state can't do anything to harm the kids or parents when a failed tag is involved—you found that out from what happened at Thomas Mann. My having the student list doesn't harm the school officials personally since they wouldn't know it was copied and used. The same with the district officials; no one there would be personally harmed."

Nadine smiled. "That's a good analysis. Now, what's the score? Benefit versus harm?"

"Can I do the chains again?"

Nadine nodded.

"Okay, The Florida SiF chain harms kids themselves, and the parents too, a little, I suppose. There's no personal benefit from the SiF law to anyone. The remedy chain benefits kids personally and harms no one, the same way. Oh, and I suppose I need to think of any property damage too."

"Good point. That's a part of the harm equation," Nadine said.

"Sure. Okay, the RFID tags will be fried. But the parents bought them and paid to have them inserted. The value of a chip is tiny—about a dollar, Sue told me. The SiF fee is really a registration fee, not a chip purchase. So I guess the property damage is about zero."

"I suppose that's a valid argument, but there could be other points of view," Nadine observed. "So how does thinking about harm versus benefit make you view your dilemma?"

"Um... Is it okay to violate the law in a good cause?" Tamara asked. "I think that if a law is bad... like it discriminates, or maybe even interferes with other laws, it can be ignored. Right?"

"There are a lot of instances of that happening, honey. Look at the recent past. Civil rights protestors would violate laws; there's a term for this, it's 'civil disobedience.' Basically, civil disobedience is illegal non-violent political action which is done for moral reasons. Some people even consider that in certain situations, doing property damage is sometimes morally permissible."

"Oh! Sure, I remember about that in my civics class. So if no one is personally harmed by my using school records, and the purpose is to fix the personal harm to others, then it's morally okay to break some rules."

"And in your case, being extremely careful in the process," Nadine nodded.

"Oh thank you, Momma! This was a great help," Tamara exclaimed as she hugged her mother.

Tamara decided that she would copy the attendance file the next time she was given that job.

~~~~~

It wasn't long before Tamara got her first tutoring referral. It was a junior girl who was falling behind in her math class.

"I just don't get this geometry crap," Olivia complained after Tamara greeted her.

"You did take Algebra I, right?"

"Yeah, and I did okay, a 'B' in the class."

"Well, that's got concepts that can be harder for lots of people," Tamara told her. "Where is geometry hardest for you—I know it's only been two weeks."

"It's all the names of things, I guess. I mix them up. I confuse area and perimeter. Circles? Circumference, radius..."

"Yeah, I know. Diameter, chord, tangent, interior angle... Right?"

"Yes. And the proofs of theorems."

Tamara nodded. "Sure. You named the keys to learning geometry. I'll show you how it works and we'll have fun along the way too. Learning terms is just memorizing, like learning spelling. Let's look at the terms used for the circle's area, okay? So take a circular flatbread that's covered in cheese and tomato sauce. It has a radius of 'z' and a depth of 'a.' Where does it get its name from?"

Olivia looked at Tamara blankly. "Huh?"

"It's Pi times 'z' times 'z' times 'a.' Pizza!"

Olivia giggled. "Oooo. Not funny!"

"A tangent? That's a man who spends all summer at the beach."

"Not fair, Tamara." Olivia was smiling broadly now.

"No? Then you won't like what a rectangle is: a smashed angle."

"Oh my god, Tamara."

"What's another name for an adorable angle? Acute angle."

"Tamara, please..." Olivia was laughing now.

"What angle is the best one to take to approach any problem? The try-angle!"

"Oh jeez... No, stop it. Do you always do that?" Olivia asked, laughing.

Tamara tried to make a serious face. "Who, me? Yes, I do. I enjoy helping people learn things and if they laugh, it helps them learn. It's fun, right? Let's learn some terms now and try to make them into puns. Then you'll never forget them, guaranteed."

At the end of the session, Olivia was so happy that she hugged Tamara.

"Oh, you were awesome, Tamara!" she gushed. "I think I can see how to do some of the theorems now, too."

"Good," Tamara said. "Just remember; think of the postulates and basic theorems you're learning now as playing cards. Then you play them when you have more complicated problems to work out. See you next time?"

"For sure."

Word of Tamara's tutoring abilities rapidly spread and she soon became one of the more popular tutors at Edison.

### *Mid-September*

In mid-month, Tamara brought home a letter to Nadine and Wilson telling them of a parents' meeting the following week. The meeting was to discuss the school district's plans to begin the Naked in School Program in Miami. Miami Edison High was not on the list of schools to begin the Program because their graduation rate was below the school district's cutoff. But the principal wanted parents to know what was happening in the state and the rest of the school district.

The next day, Wilson came home with a newspaper.

"Hey, honey," he called to Nadine and greeted her with a kiss. "Ray gave me this newspaper."

He opened it.

"Tallahassee *Beacon*?" Nadine asked. "Why did he have a Tallahassee paper?"

"He has a sister living there. She's a high-school counselor in the city and Ray says she sees kids in the SiF program who are depressed. You know Ray has two teen boys; well, they were caught skinny-dipping and Ray is facing having them put into the SiF program or he faces a huge fine. His sister mentioned that she knows some parents in her own school district who were faced with a similar penalty, so she told him to get the paper because an article in it mentions how some parents got the fines thrown out. She also told him that in another case, the parents moved to Georgia—it's only about fifteen miles from her school—and they're commuting. Those kids are in a Georgia school now. Anyway, she told Ray to get this paper because there's an exposé of the whole SiF program in it. He gave it to me after he read it because he remembers my telling him about Tamara's run-in with the SiF people."

"What's in the exposé?" Nadine asked as Tamara came into the room and Wilson greeted her.

"Hi, sweetie. I was telling your mom about this exposé of the SiF program that this newspaper published yesterday.

"The report starts by talking about how the newspaper got into doing the investigation. The reporters wrote that teachers in the area schools had began noticing that there were fewer and fewer naked kids in school as the year passed. So the reporters watched at a number of Tallahassee schools to see how many stripped kids were showing up. The state SiF records showed 8 percent of the kids in the Tallahassee area were stripped but the reporters saw far fewer than that. A lot of stripped kids in the Tallahassee area were getting around the law and escaping detection because they were wearing some kind of arm band. They were clothed chipped kids and the bands kept their chip from being detected. The reporters wrote that they found that instructions for making the arm band were all over the social media,. So they decided to look into the SiF program.

"The SiF program was supposed to earn the state money by charging a fee to strip kids, both residents and also tourists. The report in the paper covered tourists first. The people who proposed this program thought that by giving visitors to the state the option to strip their kids when they came to Florida, it would increase tourism and thus revenue. The article showed that for the first year or two, there was a bump in tourism but now the numbers are trending lower than before the SiF program got started."

"That's interesting... maybe at the beginning it was a novelty and that's worn off," Nadine commented.

Wilson continued. "That's apparently what happened. For state residents, then, the paper's reporters dug out some interesting facts. First, the registration costs—the state had to keep raising the price of registering a kid because the costs weren't keeping up with the revenue. Now the registration cost is high—\$150, and it costs the

parent at least \$186 for the doctor's visit to get the SiF chip implanted. So, at first, only about 80 percent of the parents who buy the SiF registration, now it's down to 60 percent, actually go through with having the chip implanted, especially when they see—and the kids see—the big honkin' needle that's used. Almost every doc will refuse to implant a chip if the kid isn't cooperative."

"I wondered about that," Nadine said. "What kid would want a big needle stuck into their arm?"

"Sure. And next is the part that Ray was interested in. The report covers the legal challenges to the very severe penalties for parents if their kids violated the SiF law. The article tells about a class-action suit in Jacksonville. There were eleven families in that area whose kids violated something in the law and their parents were each fined \$5000 and the children were given 500 hours of community service. Those families did a class-action lawsuit, saying that the penalties were ridiculous; they were excessive. Also, what kind of community service can a 10- or 11-year-old kid do? Also, that number of hours could mean two or even more years of service. The judge agreed and invalidated the penalties of the SiF law, as a violation of the maximum penalties permitted under another Florida law and it also violates the U.S. constitutional prohibition against 'cruel or unusual punishments.' The article reports that there were similar legal challenges in other courts in the state."

"What's that mean for the SiF program, then?" Nadine asked.

"Wait, there's more, honey. Look at this next section of the article. It's about the costs of running the program. The chips are the least of the costs. The reporters did an analysis of the infrastructure costs. The initial law mandated that each retail store in the state purchase and install the scanners for their shops. The merchants fought back against that unfunded mandate and the state lost. The paper reports that there are 273,723 retail shops in the state and the minimum cost of a scanner with installation is about \$1100. Just placing the scanners in retail stores alone comes to an expense of \$301.1 million at the lowest end, assuming just a single entrance door for each shop. Then add to that the schools, office buildings, public buildings, and everywhere else the state put the scanners and they came up with a scanner cost of not less than \$549 million. Then the state ordered 3 million tags at \$1.13 each. Add the cost of computers, office space, handheld scanners and all the rest... see, the total they report for infrastructure cost is \$786 million, minimum. And the annual operating costs for the program, they calculated, is \$7.2 million."

Tamara interrupted, "That's pretty much what I thought when I saw all those scanners they put everywhere! If Florida was paying for all that, I couldn't see how they'd ever get all that money back. Even in fifty years."

Wilson nodded. "Exactly, honey. That's just what this newspaper article reports—that for the state to recover just the initial infrastructure costs, when they started it, they needed to register more than 17.5 million kids at the initial fee of \$45 each to recoup the infrastructure. The report says that there are only about 2.5 million kids and teens, ages 10 to 20, in Florida. Raising the fee to \$150, as they recently did, just makes the number of kids needed to be registered to pay for the infrastructure a little less than 6 million, double the number of kids in the state—and even then, *every* kid in the state would have to be registered. Tourists contribute only a small fraction of the revenue, less than 2 percent. And, the report says, that doesn't even account for the annual operating costs—to recover just the annual costs, it would require registering about an additional 50,000 kids each year. There just aren't that many kids in Florida to support that cost. Their report's conclusion is that the SiF program is a huge drain on Florida's funds, not the fiscal lifesaver it was represented to be when the legislature passed that law."

Nadine shook her head. "Couldn't they see how much it would cost before they even began the program?"

"You'd think they would do some sort of analysis, wouldn't you? Apparently no one did, or perhaps someone did and was ignored," Wilson remarked.

Nadine nodded. "If Tamara could see that having to set up so many sensors would cause a funding problem, I

can't understand why the state officials couldn't see that."

"So maybe now they'll stop the SiF program?" Tamara asked hopefully.

Wilson snorted. "Not likely, honey. Not unless there's a huge public outcry. We'll see."

~~~~~

At school, Tamara had copied the list of students from the scanned daily attendance reports to a flash drive and, using a computer matching program on that list against the state SiF list, she now had the names of the SiF kids attending Edison. She grouped the names into their respective grades. There were 68 names, broken down about evenly by grade. Knowing that complex plans are the most likely ones to have difficulties, Tamara spent a lot of time considering her options for how to zap their RFID tags. All her best ideas would require her to use her "pushing" ability and she was not sure that the *lwa* would help her if she needed any additional assistance.

*Nothing ventured, nothing gained*, she sighed, and began working out how she could pull off what she considered her best approach to do the job. This would be to get the SiF kids, grouped by grade, into one single place where she could use her updated zapper—version 2.1, as she thought of it fondly—to fry all the chips at once. Settling on that approach as being the best one, Tamara began making the necessary preparations. She had tuned the EMF pulse that her zapper emitted to the frequency that the SiF RFID chips used; this would increase the chips' energy absorption efficiency, making less power needed to overload their circuits. She had also devised an RF "reflector" for her device, enabling her to send more of the pulse it emitted in the general direction she intended, and finally, using the information she gleaned from the damaged scanner, she had figured out a way to increase her zapper's power output. To test her improved device, she sacrificed one of her SiF chips—and was delighted to see that the chip was zapped from about sixty feet away.

Her plan needed a cover to account for the chips' inactivation and that would involve having the kids participate in some way—and then she thought of cell phones. She could pin the blame on a cell-phone app. That meant that the kids would need to get instructions to use their phones while leaving no physical evidence of those instructions. She decided that the best way to do that was to use an on-line document, so using the computers in the Media Center room to display the document would be simplest. Also, the location of the zapping needed to be in a somewhat public area so she could be close to the kids without being noticed as being out of place. Again, the Media Center room was the ideal choice for the location, since part of it was set up with computer work stations and the other part had library and A/V facilities. This would allow Tamara to be seated in the library area but not be noticed as being involved with the SiF kids at the computers. How her zapper might affect the computers and monitors in the Media Center—not to mention any cell phones—was a bit concerning to her. But after careful, and clandestine, testing, she learned that the computers, in their metal housings, weren't affected. Neither were cell phones. The monitor screens blinked after a pulse but were otherwise unaffected.

Her first preparation step would be to arrange for using the Media Center room. So, three days before her personal D-day, she "pushed" the technology teacher to reserve the computers for four periods on her chosen day for the SiF kids to participate in a special project that she had invented, a fictitious state SiF survey about how kids were adapting to being always naked.

The next step was a more difficult one because she would need to have Mrs Maria Leonard, the assistant principal, send notes to each teacher who had SiF kids in their classroom, releasing them during the designated period for their grade. Tamara did *not* want to forge the AP's name, so she prepared envelopes, one for each grade, containing her lists of student names and she attached a printed note on school letterhead to each envelope which read,

"These students are needed for a brief state-designed survey project in the Media Center during the [insert number] period on November 11. The office secretary should send this notice to the appropriate

teachers. Please deliver these instructions to each teacher today. If the student has a mobile phone, have him or her bring it, as it's required for the project."

She printed identical notes for the ninth graders for the second period, tenth graders for the third, juniors for the fifth, and seniors for the sixth period. And by having the secretary match up each student's name with their proper class for that period, Tamara wouldn't need to access any student's record.

Then she left the completed envelopes with their student lists and instructions for the assistant principal and "pushed" the suggestion to her that the technology teacher had sent the lists and not to question what this was about. Later that day, she was relieved to see that the secretary was working on the SiF student lists.

Next, she left instructions for the Media Center specialist that just the students on the four lists, copies of which she provided, were to be allowed in the computer area during their selected period. Her instructions implied that Mrs Leonard and the technology teacher were directing this project. Then she "pushed" the suggestion that the specialist wouldn't notice anything unusual about the group.

The final preparatory step was to write the instructions for the kids to follow. The instructions would appear on the computer monitors and would consist of a text file which she would save on a web cloud-storage site. She had already set one up for this single purpose.

Tamara couldn't sleep the night before her personal D-day; she was so wound up. *Did I think of everything? What if the kids don't get the notes? What if the internet quits? What if...*

She spent an anxious morning the next day, her D-day, and just before the second period bell rang, the final part of her plan began.

Using the pass she had gotten to skip her scheduled second, third, fifth, and sixth-period classes, when the second period bell sounded, Tamara rushed to the Media Center room, where, during the flurry of activity of the class-changing time, she put an instruction sheet next to each work station. Then she sat at a work table near the computer area, making herself "little" so she wouldn't be noticed, and waited. There were just seven clothed kids in the Media Center when the period began, all sitting on the library side of the room. After the bell rang to start the period, about five minutes later, naked kids began arriving, and the specialist began dutifully checking them off her list.

"Go sit at the computers," she told them. "There are instruction sheets there. Two to a work station."

Then she turned back to her work, ignoring any further activity in the room.

"What's all this about—hey, everyone here is SiF?" one boy asked. "Hope it's not more of the damn state buggin' me..."

"Here're some instructions," a girl said. "Wonder why they said to bring our cells?"

The instructions gave one task: to enter a web address in the browser and read the document there and everything would be explained. After a bit of fumbling, everyone was reading the on-screen document.

"Greetings. It's come to our attention that most, if not all, of the kids in the Stripped in Florida program would be delighted to be able to wear clothes again. We can help you if you want to stop being naked. If you **DO** want to remain in the SiF program, this is your chance to stay in it—leave this room **now**, because after following the instructions below, the RFID tracking chips in your arms will no longer work and you will be able to wear clothes again. This is your **last chance** to leave.

"Everyone still here who wants to be here? Good. Now this is important. Tell **NOBODY** about what happened here. It's not likely to happen, but if you blab, you could get into trouble, and

no one likes trouble, right? Having a damaged chip isn't your fault, we have confirmed that, and the SiF people can't force you to get it replaced, either. We have confirmed that fact too.

"Here are the steps you need to take. When you use the phone app you'll be installing, you'll know that there are many people who are against the SiF stupidity and the phone app, together with the website that this doc is on, will help to inactivate your arm chip. In other words, this only will work this one time, right here, right now. Don't try this at home—it won't work there. Got it? Are you still with us? Good."

Tamara could hear chuckling from some of the groups as they read that last paragraph. *Time to get ready*, she thought. She watched the kids as they kept reading and a few seconds later, when she saw most of them begin to fumble with their phones, she fired her zapper.

"Here we go. Go to your phone's app store and search 'network analyzer' and install it. If you don't have a phone, no worries, sit next to someone who has one. Within three feet will work. All done?"

"Now open the app and at the very bottom of the screen, look for 'LAN.' Select that and on the screen that opens, press 'Scan' at the top. Don't bother reading what appears in the app—the chip in your arm is dead now and you're free to wear clothes again."

There was a minor commotion from the kids as the words sunk in and the specialist called for them to be quiet.

"Look, there's more instructions," a girl spoke. Everyone turned back to their screens.

"Don't believe the chip's dead? Go to your app store again, search for 'nfc,' and select 'NFC Scanner.' Install that and open it; then move your phone over the spot on your arm where the chip is. If the app doesn't show a ten-character alphanumeric code, your chip is dead.

"Congrats! Now go back to class and remember, 'mum's the word.'"

"And go get some clothes! Jeez, these Florida kids!"

As the kids read the last paragraphs, they started laughing and then began high-fiving each other. They began filtering out of the room, talking about how their parents would react, and their friends, and...

Tamara quickly reset the web page containing her document, since she was using a different cloud-storage address for each grade so the document the ninth graders saw would no longer be accessible. Everything went smoothly as she repeated her setup with the next two grades, and then it was the seniors' turn. Just as most members of the group hit "Scan" on their apps, Mrs Leonard rushed into the room with the technology teacher following.

"What are all of you doing?" she ordered.

Everyone looked around, embarrassed and confused.

"Well? What is this all about?" she insisted.

A girl ventured, "Our teachers told us to come here. Then we were told to go to this web address." She held up the paper.

Meanwhile, Tamara had already zapped the kids' chips and then used her tablet to delete the document on the website. Then she refreshed the folder that the doc was in. But the doc would remain on the computer screens until moving the displayed page refreshed the view, whereupon the document would vanish. She tried "pushing" a suggestion to the kids to refresh their browser, but she was too far to affect most of them.



“What’s on that page on the screen?” Leonard asked.

She looked at a nearby screen and read, “Don’t bother reading what appears in the app—the chip in your arm is dead now and you’re free to wear clothes again.”

Leonard tried scrolling the document on the screen to keep reading and the document vanished.

“How do I get this page back?” she asked.

Someone handed her the sheet with the web address and she entered the address but got a “Page not Found” error message.

“Was this something about your SiF chips? Something that deactivated them?” she asked.

After a lot of quizzing of the kids, the only thing that Leonard learned was that somehow an innocuous phone app, together with a vanished web page, was supposed to have inactivated every SiF chip in the group. But she didn’t know of any easy way to confirm that. She learned that none of the kids had any idea that their chips were to be deactivated; in fact, they had no idea why they were asked to go to the Media Center in the first place. The reason that Leonard came to investigate was because of a widespread disturbance in the school about all the SiF kids’ chips no longer working and people had noticed that they had been sent to the Media Center earlier in the day. Apparently none of the SiF kids had talked about what happened to them in the Media Center—other people were able to put the pieces together.

That evening on the local news, there was an item about a strange incident at Miami Edison High School where virtually every kid’s SiF chip had been deactivated, apparently by an ordinary cell phone app, and state officials were frantically trying to get the app’s developers to explain how that had happened. Of course, the app’s developers had absolutely no inkling of what the Florida officials were talking about.

After the news, Wilson looked at his daughter. “That was your doing, Tamara?”

She nodded. “Yep.”

He chuckled. “Very creative. What was the deal with the cell phone app?”

Tamara grinned. “Creative misdirection. It gave them a technical reason to look into to explain why the chips were broken, instead of trying to discover how it really was done.”

Wilson laughed. “That’s called a red herring, you know. A misleading clue.”

“Huh? Why? Where does that come from?”

He shrugged. “Dunno—maybe because it smells fishy? Go look it up. So how did you get the school officials to help you—you couldn’t have done that alone. ‘Pushing’ them?”

“Yeah. Just a tiny bit. I ‘suggested’ things to them that they usually do anyway, so they thought that doing what I wanted was completely normal.”

“You’re sure you won’t get in trouble? Anyone see you doing ‘stuff’?” he made finger quotes.

“Either I was doing my usual office aide job or I was in the library along with a dozen other kids, so no, nobody saw me doing anything out of the ordinary.”

“Good. I wonder if we’ll hear anything more about this at tomorrow night’s parents’ meeting.”

They would hear plenty at that meeting.

## Chapter 15 - A Naked in School Program?

The parents' meeting the following evening began as an unruly affair. Many parents were worked up about the recent SiF news: first, the exposé in the Tallahassee newspaper, which had been picked up by all the remaining newspapers in the state; second, news of a scandal in the state government which had just broken, involving payoffs to elected legislature members to ensure that the SiF program would be implemented despite its costs; and third, rumors about the SiF chip deactivation incident in the high school the day before.

Principal Barello tried to restore order as questions were shouted at her.

"Please! Please settle down. I'll answer your questions but let's do this... orderly. I'll tell you what we know about yesterday's incident, then answer questions about it. After that, I'll talk about the subject for this informational meeting."

After everyone got settled, she began.

"What happened yesterday is a mystery to the whole staff and faculty here. We carefully reviewed everyone's recollections and the most coherent story we can assemble is that Mr Bill Jones, our technology teacher, had a note on his calendar from a few days ago about a state survey in some high schools, to be conducted by computer, about how kids in the SiF program were adapting to being always naked. He didn't recall when he entered that in his schedule and has no idea where he got the request to set that survey up. We found out today that there was no such survey. He reserved time on our Media Center's computers and his calendar note said that Mrs Leonard, our assistant principal, would send the selected students to complete the survey. That was our earliest written record of the event, from four days ago.

"Then Mrs Leonard noticed that the office secretary had copies of instructions and lists of the students, by grade, who had been selected to participate in the survey. The secretary told me that she had assumed that the lists came from Mrs Leonard, but Mrs Leonard said she had no knowledge of any such lists and that it appeared to her that Mr Jones had provided the lists; however, he denied having any knowledge of the names of any students enrolled in the SiF program and there's no reason that he would even have any such names—and even stranger, there was no way for him to get the names, without Mrs Leonard knowing about it.

"But somehow, every single name on the four lists that the secretary had was a SiF child. The school doesn't even keep a separate list of students in SiF; a notation about their school dress code exemption only appears in their individual personal records. Those student records are quite secure; Mrs Leonard did not prepare those lists, so how those student names came to be on the lists is baffling to us. The only possible way is that the county SiF office sent the lists to the school, but they deny doing that. They claim that they don't have children's names associated with any school.

"That's just the first mystery. The second is what happened to inactivate the chips. There seems to be a cell phone app involved, but the technicians who looked at that app said that it was not remotely possible that that particular app could inactivate RFID chips. There was a website involved too, but that was a document cloud-storage site and the document on it disappeared just as Mrs Leonard began looking at it. The techs told us that it would be impossible for any website to transmit a signal to damage a RFID chip. The cloud-storage account that the doc was in was a temporary one created with an anonymous email address and was only active for a few hours, according to the techs who investigated.

"So in summary, we're at a loss to explain how and why this happened; the only concrete fact is that many or most of the students in the school—that we know of—had their chips inactivated. We interviewed two children whose chips weren't affected—they came to school naked today—and they both said that they were afraid that their parents would punish them if they stayed in the room when the chips were... whatever was done to them. Other students who were in the room will only say that they were told to report to the Media Center room and

were extremely surprised to learn that they could get their RFID chips inactivated. And quite happy about it, I might add. Every student who we asked had the distinct impression, when they were reading the vanished on-screen document, that some kind of large organization was behind the chip-inactivation, and something in the doc's wording suggested to many that it was an out-of-state organization.

"I sincerely hope you have no questions because I told you everything we know about this totally weird event."

Someone in the audience came up to the mike in the aisle anyway.

"Dr Barello, this isn't about the incident—it's a general question. How do you feel about the SiF program in your school? If you decided to end it, what happened would be the ideal way to do it."

Barello stared at the man. "Sir, I hope you're not attempting to impugn my character by suggesting that either I or my staff would break a state law by interfering with the SiF program. I'm not a fan of it; the SiF causes real classroom management issues and plays havoc with our dress-code policy. But as a public employee, I am sworn to follow state policies and laws. Other questions?"

A woman stepped up. "Ma'am, what is it about a cell phone that can damage one of those chip things? Does that mean cell phones are dangerous?"

Barello shook her head. "I'm positive that cell phones are completely safe. I have zero knowledge of the technology, so I really can't tell you any more than what I mentioned earlier."

Another woman. "What will happen with those SiF kids? Are they being punished?"

"They were all very smartly dressed in the proper clothing and smiling when they came to school today. And the SiF scanners at the school doors were quite happy to let them pass without sounding an alarm, showing that their chips no longer work. What will happen to them? I heard that a similar thing happened at Thomas Mann Middle School... last year? Two years ago? In that case, the SiF people tried and failed to get the parents to have replacement chips implanted in their kids when those chips stopped working. The way the law reads, without a chip, you can't be naked in public and a dead chip is no chip. No chip, no punishment. I truly hope you have no more questions because the last two really didn't have much to do with how our weird incident happened. No one? Wonderful. Let's move on to the scheduled topic.

"Why the officials in charge of education and other social areas are so concerned with the nudity of our children is beyond me, but that's what we are facing with both the SiF program and now in the Naked in School Program. The NiS Program—I'll call it the 'Program' from now on—is a federal invention and you know, from the materials you got from the school district earlier this year, that it's a kind of federal social engineering project designed to make children comfortable with their developing bodies. I'm not going to debate the merits of this with anyone because we, at the school level, have zero voice in the Program's design or how it's administered.

"So far, Florida has been unable to start the Program in its schools basically because of the SiF Act. Florida law currently prohibits a child's nudity unless they are enrolled in SiF. Legal penalties, plus fines, are assessed if a child, who is not in SiF, is naked outside the child's home—or in any public space, except in locker rooms or similar places.

"The SiF law authorizes a court to assess a \$5000 fine and community service for violators and mandates that the child's parents must enroll their child in SiF if the child is naked in any public setting and doesn't have an implanted chip. On the other hand, the NiS Program requires a child's nudity in many public places—while traveling to school, while at school, and while at all school functions, including public ones like football games.

"The difficulty that the Florida education department is currently facing is that the SiF program is enrolled as a

state law but the NiS Program is a curriculum requirement, mandated by a federal law, that the state education department is required to implement. Without carving a loophole in the SiF law, the state can't start the NiS Program in our schools. And with the current scandal surrounding the SiF law in the capital, legislators aren't willing to even touch the SiF law, it's such a political hot potato now.

"Another major impediment to starting the NiS Program is Florida's sex abuse laws. When they passed the SiF law, to try to protect children from sexual predators and abuse, the legislature made the abuse, assault, and battery laws pertaining to kids so strict, that should a school official even *suggest* that a child strip as a NiS Program participant, that could get him a twenty-year prison sentence for sexual assault. So those laws would need to be changed too, or an exemption made. But what legislator would stick his neck out as being in favor of liberalizing child-abuse laws?

"Finally, here at Miami Edison High, although we're not proud of it, our current graduation rate is just below the cutoff that the school district has set to start the NiS Program in Miami-Dade high schools. That is, whenever it starts. So whatever happens at state level, it won't affect our school this year and probably not even the following year.

"I just wanted to give all of you parents this heads-up on the Program to try to dispel any damaging rumors, which I'm sure you know can upset and terrify your children about things like forced nudity in the schools. That issue remains, even given their experience in seeing the SiF kids. Seeing how classrooms work with SiF students in them makes me wonder how we'd ever control our classes if NiS Program rules are adopted. That's all I have on that topic; I can take questions now."

There were a few questions that addressed trivial issues and some that required making some really far-fetched assumptions. Barello shrugged those off as unanswerable at the current time. Then the meeting ended.

### ***Later that evening***

"So that Naked in School thing won't be starting this year?" Tamara asked after her parents told her about the parents' meeting.

"No. There're way too many hurdles for officials to clear," Wilson told her. "Also, the SiF program may also be in trouble because it costs the state too much to run. I'm guessing that it'll be left to limp along without Florida putting much more money into it. There's so much invested in the infrastructure that I'm sure the state won't simply drop it."

"Okay, I'll keep doing my little part in helping it go away," Tamara giggled.

She did indeed continue to do her part by using her improved zapper, triggering it whenever she came close to a naked kid. Soon it became widespread knowledge that if a SiF kid spent enough time in the Little Haiti and surrounding neighborhoods, their chip would become deactivated. SiF officials were extremely frustrated because very limited funds were available to learn why the chips were being affected in that particular area of the city.

### ***Miami Edison High School: January***

Tamara continued to do her part in the school's tutoring program too. After the holidays and with the end of the grading period, she had several requests to tutor some athletes. She had two boys and a girl who wanted help to raise their math grades. When she met one boy, a wrestling team member, she was concerned.

*Something's wrong, she mused. His aura tastes... bitter light orange? What's that about?*

She soon found out when the boy began making suggestive comments about her appearance.

“Hugh,” she said sharply, “you’re here to get class help. This isn’t a social event; we’re not on a date, and I don’t care for your comments.”

“But you’re cute, Tammie, and I want to get to know you better...”

“The name is Tamara. Now let’s get back to the math.”

He leered at her, “First you’ll need to kiss me. And I’ll show you I got something nice and hard for you.”

Tamara knew what the “bitter-light-orange” was now—some kind of predatory lust. She thought the guy was acting disgusting, so that’s what she decided to do about him—make him ill. She gathered a dark pink-colored taste with streaks of brown and gently “pushed” the aura to him.

“Hugh, this is how you’ll feel every time you see me,” she whispered to him as his face became ashen and he lurched away, running for the closest boys’ room.

After that incident, Tamara began to wonder about boys and the lack of attraction she felt for them.

*It seems that most are so immature, she thought. The ninth- and tenth-graders are still like little boys trying to act grown up. The older ones are clueless, jerks, or have a conceited, self-important attitude. Even the nerdy, shy boys don’t attract me. I don’t find that any boys are emotionally appealing and their physical appearance has no effect on me. Is there something wrong with me?*

She decided to ask her mother about her fears when she got home.

“Mom, I had something happen today; a boy started hitting on me and became very pushy. So I made sure that he won’t come near me anymore.”

“Not too damaging, I hope,” Nadine replied, smiling.

“Not really. A bit of nausea is all. But that made me wonder. I feel no attraction to any of the boys at school—they’re immature or too full of themselves, mostly. And if you ask me about girls, no, I’m not oriented that way either. I hear the girls talk about ‘hot guys’ who make them feel ... they say things like ‘all squishy inside.’ Is there something wrong with me?”

Nadine sighed and invited Tamara to sit on the couch with her.

“Tamara, honey, the blessing of your gift, your ability, that power contains a curse as well. You sense people’s emotions and auras and what you sense in them overrides any effect that their physical appearance may have on you. Those senses of yours probably don’t even let male posturing affect you. Because that’s what males do to attract females. All over the animal kingdom, you can see how male behavior is linked to attracting females. Teen girls, with their puberty hormones ruling their emotions, tend to respond to the posturing of teen boys. That even extends to the allure of the media stars. You’re simply immune to that. The guy who finally attracts you will be intellectually and emotionally compatible with you, so I wouldn’t worry. You’ll know when you’re ready to consider entering a romantic relationship. I was just like you until I met your father. I could sense in him his guiding *lwa*, *Ogorin*, and I knew that we were meant to be mates.”

“So you didn’t have any crushes growing up?”

“Nope. Just like you; I was fixated on my learning and had no time for boys.”

“Oh, that makes me feel loads better. I do have a number of friends, the kids I hang with, and some are boys. But I have no romantic feelings for anyone—not even the pop stars a lot of kids swoon over.”

“There’s that male posturing at work again—media stars use it. The female stars do similar things to attract in their own way. Music can be a powerful emotional and sexual attractant too,” Nadine told her. “So can acting.

Movies allow the viewer to imagine themselves in the scenes. It creates powerful fantasies. In one of my psych classes, I learned about associationism. That's where the mind's processes are connected from one state to the next and if the person feels rewarded, even if the reward is only imagined, they can get great pleasure. Now see what you've done, gotten me into a lecture mode."

Tamara shook her head. "Oh no, *Manman*, that was an awesome explanation. I think from now on, as far as boys are concerned, if I feel that same taste from anyone, now I know how to deflect any amorous or lustful ideas. Like I do when I make myself 'small.'"

"Just remember, sweetie, that there's nothing at all wrong with you, okay?"

Tamara hugged her mother. "Okay. And thanks."

### ***Five months later***

The rest of Tamara's freshman year passed uneventfully. There was no news on both the SiF Act and the Naked in School Program on the political front, until mid-May when, once again from Tallahassee, the capitol, came a report from legislative observers, who noted that the House Education Sub-committee had begun discussing possible amendments to the SiF Act. The news article was a small one and was printed in the state news section of the *Miami Herald* on the third page. Little notice was taken about the news item at first, but two weeks later, that news had become a TV evening news topic.

The Alexandre family heard that there would be a report on the status of both the Stripped in Florida Act and the Naked in School Program on the *News at Six* program, so after dinner, they gathered to watch it. The item came on at about 6:10 p.m.

"Continuing with news about happenings in the capitol of the Sunshine State, we'll go to Janice Carver from the WMIA education desk. She's been following the latest situation in Tallahassee about what the state is doing about the languishing Stripped in Florida program and the proposed federal Naked in School Program. Welcome, Janice. Tell us what you found out about the problems with these programs."

"Thank you, Sylvia.

"The Florida legislature is still recovering from the bribery scandal over the Stripped in Florida program last year, which saw the resignation of three state legislature members, the dismissal of several department deputy heads, and multiple prosecutions. But now the Education Sub-committee of the House of Representatives has finally turned their attention to the Stripped in Florida bill itself. Until they took up this bill to review it for any needed changes earlier this month, they hadn't made any effort to amend it. A highly placed spokesman in the House told this reporter last year, off the record, that the House, quote, 'wasn't going to touch that bill; there's too much lost money there to try to fix it,' unquote.

"Well, now the time and need to fix it has arrived. With increasing pressure coming from the federal government for Florida to begin adopting the Naked in School Program in its high schools, the SiF Act needs changes, because many of its provisions would actually make many of the rules that the Naked in School Program requires to be followed illegal in this state. If Florida fails to immediately begin the Naked in School Program, federal officials have threatened to terminate their education funding. That currently amounts to 16 percent of the state's education budget in direct costs and another 9 percent in competitive grants—a quarter of the state education budget. Florida can't afford to ignore that.

"We reported on the Naked in School Program here last year and listeners may recall that the Program requires that each public high school adopt it into their school's curriculum. The Program's basic premise is supposedly to help teenagers to become more in touch with their developing bodies and

requires them to attend school and all school activities while naked. Program participants are required to permit other students to fondle them sexually; they must perform sexual acts as part of classroom activities; and in many cases, we have heard that the sexual acts can include copulation. Many critics of the Program claim that most of the required sexual activities are not voluntarily performed by participants. In addition, there are other controversial activities that students must perform while they are Program participants.

“The requirement to begin the NiS Program conflicts with the SiF Act, which makes it illegal for children to be publically naked unless they are registered in the SiF program. And the SiF Act contains strict provisions which provide enhanced penalties for abuse, assault, and battery in prosecutions where a child is the victim; while those provisions are in effect, even a verbal request to perform anything remotely resembling a sexual act, even a simple demand to disrobe, which is at the core of the Naked in School Program, could be prosecuted as a second-degree felonious assault.

“To discuss these issues, we invited Mr James Donnelly, the legal director of the Florida ACLU, to join us by video chat, and he’s on the line now. Mr Donnelly, our listeners would like your opinion of the SiF Act and how Florida can change it to allow the Naked in School Program; so, greetings to you and thanks for your time.”

“Hello, Janice. Glad to be here.”

“The role of the ACLU in opposing the SiF Act is well known. Your organization, although you couldn’t prevent the passage of the act, did get the legislature to include strict penalties for sexual abuse from potential predators and the ACLU was insistent that only the child’s parents or legal guardians, acting jointly, could register their child. And that the child’s registration must be done voluntarily by the parents or guardians.”

“That’s true, Janice. But we’ve seen cases of coercion—such as in cases where a child who isn’t in the SiF program was found naked in public—as part of the fines and penalties assessed to them, parents are being coerced into registering their child under threat of a larger fine. We try to fight such cases when they come to our notice.”

“So now, Mr Donnelly, we have the conflict between a Florida law and a federal education requirement. There’s a direct conflict here. What can you tell us about how the state intends to resolve these conflicts?”

“In the preliminary hearings, Janice, there was a lot of grandstanding about how the state needs to recover the money it lost in building out the infrastructure when it adopted the SiF program. It looks very much like the representatives have no intention of repealing that act, even though operating it is putting the state deeper in the hole every year it runs. Several of the committee members have been pushing to make registration in the SiF program mandatory as part of the Naked in School Program; that is, the children chosen as a participant must get enrolled in SiF. And since the intention of the feds who devised the Naked in School Program was to ensure that every high school child would eventually be a participant, those committee members are pushing their idea because every kid in the state would have to be naked, producing significant revenue.”

“But the SiF law specifically gives only parents the right to enroll their kids...”

“True, so that’s one part of the SiF Act which they are proposing to change. Our office has already sent our comments to the committee that we will contest any changes that impact the private lives of Florida citizens. We reminded them of the provision in a 1980 amendment to the Florida Constitution which says, ‘Every natural person has the right to be let alone and free from governmental intrusion into the

person's private life.' The Florida Supreme Court has ruled about that amendment, saying that it '...extends to all aspects of an individual's private life... and it ensures that the state cannot intrude into an individual's private life absent a compelling interest.'"

"A final question, Mr Donnelly. How would the Naked in School Program be affected by the abuse laws in the SiF Act?"

"From what I've read about the Naked in School Program, school officials would have a very difficult time following all the NiS Program rules without running afoul of those sections which address child-abuse situations. And writing loopholes into laws to accommodate special cases for relaxing legal provisions has always been fraught with major problems. That is a very difficult problem to overcome."

"I want to thank you very much for providing those insights, Mr Donnelly."

"My pleasure, Janice."

"Mr James Donnelly is the legal director of the Florida ACLU. This is Janice Carver reporting from the WMIA education desk; back to you, Sylvia."

Tamara was troubled. "Does this mean that they might be able to start the Naked in School Program here?" she asked.

Nadine shrugged but Wilson said, "There's a good possibility of that happening now. Money is a huge motivator and the state can't afford to lose the federal money."

### ***Early June***

Tamara finished her high school freshman year mostly a very happy girl. But there was one thing about which she wasn't sure just how happy she should be. Her school counselor had told her that her grade level was being advanced to a junior for the fall. She was too far advanced for any classes at the sophomore level now, and the classes she'd be taking were all at junior and senior levels, so she might as well be given that class status. Tamara had just one single class that was at her grade level—it was P.E. The academic class portion of P.E. for the tenth grade was Health and Hygiene and she had no issues with that kind of course, but it was the physical part of P.E. itself that she particularly liked. She found that she enjoyed running especially, but she was coming to like volleyball a lot and was okay at softball. She vowed that she'd keep up the running as her daily exercise since she liked how it made her feel. Tamara thought that, in the general scheme of her education, that moving up to junior class status was a reasonable step.

On the more good-news front, the medical school had helped her father locate a patent attorney whom he liked, and the patent applications for her new coil design had been duly filed. Getting the patent application started was critical since word of her invention had circulated widely in the small MRI community and several companies had already approached Tamara seeking licensing rights. After the attorney had been engaged and the patent application filed, her attorney was able to negotiate some very lucrative licensing packages with two companies. Tamara's college fund, plus a large trust fund, were created.

She was also pleased about her classes and her ability to keep working on projects in Dr Beauford's department. And during the next school year, she'd be able to take a physics class at the main University of Miami campus in Coral Gables, located about ten miles south of the high school. With her patent-licensing money, now she'd be able to afford a car service like Uber or Lyft so she could fit the university class into her high-school schedule.

And she was most happy about her success as an anti-SiF vigilante, zapping RFID chips and shop scanners with abandon, as she went on her daily runs. Her little camera zapper, being very portable, was still useful. She was



actually running out of targets. *Well*, she thought, *there's always Coral Gables*. But when she went to the university to register for her class, she noticed no naked kids on campus. When she completed her business in the registrar's office, she asked about that.

"I need to ask—I don't see any Stripped in Florida kids here or even any scanners...?"

The man helping her had begun grinning before she even finished and held his hand up to stop her question.

"Yeah, that dumb program. We're a private university and our campus is private property. When the SiF law was being worked out, Florida's private universities, public ones too, got exemptions. How, you may ask. Simple: all the universities told the legislators that none of us would admit a student who was actively in the SiF program and had to be naked. First, on this campus and our satellites, nudity is prohibited. Second, when a SiF kid turns eighteen, the state can't force him to remain naked—and most students beginning college are over eighteen. As an adult, an eighteen-year-old's own decisions overrule his parents' contract with the state. And finally, we don't have scanners because there's no enforcement here."

Tamara nodded. "Thanks. I wonder where else the SiF law doesn't apply."

"Most hospitals, I think. Courthouses—depends on the judges, I heard. I think all federal buildings too." he replied.

On the way home, Tamara thought, *What a really different experience university classes will be*.

~~~~~

Tamara continued to work at the medical school hospital on her MRI external patient-coil project and on developing more applications for the coil circuits she had invented and now had two additional pending patents for her device. One of the ideas she had was a miniaturized directed-pulse RF transmitter which emitted a pulse similar to a focused light beam. The RF emitters could be installed in external MRI coils and the coils with the device gave the best image resolution the radiologists had seen to date. This project gave her the idea to adapt that kind of transmitter circuitry into a third-generation RFID-tag zapper. Although it was still small, with its collimating reflector, the device was now too big to fit into a little camera housing like her previous versions; besides, she wanted to use a more robust battery. She wound up building the device into a pocket on her backpack and powered it with a 24-volt lithium-ion battery, all supplied by Tim's stock of surplus or used parts. With a hand-held trigger wirelessly connected to the device, she could now fry chips up to 80 feet away and RFID scanners within about 25 feet on its high-power setting. She added a low-power option for safety.

~~~~~

The University of Miami's summer term was almost finished for Tamara; only ten days were left, when she heard some disturbing news. When she returned from her class at the university, she was bursting to share her news and her mother happened to be home; she had swapped shifts with another worker.

"Hey Mom. In my math class at UMiami, I was talking to a girl—she's a senior—and she has a little brother who's gonna be a sophomore at Northwestern High—you know, just on the other side of I-95. She told me that Northwestern's starting the Naked in School thing in the fall. Her parents got the forms they had to sign last week and get this—there's no opting out."

"Your dad and I haven't heard anything about it from Edison though," Nadine said. "I guess the government people must have worked out the SiF conflicts."

The answer actually appeared in that day's *Herald*. Wilson brought a copy of the newspaper home. The article gave a brief review of the conflict between the provisions of the SiF Act and the Naked in School requirements. It went on to explain the temporary solution which had just been adopted by both houses of the Florida

legislature and had been signed by the governor. He gave the article to Tamara to read.

“...The major difficulties which needed resolution were, first, the conflict between the nudity restrictions provided in the SiF Act, which made public nudity illegal unless the child was enrolled in the SiF program, versus the public nudity requirement of the NiS Program. And second, the sexual abuse provisions of the SiF Act conflicted with the need for school officials to require chosen NiS participants to strip without subjecting the officials to charges of sexual assault.

“The first conflict was resolved by an amendment to the SiF Act which exempts NiS participants from the requirements of the Act, unless, of course, the child is already a SiF registrant. The second issue was more difficult to resolve, since no law-maker wanted to be identified as a liberalizer of any child-abuse law.

“The interim solution for this issue was for an amendment to the abuse section of the Act which carved out an exemption for school officials who, in the course of their NiS supervisory duties, would have a limited exemption from felonious assault charges as a result of any demand for students to strip. This exemption even gave limited protection to forced stripping; however, the amendment stated that the ‘use of *excessive* force’ was not permitted (the italics are our emphasis and aren’t in the amendment). It is unclear from the amendment’s text, or from the transcripts of the subcommittee’s hearings, precisely how much force would be considered to be ‘excessive.’ This unknown may lead many school officials to be very hesitant to legally test the definition of ‘excessive.’

“The final abuse matter which needed to be addressed was the peer-to-peer sexual interaction between students, a feature of the Naked in School Program. The subcommittee decided to leave enforcement and monitoring of peer-to-peer student interactions up to the school’s administration and made that decision clear in the wording of the SiF Act’s amendment.

“The adoption of this amendment to the SiF Act was the signal for the Florida Department of Education to let district school boards know that they are to commence running the Program when the fall term begins. All schools in the state are expected to be running the Program within six months to a year. We will continue to monitor this issue as best as we can, but the federal Office of Social Awareness, which administers the Naked in School Program, beginning about a year ago, has imposed extremely strict privacy rules about any Program activities in schools; the courts have upheld those rules to ensure the privacy of minors.

“These changes will affect us locally, as the Miami-Dade School Board announced that they will begin the Naked in School Program in selected high schools this fall and in the rest of the schools in the following spring term.”

After she read the article, Tamara asked her father, “How can the government keep info about what happens to kids in the Program private? Look at all those social media channels, like Facebook, Instagram, others... um, WhatsApp, blogs—hey, even on discussion websites that kids can use, like Quora. My high school has a site too and kids can post stuff there.”

Wilson shook his head. “No idea. Go on the internet and see what you find.”

She did and about fifteen minutes later, she had the answer.

“Hey Dad, it looks like the federal Program office actually does stop people from sharing information about the Program. I found this page on Facebook that says that whenever someone tries to start a website or post something on social media, the feds get it shut down within a few days. It says that the feds are even able to shut down sites that’re on foreign web servers too. I wonder how they can do that.

“The owner of this page says that he tries to post text messages and stuff from other sources that he sees about the Program, but when the feds find his posts, they get Facebook to pull his account, so he keeps creating new accounts under different user names. But that’s not a good source of information about the Program. Let me keep... damn, all these government sites show up on Google... the feds must be flooding the search engine... I can’t find any other site that talks about kids’ school experiences. The feds must really have shut everything down.”

“That’s bad news,” Wilson remarked and Tamara agreed.

About twenty minutes later, Nadine came home.

“Hi, phew, busy day today. Got a flock of new patients and I had to cover for Louise too. She called in sick. And I saw an article in the *Herald*—oh, you have a copy. But I heard something else from Marjory, you know, my charge nurse, well, her daughter is a paralegal in the Miami School District office. The district plans to have the Naked in School Program in every high school by spring term. So, Tamara, you’ll have a new flock of kids to try to protect. What’s so interesting on the computer?”

“Trying to find out anything about what happens in schools where they have that naked program,” Tamara told her.

“And?”

“Nothing. The feds are blocking everything.”

She told Nadine what she learned from that Facebook post.

“Well, maybe the press will dig out something that they can cover,” Nadine commented.

### ***Miami Edison High School: September***

Of course, when Edison’s fall term began, the news about the likely start of the Naked in School Program was now a hot discussion topic among the students. But Tamara had other things on her mind too—academics. She had arranged her fall eleventh-grade high school courses to coordinate with her University of Miami classes so that she would spend her Tuesdays and Thursdays at the university, taking a math course on differential calculus and a special projects course in physics, and would also work at the medical school laboratory in the afternoon on those days. In the spring, she planned to enroll in the university’s electricity and magnetism course and continue with the math course. She could arrange such a schedule now as she was an upper-class student on a full AP academic track that provided the ability to take community college courses for academic credit—although Tamara was doing this at a four-year school.

Yet another distraction jarred Tamara her during her first days back in school: there were naked kids in the school again. The incoming freshman class had a number of SiF kids and there were a few transfers from other schools going into the upper grades. Tamara decided on a new tactic to help those kids. She’d wait for one of them to pass by the office and zap their chip while she sat in the office—she had kept her office aide job, and her little desk was close to the glass window-wall which looked out from the office into the main hallway. If she propped her backpack against the back of a chair facing the window, she could watch the hall as kids walked by. If a naked kid passed by, she’d trigger her zapper.

But Tamara didn’t care for the randomness of this approach, so she added a little teaser. She started a rumor that there was some kind of malfunctioning electronic device in the hall near the school’s main door and if you passed by that area several times during the day, your chip would very likely be inactivated. With that rumor as bait, Tamara thought she’d catch more fish—with her red-herring rumor.

It didn’t take long for the school’s rumor mill to spread that news, with the result that a number of stripped kids

got their chips zapped so, a week later, two county SiF officials showed up and began using equipment to hunt all over the hallway area, looking for some kind of electronic signal. Then several days later, a tech arrived and began installing what appeared to be a larger version of the typical SiF RFID scanner devices used at the school's doorways. It was mounted at the window, near Tamara's student aide desk, with its camera pointed out into the hall. When Tamara arrived at the office for her assigned student aide period, she saw the device and asked the secretary about it.

"They're trying to find whatever it is that deactivates those SiF tags. The tech said that if that gadget detects any radio signals, its camera will record what's happening."

*Ooo. Time for some fun,* Tamara thought.

*Game on.*

## Chapter 16 - Using a New Tool

It was time to play. Tamara set her backpack on the chair where it usually rested while she was in the office but moved the chair closer to the new scanner device. Then she set her zapper to the high-power setting and turned its mode to continuous. What that did was to remove the damper resistor from the superconducting RF emitter loop, so rather than emitting a very short EMF pulse, her zapper now would blast a continuous RF wave directly at the scanner for as long as she held down the remote's trigger button. Then she got a hall pass to use the girls' room. She made a show of leaving the office and went to use the facilities. When she left the restroom, she triggered the zapper for a five-second burst. Then she took a drink at a nearby water fountain and stopped to ask a passing teacher a question. Suddenly a commotion broke out in the office.

The teacher she was talking to ran to the office and Tamara followed. When they entered the office, they smelled the acrid odor of burning electronics and smoke was drifting up from the scanner.

The teacher asked the secretary and assistant principal, who were standing a distance away from the smoking unit and staring at it. "Is it on fire?"

Mrs Leonard said, "No, there was a loud *pop* and then white smoke began coming out of that thing."

A tendril of gray-white smoke was still curling out of its side.

Tamara said to them, "I better get my stuff out of there in case it does go on fire," and took her backpack off the chair and went to stand with the others.

"Maybe we should get the fire department just in case," Leonard said.

"Um, maybe it should be unplugged?" Tamara suggested, pointing toward its power cord.

"Good point!" the teacher said and rushed over to pull the cord out; the smoke stopped coming out of the unit after a minute.

Leonard called the fire department and reported a non-emergency but requested that a crew come to check out an overheated electronic device, which had been disconnected.

Tamara figured she'd be better off being elsewhere. "Mrs Leonard, the smoke is bothering my eyes. May I go to the Media Center? If you need me for an errand or something, I'll be there."

"Oh, certainly, Tamara. Sorry this happened. I'll phone the specialist if I need you."

When Tamara stopped in the office the following day for her office aide shift, there was still a faint acrid odor.

"Ugh. Still smells. How do you stand it, Miss W?" she asked the secretary.

"I guess I got used to it," she answered.

"Did they figure out what happened?" Tamara asked.

"Only that there was a short in that thing and it melted part of the insides. The SiF people wanted to put another one here and Dr Barellio told them, 'Not in my school! There's been too much disruption already.'"

Tamara took her usual seat, got out a book, and began to study. Her thoughts were on the damage her zapper had done, though. *What caused such a large overload?* She wondered. *Maybe I need to analyze the zapper's RF output during a long burst—never really did that.*

The next time she was at the medical school electronics lab, she borrowed Tim's signal analyzer and put her zapper device into the Faraday cage she had set up. She was testing the device's output when Tim wandered over.

“Okay. Tell me, what mischief are you up to now?”

“I need to figure out why the field strength of my device increases so rapidly during longer pulses,” she told him. “Look, the power output increases exponentially after it’s been on longer than several milliseconds.”

“Hmm...” Tim muttered after looking at Tamara’s data. “That’s likely because your antenna circuit is superconducting—when the ballast resistor is out of the loop, there’s no resistance damping, and the current can circulate through the coil forever, basically. It’s like... goddamn, I don’t believe it, you’ve effectively created something that acts like a kind of maser here, girl.”

“What’s that?”

“A maser—that’s short for ‘microwave amplification by stimulated emission of radiation,’ Like a laser, which uses light instead of the longer microwave wavelengths. But normally you need to have some way to constrain the molecules while they’re ‘pumped’ to an excited state—a container of some kind. The microwaves are emitted when the pumped molecules return to ground state—similar to what happens to hydrogen atoms when they’re stimulated by the MRI coil’s RF pulse. The delay you saw in your device before the power increase must have been the pumping stage. Something about your coil and the reflectors—oh, and the superconducting circuit elements—must have constrained the air molecules somehow and when their transition energy was reached, a continuous beam of RF was emitted.

“This violates what I thought I knew about physics, but then quantum tunneling seemed to violate physics too. Shit. This could make a frikkin’ nasty weapon—maybe even a particle beam gun—if it’s set up with the proper components. If you tried to patent this thing, you’d have the military all over your ass trying to shut you up. I think you need to get some legal help with this one, Tamara. Talk about the mischief you’re causing!”

Tamara realized that she needed to learn a lot more physics and math for her to understand the operational theory of her device in continuous mode. But now that she knew what the device was actually doing, she could visualize several MRI applications for her circuit if it could be made small enough. But first, she needed her dad’s advice. He knew lots of people in the federal government.

“Hey Dad,” she asked when she got home that evening, “got a little problem.”

After Tamara explained the situation, he was unsure what to do.

“Tamara, maybe we should check with your patent guy first, not to make a patent application, but for advice. This can’t be the first time he’s dealt with inventions which may have a military use.”

“Okay, Dad. But I have some ideas about using that circuit in my MRI work. You think that I could keep doing that?”

“The only people who know about what you’re doing there are still Beauford, Tim, and the MRI techs, right?”

“Well, the radiologists read the scans, but they don’t actually look at the electronics,” Tamara told him. “And my testing gadgets aren’t used clinically yet. So yes, only a few people know.”

“That’s good; I guess you can keep up what you’re doing.”

~~~~~

Then, two weeks into the term, in the weekly school-wide assembly, Dr Barello made the dreaded announcement.

“Students, you have all heard about the federal Naked in School Program—I hear buzzing about the Program whenever two or more students are gathered in the same place. So you know it’s coming, and the Miami-Dade

School District has announced that the schools which haven't adopted it yet must begin this spring term."

There were muttered boos and hisses.

"Hush. I know how you all feel about it but, just like the Stripped in Florida Act, we'll need to learn to live with it. I've read all the materials about the Program and I've heard rumors which claim that many schools have had problems with how the Program is managed, but I will make no judgment about such rumors. Just know that the excesses which have been claimed to have occurred in other schools will not happen here at Miami Edison High.

"Now, to introduce the Program to you, and show you a video clip about it, I want you to meet a new addition to our staff, assigned to Edison by the regional Program Office, as the school's Program coordinator. Mr Laslo Kovacs, please come to the podium. He will be in charge of all Program activities here and will be meeting with your teachers soon to give them the materials and curricula they will be adding to their classes in support of the Program. Mr Kovacs?"

He appeared from offstage, walked to the podium, and took the mike out of its stand. Then he moved away from the podium.

When he appeared, Tamara felt a jolt of warning. Seeing him kicked her premonition sense into overdrive. But she was too far away to sense anything specific; there were too many strong and conflicting emotions roiling the hall.

"Thank you, Principal Barello," Kovacs said in a high, thin voice in stilted, slightly accented, English. "Hello, children..."

The room erupted with growls and snorts.

"Please. Control yourselves. One of the things the Program does is teaching respect for authorities."

Tamara noticed that Barello winced at that statement; Tamara had already felt the very bad taste increase when Kovacs had begun speaking.

Kovacs began with what he called the Program objectives.

"This paragraph is printed in the pamphlets you will get next term when we start the Program here. I will read it. 'The Program has been carefully designed to help you become more comfortable with your body and your sexuality, to treat others in natural balance as both individual people and sexual beings, to learn to harness your natural energies, and to behave in a more mature and morally conscious manner. By becoming more comfortable with your body and sexuality, your sexual tensions will be diminished. This is your opportunity for rapid personal growth.'"

Tamara had read that statement on the official federal Naked in School website and considered it to be total nonsense.

Kovacs began enumerating the various Program rules.

"Nudity is required everywhere for the full week, even coming to school if you use a school bus, anywhere on school property, and at all school-sponsored events. Program participants are required to display themselves to any student and must perform any activity that is requested of them, including allowing the touching of their naked body. This is called 'Reasonable Requests.' Teachers may require participants to perform activities beyond those permitted by the Reasonable Requests. Participants may request of the teacher to be allowed to get sexual relief, by themselves or with another person's help, during the first five minutes of class time, and we will expect that all participants will avail themselves of this benefit, which is called 'Relief.'"

He went on, giving various specific details about the rules and punishments for non-compliance.

“Now I will show the video prepared by the federal Office of Social Awareness, that is the national office that is in charge of the Program.”

The lights dimmed and a video began playing. Tamara watched as various talking heads began extolling the social and psychological benefits of the Program. To try to show that nudity was becoming more acceptable to the general public, the video showed clips of naked bike rides, naked beaches, body-painting festivals, and naked attendees at rock concerts. But Tamara quickly noticed Westminster Abbey in the background of the bike ride clip and a sign reading ‘FKK-Strandbereich’ which appeared for a moment in the beach video.

*The cheats used European scenes, she thought, but their video implies that the scenes were from the U.S.*

When the narrator began a voice-over discussion of what she referred to as “sexual positivity,” clips of teens doing all kinds of pornographic activities with each other in school hallways and classrooms were playing. Tamara closed her eyes and tuned out.

On the way out of the auditorium, each student was handed a packet of documents to have their parents sign and return. The documents were not permission forms; they were acknowledgments that the parents/guardians had been informed that their child would be selected to be naked in school and would be required to engage in supervised and unsupervised sexual activities. The parents/guardians were requested to sign, acknowledging and accepting any risks of these activities, and their signature would absolve the school and the Miami-Dade School District and School Board of any and all liability on their part in supporting and promoting the mandated Naked in School activities in the name of a required federal education program.

There was also a permission form giving the school approval to administer a birth-control and sexually-transmitted disease inoculation which was required of all girls in the Program.

When Tamara’s parents came home, she took out the packet. When Tamara handed the forms to her parents, she told Wilson, “Dad, don’t explode, but here are the papers for that naked program crap.”

He took the papers and scanned them; then frowned.

Tamara was quite acquainted with that frown. Her father was well and truly pissed.

“This is nonsense,” Wilson exclaimed after he read through the forms again. “Of course I’m not giving them a bye on any liability.”

“Dad, I can’t take the birth-control either, remember?” Tamara pointed out.

“That’s right,” he said. “I’ll return these forms saying that we will not sign them and, on the advice of your doctor, we forbid that they give you any hormones.”

He filled out the forms, noting on them his refusal to sign, and mailed them back to the school.

### ***Little Haiti, Miami, Florida: mid-September***

“You look really intent,” Wilson said when he came into his home about two weeks later.

Tamara was busy working at her laptop, reading the screen and moving from page to page on the site that was displayed.

“Found a site that has kids’ info about the Program in their schools,” she replied. “Oh... before that... I heard in the office that lots of parents refused to sign those forms so that Program guy’s gonna be calling parents to go to the school to see him. They’re going alphabetically, so you’ll get a call soon. On the computer here, this whole website is devoted to Program activities in the schools and kids can post their experiences on a forum in here



and tell about problems that are happening in their schools.”

“Okay, we’ll deal with the school when they contact us. So how do they keep the feds from shutting them down?” Wilson asked.

“Um, I’m reading... Okay. They explain that right on the first page, actually. Let me go back,” she said, reading. “Here. It tells what they’re doing to stay on line. They’re using proxy servers and hiding the location of the website’s hosting server. You know, there’s gotta be some money behind that—I’m sure it takes lots of resources to hide a web server the way they’ve done.”

She and Wilson spent a while reading pages on the site and soon Nadine arrived home.

“My, what’s so interesting on there?” she asked.

“Information about the Program in schools,” Wilson replied. “This is really disturbing stuff.”

“Yeah, reading this, there’s no way that I’ll do any of that stupid naked nonsense,” Tamara insisted. “Mom, I found this website and it has all kinds of stories about that naked program in the schools where they have it.”

“Yeah, Nadine, this Program crap is evil. No wonder the feds don’t want to let any information be published. Looking at this site, people will be able to see how bad the Program really is for kids.”

“What did you see there?”

“Well, for starters, there’s a forum where people can write up what happens at their school. I saw two posts where they told about kids who were so traumatized that they suicided...”

“Oh god...”

He went on, “... and other posts talk about kids they knew about who were hospitalized for depression or shock. A couple of posts say that lots of kids in the Program at their school need to take anti-anxiety meds to make it through their days.”

“Why? I haven’t heard about any of this happening with SiF kids in school. What’s different now?” Nadine asked.

“It’s not just nudity, Mom. Remember that news program we heard? They said that the Program kids have to allow anyone who wants to touch them down there. They have to do nasty things in classes for the teachers and they let the kids do intercourse too, even if a kid doesn’t want to do it.”

“Oh, that’s terrible...”

Wilson pointed to the screen. “And let me tell you some more of the things it says on the site. It says that the Program forces the naked kids to use the opposite sex’s bathrooms and locker rooms—and here’s a posting about a girl who was assaulted by six boys in the boys’ locker room, it was an attempted rape. A P.E. teacher happened to come in and he stopped it.”

Nadine was shaking her head in horror.

“There’s much more, Mom. There’s a doctors’ section and the postings there are from medical people. Let me read some. ‘I’ve been seeing unusual pelvic injuries on boys and girls now as a result of some of the things they’re forced to do.’ Another from a urologist: ‘Our office has treated penile abrasions and testicular trauma in some boys and urinary tract infections in girls caused by manipulation of their perineum with dirty fingers.’ A gynecologist wrote: ‘I’m seeing all kinds of new vaginal problems ranging from blunt trauma to internal infections.’

“Then ones from some kids: ‘My biggest problem was the groping. I got poked and prodded all week and my body was sore and bruised from all the abuse. Kids would jam their fingers into my snatch and even my butt without asking.’ And one girl wrote about what a teacher did, ‘I was made to take part in a class demo on female sexuality and the teacher fondled me to try to force me to come. When I didn’t, he said I must be frigid and took out a dildo and jammed it in my vaj. I was a virgin and it really hurt. I had to see the nurse for the bleeding and some abrasions.’”

“Can’t they stop that?” Nadine asked in horror.

“Apparently not—the kids are forced to do what they’re told,” Wilson said. “I read several accounts in there where the kids violently resisted being forcibly stripped. Many of the cases on this forum told about injuries, some serious, and there was property damage too. One kid threw a chair at a teacher and broke several of his ribs; in another case, when teachers tried to restrain a student to strip her, she struggled, fell and hit her head, got a serious brain injury, and is in a wheelchair now.”

Tamara went on, “They also force kids into the Program for additional naked time for doing things that have nothing to do with the Program. Like being late to school or talking in class or not turning in homework. This is all really scary. No way will I do any of that, and I’ll do whatever I can to help others resist, too.”

“Why do you think this is different from the SiF kids in school—the, um, groping stuff?” Nadine asked.

Wilson nodded. “That seems to be a big piece of it. The only thing it has in common with the Naked in School Program is that they both require nudity. But... no one may touch a SiF kid in any way without the kid’s permission—there are huge penalties if they do. In NiS, permitting the touching is required—hell, it seems that permitting *abuse* is required. NiS kids are required to allow themselves to be groped—that’s called ‘reasonable requests’ under the Program, but from what I read here, the word ‘reasonable’ is a joke. *Nothing* seems to be unreasonable.”

Tamara cut in, “If you refuse a request that you think is unreasonable, it looks like they can make you repeat the Program week. If you don’t complete your Program week, they don’t let you graduate. Also, teachers can use you in the classroom for demonstrations. You just heard what can happen in classrooms and that was just one example out of bunches I read there.”

“They also make kids masturbate in front of the classroom,” Wilson told her.

“Yeah—it’s called ‘relief’ and you have to do it yourself or can have someone help,” Tamara said. “You saw it in that Program description that came with the consent forms, remember? I read plenty of times that was a source of abuse too. And you saw from that post how girls have to use boys’ bathrooms and gym showers—and the boys have to use the girls’. Some schools even take photos and videos of the kids and put the pictures on the school’s website.”

Nadine had slumped into a chair. “This is overwhelming. I had no idea... Tamara, do you want to withdraw and start home schooling again? You probably don’t even need any more high school; I’ll bet you could go straight into college.”

“No, Mom, I want to stay with what we planned. I like the classes I’m taking now. I’m advanced just in math and physics, the other sciences—not in anything else. But reading the stuff on that website ... I’d love to mess with anyone in the school who tries to abuse kids. That’s a thought... With my abilities, wow, I could really do some stuff...”

“Ahem. About that,” Wilson began. “I...”

“No, wait,” Nadine stopped him. “Years ago, I spoke to Tamara...she had a different name then...”

Tamara chuckled, “No, you just *THINK* I had another name.”

“Right, well, I told her about our Vodou beliefs and how they influence the behavior between all people. We all try to work together as a community and highly value community service and social and civil justice. We treat people who need help like our own family and do whatever is in our power for them. Tamara’s taken my words to heart ever since that chat we had and I’m proud of her for being so caring. This naked business is well over the top as far as its being a social abomination and Tamara wants to help anyone abused by the system that’s supposed to help them develop into adults—the schools.”

Tamara broke in. “Excuse me, Mom, I want to resist but I have some real misgivings about using my abilities on teachers and even students. Even if it’s against the naked program. And also, I’d feel bad about doing any physical damage if I needed to. I need your advice about ‘pushing’ people to interfere with that naked program.”

“All right, that’s an important point,” Nadine replied. “Let’s do what our Vodou tradition has always told us to do when we have a momentous decision to make. In our ceremonies, when we are close to the *lwa*, we can ask for guidance. At our worship ceremony on Friday evening, with our congregation there, we can ask for guidance then.”

Nadine and Tamara began to discuss what to do at the ritual and Nadine decided that Wilson had to be included as well.

~~~~~

The worship service set for Friday was to begin in an hour.

“I know you don’t usually attend our rites,” Nadine told Wilson, “but this time it’s important that you do. I had a dream last night that *Papa Legba* has important advice and that you must be prepared to receive it. I don’t like doing an *alamyet* service—without drums, so I really hope that our *ountògi* will come. Their drumming always makes our experience better—the volunteers do try but it’s not as good.”

Wilson knew that drumming is a major part of the Vodou ritual and the drums that are used are special. Nadine’s Haitian drums had been lost in the earthquake but fortunately, several experienced drummers, *ountògi*, in their Little Haiti area had been curious about the new *ounfò* in the community and had attended a few rituals with her. Liking what they had seen, they became somewhat regular members of Nadine’s little congregation.

Wilson nodded. “And their drums are works of art.”

“True. They’re beautiful; what I had in Aubry doesn’t compare. I wish I knew what happened to *Manman*’s. When she disappeared, I was able to get a lot of her things from her *ounfò*, but the drums were gone. They were antiques from Dahomey, I think.”

“I never learned about the drums. My *maman* was a *manbo*; she taught me about the Vodou religion, but not about the drums,” Wilson told her.

“There are three drums, basically,” Nadine answered. “The main drum is called the *manman*; it’s the ‘mother’ of the ensemble and sets the rhythm’s backbone; it’s the drummers’ time-keeper. Think of the bass guitar, which ‘grounds’ the group’s sound. Next there’s the *segon*; that’s a medium-sized drum and works in the ensemble like the rhythm guitar in a rock group. The *segon* player sets the basic drumming pattern around which the *manman* player weaves the underlying beat. The *segon* is played with two hands, like the other drums, but the drummer will sometimes use a stick. The smallest drum is called the *boula* and provides the beat to which the worshipers dance. The pattern and rhythm this player uses is the most complicated and it’s the soul of Vodou drumming. Done well, its effect is hypnotic. Oh, and there’s the bell, too. It’s called the *ogan*.

“Each *nanchon* has its own set of drumming styles, variations, and conversations between the drums. I use the

*Rada* style; that's the most common in Port-au-Prince drumming. My favorites are the *Zèpòl*, *Mayi*, and *Dawòmen* rhythms, but there are many others. Usually the *boula* begins and sets the rhythm to be used. Then the *segon* enters. When the *manman* comes in, the beating comes fully to life."

"It does. When I hear it, I feel something move in my spirit," Wilson said. "Okay, instead of just being present in the room, I'll join into the ritual."

"Good. It'll be an experience, you'll see."

It was time and as Nadine's congregation assembled, she spoke to Tamara and Wilson.

"I will guide you both if you need it but somehow I don't think I'll need to tell you very much. When the drumming for the dance starts, be prepared to join me."

Several minutes later, Nadine greeted the group and welcomed them to her *ounfò*.

"We will have a ritual of guidance tonight. If you need advice about your lives, your health, your relationships, your careers, any guidance at all, please join in our worship and pray to the *lwa* to answer."

Nadine began the ceremony formally, first with a prayer drawn from the Roman Catholic liturgy, and then praying to *Papa Legba* to appear and to bring his spiritual guidance. Then after sacrificing a sanctified chicken, she invited the remaining *lwa* to come, by name, and join with their worshipers. In order, she invoked the *lwa* by their name for those whose advice she sought. She sprinkled handfuls of cornmeal on the floor and drew in the cornmeal the outlines of their *vèvès* using a small bundle of branches; then she sprinkled a cup of rum over the drawings.

Then the group's singers began chanting and three *ountògi*, the ritual drummers, took their places as the dancing began. The drummers begin to beat out syncopated rhythms as they carefully watched the dancers and soon their rhythms and the dancers' movements came together.

Nadine drew Wilson and Tamara from their chairs and whispered to them to begin moving to the rhythm of the drummers. Wilson began to move and gradually became lost in the syncopated beating; soon after he begun he felt as if a great weight had settled on his back and his legs almost buckled. When he began to feel like he was fading, losing his energy, Tamara came close and took hold of his arm.

"Daddy," she whispered, "*Ogorin*'s very strong. Show him you're strong too and he'll guide you! Hold my arm like I'm holding yours and think of what you need to know. And move with the drums."

Wilson resumed his dancing but he was moving differently now. He continued dancing for perhaps an hour, now showing no signs of tiring. It was no longer Wilson who was dancing alone; he was together with *Ogorin*, the warrior *lwa*.

Tamara was moving to the drumming too, now apart from her father, dancing with a beatific expression, her lips moving silently as if she were conversing with someone. Nadine was watching her congregation, in one case having to help a woman get up from the floor from where she had fallen, her face twisted in an expression of joy. She could no longer stand by herself so Nadine helped her to a chair.

Another hour later, the worship ceremony ended and both Wilson and Tamara suddenly found themselves exhausted. After they helped Nadine restore everything to their proper places and cleaned up, they returned home.

Wilson slumped into the couch. "Man! That was mind-blowing! Like a roller coaster. I'm dead tired too."

Nadine smiled. "You found your mentor—your patron, I take it."

“You mean *Ogorin*, the warrior *lwa*. Yes, but I never realized that his influence has been part of me all of my life. He showed me the things I’ve done that he helped me with; he wants to help now by showing me how our government has gone wrong by mistreating our kids, the government must be responsible to the needs of the people, not to order them to do immoral things. He told me that he can lend his strength to Tamara through both prophecy and her ability. That we shouldn’t worry about her using her abilities to help her fellow children.”

Nadine chuckled. “I always knew that *Ogorin* was with you. I could sense it when we first met and that’s what drew me to you the most strongly. You know that we Haitians believe that a man’s patron *lwa* reflects either his innermost nature or its diametric opposite. *Ogorin* is precisely that, he is both a warrior and a diplomat, fierce and passive, active and withdrawn, a leader and a follower. Your nature is all of those. I think I noticed when you were first mounted—Tamara came to help?”

“That part is cloudy. A great weight settled on me, I think, and I felt woozy.”

“Ah. That was the aspect of *Ogorin Feraille* then; he presents himself to his *servitors* by leaning heavily on them or slapping them on the back. Be happy he didn’t have you do other things reputed to him, like having you wash your hands in flaming rum...”

“Ouch!”

“Yes, but his *servitors* aren’t hurt from doing it. Like Polynesian fire-walkers, I suppose. You already proved your mettle to him during battle. And you, young miss, I noticed you had a very long communion tonight.”

“Ahh, *Manman*, they were awesome,” Tamara sighed. “First, *Ogorin* told me to help Daddy ‘cause he would need a little ... um, focus? Yeah. Focus at first. Then both *Erzulie Mansur* and *Granne Erzulie* came. I never felt such strong love—sorry, Mom and Dad, but this was like being bathed in love like a protecting blanket covering me.”

“No wonder you were glowing like that, darling,” Nadine told her. “*Erzulie Mansur* is the *lwa* of maternal love; she is the protector of children from harm. And her *manman* is *Granne Erzulie* who is the *lwa* of grand-motherly kindness and love. Can you tell us their message?”

“It wasn’t really words. It was an emotional feeling that my protective instincts that I have toward the other kids are appreciated and valued by them. I can call on them whenever I need help. And that *Ogorin* is also willing to help, to protect kids I want to help. And did you know that *Papa Legba* is the trickster, too?”

“Yes I did; that’s in the Dahomey tradition of the *lwa*,” Nadine replied.

“*Papa Legba* enjoys a good joke so he’s willing to help with any innocent mischief I can cause. Nothing evil, though,” Tamara said. “And I felt some support from other *lwas*, feelings really different from anything I experienced before. I got the impression that other *lwas* want to help me too.”

“So that means you’ll use your abilities to get out of doing the Program?” Nadine asked.

“And help other kids in school too. I wish there was a way to ... oh! Wait...”

Tamara had sunk into a deep reverie. Wilson was alarmed but Nadine reassured him, “It’s part of her wonderful gift. Like *Manman*, she can sometimes commune outside of our worship ceremonies and our dreams.”

“Oh... shit... sorry, you didn’t hear that, okay?” Tamara exclaimed as she returned to awareness, blinking. “It’s just awful! When I said I wanted to protect kids... every kid... suddenly *Erzulie Mansur* came to me. There’s something horrible about the Program, Dad—it’s sinister. *Erzulie Mansur* doesn’t communicate by words—she talks by emotions—so I don’t know what it is, but it’s real bad. I’ll try to see if I can find out any more, but I definitely have the *lwas*’ permission to ‘push’ when I think it’s necessary.”

***Miami Edison High School: late September***

In school, Tamara learned that she hadn't been the only one who had found that private anti-NiS website. Other kids at Edison had found it too, and during that week, news of the site had spread like wildfire through the school. During the days following their discovery of the site, with much trepidation, the kids were raptly following the news from students at other schools about their own Program experiences—use of the site had exploded and new postings were appearing every second, since news of the site's existence had gone viral among high-school students nationwide.

Tamara met with her friends at school lunch on the day following her discovery of the anti-NiS site. These friends were mainly friends of convenience—she didn't, for example, share her private thoughts or even much personal information with them. She realized that she tended to be a loner and hadn't made any very close friends. This disappointed her but she realized that the three-year difference in age—her thirteen years to the sixteen-year-old juniors—was a significant difference, but when she spoke to some of the freshman girls, she saw that she had nothing at all in common with them. The group of girls she was closest to tended to be the high-achievers; they were viewed as “nerdettes” by the “in crowd” and tended to be ignored by the school's social cliques.

“So the damn Program's really coming, and look what happens to the kids in it,” Linda, the girl that Tamara considered to be her closest friend, fumed.

“Sure. And it's gonna be running in Northwestern,” Jamie said as the others nodded. “Starts there in October.”

Kathy shook her head. “This is so unfair... I know you guys must have read about all the shit that happens in the schools with it? On that site?”

“Yeah” ... “Damn” ... “Ugh” ... “Sure.”

“I told my folks that I want to be home schooled if that crap starts here,” Maddie grumped. “They said they'd think about it. But that's parent code for ‘no.’”

“Guys... if they do start it, let's make a team and figure out a way... you know, lots of kids wrote on that site how kids in their schools resisted,” Carlos commented. “Let's read the stuff there and see if we can do any of that. My uncle's a lawyer and he told me about the assault laws—told me that according to the law, someone can't hold you while another person strips you. He said that's sexual battery. Even with the way they changed the laws.”

Tamara joined the discussion. “Acting as a united group would give us a lot of power. But the authorities know this and they try to spread ideas to try to break up organized opposition. We need some kind of communicating channel to bring others into a group we can try starting. We're the social outcasts at Edison, so if we try to start a group on our own say-so, we'd get laughed at. Let's wait to see what everyone finds out from that website. Get ideas from there, like Carlos said.”

They all agreed that they'd search the postings to try to get protective ideas.

## Chapter 17 - Program Problems

### *End of September*

A week later, Nadine found a message from the school on her phone. As Tamara had mentioned would happen, the return of the unsigned forms resulted in a call from the school; it was a request to come to the school to discuss their refusal. Wilson and Nadine went early on Tuesday morning and Tamara accompanied them. They were directed to see Mr Kovacs. When they entered his office, Nadine saw Tamara staggering slightly and noticed that her face had turned pale.

“One moment,” Nadine said as she took Tamara back out to the hall.

“What’s wrong?” Nadine asked. “It’s him, right? I got the creeps when I walked in there, myself.”

“*Manman*, he’s part of what *Erzulie Mansur* warned me about. He’s evil, like the one who came to our house, but evil in a different way. Oh, he doesn’t belong here either, just like the other evil one. He must be here illegally. One of his tastes feels like fear of being caught.”

Then Wilson came back out to see what was wrong.

Nadine asked her, “Can you ‘push’ him?”

“I’ll try. I need some kind of rapport to connect and he’s... ugh. Rancid. I could destroy him like I did the other, but...”

“No, we don’t want that. See what you can do,” Nadine told her.

Tamara nodded. “Good. I still feel bad about Mr Evil, even though he deserved it.”

She set her shoulders and followed her parents back into the office.

“Sorry for that. I wanted to tell my daughter something,” Nadine told Kovacs.

“I hope it was not to interrupt her elders,” Kovacs snarled.

*Jeez, this is a nasty one*, Wilson thought. Aloud, he said, “Okay, we can start. I’ll introduce us all. Again, we’re the Alexandres. I already told you my name, it’s Wilson. My wife is Nadine and the daughter is Tamara. We returned some forms unsigned.”

Tamara focused on Kovacs and shuddered when she locked her eyes with his.

Kovacs winced for a second, but then replied, “Yes. You must sign, it is absolute a requirement. Parents must acknowledge the participation of their children.”

“Correction. No, we don’t have to sign and you have no authority or enforcement powers over parents. My wife and I don’t consent to her participation. Also, according to her doctor’s orders, Tamara must not be given any birth-control hormones; they are dangerous to her health.”

“Not acceptable. We do not recognize state authority or medical authority other than those who are Program officials. If you do not sign, then we will choose your daughter among the first participants and of her we will make an example of what... urk.”

Wilson was on his feet in an instant and quickly had the man in a judo choke hold before he could utter another syllable.

“You will not threaten my daughter like that now, or ever again. Raise your hand to say that you agree that you will not ever threaten her.”

While Wilson had been talking to Kovacs, Tamara had been busy ‘pushing’ Kovacs, trying to find the color-tastes which would make him more amenable to her suggestion. What she had accomplished, instead, was to strip away his outward veneer and any politeness, so that when he spoke to Wilson, he said just exactly what was on his mind; thus he revealed his intention to make an example of her.

Meanwhile, Kovacs had been trying to struggle but when he moved, Wilson increased his choking pressure.

“Mr Kovacs, if you keep it up, you’ll regret it,” Wilson warned him. “I insist that you agree to my demand. You will not threaten her or make an example of her.”

“Dad, wait. Let me tell you this...” She moved to him and whispered, “He’s definitely evil. I told *Manman* that somehow, it’s even worse than Mr Evil. Let me work on him some more...”

A few seconds later, Tamara found the key taste to “push.” A yellow-brown taste with black-tinted edges, and when she “pushed” it, Kovacs’ muscles went slack and he slumped. Wilson was caught by the fringe and he let go of the man, who fell to the floor, as Wilson stumbled away.

“Holy shit, Tamara! That hurt! My muscles felt weak suddenly, too.”

“Sorry, Daddy... It’s hard to aim this stuff. Quick, ask him what he’s doing here. I already told *Manman* he doesn’t belong.”

“Like um... Leger?”

“Yeah. But worse than him. Ask him who sent him.”

Nadine and Wilson hauled Kovacs up onto a chair. He was pale and his breathing was shallow. Then Nadine said, “One second,” and quickly grabbed her phone and turned on the voice recorder.

“Who sent you?” Wilson asked, after Nadine nodded to him.

“*A kartellem. Itt kellene átvennem az irányítást,*” Kovacs, still dazed, responded weakly.

Wilson glanced at Nadine who covertly displayed her phone and mouthed “Okay” to him.

He nodded at her, “All right. But what language is that?” he wondered aloud. “What now?”

Tamara answered, “*Papa Legba* says he’s Hungarian and said, ‘My cartel. I’m supposed to take over here.’”

Wilson nodded. He’d need to find out later how Tamara did that. “What cartel is that?” he asked Kovacs.

Kovacs’ face began to turn bright red and he began gasping for breath.

“Daddy! I think he has something wrong inside him! He’s panicking! Maybe ask him who hired him!”

“Kovacs! Who hired you? Are there others?”

“*Társadalomismereti Iroda. Az egész csoportom itt van a kartellért.*”

Wilson looked at Tamara, who frowned, answering, “He said, ‘Office of Social Awareness. My whole group is here for the cartel.’”

“What were you sent here to do?”

Apparently, that caused another panic attack because, as Kovacs began saying in a rasping voice, “*A szívem... nem kap levegőt... Megijesztjük a gyerekeket és...*” he grabbed his chest, gurgled, and keeled over.

Wilson checked him for a pulse in his neck and found none. He picked up the office phone and dialed 911.



“This is 911. What is your emergency?”

“I’m at Edison High talking to an official here and I think he had a heart attack.”

Wilson answered a few questions and was asked to stand by.

Nadia asked Tamara, “What was that last thing?”

She answered haltingly, “He said, ‘My heart... can't breathe... We frighten the kids and...’ Then he died. I could feel his spirit go, *Manman*,” she sobbed, holding onto Nadine. “I was still a little connected to him. I feel so dirty...”

Wilson shook his head angrily. “...frighten the kids,” he mused. “He’s the Program official here, and a Hungarian. He was sent here by some kind of cartel; a group of them was hired by the feds. He said he’d make Tamara’s life difficult. Something’s really wrong with our government to let this crap happen!”

Within several minutes, the school security officer ran in and ten minutes later, two EMTs arrived. Then the Miami police. The Alexandres were questioned for an hour before they were allowed to return home.

“Wilson, I’m impressed at how quickly you moved in there,” Nadine told him as they left the school.

He chuckled ruefully. “My patron. Now I know the feeling when *Ogorin* is with me—like a hand resting on my back. I actually felt a push! But, Tamara—hell, sweetie, what you did was scary!”

She nodded. “To me too, Daddy. But like *Ogorin* was with you, I could feel *Erzulie Mansur* helping me—other *lwa* were with her there too and *Papa Legba* translated. Now I have the feeling that the great danger is still there but that it’s more distant.”

Wilson was troubled, but in awe of Tamara—what power she had! And that she could hear *Papa Legba*, whom he recalled knew all human languages, and that *Legba* could help her translate Hungarian, of all languages. And the powers of other *lwa* were hers too. But if the mundane world—not the spiritual world—was involved in “frightening the kids,” and foreigners were involved too, he knew just who to call.

“Secretary Masters’ office,” the voice said. “This is Shirley Harper, his deputy assistant.”

“This is Wilson Alexandre; I’m a... well, I guess a ‘protectee’ of the State Department. I learned something disturbing about possible aliens being hired by the government.”

“I’ll see if he’s availab... yes, he’s off his line now. Let me connect you.”

“Hello, Wilson?” Masters said a few seconds later. “Shirley said this was a hot call.”

“It is,” Wilson told him.

He went on to explain what had happened, leaving out Tamara’s part and making it seem like Nadine had gotten Kovacs to speak.

“So I have a recording of what the guy said and it looks like there’s something really wrong with that Naked in School office in D.C.”

“Huh,” Masters replied. “This isn’t the first report like that circulating around here. A few days ago, the president ordered a major investigation within the executive branch of the government. It’s gotten into the news reports today, so it’s not a secret. The Department of Education and the Justice Department are both involved; agents from the FBI and U.S. Marshals Service are all over the State Department now demanding passport data and visa apps and other records. Your report just now fits into some of the questions they’re asking.”

“Good,” Wilson commented. “The guy’s name was Laslo Kovacs and he died—the medics said it was sudden

cardiac death. He had a medical alert bracelet that said, um..." Wilson looked at his notes. "...tak-o-tsubo cardio-myopathy." He said slowly and then spelled it out. "The medic explained that's a weakening of the heart's pumping ability that can be caused by a surge of adrenaline from severe emotional or physical stress. The Miami police have the details of what happened, so since you said that the FBI's involved already, they'd probably want this Miami info to help connect the dots. The recording of what he said is in Hungarian. I didn't give it to the police because... well, it might have warned any possible accomplices of his here. I guess my Haitian reluctance to trust cops is showing. I'll email it to you and you can do whatever with it."

"Thanks, Wilson. Once again, another service to our country."

Wilson copied the recording, cutting out Tamara's voice when she spoke, and sent the edited copy off to Masters.

"What do we do now?" Wilson asked, turning toward Nadine and Tamara.

They decided to wait several days before calling the school office again. Nadine wanted to make sure that Tamara wouldn't be forced to take the hormone shot, but then, she thought ruefully, that no one could force Tamara to do anything that she didn't want to do—providing she were conscious, that is.

### ***Early October***

About a week later, there was a buzz among the students in Edison High about the anti-Program website—that the feds were about to get it shut down. Tamara heard more about that news in the week-ending school assembly.

After a few announcements about the evening's and weekend's sports teams' games, Principal Barello brought up the current situation about the forthcoming Program.

"You've heard of our unfortunate loss of the Program coordinator," she paused for a few hisses, "so I'd like to tell you where the planning now stands. We are supposed to be assigned another person as coordinator but we haven't heard anything yet. Many parents have refused to sign the Program forms that we sent home, so the district officials are looking into how to proceed. Apparently many parents at other schools have refused too—so we're not alone.

"I've heard from a lot of parents who have asked about exemptions for their children, giving reasons ranging from religious to medical. This matter will need to wait until our new Program coordinator arrives.

"Copies of the Naked in School Program rules will be available just before our winter break. That will give you the chance to read them and become familiar with them before you return to school in January.

"Finally, we have received a request from the Office of Social Awareness, the federal agency which runs the Naked in School Program, to read a statement, so here goes. 'We at the OSA have become aware of an illegal pirate website which is providing inaccurate, false, misleading, and sensational information about the Program's operation in schools around the country. We want to warn all high school students that if you post any information on that site, or even access it, you are committing a federal crime. Our office will have that site shut down before this coming Monday; we will identify, arrest, and prosecute all students who have contributed to it or visited it.' That is the text that they wanted to have us read to all students.

"That's all we have for you today. Come out to support our teams! Go, Red Raiders!"

When Tamara's parents got home that afternoon, she learned that they had also heard about the federal plan to shut down the anti-Program site.

"How can they do that?" Tamara wondered. "Also, how can they punish anyone from going to a website? Or

posting on it? In my Civics class, we learned that the First Amendment protects speech; writing and reading what others write are protected too.”

“I think it’s just posturing, honey,” Wilson said. “Maybe they’re trying to scare the site operators into doing something that the feds can detect so they can find where that server is located. Did you hear anything else about the Program?”

“Nothing important. There’s no one to replace Kovacs yet. I wonder what he was up to?” Tamara mused. It wouldn’t be long before everyone learned the answer to that question.

### ***One week later***

The answer came early the following week. Tamara was in class when the room’s P.A. system activated.

“Your attention, please. We have been given a message from the school district that an important announcement is to be made in ten minutes in a news conference from the office of the U.S. attorney general. The news conference concerns the Naked in School Program. Because of the importance of the announcement, we’ve decided to interrupt your classes; this way students will be able to discuss it without the disruption extending for the rest of the day. Thank you.”

There was a flurry of comments from kids wondering what this was all about.

“Okay, students,” Ms Lowell, the teacher, interrupted, “let’s get back to work. We have just ten minutes before we lose the rest of the period.”

And as promised, the P.A. system crackled to life about ten minutes later. The announcer was already doing an introduction.

“... Department in Washington for a statement from the attorney general about this major news development. Here’s Attorney General Minners.”

“Good afternoon, fellow American citizens. I’m here to report to you on an incredible event, a major success in fighting crime and identifying and ending a major breach of our country’s security committed by criminals operating within the halls of our government itself.

“Every listener is certainly aware of the national Naked in School Program that is in operation in most high schools in the country. The Department of Justice recently became aware of the operation of an international criminal organization, members of which had managed to infiltrate the offices of the Program administration and changed the Program’s operation, not significantly, but enough to achieve their nefarious goals.

“Federal law enforcement officials recently managed to penetrate the computer system that the organization was using to coordinate its activities and learned the details of its operations and were able to identify the people responsible, from its leaders to the people who carried out the criminal ring’s plans.

“Early this morning, in a series of simultaneous, coordinated raids, the U.S. Marshals Service, FBI, and local law enforcement agencies raided nine locations around the country and rescued 47 teenaged children who had been kidnapped during the past seventeen months. These children had all been participants in their school’s Naked in School Program and had disappeared either during their Program participation week or on the day prior to beginning their participation. Records seized by the U.S. Marshals Service and the FBI indicate that the criminals belonged to an international sex-trafficking cartel which was known to be involved in kidnapping children to be sold to the sex trade.

“Law enforcement officials have recovered all of the children who had been reported missing, they are now safe and have been placed in hospitals where their health is being evaluated. Many appear to have been mistreated and some are malnourished, but none have life-threatening injuries or conditions. An operation like this is unique in our nation’s history of fighting crime, but also unique was the failure of the government in preventing a situation like this from occurring in the first place and safeguarding agencies from being compromised by insiders.

“All of the individuals connected with this crime have been identified and most have been taken into custody. There are sixteen additional individuals whose whereabouts are unknown; most of them are apparently not U.S. citizens and border control officials have increased surveillance.

“Within the government Program agency, a number of employees have been arrested and are being held for indictment for lesser crimes than kidnapping. These people were not part of the criminal ring and had no knowledge of the kidnapping plan, but they had improperly implemented procedures that violated the law that authorized the Program.

“We will provide further information about the rescued children and their condition as soon as we have details, but I want to remind you that they are all minors and their identities must be protected. Thank you. I can take a few questions. Over there ...”

While the attorney general was speaking, there were many hushed exclamations among the class members as well as a few outbursts of “oh, shit.” But the class was mostly quiet, listening in total shock. When the audio ended, however, chaos broke out; the room exploded in noise with everyone shouting questions at each other while the teacher was attempting to restore order, with no success. After a minute, she sat down at her desk in defeat and watched the kids. She let them blow off some energy for another two minutes, then stood, and with her pointer, brought it down on the desk.

*CRACK!*

Silence.

“Seats, everyone, please.”

Everyone sat.

“All right, I think we all need to decompress after hearing that unbelievable news. So anyone who wants to speak about his or her thoughts, let’s do that. Raise your hand; one at a time; be orderly now. Jamie,” she pointed to a raised hand.

“Does this mean that the Program won’t happen now?” she asked.

Lowell shrugged. “Truthfully, I have no idea, but it sounds to me that the national office is being gutted. But Congress would still need to repeal the act. Andrew,” she called.

“Do you think that, um, that Kovacs guy was part of it? He had like an eastern Europe accent.”

“Again, I can’t answer that. I know as much as you all do. Sally? Your hand was up?”

“Um, what about the other schools in Miami? Were any kids kidnapped here?”

Lowell shook her head. “I’m sure there weren’t. The Program has only run in the other schools for, ah, a couple of weeks. At least there are no missing children reported by the district. No more questions? Can we get back to where we were? Good. We were on page 9 of your handout. Read number 7 and let’s discuss that issue now. Raise your hand to participate.”

~~~~~  
“When I got off work today, I found I had a voice message from Evan Masters at the State Department,” Wilson told Nadine when he got home.

Nadine smiled at him. “You didn’t hear the news, news, then.”

“Okay? No. I had my head buried in a Peterbilt truck tranny all day. Good news?”

“You could say that—good and bad. Let’s not play which comes first, because it’s both at the same time.”

Wilson shook his head to clear it. “Gotta be the government, then. They’re bad news all the time but sometimes, rarely, something good happens. Must be what Evan’s call was about.”

Nadine grinned. “You guessed right. Government news. *Ogorin*’s gift of prophesy is working, see? This is Tamara’s story to tell, then. She’s doing her home... ah. Here she is.”

Tamara ran to Wilson and hugged him. “I heard what *Manman* was saying. The good news is that the terrible threat that the *lwa* were warning about is almost gone and the children will be safe now. But that threat was in the Washington government—that ‘cartel’ that Kovacs told us he was part of was a sex-trafficking gang. They had managed to take over the national Program office and were using the Program somehow to kidnap kids. Oh, look. It’s almost six o’clock. The story will be on the news.”

The family listened to the replay of the news conference and when it was over, Wilson’s face was livid.

“That filth came here. He threatened my daughter...”

“Relax, Daddy,” Tamara soothed him, sitting in his lap. “It’s over. I wonder if the stuff *Manman* recorded helped catch them?”

“Oh! I forgot. Voice mail from Evan; said I could call him on his cell at home if I didn’t get the message till after 5.”

He made the call and actually connected with Masters. He had expected the he’d need to leave a message.

“Hi there, Wilson,” Masters said. “I figured that I owed you this call-back after getting the information you sent to me. I’m sure you heard today’s news.”

“I did. But it raised all kinds of questions, mostly along the lines of ‘how was that possible?’”

“Here in D.C. too, heads rolled, are rolling now, and will be rolling into the future. The shakeup—well, it’s massive. I’ll give you the official rundown, but it’s mostly confidential; that is, not to be shared with any media.

“The director of the Office of Social Awareness was caught in a blackmail scheme by this sex-trafficking cartel when he solicited under-age sex in Europe. The cartel forced him to place members of the cartel in several vital positions in the OSA and in quite a few local schools in medium-sized communities. They avoided small communities because members knew each other too well and children’s disappearances would be difficult to mask; large communities have well funded police forces with good resources like data collection and kidnapping patterns would be quickly seen. Your Mr Kovacs was one of the cartel group, but his assignment was changed to Miami right about when Florida came on line.”

“But Miami is huge! How could that fit their model?” Wilson objected.

Masters laughed. “Kovacs was to go to Miami, Ohio, not Florida. Something in his orders got jumbled because the big news in the OSA was that Florida school postings would be becoming available and the OSA was scrambling to fix the problem with Kovacs’ assignment when the takedown began.”

“Ah. That’s actually funny. But with officials in school offices, how did they do kidnapping... oh... they scare the kids. I’m afraid I see the pattern,” Wilson said thoughtfully.

“Yep, I think you did. The job of the Program coordinators was to make participating in it so odious and frightening to the kids that many would attempt to somehow avoid participating, or fight being forcibly stripped, or tell peers that they’d run away rather than go to school. That gave the operating cartel members the chance to abduct the kids, either by using their ‘enforcers’ to take the kid into ‘protective custody’ from which they would ‘escape’ or making it look like the kids went into hiding somewhere and avoid suggestions of a kidnapping.”

“What an evil plan,” Wilson remarked. “So if my info from Kovacs was just one of the corroborating elements, how were they found out?”

Masters laughed. “A teen in North Carolina somewhere; I haven’t got any details about that yet. Seems there are plenty of genius teens around, in addition to Tamara. He was hard to pin down, too. Wilson, did you teach this kid your disappearing tricks? That kid’s been running a number of federal agencies into the ground during the last month, trying to keep up with him, and whenever they thought he was done stirring things up, another jolt came from a different direction. Even the president got into it. It began when that kid got a lawyer to start a background check on the Program coordinator at his school. That got Justice interested so the FBI started looking at what the kid was doing. They learned that, as a result of the background check the kid had gotten started, his lawyer put a private investigator firm on the job and they traced emails back to Europe. Following that trail, they infiltrated the computers of a sex-trafficking cartel in Europe and were able to link the European information to operations in the U.S.A. but that’s when the trail stopped and they couldn’t get any further concrete details. The lawyer turned all that info over to the FBI.

“Then, when federal Program enforcers were sent to that teen’s school to detain him for not following Program rules, he physically disabled them. But get this, somehow he had also arranged for U.S. Marshals Service agents to be his backup. How he did that had lots of folks here scratching their heads. When the FBI questioned those disabled Program enforcers, they found that they had fabricated identities. Then the president began asking questions because one of his ambassadors told him that he had heard from a trusted source that there were all kinds of irregularities with the Program Office—so the president got the Secret Service involved too. He apparently had stopped trusting agents in some departments when he learned about all of the fabricated identities in one of his agencies.

“And again, a week later, teacher in that kid’s school got arrested for assault and battery against a student. The school’s Program coordinator was involved somehow and was arrested as a material witness. The FBI was brought into that case because the cops found that man also had a fabricated identity and could be linked to the others with fabricated identities. Finally, the teen’s attorney sent some written evidence that the teen had assembled from an anti-Program website to the Justice Department—and that evidence linked all of the information, data that the various agencies had been amassing about irregularities in the OSA, to a series of teen kidnappings. All of that activity had clearly originated from this teen in North Carolina. By that point, every federal agent in D.C., from three agencies, knew about who was responsible. They only had to figure out exactly who it was.”

“That’s some story,” Wilson said. “So what’s the situation with the Program office?”

“The president ordered it abolished. The few people in it who weren’t arrested were reassigned and the Department of Education is assuming control of the remains, but I know that the secretary of Education was a fierce opponent of the Program, so I suspect he’ll deep-six it now. The setting of education curricula is a state matter anyway, so what happens now is up to the states.”

“How did all of those people get into the U.S.? There must be a hundred or so.”

“They only found the tip of the iceberg so far. Almost all of them came here on tourist visas and then were provided with false identity documents. We’ve pulled all passport control records for the past four years and are cross-checking everyone with a European, Russian, or former Soviet Union country passport for their entry and exit status. And doing much more, which is all secret. The FBI caught a lot of them, though.”

“Well, that’s good. Hey, many thanks for the update.”

“Glad I could fill you in, So, next time you get to D.C., give me a buzz and we’ll get together and get caught up.”

“I’ll do that. Thanks again; bye.”

Wilson looked at the women. “You heard the scoop. That story is just crazy. Tamara, you...”

“... can’t breathe a word of that to anyone. Yes, Dad, I know.”

“Right. So. Maybe the schools here will just drop the Program?” Wilson wondered aloud.

Nadine shook her head. “Very doubtful. Look at all the work the Florida senators and house did to change the SiF Act. You think they’d just say ‘water under the bridge’? I think that they may believe that if they get kids naked any way they can, more kids would sign up for the SiF thing. Don’t accuse any lawmaker of being logical, honey.”

~~~~~

The next day in school, the kids were in an uproar, demanding that the plans for the Program be terminated. Hurried calls to the district office and district calls to the state and state calls to Washington all resulted in responses of “we have no idea,” and “it’s too early to decide” and “let the (president) (governor) (legislature) (education department) (school board president)/(pick one or more of those) decide.”

Finally, like any unresolved issue, the question went to the lawyers. And, like any unresolved issue sent to lawyers, it was resolved by not being resolved: the status quo is always the safe course, they decided. The decision was a non-decision. Do nothing. The Program would go on—but under state jurisdiction. Each school would provide the personnel to run it in their school.

Every school district in the state scrambled to decide who on the school staff would get the job. The choices were people throughout the staff of every school—except the custodian. Custodian unions were troubled by this slight.

With 128 senior high schools in the Miami-Dade system, the school district had a financial problem—providing 128 additional full-time senior staff positions. The Program coordinator job duties couldn’t be simply added to the job of an assistant principal or counselor, because they already had full-time duties. There were insufficient funds in the district to pay the salary and benefit costs for 128 additional positions, which by state law, as state school employees with supervisory student contact, had to be accredited teachers. So the decision was to treat the Program like an interschool sport and pay a teacher a sport supplement to act as the Program coordinator. Officials realized that many of the coordinator functions would have to be dropped, such as monitoring classrooms to ensure curriculum goals were met and policing the halls for student adherence to reasonable request rules. The record-keeping duties would need to be minimized as well. School-district officials thought this would be a good compromise.

Of course virtually none of the teachers in any of the high schools were interested in the position. What usually happened was that the most junior teacher in each school wound up with the job. This was almost always the teacher with the least experience. So it was at Miami Edison.

Watch out, folks; Tamara's coming—and she's angry now.



## Chapter 18 - Finding a College Program

Now that the immediate drama of the impending Program had passed, and nothing of consequence could be done until the spring term began, Tamara resumed her regular school activities and her work at the MRI laboratory.

And Wilson resumed his search for information about defense-related patents. By mid-October, he had finished navigating through the morass of the Defense Department and the Patent Office, where he had only gotten conflicting and confusing information. He needed a personal contact and the only one he had at Defense was the undersecretary of the Navy, Robert O'Rourke. So, after the Alexandres' patent attorney had also chased up several blind alleys, Wilson decided to call O'Rourke. He discovered that O'Rourke was now an assistant secretary of Defense. He made some calls, got the correct number, and left a message. Wilson's Medal of Honor seemed to be the passport to get an immediate call back.

Wilson answered the phone.

"Is this Mr Alexandre?" a woman's voice asked.

"It is."

"Thank you. Please hold for Secretary O'Rourke." There was a pause.

"Hello, Mr Alexandre, how are you today and how may I help you—may I call you Wilson?" O'Rourke asked.

"Yes sir, you may, and I called to see if you might be able to help solve what has turned into a bit of a strange problem. It's nothing serious—yet."

"That's intriguing. As I recall, all of my interactions with you have involved strange problems," he chuckled. "What's this one about?"

"An invention which may have potential military applications, sir. Perhaps you recall my daughter, Tamara..."

"I do. Delightful young lady."

"Thanks. She's quite gifted in technical matters and has become somewhat of an expert in MRI technology. She even has patent applications in the works and several inventions have been licensed already."

"Impressive. She's what? Thirteen now?"

"She is that. Both thirteen and impressive," Wilson agreed. "Last fall, she was working on—I don't quite understand exactly what the device was—this RF emitter thing, making improvements on its power and efficiency, and wound up making some kind of maser device. A microwave beam projector, she told me."

O'Rourke grunted. "Huh. I know what masers are. The DoD has folks studying them."

"That's what we figured. This device that she's built has applications in diagnostic medicine and, apparently, also for military technology. We didn't want to rush ahead with submitting for a patent and have the DoD come visit us and shut her work down."

"Hmmm. That's been known to happen. Here's what I can do. Our DARPA—that's the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency—has a group studying masers and similar devices and they would be the DoD group most interested in what Tamara has. You mentioned a civilian application too, and there are ways of getting a patent so that its provisions are kept secret. It's not very well known, but there exists an Invention Secrecy Act, which allows the Patent Office to suppress patent details for those inventions where disclosure to the public may be determined to be, I quote, 'detrimental to the national security,' unquote. The DARPA staff can work with you to separate out the secret part of the invention, if possible, and allow you to develop the commercial

application. How does that sound?”

“That sounds like just what we need, sir; thanks.”

“We’ll have some folks from DARPA contact you very soon. They’ll want to see the device and review any notes and design documents. You know, the kind of materials you’d put together for a patent application.”

“Thanks for the help, sir. I’ll be waiting for their call.”

“Say, on another matter, I recall hearing that you haven’t responded to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society’s invitation for your membership.”

“Oh, I guess I forgot to send the form back. Things were very busy then—and they don’t have my updated address either, I suppose. I’ll do that today. Thanks again.”

“And farewell, Wilson. I hope you can get to come to some future Medal ceremonies. You’ve got an open invitation.”

“Maybe I will. Goodbye, sir.”

Later, Wilson filled Tamara in on his phone call.

“So those fed people will want to go to the lab to see my work?” she asked.

“Right. And your notes. The stuff you were assembling for the patent.”

“Okay. I think the superconducting RF reflector I built—that seems to be the key to how the energy pumping happens without a physical container to hold the energized air molecules—might be the key part. That could be worth its own patent. Okay, I have all the info already collected. Tim gave me my own drawer in a file cabinet in his shop and he keeps that cabinet locked too.”

### ***Miami Edison High School: mid-November***

One day in mid-November, Tamara was sorting the mail in the school office and noticed a thick envelope. It was addressed to “College Guidance Office” at Edison. What caught her eye was the name of the school—Johns Hopkins University. “Her” research MRI had been developed there—she had developed a very possessive attitude toward that MRI.

She brought the package to Mrs Moore, her counselor, and asked, “This came today. If this is about attending Johns Hopkins, I’m really interested in them as a college. Can I get a copy?”

“Sure,” Moore replied and gave her one of the flyers from the package.

Reading the flyer, Tamara saw a mention of a special scholarship program: Clarke Scholars, which provided a full scholarship to a boy and girl to attend Johns Hopkins and ones to the University of Maryland. She didn’t need the financial support that the scholarship would give, but she was intrigued with the idea of attending Johns Hopkins—maybe she could get to work with the creators of her MRI.

Later at home, she went on line to look into the scholarship. This was a tough one to get, she realized, because she had already taken the PSAT exam and she had scored a 1518. Missing those last two points had irritated her for days. She looked at the test requirements for the Clarke scholarship: A one-hour physics exam covering kinematics, dynamics, Newton’s laws, harmonic and rotational motion, gravitation, and energy and momentum; and a one-hour AP math exam covering areas including Euclidean geometry, inequalities and constrained extrema, series and differential equations, and statistics and probability.

*Wow, she thought. This exam is for high school kids? This is no SAT. They’re looking for really advanced kids*

here.

There was a humanities part also. You had to write two essays, the first one would be on a current social problem in the world and a second one would address a question drawn from one of twenty-five influential works of literature. The Clarke website gave a list of the works chosen for the following year's four-hour exam, which would be held in late January at sites designated on the application page. Miami was on the list of exam sites. The website recommended that the exam be taken in the applicant's senior high school year.

To even apply to take the exam, she'd have to submit a transcript of her grades, a list of her extracurricular activities, and a description of any notable accomplishments in a technical or social area. The application also required three letters of recommendation. The application deadline was September 30.

*Damn, Tamara thought. Grades, I'm good there. Extracurricular? Can't use zapping kids' chips, I'm sure about that. The MRI work, sure. Office aide? Maybe. Oh, right—the tutoring I do. Also my patents and the medical journal papers I'm a co-author on with Beauford. Maybe I need to add another extracurricular activity? I'll check into that before I send in the application.*

What caught Tamara's eye was that as a Clarke Scholar, she would have the opportunity to work in the labs at Johns Hopkins' Applied Physics Laboratory. Tamara looked at the list of projects that the scientists and engineers at the APL were working on ... and one of them was related to the work that she was currently doing with her MRI. Another APL project seemed to be related to what she had begun studying after making her maser discovery; it involved investigating superconducting mesoscopic systems under RF excitation—and an APL project was actually using Andreev reflections and electron scattering to do that work.

She saw that there were a number of research papers published on the APL site, so she downloaded several in the superconducting applications area. Something there had caught her attention and she decided to pursue that line of thought.

### **Early December**

As the winter break approached, Tamara was immersed in her college physics class, her high school studies, and her MRI work. She continued to make refinements on the RF circuits that she had designed, seeking to make them smaller and more efficient. But she held off on doing much more work on the special coil windings, which, together with the collimating reflector she had designed, had produced that inadvertent maser effect. She didn't want to waste any effort if the feds were going to confiscate her invention.

A week before the winter break, Wilson got a call from someone who identified herself as being from DARPA.

"Hello, is this Mr Wilson Alexandre?" He acknowledged that it was. "I'm Dr Helene Tarmson from DARPA. Secretary O'Rourke told you that I'd be contacting you."

"Not you specifically, but yes, that someone at DARPA would call."

"I understand that your daughter has developed a maser application which could have military uses. He said she's only thirteen years old, too."

Wilson chuckled. "True, thirteen, going on twenty-five or so."

Tarmson laughed. "Like that, is she? Got one like that myself. Listen, I'm the lead scientist in our maser group and in charge of military applications. I'd like to come visit next week, if possible, with another member of my team and look at what your daughter's developed. Secretary O'Rourke told you that we'd need the documentation?"

"He did and it's ready. And your coming next week will work with Tamara; she'll be on break and can spend

time with you then.”

They exchanged contact information and schedules, then disconnected. During their visit during the following week, Tamara spent two full days at the MRI lab with the DARPA scientists. They were in awe of what she had done with the experimental MRI unit and its array of external coils. Tamara showed them how the array of a miniaturized version of her maser generator, less the virtual chamber and focusing grid, was used in various compact external coils.

“And this version improves image resolution by a factor of almost 100,” she told them. “When I was working with this idea, I wondered if I could direct the RF pulse into the target organs instead of creating an omnidirectional pulse. Doing that would increase efficiency, so I made a focusing grid out of superconducting materials and connected its operation to the operation of the RF source. But when I was working with tuning the pair, I discovered that a continuous RF signal somehow got amplified exponentially until this beam of RF energy emerged from the generator. The field strength produced was like inside a microwave oven, but in a collimated beam, almost. Materials in the beam heat up very rapidly. That’s when I realized that this is dangerous and could be used as a weapon.”

Tarmson was examining the device and then looked at the circuit and the focusing grid.

“This is simply amazing,” she said. “We’ve been trying to get this effect for several years now—and you’ve done it without even using a chamber to contain the excited molecules. And by using air molecules, you’re producing a range of radio frequency emissions. This opens up an entire new area of investigation, Tamara. How would you like to come to work for DARPA? That’s only half in jest; this work is impressive and so is your documentation.”

Tamara blushed. “That’s a nice offer, Dr Tarmson, but I have lots more to learn. I need to go to college first, before I get a real job.”

Both scientists laughed at that. They collected their copies of the device’s documentation and their photos, told Tamara that they’d be in touch, and left.

DARPA’s response to the visit came quickly. Officials at DARPA had ruled that the beam collimating part of the maser which Tamara had developed should be protected by a secret patent but the rest of the invention, the RF generator, could be used commercially and a regular patent application could be submitted for it. The DoD offered the Alexandres a ten-year contract to license the maser, which would allow DARPA to continue work on the device, but also would let Tamara to do further development; however, any publication involving the device, or making a commercial derivative of it, would need DARPA approval. This was a fair deal, their patent attorney told them, so Wilson signed the agreement. With the DoD contract and the other licensing royalties, Tamara realized that she was now fairly wealthy.

~~~~~  
*Damn. In addition to my college classes next term, I’ve got to think about that stupid Program too,* Tamara thought while she was on her way to the medical school for another day of play—oops, research.

It was now her junior winter break, and Tamara was spending most of her time in Tim’s shop—which he joked was now more of an advanced applied physics research lab than a repair shop—but he acknowledged that he was reaping the benefits, since the devices which came into the shop were returned in better-than-new condition. Although Tim couldn’t repair most printed circuit boards because most of the circuit components were integrated into the board, Tamara had shown him tricks in using more robust components when he serviced many devices. He did have to be certain that FDA-regulated devices were still within FDA-approved specs.

Still, the looming Program was bothering her. She wondered what kids in other schools were doing about any

changes in how other states were running the Program. When she went on line to look at the anti-Program website, she saw that other kids had the same idea and were tossing out suggestions—the most common being that kids should simply refuse to participate at all. Another common suggestion was a request that the site’s operators should allow kids to form chat groups by either school or school district to exchange local information. Tamara was highly impressed when, within several days, she saw that the site’s operators had adopted that suggestion.

The following day, when Tamara checked the anti-Program site, she saw that someone had already set up a chat group for Miami Edison. She connected and left a message.

*“Wow, you’re an early adopter. Me too. I’m worried about the Program starting.”*

The site had a feature, found in most on-line forums, to send a notification email when a response was posted. Later, Tamara got an email that her posting had a reply.

*“We need to get other kids on line here. I got a student directory with emails from my mom; she asked for it in the office. I’m emailing everyone about this forum. Oh, my name is Louise.”*

Tamara responded with a thumbs-up emoji. *“Good, then we can make plans. But remember that teachers can see this stuff too.”*

Then she texted Linda, *“Hey girl, remember the group thing we talked about? Girl named Louise set up chat on pgm site.”*

*“Saw it. I’m on it. I’ll get the girls busy recruiting.”*

### **Late December**

Tamara spent most of her winter break doing more work on her maser device, trying to learn how to focus it better and to vary its power output. When she had first used it, it ran at full power after a half-second’s charge-up and could continue, apparently, until the power supply ran out. She also found that she could, within limits imposed by the characteristics of the excited air molecules that the device used, “tune” the RF output to a few selected frequencies. Then she tested the device on some plants from a distance of ten feet to thirty feet, using various power settings. The plants were seemingly unaffected, except at the highest power or close range, when they began to wilt.

Testing on animals presented a different problem. She didn’t want to harm any domestic pets, but then she recalled the fruit rats that plagued the area around their home. The block where she lived had numerous mango trees and when they had moved in, their neighbors had cautioned them that when the mangos ripened, that they must pick up any that fell; otherwise it would attract the rats. So Tamara decided she’d trap some rats and test her device on them.

The results she obtained using the rats were interesting; even at close range, the device’s output wasn’t lethal during a minute’s exposure, but the rats clearly looked uncomfortable. Was it heat? She put two into a box with an infrared lamp and observed the same discomfort symptoms. Tamara concluded that the RF radiation raised the rats’ body temperature—very similar, in fact, to the way a microwave oven cooks foods. She then measured the range of effectiveness of her new heat ray in distances up to fifty feet. She had limited focusing ability at the furthest range, but she could make the rats uncomfortable within that fifty-foot distance.

When she asked her dad to take the used rats to somewhere in the Everglades and release them, he was nonplused.

*“What in the nine hells were you doing with a bunch of rats?”* he asked.

“Testing my maser on them,” she replied. “If I’m gonna be playing with it much more, I wanted to make sure it’s not harmful.”

“And...?”

She grinned. “No rats were harmed in the making of... my tests, Dad,” she smirked.

“Very funny. All right, I’ll take them on an Everglades trip tomorrow.”

He never did tell Tamara what he did with the rats.

### ***Miami Edison High School: January***

When she returned to school after winter break was over, the students had been told that they were to go to their home rooms first and then there would be a school-wide assembly. When she watched several teachers as they entered the school, she didn’t notice any signs of tension and the emotions she felt from them were all normal, so she was fairly confident that there wouldn’t be any untoward surprises at the assembly.

Dr Barelo opened the assembly, welcoming the students back.

“Welcome back, and I hope you had a pleasant holiday; happy new year to you all,” she said. “I know you are all wondering what will be happening with the Naked in School Program now that the federal office has been shut down. The state education department has decided that the Program is to continue in Florida until the federal statute is repealed...” there were hisses, “and the schools would run the Program according to the materials we received just before the feds dissolved the agency.

“Mr Phillips, one of the boys’ P.E. teachers, retired at the end of last year, and his replacement is Mr Jude Laguerre. As an additional responsibility, Mr Laguerre will be our new Program coordinator. But since he is new here and new to being a teacher, too, we’re giving him a week or so to get the Program running. So expect to see announcements during the next week, and we will begin the Program with an assembly on Monday, January 19, because the previous Monday is a holiday. All Program weeks will start on Mondays and we will not select students to participate during weeks with holidays.”

*Okay, we get about ten days to prepare, Tamara thought. More than half of the kids in school are reading the Edison chat page now. Maybe we should put out the request that any kid selected should refuse to strip? That’s happening in some other schools. I’ll suggest that to Linda. And get her to see if the ‘guardians’ idea that I saw kids in other schools use will fly here.*

Also, she began planning to see how much mayhem she could produce in the school, beginning with the first Program day. Tamara assumed that the Program coordinator would be planning the standard ceremonial Program “kick-off” ceremony which she had read about in the website forum; almost every school had staged a public stripping of the first selected group of participants, when beginning the Program, at such an assembly.

*How can I stop an assembly?* she wondered.

She checked out her people resources—school staff who she could “push” to do things. She had to keep the things that she would suggest to them similar to their usual duties or else her ideas wouldn’t work; her targets would rebel at suggestions which asked them to do things which exceeded their normal activities. The school’s custodial staff would be a major target, like Mr Garcia, the custodial head, but the other staff positions were important too. One was the new Program coordinator; he would be a good target for a prank or two. The office people would be helpful because she could get potential participants’ records scrambled and Tamara was sure that the secretary and clerk would have access to any Program records. Some of the technical staff, like Mr Rojas, the AV technician, would be a good target for suggestions too.

During Tamara's preparation week, she began organizing her resources. The dietician on the lunchroom staff thought it was odd that she was ordering ten pounds of sugar; the meals she prepared used little sugar. But she never remembered calling Mr Franko, who took care of the pool, to come get it when it arrived. Mr Franko thought it really wasn't necessary to have an extra ten-pound container of pot-perm on hand to treat the pool water but he figured it would get used eventually, so he put in the order. He noticed that he was low on wood alcohol, but he couldn't recall why he would need five gallons.

Then Mr Rojas wondered why the assistant principal wanted an override switch with a wireless remote installed for the period change bells installed out of sight in a corner of the office, but after the work was done, he "forgot" he had done it. He also "forgot" about the wireless microphone he dropped off in the office. It was set to use the sound system in the auditorium and the sound system could, with the setting of a control, channel that mike's output into the school's P.A. speakers. He "forgot" that he set that control on—and wouldn't notice its odd setting anymore.

One of the duties of Mr Garcia, the school's head custodian, was to serve as the building manager; he was responsible for maintaining the heating and cooling system. As an energy-saving measure, the environmental controls in the district's buildings had all been automated and computerized several years ago. The system was tied into the school's WiFi to minimize any needed wiring for the remote thermostats. Mr Garcia didn't think that it was odd when he got the idea that the principal should have a copy of the password and instructions for the environmental system. What was odd, he thought, was when a student messenger came by to pick up the instruction sheet he had prepared. Should a student be carrying such a document?. But then he dismissed that thought from his memory.

Tamara did a lot more during that week; she was quite busy preparing for a little mayhem.

## Chapter 19 - Waging War Against Nakedness

From the Edison chat page, Tamara noticed that a number of kids had written that their having to spend a week naked wouldn't be such a problem but they were very concerned about the groping and molestation that the Program featured. Tamara thought about that and decided that if someone wanted to strip, she wouldn't care, but those kids should be protected from any abuse. She saw that Linda had posted the idea about protecting the naked kids on the Edison chat and had gotten a lot of positive comments, so her little group of "nerdettes" began to put together a plan with ideas drawn from postings from other schools about protecting participating kids. The consensus idea of "guardians"—a number of volunteer students to accompany any naked kids in the halls to protect them—seemed to be popular among the Edison group. They had read in the main forum that students in other schools had used that idea effectively.

*"Hey, can we all meet somewhere? Talk about guardians?"* Linda wrote on the chat board, midweek before the planned Program beginning day. *"Off school grounds? Maybe in Little Haiti Park?"*

Tamara wrote back, *"My mom's temple can hold maybe 70 kids. How many of you can come?"*

About fifty kids responded so Tamara gave them the address.

On the Friday before the planned beginning day, Tamara began her anti-naked campaign. Her plan required getting several staff people to unwittingly cooperate. Her plan was to keep everyone out of the auditorium on Monday, so before leaving the school late on Friday afternoon, one of the custodians was to "remember" that the auditorium door locks needed to be lubricated, but he "accidentally" used super-glue, and squirted that into all of the auditorium door locks—not to forget the two doors that led outside.

Tamara had determined that the electric panel containing the auditorium light switches had a lock; so Mr Rojas was to lock the panel and "misplace" the key and to "lose" the office's backup key. That was a backup plan in case the main plan failed and the staff could get into the auditorium.

Tamara had gleaned from overhearing conversations that the office secretary was to print out the list of selected participants and put it in Mr Laguerre's box—so Tamara had "suggested" that the secretary replace those names with the names of kids who had graduated the prior spring. She had the secretary prepare three such lists for backup to use when the previous lists proved bogus. Then the secretary "recalled" that she needed to delete all the real student names from the special Program database used to randomly select students because a new list would be generated for the following week. The reasoning behind those instructions was confusing, but, after all, those *were* her instructions.

Finally, on Monday morning, none of the staff who normally unlocked the auditorium were to remember to do it until the bell rang for the end of home room period. Tamara was a busy girl Friday, delivering messages—real ones from the office, and her own.

On Saturday, the kids gathered in Nadine's *ounfò* and Linda took charge.

"Hey, quiet down! We're all here to talk about the guardians and other Program protections, right?"

"Yeah!" shouted.

"But the best way to try to stop this is for everyone to refuse to participate," Linda called. "Like those other schools did; we read about them on that site."

"What about graduating?" someone called.

"I don't think they can withhold graduation," Tamara responded. "On that site, the kids said that the graduation threat was only a threat. In every state, you legally graduate when you earn the proper number of credits and



complete the state's requirements. Period. The NiS law itself doesn't say anything about graduating."

"What if they force us?" another questioner asked.

Louise answered, "It's illegal to use what they call excessive force. I heard that if someone is struggling and they're holding them and pulling their clothes off, then that's excessive."

"My uncle's a lawyer," Carlos added. "Excessive force like that would be a felony, he told me."

Linda continued, "Okay, let's continue. A lot of you kids call me and my friends the 'nerdettes' and we think that's funny. We're not offended. We like school and want to do well. But against the Program, we all have to unite and forget about the cliques. If someone has to strip—if they actually agree to do it or are coerced somehow—then we must help them. Let's talk about strategy now and how we can protect any kid who has to be naked. That means stopping teachers from doing those awful demos I read about, too."

"What about locker rooms and bathrooms?" another shout.

"I got an idea!" another kid called. "All boys use the girls' and the girls use the boys' lockers and johns. If the teachers try to stop us, ignore them. If everyone does it, they can't stop it, right?"

"Guys, I was reading some posts from a school in California," Louise told the group. "Lots of kids there were from Marine families... that is, the school was on a Marine base. I think it was maybe 10 percent of the kids had a Marine parent and the rest of the school had kids from civilian families. The Marine kids started what they called an anti-Program platoon but it grew to be a huge thing with many more kids—the civilian kids were in it too. They didn't allow touching of naked kids—they didn't allow any reasonable requests—and the kids broke up any classroom demos that the teachers tried. Oh, and they all wore a Marine insignia for identification. Maybe not the civilian ones though."

"What insignia?" someone asked.

"It's... um, that one with the eagle and anchor. And someone in here had the idea of switching sexes in the lockers. Those kids did that too."

Another person offered, "Hey, I read about a school in... ah, maybe South Carolina? They had guardians who wore berets... maybe red shirts too. Oh, and they gave out whistles, like to use as alarms if someone was threatened."

Suddenly a brilliant thought occurred to Tamara.

"Hey guys, listen. I had an awful thought," she called and got instant silence.

Tamara grinned to herself. *What could be more awful than what we were discussing?*

"How many of us have Haitian parents or were even born there?" she asked.

Most of the hands in the room went up.

"And anyone here—or your parents—*vodouisants*? You know, in polite circles we call it 'folk Catholicism.'"

There were a lot of laughs and giggles at that as a lot of hands went up, Tamara's too.

"Yeah, Hollywood movies make Vodou look not cool. Or too cool, whichever way you lean."

Laughs.

"Well, my *manman* is a *manbo*. Anyone also have a relative as a priest or priestess?"

She was surprised; about a dozen hands went up.

“All right then, I’ll assume that for what I’ll say—this awful thought I had—a lot of you will understand. You know, we’re all virtually adults now and living in a scientific world, so we all know that spirits are a supernatural superstition. But in the last few years since I came to live in Miami from the sticks where I grew up, I’ve seen things here that make me wonder.”

Someone called, “What’s the awful thing?”

“I think... Little Haiti... might... be haunted,” Tamara said slowly and deliberately

That statement caused a hubbub. Tamara got it settled down.

“But it’s only awful for the grown-ups who are trying to get us naked,” she clarified her claim.

Again there was some shouting—mostly asking questions that boiled down to “What the hell do you mean?”

“Okay, let’s start out with maybe two years ago or more, when kids’ SiF chips stopped working. Remember? In what schools did that happen? When scanners in the shops quit? Which shops were affected? All of the kids’ chips and those scanners were in Little Haiti or close by. Nowhere else, to speak of. Next thing, last year, what happened to those SiF chips in the Edison kids? Some of you right here in this room had your chips inactivated. Remember how that happened? Like magic, nobody could explain how that could have happened. Weird stuff, right? State investigators came looking for reasons why that stuff was happening, but it was happening only in our community.”

She had their full attention now.

“What technology could do that? How were those SiF high school students—every single one of them called by their grade—and *only* the SiF students—had been singled out to have their chips inactivated, right under the noses of school officials? My folks told me that the principal—everyone, really—they were all baffled. Did you guys hear about that?”

Everyone was hanging on her words now.

“So putting superstitions aside now, are you familiar with the Haitian saints—at least heard of them? The *lwa*? If not, raise your hand; don’t be ashamed. Oh, good. Looks like everyone knows something about them. Probably you all heard of *Baron Samedi*, or *Papa Ghede* as he’s also known in a different aspect. *Baron Samedi*’s known as the spirit of death; he’s the power behind deadly magic and controls the souls of those who have met death through magic—like zombies. As *Papa Ghede*, he’s the *lwa* of death and resurrection. He’s well known as a total jokester and is neither a good nor evil spirit, but he’s amused by us humans and that’s why he likes playing jokes so much.

“You all hear of him? He’s one of the major spirits, and he’s identified with St. Peter in Christianity. Well, here’s what I think has happened in Little Haiti, where the majority of his followers live, outside Haiti itself. *Lwa* normally can’t act in our world directly, but they can influence people’s behavior—by possessing them. You know about that? Good. *Papa Ghede* is also the protector of children as well as being the spirit of eroticism. But he’s neutral at the display of eroticism by humans except when humans make a mockery of it and that’s what happened in the SiF kids’ situation and it’s now happening with the Naked in School situation here. And those programs are both hurting children badly.

“So that’s why I claimed that Little Haiti is haunted. *Baron Samedi*, as death, will take revenge on humans on behalf of his alter ego, *Papa Ghede*, for their involving children in areas that should be reserved for full adults. It’s already happening; the officials’ SiF technology is being destroyed, and you all can see the evidence of that happening. Teachers and officials who try to push us kids into doing objectionable things will regret it. Angering *Baron Samedi* is not like pushing pins into voodoo dolls. I believe this stuff is real ‘cause I can see it

happening in Little Haiti and no one can explain it, That's why I think that Little Haiti is haunted; the spirits hate how we kids are being treated. Maybe I've been able to explain it to you, I hope so.

"Hey, but we still need to plan on protecting us kids—you know what they say, 'God helps those who help themselves.' So let's figure out how to help ourselves!"

The roar of approval was deafening after Tamara finished her impromptu pep talk. And then the group continued their planning, including the idea to try to use football and basketball athletes in their scheme to protect kids who were forced to strip.

Of course, the ideas from Tamara's little speech became widely circulated and lots of people in Little Haiti began to wonder...

~~~~~

Nadine was very curious about the big meeting in her *ounfò*. Tamara had told her that it was a strategy session to discuss the kids' response to the Program. Convincing herself that she was only being protective of her daughter, not being nosy, she spent time weeding the garden—which happened to be under a slightly open window of the building. That was how she heard Tamara's little speech.

After the meeting, Nadine confessed her eavesdropping.

Tamara giggled. "I know, *Manman*, I could, er, taste you nearby. I think it was your presence that triggered my idea."

"Well, darling, I must say what you told them absolutely staggered me. How you wove the characteristics of the *lwa* into your activities was brilliant. Your words would make an unbeliever a believer very quickly. All the more so, since your words were the literal truth. And *you* were the agent of the *lwa*!"

"I want to seed as much doubt and evoke as much superstition as I can. It's another kind of creative misdirection that daddy calls 'red herrings.' I wanted to do that so people will blame what happens on spirits, not people, meaning me," Tamara giggled.

### ***Mid-January***

It was a nervous bunch of kids who entered the school building that Monday morning. Tamara was nervous too, but for a different reason—she wondered if her preparations had worked. Listening to the kids' chatter, she was amused about how many times the word "haunted" was used.

*Good, she thought. My idea's taken root.*

She saw Mr Garcia talking to Dr Barelo outside the school office, so as she greeted them, she "pushed" the suggestion to them that they had both checked the auditorium just a few minutes earlier to be sure it was ready.

In her home room, the chatter continued, with kids wondering who would get chosen, whether they would obey, and how the "protective guardians" that they had heard about would help. And there was hushed chatter about the school being haunted. Then the bell rang and the room slowly emptied, and kids began to hesitantly walk to the auditorium. And stopped in the lobby; the doors were locked and two custodians were working on one of the doors. Mrs Leonard was calling out for everyone to return to their home rooms.

Tamara hustled back to her classroom and on the way, intercepted the teacher, and "pushed" the suggestion that she had sent Tamara to the school office. Then Tamara went to the office, making herself "small," where she sat quietly at her desk there.

Mrs Leonard was there talking to Mr Garcia when Dr Barelo joined them.

Barello asked them, “When did that happen to those locks?”

Garcia threw up his hands. “Damned if I know; I was in there not 40 minutes ago to be sure it was ready.”

“And I was in there just before home room started,” Leonard said. “The doors weren’t locked then either.”

“How did the locks get jammed?” Barello asked.

“It’s hard to see past the anti-drill mechanism, but maybe super-glue? But that takes a while to harden and I unlocked those doors not 40 minutes ago! Can’t even force the key in now.”

Leonard shook her head. “We need to get the Program assembly going. Can you drill out a lock to get in?”

Garcia shook his head. “No, ma’am; take a few hours and a whole bunch of drill bits. Those are anti-drill cylinders. The guard ring is hardened and just spins with the drill and the insides are hardened steel and ceramic. The district put them in those auditoriums that have the new computer lighting systems and high-tech boards.”

Meanwhile, Laguerre had come in and was listening. “How... or better ... *who* could have tampered with the door locks—all of them—with all the staff present in the lobby? And don’t you need a key to *lock* the doors too?” he asked. “You said that they were unlocked.”

“Damn. That’s right. They were,” Garcia muttered.

“They were when I went in there too,” Leonard confirmed.

“So tell me,” Barello demanded, “how, in the space of a half hour or so, those doors got locked and super-glued right under the eyes of maybe a dozen school staff members?”

“Um... the school is haunted?” Laguerre whispered. “There’s this rumor going around... and with what I heard about the SiF chips, nobody had an answer for that either,” he said, more confidently.

Leonard shook her head. “I don’t believe in those superstitions. But what happened is definitely not possible...” she trailed off.

“All right, let’s get to business. How do we rescue the Program start today?” Barello asked.

Laguerre shrugged. “I had a lot of things to cover about the rules. It will take about twenty minutes and I need time for questions too. We also need to go over the Program book. That’s why this assembly was scheduled for a full period. I’m using the administrator’s Program guide and those are the directions.”

“I know; I read them too,” Leonard said. “We can’t do this using the P.A. and there’s not enough seating in the gym. The stadium is out; too much traffic noise. You said you didn’t want partial weeks,” she turned to Barello.

“No. It would be unfair if some students had four days and others had five,” Barello confirmed. “You know that I already had to convince parents that we would be completely fair in running the Program. That included no short weeks for some children and using a completely random selection method for participants.” She turned to Laguerre. “You have the list of participants.”

He lifted an envelope. “Right here.”

“Okay. That was generated by the Program Office’s database?” He nodded. “Keep that secure; if we can’t get this thing running today—by end of third period, then we’ll use it next week.”

Garcia returned; he had slipped out when Laguerre had come in. Barello looked at him with a questioning expression.

“No luck. The guys ruined three diamond-tipped drills. We need a locksmith. They called and the earliest we

can get one is around 2 to 3 p.m.”

“All right, we postpone till next week. This is wrecking our instructional schedule. Maria, can you announce it?”

Leonard nodded. “Sure. Would it help if we did the intro assembly at the end of the week?”

Laguerre shook his head. “That’s a good suggestion, but all of the Program materials say that the best way to start is with the complete Program program... um, well, you know what I mean.”

Leonard went on the P.A. to make the announcement that the Program’s start would be delayed until the following Monday and the other school staff in the room dispersed. Tamara slipped out quietly and as she walked back to her classroom, she heard the shouts of joy from the classrooms she passed as Leonard finished the announcement.

*Well, I need to come up with another trick for next week,* Tamara mused as she got herself seated in the classroom and started listening to the teacher. *I read about that sugar-pot-perm chemical trick on line,* she thought. *That stuff they ordered is here. Maybe when I go to the hospital, I can try it to be sure the proportions are correct.*

She had read about a trick to use some chemicals to make flames which produced negligible heat but looked awesome. Mixing sugar with potassium permanganate and applying friction makes it burn. She had read that the permanganate is called “Condy’s crystals” or “pot-perm” in pool supply houses and it’s used in pools to shock water which has an algae problem as it’s a powerful oxidizer. As an astringent, dermatologists may use it on eczema rashes and as a disinfectant for athlete’s foot and impetigo. She assumed she could get a little at the hospital to test the fire recipe.

### ***University of Miami Medical School: the following day***

“Hi, Tim. I have a little testing project and need something—but it’s from the pharmacy,” she greeted him on entering the shop.

“Gotta be more mischief,” Tim muttered. “Okay, is it dangerous?” he smiled.

“Only in large quantities. I’m working small.”

“Ooooo-kay. Thank god for that. Guess that answers the question. What do you need?”

“Five grams of potassium permanganate. The crystals, not tablets, if they have it.”

He made the call and turned to her. “Needs a script.”

“I’m on it,” she said, and rushed to Beauford’s office. He wasn’t there, but a radiologist she knew was looking through some films.

“Hi, Dr Steward, I’m working on a little project here and need some potassium permanganate, five grams of crystals, and the pharmacy needs a script. If Dr Beauford were here, he’d give me one. Can you?”

“Hmm. What’s this for?”

“You know I work with circuits. The permanganate is a powerful oxidizer.”

“That’s right, it is. Okay, let me write one. I don’t have my pad here, so let me use the hospital’s on-line one,” and he filled it out and electronically signed it. “Charge to the Imaging Department?” he asked and she nodded. “Okay, pharmacy will have it for pickup in ten minutes.”

“Thanks so much,” Tamara told him, relieved that she didn’t need to “push” him; her answers were totally true

while being totally misdirecting.

Back in the shop, she took a container and put in it a gram of sugar from a packet she had nabbed from the cafeteria and a gram of the permanganate, and carefully mixed the crystals together. Then she poured out the mixture on a sheet of cardboard.

Tim was watching, fascinated, as she took a stick and rubbed its flat side on the mixture, pushing down on it for maximum friction. Flames shot up around the sides of the stick and parts of the mixture began burning but the cardboard itself didn't catch on fire.

Tim sighed. "Jeez, Tamara... what the hell?"

She grinned. "That's part one. It worked. I saw you have some methanol here?"

He pointed at a bottle.

Tamara took a small quantity in a glass jar and mixed in equal amounts of the permanganate and sugar, then stirred it until it dissolved. She took the jar and poured a little puddle on the floor.

"Wait till it evaporates," she told Tim.

After a few minutes, the floor area had dried. Tamara looked closely at the dried puddle; she could see that some crystals, now purplish-white but very tiny, had appeared, but were hard to see unless you looked for them.

"Let's see if it works," she said, and stepped onto the spot and slid her foot on it.

Purplish flames shot up around her shoe soles.

"Damn, Tamara. What are you doing, anyway?"

"I had an idea for a practical joke, but maybe this is too complicated," she told him, but inwardly she was cheering. *It worked!*

Tamara had seen a video on line of the sugar-permanganate mixture burning. She had figured out that one way to spread it on the floor was to dissolve the mixture in a volatile liquid. Methanol, or wood alcohol, was a good choice because the components would dissolve in it and it evaporated rapidly—but not so rapidly that the crystals would form as soon as the liquid was on the floor. She had already worked out how to get the mixture spread the on the floor in the school.

When she got back to the school on Wednesday, she noticed that everything was quiet on the Naked in School front. The Edison chat page had been busy and a structure had formed, at least on paper, about how the guardians would work. If kids were forced to be naked, the guardians would surround them to escort them from class to class. Kids setting up the Edison protective group were reading how guardians worked in other schools and were adopting the best ideas.

There also was plenty of buzz about the school being "haunted," and the mysterious incident with the door locks only served to strengthen the idea, particularly when it became known that the super-glue used in the locks would have needed at least six hours to fully cure.

On Friday, Tamara learned that the school would be unoccupied for the entire weekend, so she invented a reason to deliver a message to Mr Hernando, the custodian who had the floor-cleaning and bathroom-cleaning duties. After she left Mr Hernando, he "remembered" that he had to scrub and polish the floors in the building lobby and the main hallway after everyone left today. But there was a new floor polish formula, he recalled; Auguste Franco, the pool guy, had left the materials for him.

After the building had cleared out for the day, he poured some wood alcohol into a container and added the

sugar and pot-perm, the potassium permanganate, to it and mixed everything thoroughly. He took a bottle of liquid wax mixture—the wax was dissolved in alcohol too to allow the machine to spread it evenly on the floor—and he poured both mixtures into the liquid wax tank inside his Eagle floor scrubber-waxer machine. Then he rolled the machine into the lobby where he first did a cleaning run using the unit's scrubber. After the floor dried, he went back over the entire first-floor area with the waxer setting on maximum. That way the wax should last two weeks, not the normal one week. When he finished the job, he took the machine back to the custodial service area and cleaned and flushed its holding tanks and washed out the unit's tubing. Then he closed up the area and left, leaving the building from the service door.

### ***Miami Edison High School: Monday***

When Monday morning arrived, the kids were again subdued as they waited outside for the school doors to be opened. When Leonard opened the doors and the kids poured through them and into the lobby, squeals and screams began erupting as everyone began noticing that wherever they walked, purple sparks and flames began shooting out from under their shoes. A near panic began but immediately stopped as people began noticing that the fire remained close to their shoes and wasn't spreading. Despite this, everyone, including the teachers and staff, were totally unnerved by the sight of people seemingly walking on fire.

Then the chant began to break out, "Edison's haunted, Edison's haunted..."

Tamara took that as the cue to "push" the suggestion to a number of kids around her that *Lord Kalfou*, the controller of the evil *lwa* of the spirit world and the *lwa* of fire, was responsible. The word spread like wildfire—faster than the fires that were erupting under people's shoes. All of this occurred within the first five minutes before someone pulled the fire alarm and the building emptied.

The fire personnel were completely mystified about the phenomenon. Their check of the floor did find that a friction-sensitive substance on the floor was responsible for the flames and sparks, but since the material didn't appear to be flammable, it didn't produce toxic fumes, and it simply washed off when scrubbed with water, they recommended that the floor be washed and when it dried, people could be let back in.

Barello accepted their advice and by 1:30 p.m., the students were readmitted. On the P.A., the principal told them that they were to go to the classroom they had for that period. That was Tamara's office aide period, so, making herself "small," she entered and sat at her desk. The staff's conversation she listened to was amusing.

"Please call the custodial staff in here," Barello ordered Miss Wojinsky, the secretary.

When they trooped in, Barello asked them, "What was on the floors and how did it get there?"

Garcia shook his head. "No one used the building this weekend. The security logs for the keypad show no one entered and the motion sensors detected nothing."

"I scrubbed and cleaned those floors before I left on Friday," Hernando told her. "I used the power scrubber unit and those floors were sparkling when I left."

"The kids were saying the place is haunted," Franco muttered. "First last week with impossible locks, this week with impossible floors. The spirits are opposed to the Program, it seems."

Barello sighed. "I'm not giving in to superstitions. There must be a reason this is happening. Let's see. I'm going to call for the selected Program kids to come to the office now and assembly or not, we'll get started. Jude, do you have the list?"

Laguerre nodded and took an envelope out of his pocket and handed it to her.

She went to the P.A. microphone and flipped the switch. But Tamara had grabbed the wireless mike she had gotten from Mr Rojas and turned it on, overriding the wired mike in the P.A. system.

Barello began to speak. “Attention, students and staff. With the interruption in our schedule this morning, we will be starting the Program late. In just a minute, I will have Mr Laguerre call the selected students to come to the office...”

Then Laguerre noticed that the little monitor speaker in the room was silent and no one in the hall seemed to have heard the announcement either.

“Dr Barello,” he said. “The P.A. doesn’t seem to be on,” he told her.

She looked down and flipped the switch back and forth. “The light’s on.”

“I’ll listen to that speaker and see. Try saying ‘testing’ in the mike now.”

They determined that the P.A. was, in fact, not working, so Barello used the phone to call Mr Rojas to the office.

He arrived and listened to her explain the problem.

“I’ll need to check the wiring. Let me get my tools and a meter.”

He was back about ten minutes later and spent a half hour checking.

“I don’t find a problem,” he told her. “Let me check it again.”

When he did, Tamara had turned her mike off so the P.A. worked.

“It must have been a glitch or something. It works now.”

He packed up and left and as he did, Tamara snuck out, still masking herself. As long as she stayed quiet, people who noticed her gave it no thought. She was “supposed” to be there.

Tamara watched through the window and saw Barello go to the P.A. mike again, so she turned hers on. Again, Barello’s announcement was not broadcast and she looked around, frustrated.

Tamara had an idea—she rushed to the nearby girls’ room and, sitting on the toilet in a cubicle, took a towel from her backpack, wrapped it around the wireless mike, and in a deep voice, growled, “The Edison principal is ignoring the warning that I, *Lord Kalfou*, gave by fire this morning. Let her stop trying to thwart the desires of the spirit world. I, *Lord Kalfou*, lord of darkness and fire, have spoken.”

Tamara thought, *Oh spirits! I hope that I haven’t offended Lord Kalfou with that!* when she felt a pressure leaning on her back and a whisper of a chuckle in her mind. “Thank you, *Ogorin*,” she breathed.

She shut off the mike and went into the hall where pandemonium was raging. Kids—adults too—were in various emotional states ranging from fright to amusement. When Tamara realized what had happened, she almost fell over laughing. The metal partitions in the rest room had distorted the mike’s signal and the concrete walls of the small room made the sound of her speech hollow and echoy. The result was a wavering, ethereal voice which seemed to come from all parts of the rooms where the P.A. speakers were installed. A spirit’s voice, indeed.

When she returned to the office, arriving as if she belonged, she saw a frazzled group standing there, looking at each other for answers.

They didn’t start the Program that day.

~~~~~

*What do I do for an encore?* Tamara wondered all day. *Should I let things take their course now?*



She decided on engaging in a bit of psychological warfare. This was to mess with the bell schedule. On that Wednesday, the period bell rang at random times throughout the day, disrupting classes thoroughly, until teachers realized that the bell ringing wasn't any kind of official signal. Then she got a bright idea—a bit more brilliant than her earlier ones. She'd let this Monday's Program assembly go on, but she would try to make it have unexpected results.

*School officials want nudity? I'll give it to them. I'm gonna turn the tables on them.*

## Chapter 20 - Turning the Tables

Monday came, and when nothing spectacular happened before the scheduled assembly and the kids walked unimpeded into the auditorium, there was a real sense of letdown. Tamara took a seat in the center, about ten rows back from the stage. She ensured that no one sat directly in front of her by “suggesting” to nearby kids that there was chewing gum stuck on the seats there, yuk.

As she expected, Dr Barelo had decided to let Mr Laguerre run the show. He was standing on the empty stage and was using a microphone on a stand while three teachers stood near him, two men and a woman. Tamara recognized the woman; it was Miss Tina Pierce, a P.E. teacher, and most of the girls disliked her for her bullying attitude toward those kids who weren’t athletic and the rumor was that she liked girls—the buff ones. Tamara had experienced a few problems with the teacher too; she had noticed that Tamara was a very talented volleyball player and had excellent speed and form when she ran on the track and had begun pressuring her to join the volleyball and track teams. When Tamara had refused, the woman began bullying her too.

Tamara had also deduced several things about Mr Laguerre’s nature from sensing his emotional aura. He was interested in the Program because he was somewhat of a voyeur; Tamara had noticed how the man’s emotional state changed when a pretty girl passed him. Not only did his eyes follow, his libido surged too. She didn’t know much about the other two men, but she could feel the emotion of excited anticipation from them.

*Okay, they’re all sort of perverts too,* she decided.

“I want to welcome everyone to our much-delayed assembly about our Naked in School Program,” Laguerre began. “With me are your P.E. teachers. When the time comes, I’ll be calling up onto the stage the selected Program participants for the week and have them undress. For those who need assistance or are unwilling, these teachers will help.”

Some moans and hissing sounded from the audience. Tamara turned on the maser she had built into her backpack, the one she had tested on her rats. She turned its power up to maximum and kept it aimed at the group standing on the stage.

Laguerre began describing the Program rules from the booklet that everyone had gotten.

“The Program requires that all participants be totally naked, between now and midnight on the coming Sunday, during school hours and also while attending any school-sponsored activities. You mustn’t make any attempt to hide or cover yourself; doing so is a Program violation which can result in your being required to repeat your week. If you don’t complete the Program, you won’t be allowed to graduate.”

Tamara watched the teachers as they became more and more uncomfortable, beginning to shift around and fan themselves with their hands.

“When you’re not in class, then you must permit other students to touch, fondle, or play with your sexual parts—that’s what we call ‘Reasonable Requests,’” he went on.

While she was beaming the RF waves at them, she was close enough to lock into one teacher’s after another’s eyes as she “pushed” a pinkish-green taste at them, one that she had found would make the suggested person quickly give into subconscious impulses.

Laguerre was visibly sweating now as he tried to keep his composure.

“In the classroom, during the beginning... of any class, participants are allowed... ah, um, to masturbate to orgasm with or without assistance of another student—we call that ‘Relief.’ Err, ah, um... And teachers can choose to use Program students for any necessary... ahh... teaching demonstration, such as a model for sex studies in biology... aah... or as a figure model in art or photography.

“Boys and girls on the Program, err... must use the rest room facilities and locker rooms and showers of the opposite sex. Those of you... ahhh... who are in sports or performing arts... will participate in those activities naked as well.”

Making eye contact with the teachers on the stage, Tamara started “pushing” hard the suggestion that the extreme heat and the Program and the required nudity and the discomfort and the pretty girls and it was okay to be naked—for all of these reasons, they all needed to join in with the Program’s required nudity too. She wondered if her doing that could even work; it was such a long shot and the weakest part of her plans for wreaking mayhem. But something in her thoughts had assured her that the people on the stage, being so interested in voyeurism as they were, would be susceptible to that suggestion. Even so, she was amazed and gratified by what followed.

Sweating profusely now, Jude Laguerre forgot all about the rest of his planned instructions and muttered, “Oh, hell,” and began to tear off his clothes. The others on the stage, yielding to Tamara’s “pushed” emotion which made them surrender to their subconscious impulses, followed Laguerre’s lead and quickly followed suit. Within a few seconds, the four were standing there, on the center of the stage, naked, staring blankly at each other and at the turmoil that had erupted in the audience. They couldn’t understand why everyone out there was in such an uproar.

The kids in the audience couldn’t believe their eyes, while the teachers in the auditorium aisles began running around, trying to find blankets or something to cover the naked teachers; finally two teachers went up on stage and persuaded the naked four to go into the wings.

Tamara shut off her maser, congratulated herself, and thanked the *lwa*. She was sure that they had played a hand in that performance. *Now, let’s get people out of here while there’s still an uproar going on*, she thought.

She slipped away to a dark corner of the hall, took out her mike—which she had prepared by taping some layers of cloth and aluminum foil over the working end—and in a quavering voice, spoke.

“This is what the spirits do when teachers plan to mistreat our children. Now, children, leave this hall of meeting and never obey any improper demands to remove clothes. *Ale byen vit pou yo pa bezwen plis nidite!* I, *Anansi*, the spider trickster spirit, have spoken.”

The broken, garbled voice boomed out of the auditorium’s speakers, but the words were understandable, even the *Kreyòl*, “Depart quickly lest more nudity is needed!” The kids reacted with shouts of approval and laughter when they saw that many teachers were among the first people to flee the room; several were actually running.

The shouts were heard: “Yeah, *Anansi!*” ... “Love the spirits!” ... “Way to go, *Anansi!*”

Keeping her “small” aura of projection, Tamara moved closer to the front of the hall, near the wings where the naked teachers had gone. She had seen Barello go up there a minute ago and was curious to learn what her teacher victims thought.

“I’m so fuckin’ embarrassed!” she heard Pierce exclaim.

“Whatever possessed you to do that?” Barello asked.

“‘Possessed’ is exactly the word!” shouted one of the male teachers. “Something in my head demanded that I ... damn! The heat! It was so damned hot up there too—look, my clothes are soaked.”

“The auditorium is cool,” Barello objected. “There aren’t any floodlights—how was it so hot?”

Laguerre spoke, “I was sweating rivers and then it came over me like a compulsion, I had to strip. Not only I had to, it was like—ah, doing that was proper, since this was the Program.”

“The Program is for the children, not the staff, let me remind you,” Barello told him dryly.

The other male teacher interrupted, “Why is all this shit happening? ‘Spirits’ taking over the P.A., fiery floors, tampered locks, crazy bells ringing randomly—all of them are like scenes out of ‘locked-room’ mysteries. And disembodied voices too. I *know* that I was possessed somehow. I always thought voodoo was just superstition, but this is way too much...”

“Yeah, Patricia, can you explain *this* crap away? I’m not gonna be able to face my kids again—this was fuckin’ mortifying.”

“Well, Tina, I really can’t answer. There really does seem to be some strange power at work here. We had a service guy spend a day here trying to find the problem with the school’s bells and he found nothing.”

Mrs Leonard had joined them and she spoke now.

“It seems that all the recent problems have occurred when we try to have an assembly. What if we just call the children to the office and start the Program week like that?” she asked.

“We tried that once or twice. The P.A. stopped working, remember?” Barello told her. “Look, we’re solving nothing here. Let’s just try to get the day back on track now.”

When Barello got back to the office and tried to use the P.A. to ask the students, who were milling around everywhere other than where they belonged, to go to their classrooms for the current appropriate period, she found that it wasn’t working again—and then the school period-change bell rang. It was midway through the second period now—the bell should not have rung then. Angrily, she slammed the mike stand down on the counter and stalked into Leonard’s office.

“Maria, how are we going to get the children back? The P.A. stopped working again and the stupid bells are screwed up again too!”

Tamara slipped away to a quiet alcove that led to an emergency exit. *Good. No one here*, she thought, relieved. *Have to work fast.*

She got out the wireless mike and with a deep, raspy voice, she intoned, “My treasured children. You have seen the anger of the spirits, now you must return to your studies. I will cause the bell to ring now—go to classrooms. I, *Papa Ghede*, have spoken.”

Tamara activated the bells, then she went to the office.

“Hello, Mrs Leonard, Dr Barello. Anything for me to do?” she asked innocently. “It’s all been crazy today and I guess there’s just a half period now, or what? The bells keep going. And who’s been in here using the school P.A.? The kids are going crazy with those weird announcements.”

The two women looked at each other and shrugged.

“Tamara, I wish I could answer. I’ve truly lost control of this school,” Barello moaned. “Let me check this thing again.”

She turned the P.A. mike on again and tried, “This is Dr Barello.” Leonard gave her a thumb’s up and she nodded. “Classes will resume now on the regular schedule. Please be orderly during class changes; today has been ... unusual. That is all. Thank you.”

She walked over to a chair in the waiting area of the office and slumped into it.

“Maria, what’s happening here? Is Edison really haunted?”

Leonard could only shrug her shoulders.

### ***One week later***

The following Monday, Barelo had decided not to try to start the Program with an assembly—she'd have Mr Laguerre—of whom little had been seen all week—bring the participant list to the office to call the selected students to come to the conference room to strip.

Laguerre took out a very rumpled-looking envelope from a folder, turned on the mike, and tentatively spoke into it.

“Attention, Edison students. This is Mr Laguerre. We are commencing calling participants to begin the Program this morning, so when I call your name, take your backpacks or whatever, and report to the office. I will call you by grade, beginning with the twelfth.”

He read the list of eight names and waited expectantly. And waited. Finally, with five minutes left in the home room period, he announced the names again, adding, “If I called your name, you *must* report. If you fail to do so, you will have a second week added to your Program participation.”

Nobody came to the office and the bell rang, ending the period. A teacher stopped into the office.

“Jude, can I see that list?” she asked and he handed it to her. “Ah! Where did you get this? All these kids graduated last year.”

Laguerre looked helplessly at Miss Wojinsky.

“I printed that from the school’s Program database; the app selects students randomly,” she explained.

Barelo came out of her office. “Jude, you have the backup list?”

“Yeah, the one supposed to be for week two. In my office.”

“Please get it and read it when the period starts,” Barelo told him.

When the next period began, he began to announce the names; he got five names read before Barelo stopped him, her face turning bright red with anger.

“Stop, stop. You’re reading the names of teachers, stop,” she shouted.

Confused, he looked at her and at the list. Its format clearly matched the Program database’s participant printout.

Barelo went to the secretary’s desk. “Claire, does that database allow reprinting of names?”

“Sure. I have three sets generated, for three Program weeks. I can reprint a past selection.”

“Could you print weeks 2 and 3, please?” Barelo asked.

She did and Barelo looked at the Week 2 list. All teachers’ names. She looked at Week 3 and it had the names of past graduates. She showed the list to Wojinsky.

“How could that happen, Claire?” she asked. “We sent the list of our current students to the national Program Office last year just before they shut down the agency. They sent the database back together with the participant selection app.”

“I just used the app exactly as it came, Patricia,” she told her. “To access that database, it needs two keys, the password and a one-time token that the Program office computer emails to the registered school after I enter the password. No one can make changes without having those credentials. I accessed the database just once; that

was when you told me to print the lists for the first few weeks. I gave those three lists to Mr Laguerre.”

“Hmmm. And his lists are the same as what you just printed. I saw the trial list you printed out in the fall when we first got the database from national; it had all current student names. So how did they get changed—and how did teachers’ names get added?” Barello asked, frustrated.

Everyone looked at each other and shrugged.

“Well, can you run the app and get a brand-new list?” Barello asked.

“Okay. Be a minute. I need to log in and request an access token—oh, what if their computer is no longer—okay, no problem. Here’s the token.”

She entered it and selected the option for a randomized list of eight names, two students per grade.

“Oops, there’s an error message... what? It says ‘No Data’?”

Barello looked over her shoulder. “Can you display the names, like in an on-screen list?”

Wojinsky pushed some keys and a blank screen appeared.

“There aren’t any names now in there now. They were there a few weeks ago. I don’t understand...”

“Can you enter names manually?”

“Only by typing them in one by one and each name takes four screens to go through. See, first I need to enter my password, select ‘New entry.’ Then on the second window, the student’s grade. Third screen, the student number. The final one, the last name, first, and middle. They didn’t set this up to be done manually since they wanted to keep the lists as tamper-proof as possible. With 847 kids, manual entry would take days? Weeks?”

“Okay, let’s send the student list to the Program Office computer. That’s how we got the database to begin with, right?”

“Okay.”

She found the student list that they had sent out the prior October to the national Office of Social Awareness and several minutes later, a message arrived:

```
"Host or domain name not found.
```

```
Name service error for name=listgen.osa.gov type=text/encrypted; charset=null: Host not found."
```

Wojinsky looked at Barello. “They must have shut that machine down or something.”

Barello thought for a moment. “How did you get the token then?”

She tapped some keys, then, “That used a different address. Something at Login.gov. Probably that one works for all the agencies.”

“Can we pick names from class lists at random?” Laguerre asked.

Barello shook her head. “We’d need school board authority. They told us principals not to deviate from any of the selection and record-keeping policies of the old federal Program rules.”

~~~~~

To add to her headaches, the following day, Barello got a visit from the district superintendent. Claire Wojinsky, the office secretary, had overheard the conversation and as she had become friendly with Tamara, she swore her

to secrecy when Tamara arrived at the office later that day. She wanted to share this latest juicy gossip.

“I heard him say that there was a grievance filed by the teachers’ union; that four teachers were forced to undress in front of the entire school,” Wojinsky told her.

“Wow, a grievance? What does that mean?” Tamara asked.

“It’s a complaint against school management. They said they were forced to get naked.”

“I was there, I didn’t see anyone being forced. They said it was hot and started stripping.” Tamara told her.

Wojinsky chuckled. “Wish I saw that. Anyway, that’s what Dr Barello told him. That they weren’t forced—they were all alone on the stage. Then he told her that they said because the place was so hot, they were forced. Dr Barello laughed then and told him she was in there too with two dozen other teachers; that the room was quite cool, and nobody else got undressed. Then she began talking about how the teachers had told her that they were ‘possessed’ somehow.

“Then they began talking about why Dr Barello hadn’t started the Program here yet and it sounded like Dr Barello took out a folder. I heard a *plop* sound and she said, ‘Read this.’ It was quiet until he said, ‘You know, this stuff isn’t believable,’ and she answered, ‘There are plenty of witnesses to everything written in that file, I assure you.’

“He asked when Edison was going to begin running the Program. I heard her say something like, ‘We had a staff meeting. At that meeting, more than 90 percent of my teachers told me that they would have absolutely nothing to do with the Program... it wasn’t in their contracts, and they were afraid that they would wind up naked like those four teachers.’ Then she said, ‘We can’t even select students. Somehow, again supernaturally, a highly secure and encrypted database got corrupted and then deleted. I sent a request in to the board to use another selection method.’

“He told her that he saw that request but the board was hesitant to allow any changes. So she asked him how she was expected to select students and they were quiet for a bit. Then he asked if I could enter the names—she told him it would take me weeks, longer with all my other jobs. Then they discussed how they would try to handle the teachers’ grievances and he suggested that he would get people from the school district—a lawyer, a HR person, and a few board members to come to the school, look at Dr Barello’s file, and speak to a few teachers here about what they observed. They plan to come here Monday at 10 a.m.”

Tamara planned to be ready for that meeting.

### ***Late February***

It was late February, usually the coolest time of the year for Miami, but for south Floridians, the mid-60-degree morning temperatures felt cold. The school heating system was on to warm up the building after an unoccupied weekend. The school officials were to meet in a multipurpose room close to the offices. On the Friday before the meeting, Tamara put a small baby monitor microphone and transmitter on a shelf behind a planter in the room. Then she found an excuse to drop off a meaningless memo to Garcia and “suggested” that he misplace the keys to the climate control panel in the mechanical room.

When Tamara got to the school at 7:15 a.m. that Monday morning, she took out her tablet, connected to the school’s WiFi network, and looked for the link to the environmental controls. She opened the app and used Garcia’s password to log in. She found the zone for the multipurpose room and disabled its automatic setting, boosting the temperature setting to 80 degrees. Then she changed the system password. It could only be reset manually now, or by using her own tablet. The scene was set.

When the people arrived for the meeting, she went to the empty adjoining room and turned on the monitor

receiver. When she heard the door shut and a voice say, “We’re all here? Good,” she kicked the heating in the room’s zone up to its maximum, 92 degrees. She could hear Barelo explaining the events of the past five weeks and then some teachers told their stories. Then a board member—they had identified themselves—asked why Edison hadn’t started the Program.

A teacher replied, “We won’t take part. If we do, this place is haunted, it really is. We told you what happens if we mention it—and now you just did.”

“Why’s it so hot in here?” a voice asked.

Another said, “Look, hot air is coming out the vents here. Don’t these windows open?”

Another teacher said, “See? Haunted.”

Barelo said, “The ground floor ones aren’t designed to open. I’ll call the custodian.”

Tamara heard her on her cell phone, she guessed, but her voice was too low to hear.

Meanwhile, a board member was asking about the “haunted” claim and a teacher began explaining.

Barelo’s phone rang and she answered. It was quiet for a minute and then Barelo spoke.

“Well, if I were superstitious, I’d say we angered the spirits again. The heating system is running full blast, the custodian is locked out of the automated and manual controls, and only this particular zone in the school is affected. He can’t shut it off because he can’t find his keys. He suspects that he left them at home this morning. And the school’s backup key isn’t in the locked keybox where it’s kept.”

*Now it’s time for act two*, Tamara thought.

She pulled out the wireless mike and a little audio recorder/player. During the weekend she had recorded a little script and used an online voice synthesizer with a distortion filter and frequency shifter to record, in an ultra-bass, hollow voice, an announcement.

“Children, our holy school has been invaded by outsiders who are attempting to bring evil to you. I am preparing them for the nudity which they try to plan for you by first bringing fire. They find that it’s warm now. They will learn what it means to be truly warm in my fires of death soon, unless they cease trying to inflict their immoral ideas on you. *Sispann, moun, oswa soufri pou transgresyon ou kont lwa a!* I, *Lord Kalfou*, lord of darkness and fire, protector of children, have spoken.”

Then the school’s period bells started ringing over and over.

“What did he say? Was that Haitian?” one of the visitors cried out in alarm.

A teacher answered, “*Kreyòl*. It was *Lord Kalfou*; he’s our spirit of life and death. And other things. He said, ‘Cease, humans, or suffer for your transgressions against the *lwa*!’ The *lwa* are our spirits, like the Catholic saints.”

Barelo spoke dryly then, “Just before the four teachers on the stage threw off their clothes and got naked, they got hot—just like it’s happening here, you know. Just saying. I’m not waiting around; I’m leaving. We’re adjourned, correct?”

There was a rushing sound as people gathered their possessions and hurried out.

Tamara killed the heat, triggered the zone’s air-conditioning, and restored the passwords; then she closed out of the app. She kept listening for sounds in the room and heard the two teachers talking in there. They were speaking *Kreyòl*.



“Heat don’t bother you, Irina?”

“I grew up in Haiti. This is nothin’. Damn, Rosie, I never believed my folks when they said that *lwa* possession was real. They say that the *lwa* can’t do anything in our world that has a material effect but they can mount people and get them to do strange things. No way could any one person be behind all the stuff happened here and, hell, today! That voice! Gave me chills. All the other *lwa* voices were different too. The kids are right; this school’s haunted!”

Still chatting, both left the room and Tamara began to clean up any traces of what she had done.

*Mission accomplished*, Tamara thought smugly. *But that teacher was spot on; lwa possession was the key to her abilities, but not quite in the manner that Vodou tradition believed.*

Then she wondered... was her ability tied to the very high mental activity in her brain, or was it the *lwa* who were stimulating those areas? *Ha*, she mused. *Which came first, chicken or egg?*

~~~~~

Word of the happenings at Miami Edison wasn’t restricted to the Haitian community in the surrounding neighborhood, which, of course, was fascinated, amused, delighted, and appalled—all at the same time—by the stories which were emanating from their high school. Haitians are by nature, an open, fun-loving people but are highly protective of their culture and beliefs. They were a people who knew persecution, beginning from their enslavement in western Africa, their brutal treatment as slaves on the island of Hispaniola under the French in the colony of Saint-Domingue, until they achieved freedom in 1804. That was achieved through a bloody revolt which most Haitians believe was led by a few *lwa*-inspired patriots. Even so, the brutality against them never really stopped and continued through most of the twentieth century, until the brutality of economics mostly overtook the brutality of their governments. Yet the people of Haiti persevered in their beliefs, maintaining strong connections to their African ancestors through their customs and worship.

It was now the expatriates of Haiti living in Miami who were amazed that suddenly their saints, who Haitians venerated as their guides to learn pathways to achieve a better life, now appeared to be real. They were no longer appearing in their temples of worship; they were manifesting themselves in the community’s high school. To the community, Miami Edison High was becoming a holy place.

But to the outside community, the strange events at Edison High fueled the conspiracy theory industry with an entirely new focus, and the Miami police had to post special details to keep gawkers, and those with more malicious intentions, at bay. Members of the press were flummoxed by the events and enlisted experts from every possible field, from nuclear physicists to faith healers, to get coherent explanations for their listeners and readers, who were demanding answers. Of course, none of the “experts” could solve Miami’s “locked-room” mystery. To accomplish everything that was known to have occurred would have taken a conspiracy of many people; that fact was widely acknowledged by expert and commentator alike. But the people who would have been necessary to be part of any such conspiracy had themselves been victims of the incidents—which the conspiracy supposedly caused, a tautological nightmare.

The high-school kids in the rest of the Miami area—all of Florida, in fact—were greatly envious of the Edison kids, who had neatly avoided experiencing the Naked in School Program—for the current year, that is. And now there were rumblings coming from Tallahassee, as well as other state capitols, that state legislators were getting tired of their constituents demanding that the states end the Program and might be ready to do so.

At the end of the spring term, various news media outlets ran a story originating out of Atlanta; a university group there had conducted and published a study of the academic effects of the Program on student high school grade performance. The study had documented evidence which had been collected from close to 500 sources

and discovered that students in high schools running the Program scored, on the average, one full letter grade lower than the same school did the year prior to adopting the Program. A “B” grade had become a “C” grade under the Program, they reported.

There was a companion study published too; it contained a summary of the different kinds of results which had been reported in postings on the anti-Program forum, covering reports involving positive consequences as well as the most adverse. Adverse medical and health issues were reported in that article, as were all types of sexual abuse, ranging from menacing threats up to rape with physical injury. The report also noted that the Program was assumed to be the precipitating cause of at least three suicides.

Armed with copies of these studies, parents all over the country descended on their law-makers to demand that they stop the Program in their states. But Florida was slow to respond; the members of the legislature were still dealing with untangling the morass that trying to run the SiF program and the Naked in School Program together had caused.

Tamara kept abreast of these developments as the spring term drew to a close and she wondered if she would have to go to battle against the Program again in the fall. The news on the social front was encouraging. Now with the opposition of many parents becoming evident, she hoped that this would translate to either legal challenges to the Program or that states would simply stop requiring it.

She planned a busy summer. She wanted to try for a Clarke Scholar award and was determined to get a perfect score in the SAT exam she’d be taking in the fall. When she looked at sample math and physics problems from past Clarke Scholarship exams, she felt that she had a solid grasp of those areas and could almost do those problems in her sleep. She felt that her weak spot was in the essays, so for the summer, she registered for two university courses: one in expository and critical reading and writing and the other in creative writing.

Tamara was an avid follower of the news and current events and frequently discussed these topics with her parents, who also liked to follow news events closely. Her dad especially was keen to keep abreast of current events and had a sound knowledge of world history. That was a hobby of his and Tamara found herself hard pressed to successfully challenge him on historical issues. Having such a background, she thought that writing about current events wouldn’t be difficult. She had already begun to read the literature works listed on the Clarke Scholarship website, outlining their plots and the narrative devices their authors used. She had noticed that past essay questions never asked factual questions about the work’s plot, they asked thoughtful ones which required an answer that explored the author’s character development or the author’s treatment of the story’s character interactions. No *Cliffs Notes* summary of a work would help in answering questions like those.

Tamara spent a quiet but busy summer, taking her classes and working in the medical school lab, where she was attempting to build a small version of her maser using the miniaturized RF generator circuits she had designed for the MRI coils. She wondered about the maser’s heating properties as compared to a typical microwave oven. The ovens operate at a frequency of 2.45 gigahertz, she knew, while masers in general operate between 0.3 to 300 gigahertz, and the maser of her design operated close to the frequency of an ammonia maser, 24 gigahertz. When she checked some references, she found that microwave frequencies in the range of her maser could penetrate the outer layers of the skin to a depth of about 0.75 millimeters—so they definitely heated the skin.

Tamara felt that she had made some major accomplishments in helping kids this past school year. She was gratified to notice, during her travels around Miami, that these days she was seeing virtually no naked kids anywhere and furthermore, Florida had stopped advertising its Stripped in Florida program, both for residents and tourists as well.

*I hope I made a difference for those kids,* Tamara thought, as she reviewed her junior year in her mind.

## Chapter 21 - Payback Can be Sweet

### *Little Haiti, Florida: late August*

Several weeks before the fall term of Tamara's senior school year was to begin, the Alexandres received a mailing from Miami Edison High School which contained school information for the coming school year. It contained Tamara's class schedule, the sports schedule, the daily bell schedule, a schedule of school events from the performing arts department, a list of school clubs and their meeting times and room numbers, a medical information form for her annual physical exam, and one new item: a volunteer form for the student to indicate if he/she were willing to be a Naked in School participant.

Nadine showed that form to Tamara.

"You interested?" she asked.

"Mother! Not funny!" Tamara responded.

"But I heard something at the hospital today. Remember Marjory? Her daughter is a school district paralegal?"

Tamara nodded. "Yeah."

"Marjory told me that her daughter mentioned that some officials at the district have been upset by what happened at your school last spring. They think that it was some kind of trick, but no one can figure out how it was done. When school starts, they want to try to have the Program, um, she told me they said, 'start properly.'"

"Does she know how they would pick kids? I wonder if the school got the names back into that system the Program Office used again. Why do they keep trying to strip kids, anyway? That moronic federal agency is gone and no one's forcing the states anymore."

"She didn't say. I suppose just pick randomly—lots of ways to do that."

"No, it's actually pretty hard to get a mathematically true random selection. If you use a computer, the numbers it generates aren't truly random. Computers use distribution algorithms and they aren't random because they use deterministic formulas which make the numbers they produce predictable. Computers can get pretty close to random if they use data derived from natural processes like atmospheric noise, like one popular site does. In my math class on statistics, we saw published studies which proved that humans are unable to consciously produce a sequence of random numbers and by extension, can't make truly random selections out of items in a set."

"Okay, dear, lecture mode off?" Nadine chuckled. "Sometimes talking to you is like being in a classroom."

"Sorry, Mom. I guess I got carried away. Anyway, maybe I'll let Linda know to mobilize the Edison anti-Program guardian corps for possible fall duty."

She sent Linda a text explaining what she had heard and that there was a real possibility that somehow they might have the Program starting at Edison in the fall.

The next day, Tamara woke up with a bad headache. She was alarmed because in the past, her headaches presaged something bad was about to occur and sure enough, during the day she had a strong premonition that evil, though distant, was approaching.

That evening, she mentioned her premonition to her parents.

"I wonder—is this a warning that somehow they'll be able to get the Program started?" she told them.

"Strange that you felt a premonition of evil too, sweetie," Wilson told her. "I did too. I felt the same thing today. It wouldn't make sense that I would get premonitions about Program stuff since the Program doesn't directly affect me."

“I’ll inquire for guidance from the *lwa* at our next service,” Nadine told them. “Perhaps they will provide advice.”

The following day, Tamara was still thinking about her premonition of evil coming.

*I’m still getting the premonition that those yokels from district may try something fishy. I need to prepare. I may need to use my latest, version-4 maser, like I used its predecessor last time. It should work better, since I was able to make the maser much smaller, but I still can’t shrink the power supply. I still need that 24-volt lithium-ion battery, she thought.*

Tamara assumed that they would simply claim that they had assembled a random set of names and then spring that news on the kids at the assembly. Most of the posts she had read about on the anti-Program website claimed that the kids could tell that the selectees were rarely, if ever, randomly chosen. She briefly considered simply stopping the assembly from happening by somehow coming up with another stunt, but then she decided that whoever it was who showed up from the district, they needed to be made an example of what happens when one thwarts the spirits.

She looked through the materials the school had sent about the coming school year to see if anything there would inspire a creative thought—and one item caught her eye: the performing arts schedule. It listed a number of major performances: several concerts by the band and the chorus and two productions, a musical in the winter and a play in the spring. The announcement contained a call for students to audition for the musical; the auditions would take place the week before school began. The announcement also mentioned the need for students to work as stage hands to help with the productions.

Perfect, working as a stage hand would satisfy one of the extracurriculars that she needed for the Clarke Scholarship application, plus it would give her access to the backstage area and the stage systems if she needed to disrupt an assembly. She could work with that. Besides, it would be cool to see the workings of a modern, computer-controlled sound and lighting system. But if her idea were to work, she needed to get started really quickly on getting that job. She was between terms now so she could spend time learning how the stage systems operated so she could work her own magic.

On a gamble that she could catch someone at the high school, since it was still summer, Tamara went there the next morning. She knew from conversations with the teachers and staff that they started a week or two before school began, and sure enough, she saw Dr Barello walking in from the staff parking area.

“Tamara, what a surprise!” she said. “Um, school doesn’t start for another two weeks. So I’m guessing that something’s up, right?”

“Yes, ma’am. I came early ‘cause I read the performing arts schedule announcement. With my electronics background—you know about that?—okay, I wanted to see if I could work as a stage technician. I saw in the schedule that Mrs Peary wanted some kids for that.”

“Oh, yes, three of our graduates last term were the backbone of the AV tech crew and two of their replacements that Mrs Peary had trained—the twins, their dad took a new job in Tampa. So Mrs Peary really needs some student techs quickly. She’s here today, I see her car. Let’s go see her and I can put in a word for you.”

“Oh, thanks, Dr Barello.”

Barello introduced Tamara to Mrs Peary and told her about Tamara’s background, including her patents for several electronics devices and that she wanted to help as a tech. Peary practically hugged Tamara, she was so pleased. Sometimes those technical jobs were hard to fill with competent kids.

“I’ll have you talk to Mr Rojas. He’s in charge of the student AV squad,” Peary told Tamara.

A few minutes later, Mr Rojas came in and Peary started to introduce them.

“Oh, I know her,” Rojas said. “She knows some cool stuff; helped me out a few times, most recently when I was troubleshooting a video camera in her classroom.”

“She’s volunteering to be a tech for the stage productions,” Peary told him.

“Yeah; I’m interested in computers, so the sound and light equipment here should be nice to work with,” Tamara told them.

“And we do need sound and light techs. The two guys we trained moved away,” Rojas commented.

“That’s what Mrs Peary told me.”

“Well, Tamara, you want a look-see? If you have time, I’ll show you the gear. The lighting setup has a computerized control and some automated features. This here’s the light board where we program the lanterns—that’s the ‘official’ name of the entire lighting fixture—and we program the lighting effects and save them to play back during a show. And if you look up in the fly, the area above the stage, you’ll see all the spots and floods. Those ‘wings’ on some lanterns are called ‘barn doors’ and are used to narrow the light beam. Some lanterns have shutters instead; they’re computer controlled. Our lanterns are all LEDs now and can be programmed to light in lots of colors. They’re all linked to the computer and light board with a DMX-type system. We have a few manual lanterns—don’t use them too much; they’re for special effects. We set them up and leave them.

“You see those lantern head mountings up there on the trusses? Many are pan and tilt mounts the computer runs. A few are on tracks and can move all the way across the stage. Let me show you this.”

He went to a wall control panel, unlocked it, and opened it.

“This is where the power to all the stage and house lights, plus the rest of the stage power, comes from. All the breakers are labeled; we keep the system turned off during the weekends unless there’s a show. The house lights have a bank of switches over there,” he pointed. “Now over here is one of the light boards. There’s an identical one up there in the control room at the back of the house. Now take this mike. Okay, let me get those spots on. See, these are the controls for the traveling spots. Turn on the mike and walk out to the middle of the stage, then walk upstage.”

“Upstage is away from the audience?”

“Correct. Watch the spots.”

Tamara walked out onto the stage and as she did, two spotlights lit up, bathing her in light. As she walked out to the stage center and then turned upstage, the light beams followed her. They continued following her until she walked back into the wings; then they winked out.

“That’s so cool,” she remarked. “Can all the lights do that?”

“Not all. There are six automated follow system lanterns mounted on the trusses in the fly,” he said, pointing up. “Two are traveling. Next, look at those booms attached to the walls on stage left and right, just behind the front curtain. The top lanterns on each side—the ones about seven feet above the floor—those are follow-lights too and they can give the actor or scene a dramatic wash of light from the sides. And the lights are programed to follow these little target transmitters that the actors wear,” he showed her the little clip-on box. “The mike I gave you has a target transmitter attached to it.

“That’s the lighting basics. Now, for the sound system...”

Rojas went over the wired and wireless microphones, the hand-held, clip-on, and headset ones. He showed her the sound board with its multiple connections for sources and playback from a USB flash drive or USB cable, SD card, CD/DVD player, or even a cassette tape.

“Input levels are controlled separately using the slider for each channel on this mixing board. These rotaries control the channel frequency response and the rotary dials up here are the channel pre-amp gains. There are controls for left/right balance on each channel. The big slider here is the overall board gain.”

“Gee, there are so many controls,” Tamara said, looking at the board.

“Yeah, but each column is a channel, so learn one channel and you got most of the board. Anyway, the mixer connects to noise suppressors and then the amps and they power the speaker system. How much time you got today?”

“Um, I can stay till 2 or 3.”

“Good. You interested? I can give you a crash course. With what you already know, this stuff should be a breeze. If I think you’re ready, we’ll make you the best boy.”

“But I’m a girl. Is that what they call the techs?” Tamara asked.

“The head electrician is called a gaffer, he’s also in charge of lighting design if there’s no lighting director. That’s me. His assistant is called the ‘best boy.’ Maybe they do call a girl in that position the ‘best girl.’ The best bo... um, you would run the lighting crew, tell them how to do the setups I design and we’d run the light board for productions together. Okay, best girl, let’s get to work. First, are you scared of heights?”

By the end of the day, Tamara was enthralled by what she had learned. And she was tired, after multiple trips up the ladders to the stage fly to reach the grid deck alongside of the lighting trusses. The physical layout was built with students in mind; the ladders and grid deck had tracks to clip safety straps onto the mandatory safety harnesses that people working in the fly had to wear.

But if district officials were coming here to “get the Program started properly,” as her mother had heard, Tamara would also need to come up with a viable plan for the stage; one which she could quickly get going should the officials try to organize an assembly.

Tamara worked hard during the next week, learning to run the lighting system and its computer controls. Rojas gave her a final exam which consisted of setting up a production stage lighting scheme from a lighting plan; the one he had used for the musical the previous year. By now, Tamara had two assistants and, plan in hand, the three clambered around the grid decks repositioning lanterns and aiming the manual ones. Then she had to enter the lighting command sequence into the computer, keyed to the lighting cues in the script.

Rojas checked the crew’s work; made several corrections; but proclaimed that the job was good, especially since this was their first attempt.

“It’ll get much easier, kids,” he told them. “That was the first time you saw that plan. For this winter’s production, you’ll be involved in the lighting planning from the get-go.”

Tamara also got some cross-training on the sound system, but the primary person doing that job was a member of a garage band and had several years of experience using a mixer board.

She also spent time building a second maser. She had fit her version-4 maser in the housing of a fat, stubby aluminum flashlight, so she got a second flashlight and soon had two working masers. Then she heard, through her mother, that the school was to have an assembly on the first Monday back. She needed to get ready.

The Wednesday that school began for the year was a partial day and Tamara took the afternoon to work on

learning some additional details about the lighting equipment. She was working on details of the follow lights' operation, and under the guise of learning about them, she prepared them for possible use during Monday's assembly. Using some gaffer's tape, she affixed her masers onto the sides of the two follow-lights which were mounted on the vertical booms at both sides of the stage. She connected the masers' power cords to AC adapters which she plugged into the lighting power bars. Finally, she disconnected the lamps inside the lanterns so they wouldn't come on when the tracking was activated.

The light board was bluetooth-enabled so the follow lights could be turned on remotely, as were her masers. She now had an automatic aiming device for her masers, one which would keep them aimed at the target transmitters, which she would somehow get whatever district officials who came, to wear.

The next step of her plan was preparing a special recording to play over the auditorium's speakers. She decided to use the SD card input on the sound board since the card slot wasn't readily noticeable and the card could be slipped out quickly. She would use the same web-based voice distortion and frequency-shifting app that she had used previously, too. Since the board could handle a recorded multichannel input, she recorded the "*Iwa* voices" in separate channels on the card and on the Friday before the assembly, she programmed the board to play the recording while randomly switching the various speaker output channels so the voices would appear to be moving all around the hall.

A major problem with this plan was that if Rojas noticed any of her setup when he got the auditorium ready for the visitors on Monday, everything would fall apart. So at the end of school Friday, Tamara planted Rojas with a suggestion to call in sick on Monday.

*The stage is set*, Tamara thought when she was finished with her arrangements. *Literally. He he.*

That weekend, Linda texted Tamara.

*"Can I come over? Need to talk"*

She replied, *"Sure"*

"I hope you're wrong about the Program shit," she told Tamara later, as they sat down over a snack. "I thought that after last year, no one would try that frikkin' Program again."

Tamara shook her head. "I'm sure the teachers won't get involved now, but I have a strong feeling about this. I heard rumors, and also got some tips from the district office. A friend of a friend, you know."

"If you say so. Well, if whoever comes tries something..."

Tamara interrupted, "Like calling kids' names to start the Program. That's what I think."

"Yeah. I'll alert the text tree to get the message out. If any names are called, the guardians will shout 'Everyone, refuse! We'll back you up!' You said the teachers won't interfere?"

"Yeah. Barelo said at a meeting that 90 percent of them told her that they won't enforce anything about the Program. But something could go wrong, so ask the guardians to be ready to do guardian things if the shit goes sideways."

"Huh. That's colorful," Linda giggled.

"My dad's a Marine. I learned all kinds of cool expressions from him."

That night, Tamara had a disturbing dream that an evil cloud was drawing closer and that she'd need her strength and abilities; she should keep herself ready to act. Then, when Monday came, Tamara almost had a stroke when she saw Rojas coming into the school as she started up the walk to the main door.

*Uh oh, sideways shit already?* she thought.

But he came over to her and said, “Tamara, I’m kinda sick today but realized I had taken the light and sound system keys home with me on Friday. I called Barello and told her that you knew how to set up the auditorium—the AV squad usually does that for the assemblies anyway, you know.”

Tamara didn’t know, but was delighted to learn that.

“Here’s the keys. I gotta get back to bed. Tell Barello I gave you the keys and you know what to do.”

He walked back to the parking lot.

Tamara went into the school office and looked for Barello. She was in Leonard’s office where they were talking. Tamara knocked.

“Oh, ‘morning, Tamara. Something you need?” Leonard asked.

“Mr Rojas sent me to Dr Barello with his keys for the stage—said he called here,” Tamara answered.

“He did. He didn’t have to come in; we could have opened the safe and gotten the backup set from there. He also said that you could do the setup for him. Our visitors told me they wanted just a wireless mike,” Barello said.

“Just one?” she asked and Barello nodded. “And I assume general lighting on the stage like normal. The podium is still on the stage from your Wednesday assembly; I’ll leave it there. How many are coming? And it’s still on for second period?”

“Two people, the district’s assistant superintendent and another person. Yes, second period,” Barello told her.

“I should check the stage now and make sure nothing needs doing.”

“I’ll go unlock the door for you; let’s go.”

Barello unlocked the hall. The four security lights were on. They walked to the front and looked at the stage.

“All okay?” Barello asked and Tamara nodded. “Good,” Barello said.

“When should I be here to turn stuff on and get them.... um, him? Her? The mike and whatever else they need?”

“It’s him. And get here ten minutes before the bell; that should work. Thanks, Tamara,” Barello said.

Tamara didn’t sense that Barello was hiding anything from her; she exhibited no tension in her emotions and seemed relaxed—relieved, actually, knowing that the stage setup was being handled. Maybe this was a false alarm. But, more likely, perhaps Barello was being kept in the dark too.

At the appointed time, Tamara entered the auditorium and saw Barello and Leonard at the front of the stage talking with two men. They stopped and looked at her when she came down the aisle. She climbed the steps and walked over to them and as she did, her senses detected a feeling of warning. Was this her premonition? She’d wait and see.

Barello introduced them. “Tamara, this is Mr Jose Rodríguez. He’s the assistant superintendent and this is Mr Roman Nueves, a district aide.”

Tamara shook Rodriguez’ hand and as she did, her mind filled with his emotions: a sexual interest in her, an excited anticipation, a need for domination... the tastes flowed out of him. She felt similar emotions flowing from his companion. Instantly her mind was made up. Like she had done back in middle school when she faced those four district and SiF officials, she quickly pulled up a greenish-brown taste—a “lite” version of it—and



“pushed” it at Rodriguez. Her hand and eye contact made the suggestion very powerful.

“You’re a little confused but you will carry on. You will speak what’s really on your mind. When you start, I will sit in the front row. You will watch me and stop when I signal. When you hear the spirits speak, you will obey them with no question,” she told him intently.

Still holding his hand, she kept her eyes locked on his and he looked at her, confused for a second. She dropped her hand and he shuddered. Tamara repeated the handshake and her “pushing” with Nueves.

“Happy to meet you,” she told them in a normal voice, after that. “Dr Barelo said you wanted a wireless mike. Handheld or clip-on?”

Rodriguez shook his head to clear it and instead of answering, said, “Uh, Tamara, right? You want to be in the naked kids’ group? I think I’ll add your name to the list.”

Barelo and Leonard both gave him an alarmed look at hearing that, while Tamara shook her head and walked away into the wings to turn the board and sound system on and get the mikes.

“What’s this?” Barelo demanded of Rodriguez. “You can’t just come here and do that—and with no warning to me either.”

“I’m doing exactly that. I told the school board president and he gave me direct permission. We didn’t want to give the school any chance to set up any distracting side show.”

Tamara returned and went to Nueves, locking eyes with him, and handed him a follow-light target.

“Clip this to your clothes.” Then so no one else could hear, “You want to see naked kids too.”

He jerked but nodded uncertainly and Tamara told him, “Well, have fun. Do whatever your boss does.”

Tamara was also carrying two hand-held mikes and she brought one to Rodriguez.

“Use this,” she told him; then with a quiet but intense whisper, looking into his eyes with a steely look, “Any more sexual thoughts about me and your testicles will shrivel.”

He took the mike but his legs nearly gave way; they had started to shake. He looked at Tamara with fear while she walked away. Nueves came over to him.

“You okay, boss? You looked a bit shaky there for a sec.”

“I’m good, Roman. Maybe stage fright?” he attempted a chuckle but it came out as a croak.

Tamara went to the two women who were now standing in the wings, deep in conversation. She heard, just before she reached them, “...no time to call district now... oh, yes, Tamara? Say, please don’t speak to anyone about what you heard here, okay?” Barelo told her.

“I won’t. The bell will ring any second. I just turned the sound system on. Everything’s ready. Dr Barelo, you’re introducing them, right?” She nodded. “Here’s your mike. I suggest you don’t remain on the stage after your intro.”

She “pushed” the suggestion that, after Barelo’s introduction, they both take audience seats and stay there.

The bell rang.

“I’m gonna join you in the house. He has a mike; you have yours and everything they need is ready, so nobody needs to be backstage now. I don’t wanna be near that guy. Did you see how he was looking at me? Forget about what he said; he just creeps me out.”

Barello looked at her and nodded. “I’m really sorry about that, dear. I plan to make a complaint to the district office.”

Kids were beginning to come into the auditorium now, and with Linda’s warning, most were quite angry. She had been creative in spreading the word, also letting a few teachers know what was afoot. Word spread from there, so all the teachers had gotten the “leaked” news about this Program assembly and many of them were annoyed about it too. Since the kids were mostly quiet, the staff stayed out of the way. Barello watched and became alarmed when she saw that there were no teachers among the entering students; then she saw a few at the hall’s rear. That’s when she noticed that quite a few students were wearing red shirts—hmm, that wasn’t exactly a dress-code violation, was it?—and they were not only keeping the students in order, the students were actually listening to them. She vowed to look into that phenomenon.

Barello walked out onto the stage toward the podium and waited as the students got seated. She noticed that the red-shirted students seated themselves at the ends of every row, another mystery. When the bell rang, the hall fell silent.

“Welcome, everyone,” she said. “This is an unusual time for an assembly but we were asked by the school district to hold it at this time. We have district visitors here who have a message to everyone, the gentleman who will be speaking to you is the assistant superintendent, Mr Jose Rodriguez, and with him is Mr Roman Nueves. Mr Rodriguez, you may begin.”

She walked offstage and then down to a seat off to the side of the hall, next to Leonard. Tamara had already seated herself in the center of the front row from where she could catch Rodriguez’ attention if needed. She switched on the masers and could see the slight motion of the following lanterns as they kept their aim on Rodriguez and Nueves.

He came to the podium and the room got dead quiet.

“Thanks, Dr Barello. Students of Miami Edison High School, I’m happy to be here and to see all of you; you represent the future of our city and the great state of Florida. So that’s why I asked to come here today to talk to you; to talk about your high school education and your futures.

“Children go to high school to begin to learn the skills they will need for the rest of their lives. For many of you, attending high school will be your last formal education opportunity. But the formal subjects that high schools teach are mostly in academics. Little is taught about personal relationships. Very smart people have thought long and hard about how to change that. They have told us that most of society’s social ills can be cured by fixing the problems of adolescents, and have convinced the people in education, like us in schools and school districts, that adults have a major role in watching over and guiding teens to achieve their progress in socialization.

“Adolescence is a time that many sociologists call a ‘dangerous passage’ since this age group is very susceptible to many kinds of temptations and negative influences, especially where sexuality is involved. They tell us that our schools must develop programs that can channel teenagers into a controlled environment where their sexuality could be shaped and the artificial social barriers of cliques are broken down. We must teach our children to connect with their own essential being and that of their peers so they will learn how to interact in constructive ways. Doing this requires teaching respect for others by promoting body acceptance and improving self-image, creating an environment where trusting relationships can form between the teens.

“Another of society’s major ills is a lack of open and trusting relationships between sexes. Many people do form positive relationships which are accepted by society, but at the other end of the spectrum, violence and abuse are present. Many of those problems are caused because children are never taught about developing healthy sexual relationships; in fact, most children learn extremely unhealthy forms of modesty from the secretiveness that society imposes on its members when nudity and sex are involved.

“The Naked in School Program...”

There was a great sigh from the audience at those words.

“... is supposed to teach you to overcome your personal modesty and become familiar with the bodies of both sexes.”

He paused, took out a handkerchief, and mopped his forehead.

“We want you to become aware of how your own body reacts to the stimulation it receives when your privates are touched so that you’ll learn to accept your own body and its sexuality without the interference that personal modesty imposes... Why is it so hot here?” he asked, away from the mike.

“Indeed, it is the very idea of modesty in children, especially excessive modesty among teens, which gave rise to the development of the Naked in School Program. Too many of our youth grow into adulthood with their experiences of healthy interactions ... er, whew, it’s hot ... between genders severely impaired by the modesty and puritanism which society, even their own families, impose on them. Um... ahhh... where was I ... Excessive modesty leads to improper urges that allow misunderstandings to arise between genders and can, in turn, lead to... errr, um, sexual assault and violence. Excuse me; the lights here are hot.”

He moved away from the podium but the tracking system followed him.

“The Program was specifically designed to remove, ahhh... the mystery of what human sexuality entails in all of its manifestations and to banish, um... the modesty which society has imposed on our children.”

He took another pause to wipe his face, then looked at Nueves, who was also mopping and fanning himself. Then he resumed talking.

“The Program, as the experts have developed it, ensures that those who participate in it will be conditioned to lose their modesty. Um, yeah... let’s see... This will better equip you to be able to function in our modern society. It is the indoctrination of modesty in children which the Program is expressly designed to dispel.

“To do that, our school district started the Program in our high schools last year, but out of all of our high schools, only Miami Edison did not participate; that is unacceptable. ... christ, why is this place so hot?”

He took off his sport jacket and loosened his tie. Students in the audience began chuckling—most had seen this happen before.

“Um, whew, let’s see... The officials of our school district... um... one second...” He loosened the top button on his shirt. “Ah...want to bring your school into compliance with... phew... state mandates... ahhh... Oh, I’m not saying any more... We need to start this thing... aaah... right now; it’s too hot to talk. I have... ummm... a list of students who I’ll call up here... ahhh... who must get naked to start their Program week. When I call your name...”

Tamara signaled Rodriguez with her hand and he stopped, confused, as Tamara “pushed” a greenish-yellow taste of uncertainty and fear at him while she triggered the sound board to play her prepared recording. A deep, hollow moan reverberated through the hall and everyone looked around in alarm.

“Trouble brings me again to this children’s place of meeting. I am most unhappy,” a hollow voice boomed.

The menacing bass voice seemed to move across the room, right to left and then back.

At the word “unhappy,” a thin, wavering voice broke in and the words seemed to skitter all around the hall, left to right to middle to back.

“Once again evil people from outside my *nanchon* cause me, *Anansi*, the spider trickster spirit, to leave the spirit

world to intercede on behalf of my holy people. I am angry.”

The deep voice continued, booming, “My own fury burns with fire and heat. I, *Lord Kalfou*, lord of darkness and fire, protector of children, summon my brother, *Baron Samedi*, the spirit of death, to witness what I do when my children are evilly treated.”

There was a rustling and rattling sound and then a cynical and nasal voice began, “Death is not quite ready for these evildoers, my brother.” This voice seemed to come from everywhere. “I ask that the trickster spirit *Anansi* devise a punishment that will make the evildoers wish for death. I am *Baron Samedi*, the spirit of death, and have spoken.”

“Evildoers, this is my verdict. I, *Anansi*, for your attempts to bring your immoral actions and desires to my holy people, sentence you to perpetual nudity. You shall remove all your clothes. If any garment touches your skin from this moment on, that touch will burn and blister as a reminder of the heat you now feel.”

There were gasps from the audience, who were rooted to their seats, listening and watching with fascination, awe, and disbelief.

As the last sentence wavered through the hall, the booming voice uttered, “Well spoken, my brother. *Se pou dezi imoral yo pou nidite se pwòp pinisyon yo*. Let it be so!”

Then it was quiet. Tamara caught both men’s eyes as the recorded voices stopped and gathered a dark gray taste, filled it with red, yellow and brown, and “pushed” it at the men to complete the suggestion she had implanted in them earlier. But moaning in pain, the two men were already hurriedly stripping off their clothes, exclaiming that their clothes were burning hot. Tamara switched the masers off.

She heard behind her a hushed, “What’d he say?... What’d he say?” and another hushed voice said, “It was, ‘Let their immoral desire for nudity be their own punishment.’”

Barello gathered her wits then, stood up, and used her mike, which she was still holding.

“Students! The assembly is over! Please be orderly and return to your second period classes. Teachers, take control of your students and help them get safely out of here. Thank you.”

The two men were standing there naked now and their skin clearly was glowing bright red—looking very much like a severe sunburn.

Barello called to them, “I didn’t appreciate that show. I will be complaining to the school board about what you two have done here. I must ask you to leave the premises immediately.”

“We can’t leave yet... can we get dressed? It’s not hot up here anymore.”

“You have five minutes.”

But when Rodriguez tried slipping his shirt on, he yelled in pain. “Shit! That hurt!”

Nueves had already found that out. He reached into the pocket of the pants he was holding and pulled out his cell phone, then dropped it, shaking his hand.

“Shit! My phone’s blazing hot!”

Rodriguez checked his. “Mine too. What the fuck’s going on in this place, anyway?”

Barello grinned mirthlessly. “I’m told the people in the community are convinced that Edison is haunted. I believe that you just found out why.”

Holding their clothes in a bundle, the two men scurried out of the auditorium and out the main building door.

Tamara called from her seat in the front row, “Um, I’m supposed to close things down? Or what? What should I do?”

“Humpf. That’s the big question, isn’t it?” Barello sighed. “What do we all do now? If I hadn’t witnessed that... Unbelievable things keep happening here. Tamara, I think they’ll say that the school somehow staged that display. I need to confirm that the school didn’t stage this... Tamara, do you know anything about what I just witnessed?”

“Um, I just know that was kinda scary; those sounded like real spirits too. And how could it get so hot up there? The only stage lights on are those LED strip lights.”

“You’re right. Let me look at the sound system and see if there’s anything attached to it, like a tape recorder or something that was playing on the speakers. Can I check the sound system?” Barello asked.

“Sure. Go on back there. Let me get the mikes to put away too.”

Barello handed hers over and Tamara went to get the other one; she noticed the target device lying on the floor where it had dropped when Nueves stripped. She grabbed it and then picked up the mike from where it had been dropped. It was hot.

“Oops,” she said. *Well, looks like extended maser exposure is unhealthy for electronics.*

She went into the wings where Barello was poking around at the sound board.

“I know a little about these; my husband was in a band in college and he showed me the band’s board. This one is maybe four times bigger.”

“Yeah, this is a cool board. See, I rigged just these two wireless mikes, these two channels. See how all the other channels are turned off?”

While she was pointing at the controls, she surreptitiously popped out the SD card.

“Is it okay to shut things down now?”

“I saw what I needed to, dear. You can close up. Then you can get to class.”

Barello walked out and Tamara hit the stored program selection button, selected her preprogrammed sequence, and deleted it from the board’s memory. She shut the board down and locked up the control panels, then put the mikes and target device in a cabinet and locked it. Finally, she quickly unplugged her masers, pulled them off of the sides of the lanterns, and reconnected their lamps.

*Gotta remember to let Rojas know about that mike,* she thought.

When Tamara was walking through the hall going to her class, she could hear that there was a commotion going on in every room; students were jabbering about what they had seen and were rejoicing that the dreaded Program was again being held at bay. Within a few minutes, the P.A. crackled to life.

“Edison students! Please attend. I know what you just saw was exciting and unprecedented. But please, contain your enthusiasm until after school. Just think of how entertaining your descriptions of this morning’s show will be for your families. I want to thank all of you students, especially the red-shirted ones—who I just found out are members of the school’s new guardian corps—for your orderly and disciplined behavior this morning. Red-shirted guardians represented the Red Raiders well. Mrs Leonard and I are proud of you all and you should be proud of being a Miami Edison Red Raider. Thank you and please return to your lessons.”

Tamara walked into a mostly orderly classroom but she could sense that everyone's emotions were running at a fever pitch. The overall emotional tastes she felt in the room were ones of joy and relief; but she was both physically and emotionally exhausted by her mental exercise.

*This was even more tiring than when I handled those morons in middle school, she mused.*

## Chapter 22 - An Old Threat Returns

Later in the day, Tamara had her office aide period and she found that the office was surprisingly quiet. Miss Wojinsky, however, was bursting with the need to pass on some juicy gossip. She hustled Tamara over to a corner of the room.

“Dr Barello was called to the district office. But I heard the conversation before she left—Mrs Leonard was with her and they had the phone speaker on. It was the superintendent. He told them that those two guys called from the med school hospital. They claimed that they were assaulted here and were forced to strip. They were made to stand under hot lights and then Barello had demanded that they leave.”

“They said that? There were almost nine hundred people who saw what happened...” Tamara started.

“Barello told him that some kids recorded much of the thing on their phones and now it’s all over social media, so that if he wanted to see what really happened, he should check out Tik Tok where it’s going viral. Including the strip tease. So the super asked her how she could let such a thing happen at her school and she really let him have it. She told him, more or less, as I recall, ‘First, you let someone come here to run an assembly without telling me what it was about—he had the nerve to tell me that if I knew, then I would stage a disruption. That, sir, impugns my character and I will be requesting a formal apology from the school board for that remark of his. Then he had the audacity to use a sexual innuendo and suggestive language in talking with one of my students. Third, he and his companion voluntarily stripped off their clothes in front of many hundreds of minor children.’

“The super told her that the guy claimed that he was forced and she told him to just watch the videos; no one was anywhere near him on the stage. And, Barello asked him, since she was kept in the dark about the purpose of the assembly, how was it possible that the school could plan to stage a response which so closely reacted to what Rodriguez said in his speech? She also told him that there was no one backstage during the assembly, just two microphones were active, and that she herself had confirmed that fact immediately after the two left the stage. That’s when the super asked her to come to the district office. She took a couple of teachers who were at the assembly with her to back her up.”

Tamara was nodding her head. “Wow, that’s quite a story. D’you think she’s in trouble?”

“Uh uh; the super didn’t sound angry. He sounded... weary... like he’d rather be somewhere else. Very far away else. Oh! You know something else? He told her that kids in lots of schools heard about what happened here and are starting to refuse to be in the Program. He said it’s disrupting the schools all over the county.”

Tamara chuckled. “Nice. I’m really happy about hearing that. I’m so happy we have our spiritual protectors here—kept us from having the Program start here.”

“You know, I’m not from your culture—look at my name?—really. Is that stuff for real, like the haunting?”

“I’m guessing that 90 percent of Haitians, native or born here, have an affinity for our spirits. Maybe not so much for those who are Protestants, they don’t believe in the Catholic idea of saints, but that’s what the Haitian spirits are—like the saints. They guide believers and to us, praying to them is more accessible than praying to *Bondye*, the One God, is.”

Wojinsky smiled. “Yeah, I’m Catholic and we pray to the Virgin Mary and there are special days that we observe for our saints, so I know exactly what you mean.”

Tamara nodded. “The major difference is that we Haitians believe that we have a special relationship with certain spirits and given the right circumstances and motivations, we believe that spirits can occupy worshippers’ bodies for an amount of time. So I can’t explain what happens here... some kind of group hypnosis? Who

knows.”

~~~~~

At home later, Wilson told Nadine and Tamara that he still had ominous feelings of a threat but no specific idea where it was coming from. Tamara told them about the assembly and how it ended.

Nadine shook her head. “You’re becoming quite creative. You still have the feeling that the *lwa* continue to support you?”

She nodded. “Dad, do you know when you feel *Ogorin*’s presence?”

“Like a feeling of leaning on you?”

“Yeah. And a chuckling in your head. And whenever I do something that helps protect kids, I feel bathed in comfort and I feel that *Erzulie Mansur* is close. Oh, another thing. I think I got help when I recorded the *lwa* voices. When I played them back at school, they sounded so much better than they did when I played them after I finished the recording. It could be better speakers, but still...”

### ***University of Miami Medical School: early September***

The next day was Tuesday and in the afternoon, Tamara was at the medical school MRI lab, making some adjustments to a coil assembly.

Dr Beauford had stopped off at the MRI control room to speak to her.

“Say, Tamara, there’s word going around about strange happenings at your school. A colleague of mine, a neurologist, was asked to consult in a case where two people had burning sensations on their skin whenever they tried to wear clothing. They had been at your school. I don’t think patient confidentiality applies because the event seems to be common knowledge—besides, they’re not my patients.”

“I may have seen something like that happen, actually,” Tamara grinned. “I believe they stripped because their skin was hot or something.”

“This was a strange case, my colleague told me. There are all kinds of reasons for psychosomatic illnesses but this one was a doozy. The two appeared at the E.R. naked and when they were asked to put on gowns, they did and then claimed skin pain and the E.R. doctor actually observed their dermatitis and urticaria; their skin temperatures also became elevated. I was asked if I thought if any imaging studies would show anything. Functional MRI can indeed detect the presence of functional brain disorders related to neurogenic problems, but I told him that in this case, I didn’t think they’d be useful.”

“Did they say what happened?” Tamara asked.

“Only that they were giving a school presentation and suddenly it became very hot. They were so uncomfortable that they took off their clothes. When they tried to dress, it was too painful.”

“What did your... um, colleague think?”

Beauford thought for a second. “That this was strange but not unprecedented. There are a number of psychological diagnoses that can explain symptoms which have no apparent physical cause. You want the technical lecture?”

“Sure,” Tamara grinned. “Hit me with your worst.”

“Remember, you asked. There’s Munchausen syndrome. That’s a rare factitious disorder where the person pretends to be ill or deliberately tries to produce symptoms of illness in themselves. My colleague ruled that out. Then we have conversion disorder. That’s a condition where an issue in a person’s mind disrupts how the brain



works. The symptoms happen because the brain “converts” the effects of that triggering issue into functional disruptions of the person’s brain or nervous system. It results in real, physical symptoms that the person can’t control. People with this condition often feel pain, sometimes with other symptoms and sometimes on its own. My colleague thought that this was a possibility, but having two people present with this problem at the same time was ... ah ... not just atypical, but difficult to understand.

“Another possibility of what happened to them could be a mass psychogenic illness; that’s a functional neurological disorder which is another brain problem that’s not caused by an obvious physical problem, and it can happen with groups of people who are connected in some fashion, such as having similar jobs. An example of this kind of problem is known to the public as the ‘Havana Syndrome,’ where it’s believed by many medical authorities that extreme job stress, together with the suggestion that some type of sonic attack was being perpetrated on their sites, caused the victims to experience similar neurologic symptoms. Those symptoms are real and very painful, but they are actually created by the brain. This could be the cause of those two people’s problem.

“But more likely it’s related to something called the ‘nocebo effect’; that’s when the person has no expectation of having a particular symptom and then experiences that very symptom in the body. It’s another proof that the brain is capable of producing all sorts of real physical symptoms. So how can the brain produce physical symptoms, you ask? Let’s look at their rashes first.

“If a person experiences increased levels of stress hormones in the body, adrenaline and cortisol, those hormones can increase one’s heart rate and blood pressure, suppress digestive system activity, and also affect the immune system. Immune system changes caused by stress hormones may lead to inflammation in the body. Thus we can see rashes, itchiness, and changes to the skin. And next, looking at pain, the mind can cause pain without a physical source. It’s called psychogenic pain, and it happens when the person’s pain is related to underlying emotional, behavioral, or psychological factors.

“Enough?”

Tamara nodded, grinning.

“So these patients may have received a psychological and emotional shock which somehow persuaded them to remove their clothes. And now their brains and bodies have somehow developed a conditioned response to wearing clothing—when they do, they experience pain and rashes from heightened levels of stress hormones. That would be my diagnosis, but hell, I’m just a brain surgeon, not a psychiatrist.”

“That sounds good—better than what people in my school are saying,” Tamara told him.

“And that is...?”

“Ha. That the school is haunted and that the Vodou spirits cursed them.”

Beauford shook his head. “I may not be a psychiatrist but I do know something about the mind. There’s some real truth behind those curses or hexes. The hexes can trigger a psychogenic illness in a person, even leading to his death. The medical theory is that the curse or hex causes such psychological distress in the believing person that the person subsequently behaves as if the curse was real. That’s when something like the ‘nocebo effect’ may play a role. The outcome is that the person, believing himself to be cursed, stops eating or caring for himself while awaiting his expected demise. Such cases have appeared in the medical and psychological literature, in fact.”

“So they will themselves into illness or death,” Tamara commented.

“Exactly.”

“How long do you think that they will need to stay naked?” she asked.

“Until a shrink gets them to understand that the problem is all in their minds.”

~~~~~

On Wednesday, Tamara was back in high school. She felt like she was living two separate lives, and in a sense she was. Her classes at the university were so different, both in their structure and the students. Her university classes had no classroom drama—usually. There had been some drama in her Tuesday morning class—excitement, really, over the unique news that some school officials had been stripped, instead of the students, when they had tried to start the Program. The students enjoyed the idea of a fitting payback. None of the native Floridian University of Miami students had experienced the Program, but some from out of state had encountered it in their school; a couple had even been participants. The instructor had to wait until the class settled down.

As in her college classes, the Edison kids were still chattering about Monday’s dramatic event. They were even more wound up by the news from social media that the Edison kids were being regarded as heroes for resisting the Program and as models to be emulated. Their chat page on the anti-Program website was being examined by kids from a lot of Florida schools and though the plans and ideas discussed there had been never used in practice, kids from the other schools were adopting those ideas.

When she heard voices coming from the auditorium as she passed by, she peeked into it to see who was there. Rojas noticed her and beckoned her over.

“Of all the days for me to miss by being sick...” he began.

“How are you feeling now?” Tamara asked.

“Just a stomach bug. Felt fine by the afternoon.” he answered and Tamara nodded. “These guys here are tearing apart the place. They’re trying to find any physical evidence of what happened on Monday.”

“Oh. I didn’t see anything unusual when I set stuff up and Barello didn’t either. Everything was locked up over the weekend too. Oops, I think a wireless mike was damaged. It felt hot after that guy used it. I tagged it but didn’t get to check it because Barello told me to just close up and go to class.”

“Yeah, I saw it. It’s shot. Something shorted and it overheated, but how that could happen with a battery is weird. Hey, like everything else is weird about this place.”

One of the men came over. “Is this the student you mentioned who was running the sound board on Monday?” he asked.

“Yeah, Bob, this is Tamara. This is Bob Ayers from the school district.” They greeted each other. “According to the principal, Tamara just came in here on Monday to turn on the system. Right, Tamara?”

She nodded.

Ayers asked, “See anything unusual—like something where it shouldn’t be, or something connected to the board?”

“No, there wasn’t anything, Mr Ayers. But, you know, I wasn’t looking specifically for anything. It looked the same as it did on Friday, I guess, and on Monday morning, everything was still locked up. Just before the assembly, I unlocked everything, turned on the system, and got out the mikes. One for Dr Barello and the other for that guy. That’s basically all I did to set up on Monday.”

Rojas added, “Barello confirmed that she saw nothing connected to the board when she checked it just after the

assembly ended. She apparently knows a little about sound boards.”

Ayers scowled. “The district sent me here to find out how your school set up a sound program to play a set of disembodied voices. I guess your sound board and the attached gear does have that capability, but it would take a fair amount of prep time and unrestricted access to the system. Who has the keys?”

Rojas said, “I have a set. The office has a backup set in their safe. I had the keys all weekend; left them in my pocket by mistake. I usually keep them in my desk.”

“And who else knows how to run the board?” Ayers asked.

“A sophomore, Judy Gilbert. She’s being trained. Tamara’s my assistant, um... ‘best girl’ they call it. She’s captain of the AV Squad and stepped into the role when we lost the two kids we had spent a year training. They moved away. Tamara took to learning the sound and light systems like a natural. She’s been around electronics her whole life, it seems. She’s helped me troubleshoot stuff going back maybe two years now, right, Tamara?”

She nodded. “Yeah. When I was a freshman.”

“Judy wasn’t even here Monday, either; she must have gotten the same bug that I had,” Rojas added. “So no one else knows how this setup works, I’m sure. And definitely no one had the opportunity to set up anything like you described happened. Tamara, Dr Barello told me about it. What did you think?”

“What I thought? What happened just about blew me away. I’ve never heard of anything like that happening... um, but last spring? The rumor is that something happened then. I heard that a room got hot and I heard strange voices coming on the P.A.”

Rojas said, “Right. I do know about that. It was a mystery that time too. Anyway, Bob, anything more you need?”

“No. I’m not sure what they expected us to find, anyway. I looked at the videos that were on social media. The voices were... just voices. But the people described them as if they were unworldly. But that’s likely because of the phone mikes; they compress frequencies and, well, they’re not intended to be studio quality. And there’s nothing anywhere on the stage to cause heat. All the lighting is by LEDs. And there’s nothing up here that can melt cell phones either. So, we’re done. Thanks for the help, Hector.”

Rojas shook his hand and Ayers walked away, collecting his gear and assistant.

“I just popped in ‘cause I heard voices,” Tamara told Rojas. “I was in college classes yesterday so I didn’t hear about what happened then.”

“Not a lot. Lots of chatter among the kids. Some community members showed up in the afternoon—wanted to consecrate the auditorium, they said. So Barello let them in and they did some kind of ceremony. That was all.”

“I wonder what the consecrat...” Tamara started and the bell rang. “Oops. Gotta get to class now. See you later.”

The remaining day was quiet, but when Tamara got home, she found both parents there.

“Hey, hello,” she called when she walked in. “How come you’re both home?”

“My premonition told me that the danger was to your mom and was this afternoon or tomorrow,” Wilson told her. “We were talking about what it could be.”

Tamara looked at her mom thoughtfully.

“Oh! I... think ... maybe ...no, it is. It’s Vanessa—she’s nearby somewhere. I’ve been so busy with fighting the Program—I totally missed it! When I concentrate, I can taste a hint of the same evil that came from Mr Evil

when he came here.”

Wilson looked alarmed. “How could she find us? And how could she enter the country? Masters told me she was on a ‘no-admit’ list.”

Nadine shook her head. “Don’t rely on that. She could persuade most anyone to do what she wanted—even the immigration people. She’s got an ability like Tamara in that way.”

“I’m calling Masters. I’ll find out if he knows anything,” Wilson said.

He made the call and learned that Masters wasn’t available, but spoke to someone who knew about their case.

“Okay, the State Department guy is checking with the FBI and with Border Control. He said someone will call me within the hour.”

Forty minutes later, a call came in. It was from John Norris, the FBI agent in the Miami office. Wilson put the call on his phone’s speaker.

“This is FBI Special Agent Norris, is Wilson Alexandre there?”

“Speaking, and Nadine is here with me. Do you know anything about Vanessa, the Haitian priestess who was trying to take over their government, coming to Miami? I heard that she was probably here.”

“Border Control is checking but there are a lot of places to check. If she entered the U.S., Miami’s not the only port of entry and Haiti isn’t the only departure point for travel to the U.S. If you think that she somehow did get to Miami, you should keep alert. We have some people at the Agency starting to look into how she’d be able to locate you. They think that the most likely possibility is that the suspected rapist you guys stopped could have told her. He was mentally deranged and violent, so INS had him deported to Haiti. The most likely way that this Vanessa person could find you is if she got to talk to him and if he could remember where you lived.”

“Oh, I never even considered that danger. I suppose if Vanessa got to see him, it’s possible she might have gotten something coherent out of him,” Wilson told him.

“Right. Oh, another matter. I’ll be in Little Haiti tomorrow at the high school there. That’s where your kid goes, yes?”

“Correct.”

“The Miami cops told me that some people at the Miami-Dade school board think that there’s been an alien invasion. They claim that two of their employees were assaulted and forced to strip and they claim that there must be some kind of invisible aliens hiding in the school, making it hot and taking over the sound system. They say it’s happened a few times at that school. Well, the Miami cops asked the FBI to come too.” He laughed. “A national security matter, they say. I think if word gets out about them having to chase ghosts, they want to have another agency at least to share the blame.

“I’ll let you know if we hear anything more at the office about Vanessa, Wilson. But be careful, okay?”

They disconnected.

“So it’s possible that Vanessa knows where we live?” Nadine asked.

“Looks like it. I didn’t think Leger was coherent enough to remember,” Wilson replied.

“Maybe he could only give Vanessa a general area and she’s been looking around here for a while. That could be why your premonitions have been getting stronger, Dad,” Tamara said.

Wilson agreed, saying, “That makes sense. But maybe... Nadine, you think she wants to get you alone here? In

the Marines we'd watch the target to see if there was a pattern of activity they followed. Maybe she's doing that and has someone watching to see when you're alone. I think we need to plan something. Make it look like you're by yourself and turn the advantage of surprise in our favor."

"Even if she has bodyguards with her, she's still dangerous all by herself, Wilson. I could feel how strong she was when she came that time. I can resist her—hypnosis, I guess you can call it. A 'charm'? Yes, that's what it was like. You can't let her touch you or even look into her eyes."

~~~~~

The following morning, Wilson's premonition was even stronger, so he left the house at his normal time, 6:30 a.m., but he circled around the block to park near the back driveway of their property and snuck back to the house. Months earlier, he had put a chain across the back drive and kept it locked except when Nadine had her religious ceremonies. Then, at 8:30, Tamara's parents sent her off to her college classes with an admonition that she wasn't to get involved with Vanessa. She left, traveling with one of the several car service drivers she used.

"Now we wait," Wilson told Nadine. "I have an almost certain sense that they're coming today. Be sure you're always holding that shotgun and don't be afraid to fire it when you're threatened or if I tell you to shoot."

"What protection do you have?" Nadine asked anxiously.

"My hands; they're deadly, but I also have my Fairbairn-Sykes here," he showed her the knife's well-worn scabbard. "This blade's protected my uncle's life and mine too, many times."

They spent a few minutes in the kitchen talking over coffee—ginger tea for Nadine.

After about ten minutes, Wilson said, "Oof, shit. They're on the way. I just got that feeling like I used to get on missions when the shooting was about to start. Now I know that feeling was from *Ogorin*; he just shoved me on my back. That means action real soon. Darling, please go to the living room where you can watch the front drive but keep out of sight; I'm staying in the kitchen. I can watch the back door from here and see you too. And if I tell you to shoot, then shoot!"

A short time later, Nadine called, "Car coming up the drive! Stopping, two men getting out."

"Okay, dear, they may try breaking down the door. Be ready; shoot through the door if they try breaking in. Love you!"

"One's heading for the back now. Oh! It is Vanessa. She's getting out of the car now. *Merde...* is that Tamara? No, no, Tamara, don't let her see you... Oh, Tamara's hiding now. That *IMP!*"

Just then, there was a loud crash at the front door and a second later, one at the back door which flew open, the frame shattered.

"*SHOOT*, Nadine!" Wilson called as he twisted away from the rear-door invader, who was swinging a machete at him.

*BLAM—BLAM* rang out from the living room.

As Wilson twisted away, he dropped low, and before his assailant could raise his weapon for another swing, Wilson drove up at him and thrust his blade deep into the man's chest, right into his heart. He died standing up. Wilson turned and ran to the front. The front door was virtually gone. On the porch, Wilson saw what was left of a man lying there. His head was almost blown clear off, as was most of his chest. Nadine had gone outside for some reason, passing through the shattered door. She had said Tamara's name—that Tamara was somewhere out there and perhaps Nadine went out to protect her.

Wilson saw that Vanessa was bent over in apparent shock and holding one arm, which appeared to be bleeding. Some of Nadine's buckshot, or flying door fragments, must have hit her. Then she stood up, facing Nadine, and Wilson noticed with alarm that Nadine didn't have the shotgun with her. It was lying on the floor near the shattered door. He picked it up.

Vanessa screeched to Nadine in *Kreyòl*, "There was not supposed to be anyone here but you, Cassandra! But I have the upper hand! I have your daughter Fabienne, and you will come with me or I will have her killed. One of my men went to her school this morning and has her now."

Nadine could see Tamara stealthily move from the bushes along the driveway to a point behind Vanessa's car.

Wilson slipped through the front door frame; Tamara's movement had also caught his eye as he slowly walked toward Nadine.

*What the hell does Tamara think she's doing?* Nadine wondered angrily.

Then she noticed that Tamara was signing her to keep talking and Nadine saw her holding two flashlight-shaped objects, pointing them both at Vanessa. Tamara's activities momentarily distracted her parents and suddenly Vanessa was holding a small pistol and aiming it at Nadine.

"Drop the gun," Vanessa demanded to Wilson. "I'll shoot her if you don't."

Wilson cursed himself for his stupid, amateurish mistake and carefully set the shotgun on the ground.

Nadine looked at Wilson, then back to Vanessa. "How did you find us?"

"One of my men told me. The fool disobeyed me and somehow his conditioning was broken. You must have been responsible."

"What do you want me to do? You lost your influence in Haiti. How does capturing me help you?" Nadine asked.

"Why I want you is my concern. Now... uh, go to the car and get in. If you don't... ahhh... start walking, I'll ... aaahhh... shoot him," she said, pointing her pistol. "You'll drive..."

"If I go with you, how can I be sure my daughter's safe?"

"I will call my... my... oh!... ah... what's happening... feel weak... ahhhh..."

Vanessa fell to the ground, clutching her chest. She lay there shivering, mouthing, 'Please help me...'

Tamara ran up to her, still pointing the flashlights, and Nadine could see wires from them going to Tamara's backpack as Nadine started to approach Vanessa.

Nadine had a sudden incongruous thought, *She's always got that stupid backpack with her...*

"Stay back, Cassandra, I need to finish her," Tamara called, but the voice was... Nadine's mother's? Her mother's voice? What?

Wilson was standing with Nadine now and both watched with fascination as Tamara brought the two flashlights close to Vanessa's chest and the woman jerked, then lay still. Tamara sighed, pressed something on her devices, then stuffed them both into her backpack. Then she ran and threw herself into Nadine's arms, sobbing.

"I had to do that, *Manman*, for Tamara. I had to. She told me. Your *manman*. Told me what to do to stop that evil creature. You know how many that witch's killed? Tortured?" Tamara sobbed.

"I don't understand, dear. Why did you risk yourself? We told you to stay away," Wilson asked her gently.

Then Wilson's cell phone rang.

"This is Wilson."

"Special Agent Norris. Are you safe?"

"I am now, why?"

"I confirmed that this Vanessa person is going to your home now, so watch out."

"Already taken care of. She won't be a problem anymore."

"You... did you kill her? What happened?"

Wilson snorted, "If I could have killed her, I would. She just keeled over. Heart attack, probably. How did you know she was coming?"

"Nabbed an accomplice at your daughter's school."

"Sounds like we both have stories to trade," Wilson remarked. "Why don't you and your Miami cop friends join us for a spot of tea? That is, if you won't mind some untidy housekeeping issues like a bit of spilled blood and some scattered body parts. Oh, and my daughter's safe with us."

"You know, Wilson, I like your style," Norris chuckled. "Yeah, let's trade stories. I have a feeling yours will be better, though."

Ten minutes later, a police car and a black sedan drove in and parked next to Vanessa's car. Wilson had moved it from where it was blocking the driveway to a parking spot, but wore gloves and was careful not to disturb any existing fingerprints.

Norris got out of his car and introduced the two police officers as they left their vehicle. When they saw the scene, they dove back into their vehicle and called for a crime scene crew, detectives, coroner, and ambulance.

Norris watched and laughed. "Gives 'em something to do. We'll need to hold off our confab until after the circus leaves."

Seven minutes later, a detective arrived. The cops had rolled out crime scene tape everywhere; and official cars were still arriving. The detective looked around and shook his head.

"Hi, Norris. FBI here too? Looks like a war scene—or a gang shootout." He looked at Wilson and Nadine. "You the homeowners—that's your house?"

Wilson nodded. "The woman lying there has been hunting for my wife for years. We believe she killed my wife's mother and she threatened to kill Nadine and my daughter too. They came here and broke into the house. As a Marine, I'll use Marine terminology. We counterattacked and repelled the invaders. One's dead in the kitchen and what's left of the other, after taking two shotgun rounds, is on the porch. The dead one there? Looked like a heart attack; she clutched her chest and keeled over."

"Why was she after your wife... Nadine, you said? Last name?"

"Alexandre." He spelled it.

Norris broke in. "Not to interfere with your investigation, Gutierrez, but the woman there was involved in an attempted political takeover in Haiti; she's in the U.S. illegally, and the State Department and my agency are supposed to be being protecting the Alexandres. But it seems that they've been doing a pretty good job of protecting themselves while we feds have been falling down on the job."

“Wait, I think I remember an incident here, maybe two years ago? Also connected to Haiti?” Gutierrez asked.

Wilson answered, “Same deal, same woman involved. But she was in Haiti then and had just sent her goons out.”

“Okay, I got the picture,” Gutierrez remarked. “I see the pistol that woman’s holding, too. Let’s look at the rest of the scene.”

Leaving Nadine with a weeping Tamara, Wilson led Norris and Gutierrez through the ruined door—*Good, she only got the door with the blasts, not the frame*, Wilson thought—and into the kitchen. There was some blood on the floor, but with a wound that stops the heart, there’s no pump to force much blood out of the body.

Gutierrez noted the smashed door, the machete, still loosely clutched in the invader’s hand, and the clean wound to the chest.

“Combat training, I’m guessing,” he remarked.

“Yep. Had to rush it, the wife had just let two shots go and I needed to get to her.”

“Understood. This was very efficient.”

“You can’t make any wasted moves in hand-to-hand. That ninja stuff looks good on the movie screen but it gets Marines killed if they get fancy,” Wilson told him.

“Okay, this was clearly a home invasion and the use of deadly force is totally legal. Their motive was as Agent Norris said, do you concur?”

“Yes,” Wilson agreed. “When can I call someone to start fixing things? A busted front and back door ain’t safe in Miami. And the bodies and blood cleanup too.”

“I’ll check with the CSI crew chief. What happened here is straightforward, so it shouldn’t be long.”

“Let me get my family now; my daughter needs some comforting,” Wilson said.

“Say, Wilson, I just got a call I need to handle. Can I come back in, say, an hour? This won’t take long.” Norris asked.

“Sure. See you in a bit.”

A photographer came in then and took some shots; then the EMTs put the body on a gurney and left with it. There was a small pool of blood where the man had been lying and an EMT returned with a handful of absorbent pads. He put some of them on the blood.

“Leave these pads on for a few minutes. They should absorb all the liquid. Then pick them up, roll them, keeping the plastic on the outside, and put them in a trash bag. Then scrub the local area with a good dishwashing detergent using more of these pads—only the area with the blood. Use the rest of the pads to absorb the detergent and put them in the trash bag too and tie it closed. You can put the bag in your trash collection. Then use a 10 percent bleach solution to scrub the area, let it sit for ten minutes, clean that up, and you’re good to go.”

Wilson asked him, “What about the mess on the porch?”

“We cleaned up whatever body parts we could, but there’s blood on the wood and on the ground outside. Let me give you a card that has the numbers for several cleaning services. They do crime scene cleanups and your homeowner’s insurance might even pay for it.”

Gutierrez was outside talking to an EMT; two others were loading Vanessa’s body into an ambulance.



Wilson heard the EMT say, “...yeah, I’m pretty sure. Cardiac arrest. Probably from the failure of her pacemaker or ICD—that’s implantable cardioverter defibrillator. That looked strange though, her skin was burned where the device was implanted, like it got really hot and burned out. Never heard of that happening. Most likely something shorted in it and an overloaded pulse to the heart caused the cardiac arrest.”

“So the cause of death was still accidental?” Gutierrez asked.

“Unless they find something else during the autopsy, that’s my thinking.”

*Damn, Wilson thought. Tamara must be freaking out. And Nadine killed that other person. Shit. I hope they can get through this okay.*

He set off to find them.

## Chapter 23 - Scholarship Examination

Wilson found his women in the *ounfò*. Nadine was on a couch and Tamara was lying there, apparently asleep, her head in Nadine's lap.

"She's really traumatized by what happened, honey," Nadine whispered tiredly.

"Did she say anything about why she came home?" he whispered back.

"No, I was comforting her and telling her to relax; then she just fell asleep."

"Maybe the sleep is good. Help her mind heal a bit. I'll check on..."

Just then, Tamara stretched and yawned; her eyes opened.

"Oh, it's real; not just a bad dream then," she sighed.

Nadine kissed her. "No. Tell us what happened, if you're able to, that is."

Tamara sighed again. "That was so awful... Yeah, I can tell you. So, when I woke this morning, I had the most powerful feeling of foreboding I ever had. So when my driver got out of our driveway, I asked him to just drop me off at that fast-food place down near the highway. I told him I was playing hooky today and he laughed and said okay. While I was sitting there nursing a Coke, I got such a headache and suddenly felt like I was outside my body. Then... then ... Emily... came to me..."

She fingered the amulet hanging at her neck.

"But it wasn't Emily anymore. It was Tamara, your *manman*, Mom. The images were so confusing, like it wasn't speech or thought—it was *urges*. Like I had to get home *now*, and I had to keep *small*, and I had to do *things*. It was all a jumble. I ran all the way back here, like a half mile, as fast as I could. My daily running paid off, see? Anyway, while I was running home, things got clearer. Like maybe the other Tamara in me was figuring out how things worked. But there was such a strong feeling of 'Finally the end comes!'

"Just before I got to the driveway, I saw a car that was blocking it down near the house and saw a woman get out of it, so I hid so she wouldn't see me. Then I heard two *BOOMS*, the front door disappeared—so did the guy who was kicking it—and the witch staggered a bit so I guessed that something had hit her, but she stood up again. That gave me the chance to get the car between me and the witch, so I would be kinda close to her. I hid behind the car but I saw that you knew I was there—you looked right at me. Then that *urge* came on me again; you had to keep her busy talking. So I motioned that to you. And suddenly I knew that Vanessa—I never tasted anything so putrid and rotten and vile as that aura—had a heart implant thing. I just *knew* it, the *urge* told me, and knew I could make it burn out. With that thought, I had the most incredible feeling of relief and thanksgiving I ever felt.

"You know about my masers. I had found out that they can short out delicate electronics, even melt it sometimes. Well, I had made a second one and they both have a very high power output. I pointed them at that witch and turned them on. Then she pulled out the gun and the *urge* came that I needed to make sure she was... well. I was close enough that they worked on her pretty quickly. When Vanessa fell down, the *urge* told me to finish what I had started... and then I heard myself say, 'Stay back, Cassandra, I need to finish her.' When the witch died, the Emily/Tamara presence gave me a mental hug and kiss, praised me for being brave and smart, and said she could finally rest peacefully now.

"*Manman*, that was your own *manman*!" Tamara wailed. "When she left, she left behind some of her memories. Some are hard to understand, but one was that our ancestry goes back thousands of years to when *Granne Erzulie* was human, she's our family's many-greats grandmother and is now the *lwa* of kindness and love—so

*Erzulie Mansur* is our ancestor too. Other memories are about what that witch did to *Granmanman* Tamara. In one of her battles with Vanessa, Tamara damaged Vanessa's heart somehow. That's how she knew about the implant. Other memories that Tamara had? I don't want to look at those memories—at least not yet.”

Nadine was weeping as she listened. “Was *Manman* with you the whole time you were growing up, then?”

“No... yes... no... oh, maybe not. I can feel that her presence has left me now and I know what it felt like when it happened back at that fast food place—it was nothing like when the *lwa* mount you—yes, I've experienced that; don't look at me like that, Mother—but I feel the same as I used to, now that her presence is gone from me. So it's probably no. I'm sure I communed with her spirit through Emily and whenever I think of her, my amulet feels warm. So I know there must be some kind of connection.”

“So *Manman* was the defeat of Vanessa after all... so fitting,” Nadine mused. “And it was done by technology, not magic. We will need to give thanks to our protecting *lwa* for their warnings and support, my husband and daughter. But Tamara, are you not traumatized by what you did? Like after what happened with Leger?”

“No, *Manman*... What happened here was... right. And it wasn't like I was the person who did it to her; I was guided and *urged* to use my masers like that. Now I feel... like... complete? Fulfilled? Yes, like that.”

“Oh, that's excellent, darling,” Nadine said. “I worry for you. Oh! But how is my poor house?”

“Well, it needs new doors for sure. Some cleanup, but most of that is outside. I think the police should be done by now; let's look,” Wilson said.

They went outside and the area was empty; even the car that Vanessa had used had been towed away.

Wilson looked around. “I want to call the handyman who fixed up the place to come to do the repairs. Don't use the front porch; that will need professional cleaning. Your aim was perfect, Nadine. Oh, the FBI agent, Norris, should be back soon. He's heard my story; I'd like to hear his—what he learned about Vanessa—and see if there are any more people who we have to watch out for.”

About a half hour later, Norris returned. By then Wilson had cleaned up the remains of the blood in the kitchen and sanitized the floor, so except for the door and frame, the kitchen looked normal.

Nadine heard the car pull into the yard, so she waved for Norris to go around to the back.

“Done with the cops?” he asked as he sat at the kitchen table and accepted a cup of coffee as Wilson told him about Vanessa's likely cause of death.

The family sat at the table with him.

“I heard you were at my school,” Tamara said. “I want to know what happened there.”

“And if you learned any more about Vanessa's intentions than you heard from us here,” Wilson added.

“Okay, let's start at the beginning. We did find that she entered through Tampa over a week ago. She had a bogus diplomatic passport but she got the passport control people so confused that she was out of the airport before they could find her. That info came in just about an hour ago; Tampa didn't know about the Vanessa connection and the passport was in a different name.

“The school. What happened there was sheer coincidence. The Miami police were investigating claims of a possible assault on two school district employees by some kind of invisible ‘aliens,’ so the police invited the FBI to be there too. They thought it was a national security matter. I had told Wilson about that.”

Wilson nodded.

“Well, when we were in the principal’s office, talking to her about Monday’s events, there was a commotion in the outer office; a guy was demanding that the secretary call for Fabienne Bernard, that her parents needed her, and he had a letter signed by them to release her. The secretary told him that the school had no student by that name, so he showed her a picture but it was of a nine- or ten-year-old girl. The secretary pointed out that this was a high school; possibly he was looking for an elementary school.

“I saw, from inside the principal’s office, the man go around the counter. He said to her, ‘Let me look at your student list,’ and then grabbed her arm and pulled her out of her chair and she screamed; that’s when the two cops ran out behind me, grabbed the guy, and wrestled him to the floor. They cuffed him and told him they were charging him for assault, battery, obstruction, you know how they lay on the charges. But that name he asked for? I have a good memory for names and I recalled a certain Bernard family who had arrived on a military medical airlift, a family who my office helped obtain new identities. Wilson and I had just discussed the likelihood that Vanessa was searching for his wife—and Vanessa probably would only know the family’s Haitian names. So I stepped in and took over the arrest.

“I wasn’t sure if the cops loved or hated that. They were damned sure confused. Well, attempted kidnapping is a federal offense too and we had the guy cold, with physical evidence too. I told him that attempted child kidnappers had about a thirty-day life expectancy in prison and he opened right up. To hell with Miranda rights. Oh, I did mention them in passing.

“He said that he was supposed to grab you, Tamara, and when Vanessa got Nadine, she was going to take you both to a remote house she’d rented outside Florida City. To do what, he didn’t know. He said that they’d been casing your place for several days and had followed Tamara to her school; that’s how he knew you went to Edison. He didn’t know that you also went to classes at U of Miami. And he said that you, Wilson, went to work every day like clockwork, at 6:30 a.m. When he got the call that Tamara had left and the plan was to go ahead, he had to wait for the classes to start because he had never gotten a good enough look at you, Tamara, to recognize you well enough to grab you out of a group and that you came by a different car each day that he watched. Vanessa’s thugs knew that simply trying to grab Tamara would be difficult, so they concocted that fake letter.”

“Did he know how Vanessa found out where we lived?” Wilson asked.

“Not a whole lot, except he did tell us that she visited Leger in prison in Haiti a few times and that he knows that Leger’s dead now. So somehow Vanessa got the info about you from Leger.”

“You think there were any more plans against Nadine?”

Norris shook his head. “The quality of these guys she hired shows that she was scraping the bottom. That was slipshod planning for a smash-and-grab attempt at your home and a very stupid kidnapping attempt. She must have been at the end of her resources; we learned that she got pretty well financially tied up in Haiti. Maybe she thought if she could get Nadine to work with her, she could make a comeback. Hey, gotta go; thanks for the coffee and the story. And keep safe, although you seem to do fine on your own.”

They shook hands and Norris left.

Wilson sighed. “Gotta get the repairs started.”

### ***University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida: mid-November***

During the past summer, Tamara had taken two writing courses and she had kept in contact with one of her instructors, Joyce Winters, an English literature doctoral student, who taught part of the creative writing course. Tamara was most concerned about the Clarke exam’s literature question, so she had been writing some sample essays to answer past exam questions and sending them to her instructor to critique. She had met with Winters

once in October and it was time for her November meeting.

“Hey, Tamara,” Winters greeted her. “Your last two essays were pretty good.”

Tamara frowned. “Hmmm. Just ‘pretty good’? I want them to be... excellent.”

“Ha! Grading essays is what I do. Much is very subjective. Your writing is excellent, technically. The grammar, word usage, spelling, sentence structure, all that stuff—that’s as good as any college senior English major or even grad student. The other part, the creative part—that’s what grabs the reader. You could do more there. That’s where the difference between a good essay and a great essay lies. For example, where you wrote on the topic of *Moby Dick*, here it’s...”

Winters went on to show Tamara some places where her writing could be tightened up and to remove the instances where she overused the passive voice.

“Writing becomes dull when you use the passive voice. When I read it, it makes it sound like the writer is pushing the topic away, distancing himself from the words. It’s a turnoff for creative writing, and even in narrative and expository writing, you should use the passive voice very judiciously.”

“So I need to be more creative in how I deal with the subject,” Tamara said and Winters nodded. “I have an idea. All of the essay questions I tackled could apply to novels other than the one that the question mentions. The essay questions name the novel and say ‘for example’ or ‘as an example.’ Do you think that, in addition to exploring the issue in the named work, I could mention other works and use examples from them to support my reasoning?”

Winters looked at her. “Say now, that’s an interesting idea. Hmmm, if I were grading an essay like that, it would definitely stand out among any others. That would show creativity and analytic abilities too. Why don’t you try that for the next two essays you send me? You just gave me a wonderful idea for the course I’m T.A.-ing in—thank you! And with the holidays coming, let’s meet again the first week of December instead of the second. Let’s check our schedules.”

When Tamara left Winters, her mind was full of possible ways to bring more novels into her essay question responses.

### ***One week later***

On Friday a week later, Tamara was at lunch when a commotion broke out around several tables; kids started celebrating loudly. Quickly the news spread through the room and Linda went to a nearby table to find out what the kids were looking at. A few minutes later she came back, told the others to wait a bit, and pulled up a website to display on her tablet.

“Here’s what that was about. This morning there was an article in a newspaper from an Atlanta high school about the Program there. Look, the article in that paper talks about how the Program is a complete failure—none of its objectives can be met. Let’s see... It says it makes kids suffer psychological damage; everyone’s grades in the school get lowered, and kids have all kinds of problems including assaults and injuries.

“And look here: it also suggests resistance tactics like we had planned on doing here. Let’s see, um, those selected for the Program should refuse to participate, but if they do have to participate, then others should support and protect them. Look, it says that even the network news blogs are picking up the story and the school’s news article has gone viral.”

“So maybe that story will end the Program in Florida too,” Jamie, one of the table’s regulars, said.

“I sure hope,” Linda replied.

***Late November***

The winter musical was approaching and Tamara found that a lot of her free time was now committed to the AV squad and her part in the lighting design and execution. She had recently gotten her acceptance to take the Clarke Scholar exam in January and the SAT exam date was approaching too.

*Thank the spirits I don't have lines to learn, too. How do those kids do that?* she wondered at one point when Peary was going over the scene blocking and Tamara was marking cues on her stage map.

A few times Tamara had to stop Peary and get her assistant at the light board to aim and adjust a lantern to fill in the shadows on a character's face or to create a scene highlight; other times Peary had a request for a special lighting effect. Sometimes she had to get Rojas to help her, but those times were becoming less frequent. She was learning and this was fun.

As Peary was staging the production by blocking the actors' movements and Rojas was finalizing the lighting design, Tamara was tagging the lantern setup to the lighting cues in the script, to be entered into the lighting computer. Tamara did this job after every rehearsal under Rojas' watchful eye. Soon it would be time for the dress rehearsal, but Rojas wanted to do a few lighting run-throughs before that. Tamara was quite busy.

The lighting rehearsal and then the dress rehearsal were both productive and the final bugs in the performance were worked out. The musical had three showings, all well received, and now Tamara was a show-business veteran.

She spent the holidays doing more preparation work for the Clarke exam. To practice her idea of incorporating more than one literary work into her literature essay, she went over several essays which she had already written, and added the new analyses to them. Then she reviewed them, looking for instances where she over-used the passive voice. After the holidays, she emailed two of her revised essays to Winters and got a double 'thumbs-up' emoji as a reply.

***University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida: late January***

It was late January and the date for Tamara to take the Clarke Scholars' exam had arrived. The exam was being held in a classroom on the University of Miami campus and she found that she was one of just seven students there for the exam. When she finished four hours later, she felt that all of her preparation, including her use of multiple sample tests, had prepared her well for the math and physics parts. The current events topic turned out to be on a issue about which she and her parents had differing opinions, so she had gone on the web with them to find information which would bolster her point of view. When she wrote her essay, she was able to present the two leading perspectives on the issue, arguing her own position and refuting the opposing one.

The literature essay question lent itself perfectly to Tamara's plan to write about more than the single work that the essay topic cited. She recalled the topic question.

"How is the author's life reflected in his or her fiction?"

"Most fictional works are portrayals of the author's vision of the events in their characters' lives. Many of these stories are totally fictional; however, in a large number of works, the author may base some or most of the story on incidents or experiences drawn from his or her own life in some way. In fact, many authors may even model the primary character or characters in their novel on themselves: their characters may reflect their own personalities, experiences, and ambitions. Using Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as an example, discuss how the author portrayed herself as one of her characters, showing how she viewed the world through her character's behavior, desires, and thoughts."

In Tamara's essay, she addressed how Austen had invested her own personality into her main character, Elizabeth Bennett, exploring how Elizabeth is portrayed as a realist for whom social mobility was limited and

class-consciousness was strong, which in all ways mirrored Austen's own background, the social structure of her family, and that period of English history. She illustrated her points with examples drawn from Elizabeth's interactions with other leading characters in the novel and showed how Elizabeth reacted to the social stratification that she noticed in her community.

Then Tamara discussed the similarities of Austen's treatment of Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* to her treatment of the protagonist in her novel *Emma*, where again Austen seemed to invest her main character, Emma Woodhouse, with elements of Austen's own background. From there, Tamara branched out to discuss two other authors and their works which were included on the Clarke Scholar reading list.

She analyzed Franz Kafka's *Der Prozess* and *Amerika*, showing how Kafka's lifelong relationship with his father influenced the main characters' development in those works. She ended with showing how Samuel Clemens, writing as Mark Twain, used his own boyhood experiences in building the main character in *Tom Sawyer* and that of his boyhood acquaintances in writing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. She summarized her analysis by showing how the life of each author had a major influence on the nature of their works: the romantic but stratified and staid British society life of Austen; the dark, brooding, and menacing plots that reflected Kafka's unpleasant childhood; and Twain's light-hearted and humorous stories which incorporated the experiences of his own youth.

Tamara was very pleased with her literature essay. The Clarke Scholars website mentioned that to be successful, applicants must be able to show that they are well-rounded in both the physical sciences as well as in literature and current events, and could demonstrate their ability to effectively communicate. She felt that she had met those standards.

She had also recently taken the SAT exam and was irritated that she scored 1599, instead of a perfect score of 1600.

*Oh, well, she thought. At least I improved from when I took the PSAT. Even if it's only by one point.*

### ***Little Haiti, Miami, Florida: mid-March***

Tamara finished her work on the MRI later than usual on a Tuesday evening in mid-March, so when she got home, both of her parents were also home.

She had already decided that getting a Clarke Scholarship or not, she wanted to study at Johns Hopkins, mainly because her research interests were so similar to some of the projects she had seen on the APL website.

"Tamara, a big envelope came for you from the Clarke program," Nadine told her after she greeted her parents.

Tamara squealed. "Oh! A packet is good news. If I hadn't made the cut, they'd just send a letter," she explained as she tore the envelope open.

"Yes! I'm a finalist in the Clarke selection process," she exclaimed, thrilled with the news. "The letter says I got one of the top ten scores. The five top-scoring boys and the five top-scoring girls are the finalists and my choice for attending Johns Hopkins is set. If I want to be considered for the award, I need to contact the program to arrange an interview date. Yes, I want!"

"I thought that only one girl would get into Hopkins," Wilson said.

"Dad, every finalist gets a scholarship. Of the ten finalists, just four get a full ride and the other six get their tuition and fees covered. There were two full ones for girls—one to go to Hopkins and one to Maryland. I applied to Hopkins only so that means I either get the full ride or the partial one. I have to go to an interview where they make the final choices."

"Who does the interviews? College professors?"

“This letter says that there’s a selection committee that decides, and the committee has some professors, some engineers, and some business people. I need to meet with the committee first and talk to them, then they decide who interviews me—it says ‘in depth’—then I get a tour. That’s when I get to meet with potential faculty mentors.”

Nadine hugged her. “I’m so happy for you, darling. When do you need to go?”

“They have a list of available dates here. They’re Fridays through Sunday mornings. I would get there Thursday evening, a Clarke official would meet me at the airport and I would be paired with a current Clarke scholar as a peer mentor. Oh, the Clarke Program pays the travel costs.”

“Where do you stay for the weekend?” Wilson asked.

“A hotel. Here’s the hotel flyer.” Tamara gave him the folder, “The letter says that’s where I’ll be meeting the committee and doing the interview. It’s across the street from the college. They have rooms reserved for the visitors. I’m guessing that with four weekends to pick from, maybe three or even four winners will be there on the weekend I pick. I suppose I’ll get to meet them too.”

***Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland: early April***

She did get to meet two of the other finalists, a boy and a girl, after she arrived at the hotel on the Thursday of her interview. She met them in the evening at dinner. They shared some of their background with each other but, being a little nervous about the following day, they mostly discussed the scholarship exam, but they did reveal a little personal information.

Terence, the boy, was a big, muscular fellow, well over six feet tall with very wide shoulders. He admitted to being a football player.

“But Ah’m not a jock,” he insisted. “Ah’m a second-string interior defensive lineman. Dad was a college football hero and decided that Ah should be one, too. My folks ‘red-shirted’ me for kindergarten so Ah’d be bigger than the other kids. Ah did get some play time, so Dad got his fix.”

Tamara grinned at him. “So you’re a star off the field then. You must be; look at where we are.”

Terence blushed. “It does seem surreal. My guidance counselor really pushed me to apply t’the Clarke program. Ah guess she was right; Ah did make it t’being a finalist. Ah want to study astrophysics and Hopkins has a very strong program.”

Charlene grinned. “Program. Hate that word. Reminds me of that idiot Naked in School one. I’m getting out of high school without doing it. I was just picked for it three weeks ago but I’m out of the high school building two days every week; I’m in a special college-high school AP-course program. They wanted me to miss a week of college classes to stay in the high school to do the Program but I declined. Then they told me that I could go to my college classes but had to stay naked. Sure... That was a non-starter. I told them to stuff it. The Program coordinator person hates that I’m getting away with that. But they won’t let me go to the graduation ceremony. Like I care. Terence?”

“No Program for me,” Terence smiled. “My school’s a private one, gets no federal bucks. We don’t have the Program ‘cause the feds can’t force us t’have it. We have a huge football program, lots ‘a Texas schools do, but we have great academics too.”

The two looked at Tamara.

“Me? My school never got it started. But, first, Charlene, they still had it in your school, even after all that publicity that it was so bad? I thought that it was stopped everywhere.”



“Ha, hasn’t stopped at my school. Yet. It stops at the end of this school year. That’s because—well, my school’s on Ohio State’s campus and the Psych Department there was doing a study on the Program, so they forced the school to keep it going for as long as possible. Tamara, how was it possible that your school held out so long so that it never got started, anyway?”

Tamara grinned at them. “‘Cause of a conflict between laws. Florida was behind the rest of the country ‘cause its laws made it illegal for kids to be naked in public unless they had a special implanted chip. It took maybe two years for them to fix that law, so it couldn’t get started in Florida until recently.”

Terence looked blank but Charlene exclaimed, “Oh, right. I did hear about the Stripped in Florida thing. Now *that* was a really *stupid* idea.”

They had to explain to Terence what that was about.

“Yeah... Ah did hear a rumor... thought it was a joke. So that was a real thing?”

Tamara assured him it was real. “That program’s moribund now, if not dead,” she said. “The last I heard, parents could buy a chip at the same office where they get their auto license tags. But why bother paying a fee if the laws forbidding public nudity for kids no longer exist?”

“Hey, Charlene,” Terence asked, “y’said y’all’s school’s at Ohio State? How does that work?”

“Yeah, my high school’s on Ohio State’s campus; it’s tied to the university, like a charter school, but it’s a public school. My dad’s a prof there. My school has one of the top STEM programs in the state and I was always good at tech stuff. I’m planning to study mechanical engineering and either Maryland or Hopkins would be great since they both have top-notch engineering programs.”

The three teens met again at breakfast the following morning and after breakfast, they left to face the Clarke Scholars committee.

## Chapter 24 - College Interview

Two surprises awaited Tamara on the Friday of her interview; the first surprise occurred in the morning just after she entered the hotel conference room suite after having breakfast with the two other Clarke finalists who were there this weekend. The other surprise would come later in the day.

Tamara looked around the conference room foyer and saw that there were light refreshments set out on a buffet table and about a dozen people were standing in groups and chatting. As she walked through the entrance, she noticed someone familiar and stopped suddenly, and the two kids, who were following closely behind her, almost bumped into her.

“Jeez, Tamara, why’d y’all stop?” Terence hissed at her.

“Ohmygod,” Tamara exclaimed, “It’s Dr Tarmson—I didn’t even think about who’d be on the committee...”

“Y’all know her?” Terence asked.

“Met her once and worked with her for a few days. She’s a scientist with DARPA.” She explained what the agency was. “They’re licensing one or two of my patents.”

“Patents? Shit, you must be hot stuff, then,” Charlene muttered. “At dinner, you mentioned that you wanted Hopkins and I’ll bet you get the full ride too.”

“I hope I do,” Tamara told her. “At least, to be admitted. I want to work at their APL, actually.”

Then Tarmson noticed Tamara, and with a big smile, walked over to greet her.

“Hello, Tamara. Did you decide about taking the job I offered you yet?” she asked and laughed.

“Hi, Dr Tarmson. I was really surprised to see you here—and I told you last year that I wanted to get some real school in before starting a real job.” They both chuckled. “Let me introduce you to these other finalists here. We’ve been getting acquainted with each other. Dr Helene Tarmson, this is Terence Dryer from Texas and Charlene Russo from Ohio. My fellow finalists,” she finished introducing them.

They began to talk when a man announced, “We need to start now, so everyone, please go into the conference room. Bring your coffee if you want.”

Tamara whispered to Tarmson as they walked into the room, “I made some improvements on the design of my... project. I was planning to send you the writeup soon, but since you’re here, can we meet?”

Tarmson looked at her. “I’d love to see what you’ve done, my dear. We might get a few minutes after this meeting.”

The meeting turned out to be primarily a meet-and-greet. The chairman of the Clarke Scholars Foundation ran the meeting and had the committee members introduce themselves and then asked the three finalists to introduce themselves, talk about their backgrounds, and tell the group about their education expectations and anticipated career plans. A few minutes later, three college-aged kids were shown into the room.

“Let me introduce you finalists to your student guides for the weekend,” the chairman told them. “We’ve paired each of you with one of our current Clarke Scholars based on your backgrounds. They will take you to your interviews, to a special lunch, and give you a tour of the campus. This evening we’ll have dinner with some potential faculty mentors and after dinner, you’ll have a chance to informally chat with them. Now, I’ll let our current Clarke Scholars introduce themselves...”

Each gave a quick summary of their studies and projects and then Jill Benavides, a junior majoring in math, introduced herself to Tamara. Jill would be her guide.

The meeting ended and Jill asked Tamara, “Would you like to see part of the campus now? I’m supposed to tell you a little about campus life, but we’ll be having an informal gathering later and we can talk then with the others. The regular tour will be a formal one. We have about an hour or so now before lunch and then you go to your interview.”

“Give me a few minutes first, Jill, okay? I need to talk to Dr Tarmson, okay? It’s kinda confidential.”

“Sure. I’ll wait out there,” she pointed at a sitting area outside the conference suite.

Tarmson was talking to one of the committee members and noticed Tamara waiting. She excused herself and came over to her, looking around.

“Okay, Tamara. We can sit right here; everyone’s leaving. What’s up?”

“So I had an idea to miniaturize the RF generator and came up with something unexpected,” Tamara began, and went on to explain how she had built a smaller, yet more powerful maser.

She went on, “But it’s still limited by the power supply. I still need to use a 24-volt lithium battery, minimum, and the one I use weighs over a pound.”

“Tamara, what you’ve done is just amazing. We haven’t even begun to look at the problem of focusing an RF beam yet but you approached the problem in a totally unexpected way. Yes, please send me your writeup. And consult with your patent guy too. This is definitely a new idea. Thanks for telling me about this, dear. Okay, gotta go; I need to get back to Arlington.”

Tamara rejoined Jill and Jill asked, “How do you know Dr Tarmson? She’s a manager or something at DARPA, right? And Hopkins has all kinds of DARPA projects.”

“Yeah, she’s the program manager of their Defense Sciences Office. I have some patents that they license from me.”

“Ooo, cool! You’re what? Eighteen and you have patents? I think only one of us current Clarke students has a patent.”

Tamara grinned. “Not eighteen, I’m fifteen.”

“Wow, fifteen. You must have jumped a lot of grades then.”

Tamara nodded, “Yep. I was home-schooled and went at my own pace. That was way too fast in math and science and too slow in humanities,” she giggled. “So when I began public high school, I concentrated on humanities and continued the science stuff in a college near me. According to the admissions office here, I have more than twelve college credits that can be transferred and another twelve that can be waived, so effectively I’ll have sophomore class status. If the Physics department approves, that is.”

“Skipping grades. No wonder you’re so young. So you’re from Florida,” Jill said as they were walking out of the hotel, “I’m from Atlanta and I remember all the stories about the stripped kids in Florida.”

“Stupid, isn’t that program? But you must have had the Naked in School Program in Atlanta, when you were there, right? That NiS law was passed maybe eight years ago. They just started it in Florida last year.”

“But it won’t last long there, right?” Jill said, grinning. “You must have heard about what that one school in Atlanta did—that school newspaper article that went viral?”

Tamara chuckled. “I sure did hear about it. Was that school where you went?”

“No, not even close. I live in Forest Park, in the south Atlanta area. That school where they had that article was

in the northeast Atlanta area. But my folks told me that the school still kept up doing the Program even after other area schools had been dropping it. Kids at that school just started to rebel.”

They were walking onto the campus as they were speaking, and Jill pointed out some of the features.

“This is the athletics area,” she said. “We’re passing the football stadium and baseball field, obviously.”

“Did you ever have to be in the Program?” Tamara asked.

“Fortunately, no. Actually, the Program was running when I was in high school and I hated it; so did lots of kids, but sometimes a kid couldn’t avoid it, like if a parent made him. Some of the things I saw in it were gross. It was an open secret that kids could get out of it if they strongly refused to participate. Everyone knew that they couldn’t be forced to strip; there was something in the assault laws about that. So a lot of kids did refuse to do it. I refused too—but all that all happened before those child-sex-slavers took it over and made the Program almost impossible to get out of. I graduated right around then, so I escaped. What about you?”

“They tried to start it, but ran into some problems,” Tamara said, trying to hide a smirk.

“Uh, okay... oh, so this is the Freshman Quad. All of the dorms here are where most of the freshmen live. This is probably where you’ll live, too. Um, tomorrow will be the campus life tour and you’ll see the insides of some dorms then. So what kind of problems would stop the Program?” Jill asked.

“Weird stuff, like everyone getting locked out of the auditorium for most of the day when the very first stripping assembly was supposed to happen. Also the school P.A. system stopped working when they tried to call the selected students. They also had problems getting random lists of kids printed—one list even had teachers’ names instead of students...”

Jill laughed, “Sweet! Were they made to strip too?” she giggled.

“As if,” Tamara giggled back. “No, somehow they figured out that list was wrong.”

They both laughed again and Tamara continued, “Oh, and the fed’s Program guy had a heart attack. Then, when they finally tried to start it, after they got all the problems fixed, the replacement Program person and some teachers went all mental or something and stripped themselves on the school stage before they could call up any kids and that got it stopped again. That happened again to a school district guy when he tried starting it all on his own. Weird stuff like that.”

Jill looked at her wide-eyed. “No shit. Stripped teachers too. All that stuff is *totally* weird. Okay, we’ll walk down here; this building we’re passing is the main building for the Arts and Sciences school. The library is ahead on the left but we’ll go to the right, to Kayser Quad, and straight ahead, those stairs, that’s the Breezeway. It’s considered to be the center of the campus.”

While they were walking through Kayser Quad, Jill stopped to speak with a few students she knew and introduced Tamara to them. They chatted for a bit but then they had to get to class.

“I’ll bet with Florida’s stripped-kids program, the Naked in School Program wasn’t such a big deal for kids to be naked, right?” Jill asked as they walked from the Breezeway onto Wyman Quad. “Oh, there’s the Shriver Concert Hall, straight ahead.”

“No, not hardly. The only thing similar was the nudity,” Tamara explained. “In the Stripped in Florida program, the parents made the kids get naked but if anyone tried to molest the kid, they’d get the book thrown at them. In the NiS Program, molestation was a Program requirement.”

“Yeah, that’s definitely true. I did see some nasty stuff happen bunches of times. Okay, now we’ll circle around to Decker Quad; that’s the Biomedical Engineering department on the left.” Jill looked at her watch. “Hey, we

need to get to the Johns Hopkins Club—that's where the Clarke Scholars Board is treating us to lunch. The club just reopened after a major renovation. You'll meet your interviewer there and also the rest of the other Hopkins and Maryland scholars. Damn! I was supposed to tell you all about student life here and we wind up talking about stupid nudity programs."

Tamara laughed. "Well, those things *are* in the news, so you could say we were discussing current events."

"Good idea. Don't say what we really discussed or else they'll dock my pay," Jill giggled.

"Which is...?"

"Zero. We volunteer for this," Jill smiled. "I like meeting the new scholars."

They entered the JH Club and were shown to a private dining room. Tamara recognized several of the committee members from the morning's meeting, but there were a number of new people there too, and several more students were coming in. While she was looking around, she noticed that one person in the room stood out in particular. She appeared to be an older student, perhaps a grad student, and had a radiant smile as she spoke to several older people who clearly had that "college professor" look. But this woman had a "glow," a magnetic personality, and to Tamara, she could sense a taste that somehow reminded her of her mother. A pure, good, trustworthy taste.

*And something else, Tamara realized. The woman is a charisma powerhouse! The attraction is just flowing from her. I wonder who that angel could be.*

She would find out very soon as she was roused from her thoughts by Jill, who was tugging on her arm.

"Tamara, you in there? I want you to meet your interviewer. Come with me."

Jill led her over to the angel who, sensing the approaching two students, turned with an even brighter smile.

Tamara's second major surprise of the day came as Jill introduced her. "Dr Emma Clarke, let me introduce you to Tamara Alexandre. Tamara, this is Dr Clarke, who specifically asked that she do your interview."

Tamara was speechless. In all of her preparations, she never connected the idea that there was a real Clarke person behind the Clarke Scholars—she had lumped the scholarship program into the same category as the Fulbright or Rhodes scholarships. The guy behind the Fulbright, she recalled, was a Senator Fulbright, who had sponsored a law that created those awards just after World War Two. And the Rhodes program was fifty years older than that. Cecil Rhodes was a Brit who had set up the program for graduate study at Oxford.

*But here's a Dr Clarke and she looks like a college senior! Tamara thought. How can that be?*

Clarke chuckled as she reached for Tamara's hand. "Your expression says everything, doesn't it, Tamara," she said. "Don't be embarrassed; most people who meet me have a similar reaction."

Clarke's marked British accent was the final blow to Tamara, who began giggling. "I'm sorry, Dr Clarke, everything today has been quite overwhelming. And then meeting you and..."

"...and finding out that I'm not only a real person, I'm almost a kid too, innit?" Clarke grinned broadly.

Tamara could only nod her agreement.

"So, Tamara, as Jill said, I'm to be your interviewer, but to put you at ease, let me say that you have an impressive school and professional record and, as well, an equally impressive Clarke exam score, don't you. Our 'interview' is just a formality." She made finger-quotes. "I was keen to meet with you and get to know you as a person. Now let's circulate; Jill, you come along too, and we'll greet some people."

Clarke led Tamara around the room, introducing her to so many new faces that soon her mind was numb. She also met the rest of the current Clarke Scholars and after about ten minutes, a bell chimed.

Jill excused herself to join the other scholars. "I'll see you later, Tamara," she said. "Dr Clarke wants some time with you now. They'll call me to come get you later."

A voice called out, "Please take your seats, ladies and gentlemen."

Clarke led Tamara to a table with six seats and four were already occupied.

Clarke again smiled that amazing smile. "Tamara, you met them before but probably won't recall their names, so again, to your right is Dr Chester Montern. He's the chair of Physics and Astronomy here at Hopkins. On his right is Dr Nora Silverberg, chair of Physics at Maryland. And on my right, it's Dr Wilfred Zucker, the director of the APL, and next to him is Dr Stephanie Burger, the Hopkins Physics/Astronomy undergraduate advisor. As you know, my friends, this is Tamara Alexandre, our new Clarke Scholar."

Tamara didn't know. She sat down with a thud.

Clarke smiled at her. "No one told you? Bloody arses. They want to keep the charade going as long as possible. Yes, my dear, you did take the prize. Your math and physics tests got top marks, but your essays? Gobsnacked the readers, they did. Heh, one reader was ready to take your literature one and call it a master's thesis, wasn't she. Not quite, but you certainly impressed us. Now let's talk about what you see us doing for you here at Hopkins. After lunch, we'll have our private chat."

When lunch was over, Tamara had already gotten a number of her questions settled. She would have all of her UMiami courses approved for JHU, including the special research courses from the medical school. Those, together with her high school AP classes, would give her a second-year standing and allow her to fill the resulting open time with research. There were research opportunities at the APL and others here at the Homewood campus. And if her faculty mentor, still to be decided, approved, she might be able to arrange to do her own independent research.

After lunch, Clarke brought Tamara to her office in the Physics/Astronomy Building.

"Tamara, I was keen to talk to you about a few things alone, things which struck me personally about how your background is like mine in so many ways. Please don't think I'm being forward here, but when your application came in showing that you have patented inventions, I was alerted. That's one of my rules; I want to know when a high-school student with patents becomes a candidate.

"Then I read your essays. Your current-events essay was presented almost like both sides of a Lincoln-Douglas debate, where you argued the practical, moral, and ethical components of both leading sides of the issue and showed, through a very well-reasoned approach, why the side you took was preferable. We've never had anyone take that approach before and you showed an amazing depth of knowledge in the topic. Tell me, do you have debating experience that you didn't mention in your application?"

Tamara laughed. "I lucked out there. Yes, I had a debate with my parents about that very issue maybe a month before the exam and had looked up everything I could find to bolster my arguments. I decided to write the essay as if a debate was going on—it made it more compelling, Not like a dry recitation of facts."

"It was brilliant. Now, much closer to my heart was your lit essay. However did you think of broadening the scope of your response to cover a number of books on our list?"

Tamara nodded. "I took some writing courses to prepare..."

Clarke looked amazed.

“...yes, I wanted to do well, so I signed up for two college courses over the summer. I got friendly with my recitation instructor, a grad student, and I asked her, if she wouldn’t mind to help me, to critique some essay samples. She said what I wrote was good, but I wanted ‘great.’ I asked her if possibly including other works to support my argument would improve the essay. She liked the idea and said it would be a good improvement; she told me that she would make that a suggestion to students in her own classes.”

“You are so very much like me...” Clarke mused. “As well, what caught my eye was your use of Austen’s *Emma*.” She chuckled. “In high school, I too used Emma Woodhouse as an example, not of Austen’s superimposing her own personality on her character, but on my own identification with Emma because of the way I tried to organize everyone’s lives around me. After all, she was my namesake. And my grandpa came from the Chawton area, near London—that’s where Austen lived her last years. So I wrote an essay where I became Emma Woodhouse.”

“That’s so cool,” Tamara said.

“So let’s talk a bit about you now,” Clarke said. “We haven’t had many Florida applicants and I’m guessing that’s because of the unusual social upheavals from the nudity laws there. Your dumb state got a double dose of dumb, one self-imposed and the other from the feds. The Clarke Scholar staff checked your high school and found that Edison is the only one in the state not running the Naked in School Program.”

“Right, we didn’t have it. I don’t know about the rest of the state.”

“We have a *very* thorough staff, don’t we. They do full checks on all candidates’ backgrounds, looking for anything that could affect the reputation of the Clarke program. This is something I learned to do early on in my career. So tell me, why is Miami Edison High School said to be haunted? Besides the disembodied voices, there were other strange things reported in the press and in social media. Inexplicable heat. Fiery floors. Destruction of RFID chips. And a girl genius who invents a new kind of maser—yes, Helene Tarmson is on the Clarke Scholars Board and told me what you’ve done. I can add numbers higher than two plus two and I have a good idea what I think you’ve done. When the Program came to my high school in Fairbanks Alaska—yes, don’t laugh; they actually tried the nudity Program up there—I stopped it. I had help from others, but we stopped it *cold*. And that pun is intended. So, Tamara, did you ‘help’ to stop it at Edison?”

Tamara could taste the “trust me” emotions flowing from Clarke. Only two others inspired a closely similar feeling in her. One was her mom and the other, surprisingly, wasn’t her father; it was *Erzulie Mansur*. What she felt from her father was like a protective blanket—just as *Ogorin* felt when he was “near.”

“I guess I need to tell you this, Dr Clarke...”

“Please call me ‘Emma,’ Tamara.”

“I sense emotions, Emma. I was born with this ability. My family—my ancestors—they all were followers of Vodou, the ancient African folk religion which became overlaid with Catholicism in Haiti back in the 1700s to 1800s. So I know with certainty that I can trust you, and to prove that I can sense people’s emotions strongly enough to know who I can trust, let me tell you about some of the people I met today.”

She gave Clarke a description of four of the faculty members to whom she had been introduced, and then described how she thought their surface emotions shaped their personalities.

When Tamara finished, Clarke stared at her. “Tamara, I’m astonished. You described them perfectly, didn’t you. Okay, you convinced me; that’s a handy ability. No one could possibly cheat you,” she chuckled. “Do you know how you do that? Can you see their ‘auras’?” She made finger quotes.

“Not in any way I can describe. To my senses, it feels like a ‘taste.’”

Clarke nodded. “So how’d you stop the Program?”

“This is all secret, right? Only my parents know.”

Clarke smiled, “A secret, certainly.”

“Good. Ever since I was little, I always wanted to help others, especially kids, but other people too. When I was in the temple with my mom when she was doing her priestess rites, I found that I could help her by ‘pushing’ the right mood to the *serviteurs*, the worshipers. I call my ability to send an emotion to someone ‘pushing.’ Can I show you what I can do?”

Clarke nodded, “Okay, but this won’t do any damage, right?”

“Absolutely not,” Tamara reassured her, and a few seconds later, “How do you feel?”

Clarke exclaimed, “Oh! So thirsty! Did you do that?” she asked as she took a drink from the water bottle next to her.

“Yeah. I have to be careful ‘cause the spirits who allow me to do things like that are very judgmental and won’t abide having that ability used for evil. Don’t ask me to justify my belief in spirits—*vodouisants* believe that there’s a spirit world and, even though science refuses to acknowledge the possibility, it *is* a reality. I used that reality to help me stop the Program—and the Florida stripping kids program too, in my community at least.”

“This is incredible, what you’re telling me.”

“Here’s what I did, the executive summary anyway. I can ‘suggest’ people to do things. My biggest fear is that people will learn that I have that ability and I know I can trust you not to tell it to anyone. I will *never* use it for personal gain—I can’t—I think it won’t work if I try and I have the deep feeling that if I try to use it for evil, I will lose the ability. When I use it, I feel the spirits’ power come to me and I just channel it. When I ‘suggest’ something, it has to be something the person usually does, or close to it. That’s because if the person thinks it’s wrong, he can’t be ‘suggested.’

“You know about the maser I invented—I’ll tell you about that in a few minutes. It was based on an EMF pulse generator I built to destroy the RFID chips and scanners used in Florida’s stripping kids program. When I saw those poor stripped kids in school—they really didn’t want to be naked—I had to help them, so I figured out a way to overload the chips’ circuits to fry them. I have an innate grasp of electronics, it seems.”

“That’s what Helene said of you, too. Go on.”

“The things I did to stop the Program were a combination of suggestions to the right people and technology. Everything I ‘suggested’ that people were to do was well within their normal activities or else nothing would have worked. That set the scene for some stagecraft to make it seem like the events were supernaturally caused. People called what happened ‘locked-room mysteries.’ And I was happy to encourage those ideas. So I played on people’s doubts and superstitions and managed to keep a step ahead of my school’s plans. I have a spirit mentor who guides me. That’s *Ayizan Velekete*. We believe her to be the protector of the young, the disadvantaged, the weak and the downtrodden, and she’s selected me as her human agent. And my very distant ancestor, maybe going back six thousand years or more, is *Granne Erzulie*. She now resides in the spirit world and has become the spirit of grandmotherly kindness and love. My people have very long memories.

“But a lot of my success came from the electronics I used. And that brings up my research interests—they are twofold: to use the technology I can invent to learn more about my abilities—which all seem to be mentally powered—and to use my inventions to help people, especially those who are disadvantaged in some way.”

“Tamara, I am well and truly gobsmacked by what you told me. In your application, you spoke about your MRI



work and how you were attempting to achieve a better resolution in the fMRI studies you were enrolled in. Is that part of your goals?”

“Absolutely. You do know that the MRI unit we’re using was developed at the APL?”

“Yes. I worked with them over getting the superconducting magnet windings designed.”

“So its upright subject position and electrical and magnetic characteristics make it ideal for fMRI studies. The fMRI scanner is able to detect the differences between oxygenated and unoxygenated blood from iron’s magnetic properties—the iron in the hemoglobin in the blood cells. We can visualize areas of the brain that are using large amounts of oxygen; we believe that increased levels of oxygenated blood in a brain region correspond to increased neural activity in that region. We can link that increased activity with whatever task the subject performs when the image was taken.

“In my case, my own scans show an increase in blood flow to an unexpected area of my brain when I’m using my abilities. But the resolution isn’t high enough to visualize exactly what’s happening, and my need for secrecy about my ability is limiting my work. I’ve been looking for better ways to generate a more focused RF signal to use in the patient coil—by trying to develop a generator with many tiny signal sources. That’s why I was working on the device that resulted in the maser.”

“What have you learned so far?” Clarke asked.

“Sorry for this, but for me to tell you, you need to sign an NDA, my lawyer told me.”

Clarke laughed. “Usually I’m the person asking for a non-disclosure agreement. Do you have one?”

“Sure.”

She pulled a folder out of her backpack and took two forms out, handing them to Clarke. She read it.

“Standard boilerplate. Looks good. I keep one, right?”

Tamara nodded. Clarke passed the signed form back and Tamara put it away.

Tamara went on. “So when I tried to develop a generator, it was based on my RFID zapper. I had found that the windings I used to generate the pulse behaved differently if I kept power going to them after the capacitor discharged. That initial discharge both started the ionization of the air molecules and produced an RF pulse. But the fly-back transformer—whose purpose in the electronic flash is to ionize the xenon gas in the flash tube so that the main charge will fire it—letting that transformer continue to run in my circuit pumps the air ions to the critical energy state after which they discharge, producing the microwaves. And as long as I kept the circuit energized, it maintained the gas ionization, since there was virtually no resistance in the superconducting coil. There was no ‘beam,’ just a microwave signal projecting out of the source. The frequency was close to an ammonia maser. I think that was because air is mostly nitrogen and the water vapor in the air provided the hydrogen ions. That microwave beam overloaded close-by electronics.

“Then I got the idea to use windings similar to what MRI magnets use: discontinuous windings to even out and linearize the static magnetic field. I made some toroidal superconducting windings with spacings between them and it appears that by doing that, the coil array constrains the air molecules very efficiently when their ions are being energized. I found also that the geometry of the toroidal coils allows the beam to be more or less directed; at zero degrees and 180—the opposite direction—without a lot of spread. At thirty feet, the cone has about a ten-foot diameter. I use a microwave-impenetrable material to block the 180 degree beam but some of the beam is reflected back forward. I’m sending a copy of that work to Dr Tarmson; she says it’s a breakthrough.”

“Tamara, words fail. I’m a theoretical physicist—a solid state specialist, and I’ve met plenty of other specialists.

Theoretical physicists, experimental physicists, even electrical engineers. But you've combined the fields in a different way. It's called engineering physics. You thought of doing those things just as a gut feeling, right?"

Tamara nodded.

"Well, I like to quote Einstein about insights like that, 'A new idea comes suddenly and in a rather intuitive way,' he said."

"That's how my ideas come. But I want to learn more theoretical stuff so I can describe mathematically what I find," Tamara agreed.

"I'd love to help you learn, then. Would you accept me as your faculty mentor? I'm sure I'll be learning stuff from you soon."

Tamara had a tear in her eye as she stood up to shake Clarke's hand, but the shake turned into a hug.

"It's uncanny just how much we seem to have in common," Clarke commented as they both sat down again. "We both advanced academically at an early age. I, too, know that I'm sensitive to other people's emotions—but nothing like you, obviously. We both invented something major while quite young. And we both have a strong desire to help others, don't we. Am I right?"

Tamara nodded.

"Then there was that Program rubbish. You covertly opposed it whilst I had a lot of help from my mates and the community too. When it was supposed to start in my school, one of the kids' relatives owned a sign shop with a big lift bucket truck—on the weekend before the starting assembly, they secretly removed all the windows in the gym and made the school too parky for nudity. Ah, you're puzzled... yes ... 'parky' means cold. Too cold."

Tamara giggled. "That's not something I could do in Miami, even with the help of spirits."

Clarke laughed. "Quite. Then with some help, I got control of the heating plant and made the school too cold... Tamara, did you...?"

Tamara had gotten a broad grin at hearing that.

"Yep, did that too. Not cold though; I made a room really hot, where the officials were trying to plan how to run the Program with all the roadblocks I had made. Scared them, especially the teachers. They stopped the meeting."

"And you did that all alone..." Clarke mused. "I worked with cold to stop the Program; you used heat and fire. Amazing. You worked alone while I had lots of help; even the police department helped us kill the Program in Fairbanks."

"I wasn't really alone, Dr Cl... Emma," Tamara said. "I had my *lwa*... that's the *Kreyòl* word for spirit. A big help was that many of the teachers—and of course the whole community—had at least a little Haitian background. I used their cultural backgrounds and superstitions to enhance what I did. And my friends in the school organized a backup resistance plan, but that was never needed. We used ideas from a site we found—it's a forum where kids could post Program news from their schools."

Clarke grinned at her. "I think we'll work well together, Tamara. Let me tell you what I'm currently working on. Last year I was on sabbatical at Cambridge University in East Anglia, England, and I was working on some Josephson junction applications—specifically the single electron transistor, or SET. Are you familiar with that device?"

"Ah, yes I am. That's the device that uses a superconducting source and sink; the insulator coupling at its gate is

also superconducting. I'm interested in that too 'cause I read about it on the APL website when I found out about the Clarke Scholars Program. My interest in Josephson junctions is because the current flows continuously without any voltage applied. I wanted to see if using the SET as part of the MRI coils I was developing would improve resolution and efficiency. But the UMiami med school and my professor's grant there couldn't afford the expense for that kind of work. That's why I wanted to come to Hopkins."

Clarke sat back with a sigh. "Bloody amazing, you are. You're thinking of applications in mesoscopic physics even before starting college. Anyway, I was in Cambridge to work with a group on developing new battery technologies. We've developed a new battery design whose energy density exceeds current lithium-ion cells by about 8 percent. And I'm hoping that using the theory that underlies the operation of the SET will give us more improvement. The spin-off is a new battery industry, a research and development arm and a commercial arm for which I'm providing the start-up funding. Oh, as well, I endowed Cambridge for two Clarke Scholars each year to study there."

"Um, I heard the term 'mesoscopic physics' but never looked into it in detail. I kinda assumed it was physics between the micro and macro scales. Am I wrong?" Tamara asked.

"No, you're mostly right. That term refers to the electron transport properties of small systems. The mesoscopic spatial dimensions are between 100 nanometers to perhaps one micrometer, and the way I use the term, it applies to superconducting systems. The substrate interfaces in the SET are examples of mesoscopic system dimensions. As the physical dimensions of a system are reduced, the electron activity begins to display quantum mechanical characteristics instead of obeying classical electrodynamics. Why this matters to engineers is because as circuits and devices are miniaturized far enough, their performance no longer corresponds to the expected classical behavior, and the systems must be modeled using quantum mechanics.

"I'm interested in this area because I want to try to develop highly miniaturized batteries that would have high energy densities and be long-lasting, for applications like smart watches or even hearing aids. My other interest in miniaturization dovetails with yours; it's to build very high resolution MRIs that can image down to the cellular level, and your current work on the external coils looks like it can be crucial for that project. But the battery work is a priority. Are you interested in collaborating in those projects?"

Tamara had been getting so excited at Clarke's description of her work that she was almost jumping in her seat.

"Oh, yes! Yes! This means I can do some of the stuff I only dreamed about. Where do the funds come from? That work doesn't come cheap."

"Oh, I know. I have a few grants—the NIH, you know, National Institutes of Health—funds some parts of the MRI work. The SET work is supported by DARPA and the NSF—National Science Foundation. And I have private funds available too. I have a sixteen-member research team at the APL; that's where the MRI you were using at UMiami was designed. Oh, look at the time. I need to take you down to see Dr Burger. You met her at lunch; she's our undergraduate advisor. She'll go over your recommended courses and you'll plan your schedule for when you start here."

They left for Burger's office.

An hour later, Tamara had her fall schedule all arranged and had sketched out a tentative one for the spring semester.

"Okay, Tamara, we're done here," Berger told her. "I suppose your head is spinning now with everything going on."

Tamara nodded.

“I’ll call Jill and she’ll take you to a more social setting next. You can unwind and talk to the other scholars and some regular Hopkins students too. I’m so pleased you’ll be joining us. You’ll have a wonderful time here at Hopkins.”

## Chapter 25 - A New Experience

Jill arrived at Burger's office several minutes later to escort Tamara to the next event, a gathering of all of the Clarke Scholars at the new Student Center building. There they were to speak to some other scholarship winners about their experiences at both colleges.

After Tamara had met everyone, she found herself in a group with Jill and Charlene, whose guide was Nancy Janvers. Charlene was speaking.

"That was weird, the way they kept us in the dark about the scholarships. They could have just told us when we arranged our visits. I got the tuition-only scholarship. But that's okay; my folks can afford the rest of the costs. The 65 thou per year is a great deal."

Nancy nodded. "That's what I'm on. I think the reason they keep up the mystery might be because of what happened in my group. I think this guy in my group must have looked good on paper but he was rude and arrogant; he figured he was a super genius or something. He irritated the wrong people so the board must have withdrawn his offer. My own acceptance letter read that the scholarship was subject to a final interview so his must have too. They won't discuss what happened, but ever since then, they don't tell the kids what they were chosen for."

"Hey, Charlene is coming here from Ohio and Tamara from Florida. Will your coming here break up any high-school romances?" Jill asked.

Charlene laughed. "I was the school's chief certified geek and nerd. All the hot guys were chasing the popular girls—you know, the queen bees and their entourages. So I didn't date much."

"Charlene, you were saying that your school had the Program but then we got interrupted," Nancy said, "and we didn't get back to that. Even the nerdy kids on the Program get some action, I've heard."

"I wouldn't know. When it started at my school in my sophomore year, I was out of the country," Charlene said. "My dad was on sabbatical; he's a professor. We got back in January of my junior year and I had an internship at an industrial engineering company that spring, one half-day a week. I wasn't picked then—not sure how that would have worked if I had been. This year, as a senior, I'm not in high school on Mondays and Thursdays; I'm taking college classes then. I told Tamara about that; my high school's on the Ohio State campus and I was in a college-high school AP program. My name was called three weeks ago but it was on a Monday, obviously, so I wasn't in school. The idiot Program coordinator told me that I'd have to do a second week because I missed the first day, and that I had to remain in the high school for those two weeks. I just told them I wasn't about to miss any college classes and they could just stuff their Program."

"Cool," Nancy said. "They didn't try anything when you refused?"

"They made some noise about forcing me. Dad's a law professor. He got that talk stopped. But they won't let me walk at graduation. Like I care. So, your original question? No, got no boyfriend. Tamara, what about you?"

She giggled. "Boy? What's a boy? Seriously, I'm fifteen and I'll be going to college soon. The boys in my classes—they're seniors, obviously—they don't do anything for me—and the juniors and sophs? Children. Hardly any of them can hold a conversation, let alone put together a sentence."

They all laughed and Nancy expressed surprise at Tamara's age, so Tamara told her how she had skipped grades.

Then she continued, "Actually, I don't have any time for social stuff and I don't find any boys appealing. They just aren't mature."

“So no one even hit on you?” Charlene asked. “You’re really pretty, Tamara, your skin just glows. It’s a light almond color... so you must be a Latina, right?”

Tamara shook her head. “No, Haitian. My ancestors came from west Africa, not Spain or Portugal. Most Haitians are very dark, but my mom’s family has many Igbo ancestors; they tend to have fair skins. My dad’s grandparents and parents were from the Haitian upper class and most of those people tend to be almost white, but he’s a little darker, like me. And no, nobody has asked me on a date lately. I guess I project a ‘don’t bother me’ aura when boys are around. And I prefer not being bothered.”

“Tamara’s school never had the Program either,” Jill offered. “I guess one thing that the Program did was to get shy boys and girls together.”

Tamara shook her head. “No, not in any healthy way—including psychological health, too. Did you read those studies that that Atlanta high school mentioned in their articles, Jill? Especially the social effects one.”

“Um, no, that was about the information that they got from that anti-Program website?”

“Yeah. They talk about assaults, anxiety drugs, injuries—even some suicides. Given a choice between not having a boyfriend and the Program, I’d take the friendlessness any day,” Tamara told her.

“Hey, let’s not talk about that stupid crap anymore. You guys want to know about the good pros here and the ones to avoid?” Nancy asked.

“Sure!” ... “Absolutely!”

The discussion topic moved to the courses they would take in their first year and their potential teachers.

For Tamara, she floated through her remaining tour. She was thrilled that she’d be going to Hopkins and studying with a world-class scholar, a Nobel laureate, no less.

### ***Miami Edison High School, Florida***

Back at school on Monday after her Hopkins trip, Tamara found it difficult to get back into the mind-set of high school. She had gotten a new tutoring “client,” another boy, a sophomore, and Tamara felt something disturbing about him—his emotional taste was metallic, almost like blood, but there were no negative or bad overtones in it, just sadness and a little fear. He was also so shy that he spoke almost in whispers to her.

“You’re Norman, right?” she asked after he came up to her table in the Media Center, where she did her tutoring, asking for her.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “I’m not getting biology.”

“Um, let’s see,” Tamara said, thinking. “You should be doing genetics about now, is that right?”

He nodded.

“Is it something you don’t understand? Where can I help you?”

Norman pulled out some worksheets. “We have to fill these out and be able to identify the cell parts on the exam and know what they do. But I don’t understand most of this.”

The sheets he gave Tamara showed a cell undergoing the stages of division. There were lines leading from the drawings of the cell structures to labels which were to be filled in.

“Okay, Norman,” she said. “It’s mostly just memory. The easiest way to remember all this stuff is to break it up into groups. One group will be the cell and its parts. Then the nucleus and its parts. After that, the chromosomes and their parts. Finally, we come to the special parts that only appear during cell division. You with me?”

“Uh, I guess so.”

He was sitting uncomfortably, squirming a little as he sat.

“Let’s start with the cell structure. This looks like a plant cell—see, it’s sort of rectangular and has a prominent cell wall. How’s that different from animal cells? You recall?”

“Um, yeah. No wall... animal cells are irregular shape too, right?” he asked as he shifted in his seat.

“That’s generally correct, but... Norman, are you uncomfortable? You keep jiggling there,” she asked.

“No... no, I’m okay.”

“Well, if you can’t be still, then you can’t concentrate, you know. I’ll point to each structure in the cell and see if you recall the name. Then write it in the blank.”

They worked for a few minutes but Norman kept losing focus.

“Listen, Norman,” Tamara said, getting exasperated with his inattention. “I think I know why you’re having problems understanding this stuff, if you can’t concentrate like you aren’t doing now. Are you like this in class too?”

He made an evasive gesture and grunted, “No. Um, not usually.”

Tamara could still sense that strange “taste” of his aura; his emotions were in a turmoil now and she also sensed an increased feeling of fear underlying his discomfort. So she decided to press him to open up.

“What’s scared you, Norman? What’s wrong?”

“*Nothing!*” he almost shouted.

She “pushed” a calming light green taste to him and “suggested,” “You can tell me why you can’t concentrate because you know you need to do it. Why are you scared?”

He started to cry. “Father... beats me,” he choked out. “Gets drunk and... whips me with... belt...”

“Doesn’t your mother try to stop him?”

“Mother... died last year. She stopped... his beatings but when she died...”

“Is that why you can’t sit... *oh! The aura. His metallic taste.* Norman, does it bleed when he hits you?”

“*Sniff.* The welts do bleed. And sting for days.”

“Damn. If you don’t treat them... Can you put antibiotics on them?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Do you have scars?”

“Yeah.”

“Get up. We need to see the nurse *now!*”

“*No!* He’ll find out and...”

Tamara “pushed” the command, “Norman. Come now.”

She led him to the nurse’s room.

“Mrs Towner, this is Norman Javits,” she whispered to the nurse while Norman was still somewhat dazed by

Tamara's command. "I just learned about his being abused by his father. He apparently has bleeding welts from beatings with a belt. Can you... the school... help him?"

"Oh dear," Towner exclaimed. "I need to check him but yes, we can get him help if he's being abused." She looked at Norman. "He's ... is he okay? He looks like he's..."

"It's all right; I kinda forced him to come here. He wanted to keep the abuse secret."

Towner sighed. "That's very common. Victims think it's shameful and that's why their abusers can continue the abuse. Mr Javits," she addressed him, "come over to the exam table."

He shuffled over and Towner drew a curtain across the room.

"Wait out there, dear," Towner told Tamara. Then, "Norman, please slip your shirt off. Oh. Oh my. I need to get some antibiotic ointment and bandages. Wait a sec."

She came out and nodded to Tamara. "You were right. He has some moderate to severe scarring and some fresh welts. Some of the older scars have signs of having been infected. I can take care of this now. Is he your boyfriend?"

"No ma'am. I was tutoring him and noticed that he was in great discomfort. I persuaded him to tell me what happened and then brought him here. I need to see him for a second—to tell him he'll be okay. Can I?"

"Sure. You did a really nice thing for him. Thanks."

Tamara went behind the screen; Norman had his shirt back on but the front was unbuttoned. She "pushed" more of the light green "taste" to him and said, "You'll be okay now. Stay calm and don't object to what the nurse, or anyone else, tells you to do. You want to stop your dad's abuse. This is how you'll do it. Okay?"

He nodded.

"Good. I'm going now—you won't recall much of our time together, but you'll listen to what you're told. Right?"

"Uh huh," he said, then looked around. "Hey, how did I get here?"

Towner came back to him with some supplies. "Tamara brought you here. Your back needs some attention. Then we need to talk."

"Bye," Tamara whispered to Towner as she slipped out.

*Now I know what that metallic taste means, Tamara mused. Damn, I hope the poor kid gets out of that situation. Wonder if he has any other relatives? Should I...? Oh, hell, better not get any more involved.*

She went back to the Media Center and retrieved her books; then packed up Norman's bag and brought it to the nurse. Towner was alone but Tamara heard soft voices coming from behind the closed curtain.

"Mrs Towner, here's Norman's bag," she told the nurse.

"Thanks again, Tamara. Norman's with a counselor now. I think we'll be able to help him with his family situation."

"Oh, good. I was hoping you could help."

"I think so. That was a very smart thing you did. Are you interested in the caring professions?"

"Not in health care, although my mom's a nurse's assistant. I'm gonna use science to help people."



“Excellent. We need people like that too. Again, my dear, my thanks.”

This was her last period, so Tamara was free now. She called for her ride to pick her up, and on her way out of the building, she felt the warm approval glow of *Erzulie Mansur* fill her consciousness.

***Miami Edison High School, Florida: two weeks later***

“Hey, girlfriend!”

It was Linda calling from across the main hall at school.

“Hi, Linda,” Tamara greeted her. “What’s up?”

“You mean besides the news that the school district is finally gonna stop the Program in all the schools by next week?”

“Yeah,” Tamara laughed. “After that high school newspaper article from Atlanta telling kids to ‘just say no’ to the Program, and that here at Edison, we never even started it? My mom told me that her spy at the school district said that kids in *all* the schools were refusing to participate now.”

“Yeah and only six more weeks to graduation too,” Linda gushed. “You got a date for Prom yet?”

Tamara shook her head. “You know that I’m firmly in the no-boy zone, right? I don’t date. Most of the boys are still infants, or jerks, or conceits; the ones who aren’t are already taken. How can I date someone who turns me off?”

“But you gotta go to Prom. It’s the highlight of being a senior. It’s the high school experience you’ll never forget.” Linda argued.

“Somehow I don’t think so. Besides, I don’t see anyone lining up to ask me.”

Tamara thought that this would *not* be a good time to mention the negative “vibe” she projected to any boy who even looked at her twice.

“Carlos asked me to go,” Linda told her. “You know we’ve been dating for most of the senior year. I can ask him if he knows a nice guy who’ll ask you—and we can make it a double-date.”

“Linda, why is this such an issue for you? I won’t go with someone I just met.”

“How about meeting before Prom to see if the guy’s okay then?”

“Hey, girl. The way you’re pushing, I think that there’s a guy you already have in mind. Am I right?”

“Jeez, Tamara, you a mind-reader or something? You always know much more than you let on, you know. Yeah, Carlos’ cousin goes to Cushman High, you know, the private school? He’s a senior too. There are only maybe 35 seniors and they don’t have a big prom, obviously. They just do a dance social.”

*Should I meet the guy?* Tamara wondered. *I suppose it wouldn’t be a big deal; if he’s tolerable, I might consider doing the prom then.*

“Do you know him, Linda? He’s not a jerk?”

“Yeah, I met him at Carlos’ house a bunch of times. He treated me good, polite, didn’t tease me or hit on me.”

“Well, I suppose that’s about as good a reference as I could expect,” Tamara snarked.

“Oh, come on, girl. He was fine,” Linda shot back.

Tamara made up her mind. “So, then, yeah. Set up a meeting. Not a date. You be there with Carlos and I’ll see

how it goes from there. Okay?”

~~~~~

The following Saturday at noon, Tamara met Linda and the two boys at the “food court” in their little local mall.

“Tamara, this is Jerome Augustin,” Linda said as Tamara came up to them. “Obviously you know Carlos.”

“Yeah, after having lunch together for the past few years,” Tamara chuckled. “Hi, Carlos. Hello, Jerome. Nice to meet you.”

“It’s my pleasure too, Tamara.” He had a deep voice. “You don’t like your name shortened, I’m guessing,” he said as he stood up to take her hand.

“Yeah. Good call. So you go to Cushman.”

She was looking him over. He looked to be about six feet tall and was rail thin; his facial features were very soft, giving him an almost boyish look.

“Yep. My dad went there and got a good education, became a lawyer. So he figured I’d follow in his footsteps. I’d rather be a teacher, truthfully.”

They all sat down and continued chatting.

“So you have a small class,” Tamara stated. “How do you feel, not having a prom or high school team sports?”

“I’m not one for doing athletics, obviously. Look at me,” Jerome grinned. “I don’t really follow much sports either, except for soccer. And school dances—we do socialize, but with only 38 kids in my class... no ‘variety.’” He made finger-quotes. “So I wondered what a big dance would be like with kids my age. I hate those teen clubs. I went once. Never again. That’s why I was interested in possibly going to your own prom. I know some kids who go to Edison besides Carlos. If you think I can pass your audition, would you consider going with me?”

*Hmm. He’s well-spoken and has a sense of humor. A little self deprecation too,* Tamara thought.

“Yeah, let me consider it,” she nodded. “I don’t have a bell and horn to sound when you say something I like or dislike, though,” she giggled. “Let’s just chat. College plans?”

“Sure. I’ve been accepted to UF in Gainesville. Dad’s alma mater. Other schools too but that’s my top choice. Carlos is on a different track.”

Carlos nodded agreement. “Yeah, Tamara knows. Our whole gang hangs out during lunch. I got a partial baseball scholarship to FIU—you know, Florida International University. And Linda’s going there too.”

“And I have a scholarship to Johns Hopkins,” Tamara said.

“Hey, she’s even got advanced standing there, Jerome. She’s starting as a sophomore,” Linda bragged on her.

“Um, not exactly true, Linda. I’ll still be a freshman but I’ll be taking higher level courses. They may jump me in class level after my first year, though. Depends on lots of things.”

“Excuse me for being rude or forward, Tamara,” Jerome said carefully. “You kinda don’t look like you’re eighteen yet. You look younger, somehow.”

“Wooh, that’s pretty perceptive, Jerome. How’d...”

“My school. It’s so small that the grades mix quite a bit and I get to be with younger classmates a lot. So I guess I’ve gotten to be able to tell age differences in some cases—not always. You have this really cute and sweet way

of talking to us—your expressions too—that are like some of my younger classmates.”

“Well, you’re correct. I’m fifteen now.”

“Geez, Tamara! Fifteen and you’re graduating?” Jerome exclaimed.

“Yeah, Tamara, you never mentioned your age to me,” Linda said accusingly.

“Hmm, I guess it never came up. Linda, you never told me *your* age, did you?” Tamara chuckled.

“Oh, you!” Linda snorted. “Why would *my* age matter... oh, I see.”

Carlos laughed. “Hey. Mama told me never to ask a gal’s age. Jerome, buddy, you stuck your foot in it.”

“Um, sorry,” Jerome said to Tamara. “I hope I wasn’t being rude or anything...”

“No, you weren’t. I thought it was kinda perceptive. Shows you pay attention to details.” She laughed. “Like a good lawyer does, actually.”

“Damn. Don’t start talking like my father,” Jerome grinned.

“Y’know, the best thing about Jerome’s school is that they didn’t have to do the Program,” Carlos said, carefully changing the subject.

Jerome laughed. “Yep. We’re a private school. We get no federal money so they can’t extort the school to force them to have something like that.”

“Did you have any Stripped in Florida kids, though?” Tamara asked.

He shook his head. “None. Hey, there are only 156 kids in the entire high school. When I was a soph, there was a freshie whose parents tried signing him up. He found it out when they took him to a doc to get his chip implanted and he freaked. He ran out and then refused to go anywhere with his parents until they promised that they wouldn’t force him.”

“You know why they tried stripping him?” Tamara asked.

“I know from a conversation between some of his friends. They liked to go to that nudist beach—it’s in Haulover Park, up in North Miami. They still go there, actually, there’s even a bus route that goes by there. Anyway, the parents found out that he was going there and were afraid that they’d get fined because, by law, kids can’t be naked unless they’re stripped. So they were gonna make him legal.”

“Wow,” Linda commented, “so there’s a nudist place near here?”

Jerome nodded. “Yeah. That beach and there’s some nudist resorts but they’re further away. A couple hotels too, I heard, cater to nudists. But that beach is free.”

Carlos was nodding his head. “Yeah, Jerome’s told me about those places before.”

Linda looked at Carlos. “You’re not thinking...?”

“No, no. Just saying,” Carlos replied.

“Hey, if kids can’t be naked outside legally, how come they were able to go naked on that beach?” Linda asked.

“The answer comes down to tourism and the money it brings,” Jerome answered. “I was curious about that beach, so I looked it up on the internet. It’s a *huge* attraction. The beach can have as many as 7000 visitors a day and the parking fees there alone add up to about a million dollars in a year. And if I recall the info from the website right, the annual economic impact to Miami, and Dade, through that beach is... um... \$650 to \$700

million, if only just half of the people who go there are non-residents. I read that for the whole state of Florida, the annual economic impact of nudism is more than seven *billion* dollars. That number was from *before* that Stripped in Florida idiocy. So the county didn't—and doesn't—patrol the beach for naked kids who aren't chipped. If they did start doing that, the word would get out and tourists would stop bringing their families—money was speaking. Um, I think I got off the topic... oh, right. Stripped kids in my school. Just the one almost-stripped one, that I know of. Hell, they even refused to put one of those state scanner things at any door in the school."

"So those kids still go to that beach?" Linda asked.

"Yeah. I... um... overheard a group planning to go back last... um... October," Jerome answered. They went over winter break too. Hey, anything more about haunted events at Edison? I loved those stories, you know."

Carlos shook his head. "Nah. Seems that stuff only happens when there's nudity around the school or they were trying to start the NiS Program. But it was wicked awesome. Especially when the spirits got those teachers to strip."

"So you really think the spirits are real?" Jerome asked.

Linda chuckled. "Hey, if you believe that spirits can force people to do stuff like that, then they are *absolutely* real. Many in my family go to Vodou services and I've seen people who are possessed do unbelievable things."

Carlos nodded. "I don't practice it but, Jerome, you know that our grandparents do. Remember some of their stories?"

"Sure do. Yeah, it's hard to believe in things you can't see the cause. Dad is agnostic, but Mom does see a *manbo* occasionally. She says she honors her ancestors that way. Anyway, the things that happened at your school were fun to hear about. I love that it's considered haunted now."

Tamara was just watching the others and listening to their conversation.

*Hmm, this boy seems intelligent and polite, she thought. I could go to the prom with him, I guess; at least he's not a dull bore. But there was something in his comments... Ah, I know. Let me find out, and I'll see how he reacts.*

"Jerome, you outed me about my age," Tamara remarked. "You have excellent powers of observation; well, so do I. Why don't you tell Carlos and Linda that you're a nudist, just like that kid who was almost stripped?"

Carlos guffawed at her comment while Linda gasped.

Jerome just shook his head admiringly. "Damn, Tamara. Are you a human lie detector or something? I guess I wasn't dissembling enough..."

*Jeez. Points for the vocabulary, Tamara thought.*

"... and you figured me out. May I ask what gave me away?"

Tamara chuckled. "Well, for one, someone with only a passing curiosity about a topic doesn't start proselytizing about it. Also, you were too familiar with certain details. And it seems that Carlos knows about your secret too. Carlos, do you go to that beach too?"

Carlos shook his head. "Nope. Not me. No way. Jerome's tried to get me to go with his group, but no. If that fuckin' naked program had actually started, I would have freaked if I got picked."

Linda chuckled ruefully. "Yep, me too. That's why we worked so hard on setting up the guardians at the school. You know about the guardians, Jerome, right?"

“I do and that was a great idea. Too bad they weren’t used.”

“Um, that’s actually not true,” Linda told him. “Dr Barello, the principal, liked the idea so much that she formalized it. She asked if those kids would continue doing it. She said it was like schools in England, where they have class monitors—what’s the word they’re called, Tamara?”

“Um, prefects.”

“Right. The ones that we asked to be guardians were liked and respected at school. Someone in our group noticed that, on that anti-Program website, kids at some of the schools wrote that wearing a red garment symbolized protection, so we went with that idea. That was cool ‘cause our school nickname is ‘Red Raiders.’ Funny how that one thing caused the whole guardian corps thing to come together—even the regular students seemed to respect the idea. Back to you, Jerome. What got you into being a nudist, anyway?”

“Actually, it was a beach trip. I was in the lower school, seventh grade. There were nine or ten of us in sixth and seventh who hung together. When we tried going to beaches around Miami Beach, people chased us away, even though the beaches there are supposed to be public. There are condos or hotels along there and they frown on us ‘common people’ using the beach near them. When one of our group heard about Haulover Park Beach—it’s big and very accessible—we decided to try to go. I mentioned the bus. There’s one that goes right past the beach, so getting there was easy.”

Tamara asked, “Did you know then that it was a nude beach?”

“Nope, not at first. Actually only the northern part, the area near the last five lifeguard stands going north, is the nude part. We got set up at the south end—the beach is almost a mile and a half long. We didn’t discover the nudist section until our second visit there. A few of us were just exploring, walking north along the surf, and then we saw naked people everywhere.”

“Wow,” Linda said. “What did you do?”

“There were a few families with kids there. It was so strange. The kid I mentioned—the one who was almost stripped—he was the brave one. He just walked up to a family that had two kids around our age, a boy and girl, and began talking to them. Turned out that they were tourists and came to Miami every year and went to Haulover every time they came. The kids told us that swimming naked was awesome and that we just had to try it.

“Most of us were uncertain and were trying to decide when a woman came up wearing a green hat. Only the hat. She told us that she was a beach ambassador, had seen us walking up from the south, and came over to check us out, making sure that we were aware of the nudist beach etiquette. She had a flyer to give us and asked if we had any questions. No one could think of any so she told us that if we did, to look for someone in a green hat like hers.”

“Did you get naked then?” Linda asked.

“Well, the tourist kids went into the water after the woman left and we followed them. When we dove in, the girl told us to slip our suits off and just try swimming bare. I did and so did a few of the others in my gang. Damn, it was fuckin’ awesome! I was so hooked. No wet cloth dragging on my body. The girl saw my smile and guessed that I was a convert so she came over and told me that I’d feel the same way with the breeze and sun on my bare body. So I tried it and she was right on. I’ve been a nudist since then.”

“Nice story,” Tamara said. “What happened with the almost-stripped kid?”

“His dad noticed that he had no tan lines when they were showering in the gym one day. So he got the story out of him. His dad has some kind of elected position—a county commissioner, I think. So he wanted to avoid any

legal problem about his son being naked. That's all settled now."

"So you angry that I outed you?" Tamara asked, grinning.

"Nah. I'm not ashamed of being a nudist—no way. But some people aren't very understanding though—Linda? You're not freaked, are you?" Linda shook her head. "Good. I guess you're not bothered either, Tamara."

"Nope. But if we start dating, don't expect me to strip off," she grinned.

"About that," Jerome began. "Um..."

"The answer's yes," Tamara broke in. "We can go out a few times before the prom. It's been fun talking with you. Give me your cell and I'll put my number in it. Then we can figure out when we can get together, okay?"

"Sure. And thanks."

Linda nodded at Tamara and smiled; Tamara winked back at her.

*As she walked away, Tamara thought, Jeez, what have I done? Well, we have the rest of the spring term and the summer to see each other, if I can go that long without learning something bad about him. But I don't really feel much of any emotional "taste" from him. He's a straight-shooter, though. I didn't sense anything deceptive. Oh well, Tamara, enjoy the new experience.*

## Chapter 26 - Unexpected Troubles

When Tamara told her mother that she had agreed to a date for the prom, Nadine immediately started to talk about shopping for a dress.

“Mom, I don’t wanna make a big deal about this, okay?” she complained. “You don’t even ask me about the boy—you get right into how I’ll dress.”

“That’s because I know how particular you are about your friends. Recall our talk about boys not too long ago?”

“Yeah, but...”

“So you found someone emotionally compatible?”

“Um, not entirely. He’s interesting to talk to... intelligent... but no um, spark, I guess you’d say. Linda knows him; it’s Carlos’ cousin. He goes to Cushman.”

“The private school?”

“Yeah. Linda set us up at a meeting at the mall.”

“So I asked you about a dress because most girls will go all out formal; that’s what the nurses at the VA are saying. You need to figure out with the boy—what’s his name?”

“Jerome Augustin.”

“Okay. Figure out how the two of you will dress. Are you going double with Linda and Carlos?”

“Most likely.”

“Then all four of you should coordinate, if you can. I guess the choices are formal gown, party dress, cocktail dress, sheath or A-line dress. Ah, a non-dress look, maybe a jumpsuit or pants-suit would work. A suit-and-jacket look might work too. But you shouldn’t choose a less formal look if, um, Jerome wears a tux.”

“Why is it so formal?”

“You know that I didn’t grow up in this culture...” Nadine started and Tamara nodded, “...but I recall from my schooling... in anthro or sociology, one of them... that proms started in America. Ah, they were actually for boys at first—they were coming-out ceremonies—showing how mature and cultured the boys were. It showed off their social status too, so the dress was very formal. ‘The promenade,’ it was called. Gradually it changed into a dance at colleges, then high schools, but kept its ‘formal’ emphasis. Other countries have their own version of a final dance at the end of secondary education and some are formal too, like proms. That’s all I know, honey.”

“All right, I see. And girls like to dress up, right?”

Nadine nodded, smiling.

“Ha. I don’t, really. Getting all dressed up is the female version of male display, then.”

“That’s right. In the animal kingdom, usually it’s the males who display to attract females. With humans, male courtship display is more subtle and for females it’s more overt.”

“Well, I’m not courting Jerome and he’s probably not courting me. I’m not into dress-up. I’ll talk to him—Linda too—and see if they’ll go for the less-formal look.”

### *University of Miami Medical School: early May*

Tamara was in Tim’s shop working on one of the MRI patient coils when Dr Beauford stopped in.

“Hey, Tamara. You find the problem with that?”

“Oh, hi. Yeah, something simple. When the attachment flap closes, one of the leads gets pinched. That was making an intermittent connection. It was an easy fix. I’ll need to check the others to see if they’re likely to develop the same problem.”

“Good. Those last results were fantastic. Your design of clusters of signal transmitters surrounded by tiny receivers and sequential RF firing was, well, inspired. How’d you think of that, anyway?”

“I saw an article on line about the first stroboscopic photos, how the pictures allowed the photographer to break down someone’s motion into tiny steps. So I tried ‘strobing’ the RF signals a few milliseconds apart so that there’d be minimal receiver interference. I thought that would up the resolution.”

“It certainly did. Dr Steward was very impressed when he saw the films. The other radiologists will be impressed too. Oh, and about your writeup for the patent you’re going to file—you can easily turn that into the ‘materials and methods’ section of a paper. I want you to write up an article about your new coil design as the lead author and we’ll get it submitted to the *Journal of Clinical Medicine*. Just get your patent application started and then we’ll get the paper submitted. Meanwhile, we’ll need to collect some data to show the resolution increase using the new coil design. Sound good?”

“Sure. And when I start working with Dr Clarke, she’s also interested in improving MRI resolution—I can do the stuff in her lab that you don’t have the money to fund here. The project I told you about, using circuits based on SET technology.”

“I’m glad you’re finding a way to keep advancing, Tamara. We’re really going to miss you when you leave for college. Oh—almost forgot. Yesterday, a guy came to my department looking for you.”

“Me? Who was it?”

“He wouldn’t say, and then became evasive. I got suspicious so I told him that we had a high-school aide with a similar name who sometimes worked here. So he said he was looking for someone older. Then he asked if I knew anything about a patent application which seemed to imply that RF microwaves could be collimated. I knew that was a secret part of one of your patent applications.”

“Yeah. They won’t issue a public patent for that part. It’s under... they call it something like a ‘general secrecy order’ and DARPA is licensing the idea in place of any compensation that I could get for commercializing the invention.”

“So someone has put two and two together and linked your open patent app to the secret one. I’m sure he came here because the med school is the patent assignee. Say... he may be asking at your attorney’s office—their name is also on the patent app.”

“Maybe I should call him,” Tamara replied. “Then I’ll see if he got that last one sent off.”

When she called the attorney, she learned that someone did contact them but the office manager turned them away, citing client confidentiality privilege. The attorney was out, so she told Tamara that she would ask him to call her.

The following day after school. Tamara saw that she had a voice message from her attorney, asking her to call back. She did.

“This is Tamara Alexandre for Mr Russo. He left a message.”

“Hi, Tamara. I’ll connect you.”



“Hello, Tamara. Yes, I did send off that last app of yours. Wilma told you that someone was trying to get your contact info; well, probably it’s no coincidence, but we had an attempted break-in last night.”

“Really—was anything taken?”

“I did say ‘attempted,’” he chuckled. “No, the perp did get the alarm disabled but didn’t know we had a backup alarm, a silent one. When the building guard responded, the perp overpowered him and got away. The guard did whack him in the face with his baton, though.”

“Good for the guard. He should get a bonus.”

“Already being taken care of. Security found how he got into the building at night. He jiggered the loading dock door and its alarm during the day. They’re fixing that weakness now and fixing the emergency exit doors too. There are a lot of lawyers’ offices in here and we need tight security. So I’m assuming that the perp was trying to find your info. Since some of it has been classified, I’d like to bring the FBI into the case. Is that okay?”

“Sure. It’s your call anyway. Say, if this guy or someone else does find me, what do I do?”

“I’ll ask the FBI agent to talk to you about that.”

That evening, when Tamara was telling her parents about the man at the med school and the break-in, Wilson’s phone rang. It was Agent Norris.

“Hey Wilson,” he began. “You guys are still attracting perps.”

“Seems so. We’re making the effort to see that you’ve still got employment, you know. Can’t let it get too quiet; you need your job.”

Norris roared with laughter. “Wilson, said it before. Like your style. Anyway, it looks like someone might be after the patent info that Tamara has. Russo told me that the DoD’s classified some of it.”

“Yeah. Let me put Tamara on. She can tell you what it is. Way beyond me.”

“Hi, Agent Norris,” Tamara said.

“Hi again. Sorry that you’ve gotten this kind of problem, but we at the FBI know that industrial espionage is a big industry in this country and it seems you might be a target.”

“What will they do?”

“Usually approach you and offer cash. Sometimes they’ll try to use blackmail if they can get any dirt. That’s very unlikely in your case. I don’t want to scare you, but sometimes they threaten harm. That’s even less likely, since they seem to be fishing—they don’t know what you’ve invented. They’re guessing. Since you’re not in a company, maybe they figure you’re a soft target. You’d have no company resources, like legal or security, to back you up. That’s what I figure.”

“Okay, if they do contact me, what should *I* do?”

They worked out a plan.

~~~~~

At lunch the following day, Linda and Carlos spoke to Tamara about the prom.

“I’d really like to go all formal, in a gown,” Linda said, “but Carlos really doesn’t want to wear a tux.”

“Neither does Jerome,” Carlos added. “Personally, I think he’d be okay going nude,” he chuckled.

“Carlos! Stop!” Linda said, smiling. “Yeah, he’s an informal kinda guy from what I’ve seen. I think I’ll wear a party dress. I’m too ... um, big for the popular sheaths and a jumpsuit won’t work.”

“You’re not big, Linda, you’re just nice and curvy,” Carlos told her.

She kissed him. “See why I like the guy, Tamara? He knows what to say.”

Tamara nodded. “I’m okay with a party dress too, I guess. After all, no one will be paying us much attention. Thanks for getting the tickets, Carlos. How much do I owe you?”

Carlos grinned. “Nada. Jerome took care of it.”

“Oh. I need to thank him. I thought since it was my school...”

Linda raised her hand. “Tamara, this is where the boys pay. It’s their sworn duty,” she chuckled.

“Oh. See what I know. So what are you guys wearing?” Tamara asked.

Carlos grinned wider. “I’ll say what the gals usually say. Wait and see.”

~~~~~

Tamara was leaving the hospital the next day to go home after doing some more work on her new coil design, when she noticed a man with a bandaged face approaching her when she got off the elevator at the lobby.

“Miss?” the man called to her and she felt a jolt of warning and evil.

*This must be the guy who was asking about me, Tamara figured. His banged-up face; he’s the one who tried the break-in at my lawyer’s.*

“You were pointed out to me. I need to talk to your mom, Tamara Alexandre,” he said. “I guess you have the same names.”

“About what?” Tamara asked.

*I need to get the guy to agree to meet at my lawyer’s office. That’s the plan.*

“It’s confidential. But it’s about a good deal for her.”

*A lie.*

“I can tell her. Give me your phone number and she’ll make an appointment,” she said as she took her phone out and started the voice recorder.

“No, I need to see her now.”

“Okay, give me a second. I’ll call her. Oh, this must be about the invention—that’s the only reason you’d want to see her. Let me arrange for you to meet her at the attorney’s office. I think I have the address...”

“No!” the man said firmly. “I need to meet her alone.”

“Um, she’d never agree to that,” Tamara said as she “pushed” a pinkish-green taste at him. “You will tell me exactly what you want,” she whispered commandingly.

The man flinched and stuttered, “We want that secret invention and will stop at nothing to get it. ... Aah... Shit, why did I say that?”

“Listen,” Tamara said. “You know where the lawyer’s office is. Be there at 6:30 p.m. or you’ll get nothing.”

She turned and hurried out of the hospital and saw her car service driver coming up the driveway. Then, out of

the corner of her eye, she noticed that the man she had spoken to had followed her out and was making a hand signal to a man standing next to a car waiting between her and her arriving ride. The man at the car raised his arm and suddenly she felt an impact and sharp stinging at her hip and a few seconds later, she began to feel woozy.

*Shit! Must be a dart gun. Tamara thought. Knock-out? Must be ketamine. Takes maybe 30 to 45 seconds to work,* flashed through her mind.

She tried running toward her car service but her legs felt wobbly. She still was holding her phone so she quickly locked it and then gathered a big cloud of a pure silver taste, a healing emotion, and concentrated on drawing it into herself. She felt herself stumbling and then arms grabbed her, supporting her. Still pulling on the silver taste, she felt fireworks going off in her head; brightly colored flashes were happening even though her eyes were still open. She was pushed into the back seat of a car and the door closed. She closed her eyes. Her muscles weren't responding very well but she could hear. The car started to move.

She heard someone lean over the front seat and then one of her eyelids was pushed up.

"Looks like she's out," the voice said—the man she had spoken to in the hospital. "The dose should last an hour, maybe ninety minutes."

"Grab her phone, check the contacts," the other voice said.

"Phone's locked. She doesn't have any emergency contacts—just 911," the hospital man said.

"Look in her backpack for a wallet or ID."

"Just a passport card and a high school ID. That won't help; the schools are closed by now."

"Anything else?"

"A purse, a little money. Notebooks, papers, some weird flashlights and a big battery... not much here."

Tamara's silver taste had caused the blood flow in her brain to go into overdrive; it felt like sparks were shooting inside her head and she could feel her muscles begin to respond.

*Good, like after my head surgery, the anesthetic cleared almost immediately,* she thought. *Now teach these goons a lesson. Hmm, I think the recorder's still going. I hope. Even when the phone's locked.*

She reached up to her neck and pulled out her talisman. The little wireless button for her masers was on the necklace too. She pushed its activating button to the locked position.

The men up front were discussing how to get her to tell them where she lived as they drove.

About a minute later, hospital man spoke. "The car's getting kinda hot. I'll put the a/c on."

Another minute. "Shit. Doesn't work. The fan stopped too. Damn, the whole dashboard is hot! I'm sweating like a pig too... the windows won't work either. What the hell...?"

Then the car's engine died and the car rolled to a stop.

Tamara assembled a huge cloud of greenish-brown taste, shot with great streaks of a dark yellowish hue, and floated it into the front seat of the car as she whispered to them, "It's your greatest fear, being trapped and can't find the way out. And your childhood monsters are coming for you."

She opened the back door and rolled out of the car. She was still too unsteady to walk, so she closed the door and slid a few feet away as she heard the men, panicking inside, trying to open their doors. Her cloud of confusion and fear was working. They were burning hot from the masers and the plastic parts of the front door

lock mechanisms had melted in the locked position.

She shut off the masers.

*Shit, I hope my phone wasn't in the maser beams. Oh well... Time for more fun. I think I'll...*

Then she realized that they must be on I-95; cars were crawling past, and the kidnappers' car was partially blocking the right lane.

*... oh ... here comes a police cruiser. Damn. No fun now. Maybe a confession? Some greenish-gray taste should loosen their tongues; they'll be compelled to answer the cop.*

She sent the cloud of taste at the car as the cop—a sheriff's deputy, actually—ran up to her.

"Miss, you okay? Are you hurt?" he called.

"Just got away—those jerks kidnapped me. Well, they tried, anyway. Shot me with a dart. Here."

Tamara had found the dart lying on the floor of the car; it had gotten caught in her clothes when she was pushed into the car.

"Shit," the deputy said and called on his radio for backup. Then, warily watching the car where the men were flailing around, he asked, "Sure you're not hurt? I gotta secure those two in the car. What the hell is going on in there?"

"Um, I'm still shaky from the dart. In the car? Something happened to it and it overheated. I heard them say that they can't get out..."

The deputy was torn between watching the men in the car and seeing that Tamara was all right. Several minutes later, sirens wailing, several more patrol cars arrived from both directions; then an ambulance pulled up. Pistols drawn, several policemen approached the car and shouted for the men to get out. It was soon clear that the two front doors were firmly locked and the power windows wouldn't operate either. Tamara had shut the rear door she had escaped through and the car's power door lock circuit had apparently been shorted, so the police couldn't get those doors open from the outside either.

One of the county sheriff's cars was equipped with a battery-operated jaws-of-life tool. After smashing a car side window, the deputy got the door popped open and the men crawled out of the car, totally drenched with sweat and frightened out of their minds. Tamara told "her" deputy, who had stayed with her while the EMTs checked her out, about her phone being in the car and possibly recording what the men had said.

"And please get my backpack, it's in there and I don't wanna lose my schoolwork. I don't think the teacher will believe what happened here is an excuse."

Everyone around Tamara began laughing.

The EMT checking her dead-panned, "Everything about you checks out okay... except your sense of humor. That's still sick."

That set off another round of laughing.

"Seriously, Tamara," the EMT told her, "except for that huge bruise on your hip and the puncture wound from the needle, you're fine." He looked at the dart. "I'm sure you're right about it being ketamine. But how you're conscious now is amazing. If this vial was full, the dose would have knocked you out for maybe even two hours. When were you shot?"

"Um, I left the hospital at maybe 4:30?"

One of the cops who had been writing on a clipboard heard and responded, “911 got the call of a possible kidnapping at 4:32. The girl’s driver saw it happen and called it in.”

*Gotta thank Tony for that,* Tamara thought.

Tamara’s deputy returned with her phone and backpack as the EMT asked, “When were you strong enough to get out of the car?”

“That, no idea. I was fogged and had no sense of time.”

The deputy spoke up, “I stopped here at 5:03 and she was lying on the ground on the shoulder.”

“Then I got out of the car maybe two minutes earlier,” Tamara told the EMT.

“Then you couldn’t have been totally unconscious...” he began when Agent Norris ran up to the ambulance.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re okay,” Norris panted. “When the office got word of your kidnapping...”

“It’s okay, at least we got the jerks. Not the way you planned. You know, UMiami has this great course in project planning... think about taking it...”

That set everyone to laughing again and the EMT shook his head. “Yeah. Very... sick... humor. Tamara, were you conscious the whole time—it was only about a half hour?”

“Yeah. Hey, maybe I didn’t get the full dose.”

“That must be it then,” the EMT said. “You’re fine; don’t need the ER—except you need to get some treatment for the sick humor. Will you be okay—your parents know?”

“Agent Norris?” Tamara looked at him.

“Oh, sure. I can handle this; thanks,” he said to the EMT.

The ambulance got packed up and left; two others had been called to treat the two kidnappers.

Tamara’s deputy had been waiting patiently meanwhile so she turned to him.

“Agent Norris, this is the sheriff who saved me,” she said while the man demurred.

“Hell, no,” he objected. “This gal was doin’ just fine on her own. I don’t know how she got out of that car with all the crap that I saw goin’ on inside there. Oh, your phone. Found it lying on the floor; the guy dropped it, looks like. Can you unlock it? You said you had the recorder going.”

Norris perked up at that. “Really, Tamara? How’d you manage that?”

“We’ll see if anything got recorded. Ah, it still works. Still recording too.”

*Obviously, being on the floor, the maser beams missed it; good.*

She stopped it and began the playback. The sound was weak and a little broken but understandable.

Man: “No, I need to see her now.”

Tamara: “Okay, give me a second. I’ll call her. Oh, this must be about the invention—that’s the only reason you’d want to see her. Let me arrange for you to meet her at the attorney’s office. I think I have the address...”

Man: “No! I need to meet her alone.”

Tamara: “Um, she’d never agree to that.” Then, some faint words, “... tell me .. you want.”

Man: “We want that secret invention and will stop at nothing to get it. ... Aah... Shit, why did I say that?”

Norris took the phone and jumped the playback forward a little.

Man 1: “Look in her backpack for a wallet or ID.”

Man 2: “Just a passport card and a high school ID. That won’t help; the schools are closed by now.”

Man 1: “Anything else?”

Man 2: “A purse, a little money. Notebooks, papers, some weird flashlights and a big battery... not much here.”

He jumped it further.

Man 2: “How are we gonna find the mother? There’s gonna be a missing person alert soon.”

Man 1: “We’ll go to the motel. She’ll be awake in what? An hour?”

Man 2: “Something like that. Getting warm in here.”

Man 1: “When she’s awake, a careful application of pain always loosens the tongue if they won’t talk. I want some payback for getting whacked in the face by that guard, anyway. You’re right; it’s really getting hot in here. Maybe if we get the mom and the daughter, we can play with them after we get the patent info.”

Tamara blanched at hearing that. “Those vermin!” she hissed.

Norris put his hand on her shoulder. “What they said earned them a life sentence in federal prison, dear. The kidnapping penalty is virtually the same as the murder one penalty. Now we can find out about their attempted industrial espionage as well. Attempting to steal classified military information is a federal crime too.” He shut the phone down. “We’ll need this for evidence, but I don’t think we need the whole phone. We have to preserve the chain of custody for this evidence, though. Deputy Scott, I’ll need you to certify how and where you found this phone and that it was in your possession until you handed it to me. Tamara, I assume you have the cell phone records that show you own it?”

She nodded. “My dad does.”

“Good. I’ll have an evidence tech make a copy of the phone’s data. Tamara, you don’t have anything naughty on it, do you?”

“Ha. Nope. It’s clean. Unless girls gossiping about girls is naughty,” Tamara smirked.

“I’ll need the unlock code too. You know, Tamara, I’m impressed as hell with you—a chip off the block, they say. Your dad is impressive; I’ve told him that. You are too. Not many people—even adults—would be so collected after such an awful experience. But here you are, joking as if you just had an annoying splinter removed. Weren’t you scared?”

“Oh, sure. I was. I felt helpless, but then they... oh my goodness.”

“What?”

“Remember the haunting in my school?”

“Ah, yes...?” Norris said uncertainly.

“You know what happened each time before something weird occurred? You hear about that?”

“I sure did. The Miami cops wanted the FBI to cover for those ‘aliens.’ You mean...?”

“The heat in the car. Those jerks got hot—I didn’t. The front of the car got hot; the back didn’t. When I figured

that out, I knew help was on its way. Mom says that we have spirits who watch over us in Little Haiti. I believe my mom.”

Norris looked at Scott, who shrugged. “I’ve been patrolling for eight years now and never saw anything like it. Those guys were petrified with fear. And I did hear about the ‘haunting’ in Little Haiti. Oh, and when I went to get her phone, the guys on the city force were saying that those two were spillin’ their guts about everything they were up to. Maybe I need to start goin’ to church again. If there are spirits, I wanna be on their good side.”

Things at the site were winding down; the dead car had been loaded on a flatbed truck and the few official cars that were left were starting to pull away.

Norris looked at Tamara. “Shall I call your folks? If you want, I’ll drive you home or we can have them meet us where you want.”

“I think if you go home with me, Mom and Dad would feel lots better. Besides, you can reassure them way better than I can. And protect me in case they get angry!”

Norris chuckled. “Somehow I don’t see that happening.”

When Norris and Tamara arrived at her home, Wilson had just arrived but Nadine wasn’t due home for another fifteen minutes. Wilson was surprised to see Norris.

“Something fall through in catching the guy looking for Tamara?” he asked when the two went into the house.

“You might say that,” Norris grinned. “Everything went south on this one. But it all worked out. We got two of them. I should say Tamara got the two of them, actually.”

Then Nadine arrived. “Hi, I got to leave a little early in case... oh, Agent Norris, I thought...”

“...I’d be at the attorney’s office. Well, that’s not needed now, thanks to Tamara. Now don’t both of you get all in a twist over this, but the plan didn’t work. They tried snatching Tamara...”

Her parents gasped.

“... but with her quick thinking, she somehow got free within a half hour. I’m almost believing that she had some help from... don’t laugh... your spirits.”

Then he had to face a demand for the details.

“I only rolled up about 45 minutes after it happened, so I’ll let Tamara explain. She’s impressive, she’s like you in many ways, Wilson, calm under fire and never losing her sense of humor. Tamara, tell them what happened.”

She began, and after many pauses for clarifications, she reached the point where Norris arrived.

“So I didn’t witness any part of what happened, but I do have Tamara’s recording of what went down. As she told you, she had the recording app on her phone running. Her foresight was amazing. What she didn’t tell you was that the EMT who examined her was puzzled that the drug they shot her with didn’t really work. It was a powerful anesthetic.”

“John, she probably didn’t want many people to know about this, but her system clears drugs from her brain very quickly,” Wilson told him. “We learned about that when she had surgery a few years ago. She woke up almost as soon as they stopped the anesthesia.”

“Ah, that explains a number of things then,” Norris replied. “All right. I need to get proof that the phone is Tamara’s—a phone bill will work, and take her phone to the lab tomorrow to get it copied and then I’ll get it back to her. And I’ll check on the interrogation team working on the kidnappers. I want to trace everything back

to whoever sent those perps after Tamara, get them locked up too. I'll let you know what I find—if it doesn't turn out to be a national security matter. I'm just glad she's safe. See you all."

And he left.



## Chapter 27 - Prom and Graduation

“All right, Tamara, now tell us the other half of what happened out there,” Wilson said when they were alone.

“And before you do that,” Nadine added, “how are you now? Any jittery feelings? Or anxiety? Do you need to see the doctor tomorrow?”

“I think I’m just fine, Mom. I was awake the whole time but a bit woozy. I wasn’t terribly scared ‘cause I knew I could do to them what I did to Mr Evil if it came to that. Dad, what do you mean, ‘the other half’?”

“So when Norris was here, you only told us what those guys did to *you*. What did you do to *them*?”

“Ah. Okay. I saw the guy who must have had the dart gun outside when I left the hospital but didn’t have a chance to react. It must have been air-powered ‘cause I didn’t hear anything, then I felt the dart hit and it really stung. I saw Tony drive up and tried to run to him but my legs just quit and that’s when I figured that it was ketamine. I remembered reading, some time ago, an article about how ketamine and other anesthetics are thought to work, ‘cause I was interested in how nerve cells communicate and anesthetics interfere with that communication. So I asked Beauford about it.

“He told me then that ketamine doesn’t affect all brain function, just cortical function, and neurologists believe that its effect is a result of how it disrupts the neurotransmitter glutamate in the brain. There’s a special receptor protein on cell membranes that it binds to and blocks glutamate. And glutamate is necessary to generate the electrical signals that nerve cells make. So I ‘pushed’ a taste into myself that I thought would cause a feedback loop and my fMRI results had showed that when I did that, the blood flow in my brain would increase a lot. I figured that would flush the ketamine out pretty fast.

“While I was doing that, I could hear them talking. It looked like we were in heavy traffic, so I figured we were on I-95 in stop-and-go traffic like it is when rush hour starts. So I figured if I had to shut the driver down, there wouldn’t be much of a crash. Then I realized that they had my masers up front and I had the wireless control on my necklace where I keep it. So I turned the masers on, that got them hot and it began melting the car’s plastics and electronics. The AC went out, they couldn’t open the windows, and the door locks got stuck too. When the engine quit, I ‘pushed’ fear and confusion at them and bailed out. We were in the right lane and he had drifted partway onto the shoulder when we stopped. I could see that it was safe to crawl out there since I couldn’t walk yet. Then the sheriff’s car stopped behind us and he saw me. I told you the rest before.”

“That’s some story, sweetie,” Nadine said. “Did you feel...”

“Oh! Something just occurred to me,” Tamara interrupted her. “I can see why ketamine is a recreational drug. While I was still a little bit under it, I felt such a huge sense of power; very lightheaded but very strong. Almost disconnected from everything around me. It felt like I could do anything. That’s when I ‘pushed’ the confusion and fear tastes at them. I made a monster cloud of it and was right next to them and I think I recall saying to them that they were trapped in the car and couldn’t get out. That had to have been a huge overdose of fear I gave them.

“Then when I was sitting on the shoulder, I decided to *really* punish them. I was still feeling giddy and wanted to have fun. I was gonna make ‘em lose control of their bladders and bowels—but then the sheriff’s cruiser arrived. So I didn’t have the time to figure out how that worked, but I *did* know how to do compulsion. So I made a big bunch of that taste and sent it at them.”

“Tamara...”

“Wait! The point is, that I wasn’t near them then! I didn’t have eye contact and was way too far away to ‘push’ an emotion so complicated without a verbal backup. So either the ketamine gave me superpowers—possible but

unlikely—or I had some real help from the *lwa*. I’m voting for the spirit help. No way did I do that on my own.”

“Come here,” Nadine told her, opening her arms for a hug. “You are truly a beloved of the spirits, my darling.”

After hugs all around, Nadine said, “Let’s join hands and send our prayers and thanks to our protecting *lwa*. At our next worship ceremony, they all will receive special sacrifices and proper ritual thanks.”

~~~~~

Tony was her scheduled driver next day to collect her for her trip to college. Tamara knew that he was recently married and was working a main job plus his driving gig, so he probably scrimped on frills. So, with Nadine’s advice, she had gotten him a gift card which could be used at a number of higher-end Miami-area restaurants.

“Hi, Tony,” she greeted him as she got into his car. “Thanks for calling 911 for me.”

“Glad you’re okay,” he responded. “It was thoughtful of you to call yesterday to let me know.”

“I want to show my thanks in a material way,” Tamara said, “so here’s a restaurant gift card. Take your bride out for a night on the town with my thanks.”

He opened the envelope. “Three hundred? Jeez—Tamara, that’s too...”

“Just take it. You deserve it. Your 911 call saved me all kinds of grief.”

“Can you tell me anything about what happened?” he asked as they pulled out.

Tamara gave him a very heavily edited version of the kidnapping.

~~~~~

Attending classes at the university was almost anti-climactic after the excitement of the previous day. By noon, she was exhausted. Fortunately she didn’t have any afternoon classes; she usually spent the time in the library doing her class work or in study sessions with others taking the same classes. So she decided to go to the hospital to talk to Beauford. She had already let him know that she was okay.

He was seeing patients when she arrived so she relaxed a bit outside his office. When he returned to his office, he called her in. They hugged.

“I’m squeezing you in between patients, my dear. When the cops came here, they told me that the guy had grabbed you and pushed you into his car. Someone saw and called 911.”

“Yeah. My driver saw and called it in. They shot me with a dart, ketamine, I figured out what it must be.”

Beauford thought for a few seconds. “You cleared the anesthesia really quickly after your fracture reduction...”

“Yep, and yesterday too. I never really lost consciousness, so when their car broke down, I could get out.”

She went on to tell him the edited version.

“But I wanted to stop by so you’d see I was okay. Also, that jerk *was* trying to get the secret design data. They had no intention of paying, either and the FBI is looking into the case. Seeing who hired them to go after me.”

Beauford looked at her with concern. “Do you think you’ll be safe?”

“I’m pretty sure. The FBI agent told me that the kidnappers are spilling the beans; he figures that their investigators will know who hired the jerks really soon. Hey, I’m really wiped out from yesterday. Must be the aftereffects of yesterday’s adrenaline rush. It hit me around noon, so I’m going home to get a nap. I should be back tomorrow afternoon. I’ve still got some fine-tuning to do on the coil.”

“Well, take care of yourself. Don’t come in if you’re still tired, you hear?”

They hugged again and she left.

***Little Haiti, Miami, Florida: Mid-May***

The prom was next Saturday. Tamara had gone shopping with Linda and they both found dresses they loved. The best part of getting a dress instead of a gown was that the dress was much more versatile; it could be worn for parties and dates. The girls were meeting Carlos and Jerome at their favorite hangout. They had just found a table in the food court when the boys arrived.

Carlos hugged Linda while Jerome took Tamara’s hand with both of his.

“Will you allow me a kiss?” he asked her.

She nodded and touched her lips briefly to his.

“So me and Tamara have our dresses,” Linda said as they sat. “You guys decide what to wear?”

Carlos grinned. “All set. You’ll see.”

“Um, nothing garish or funky, I hope,” Linda frowned.

“No, no,” Jerome responded. “It’ll be fine. You won’t be embarrassed.”

“So you hear about Tyler and Martin? The teacher in charge of the prom tickets was refusing to sell them couples’ tickets?” Linda asked.

“What, are they gay?” Jerome asked.

Carlos nodded. “Yeah. Martin’s a pitcher on my team. He’s a great guy, good teammate. He’s been dating Tyler for two years now. I didn’t know about the ticket problem.”

“They can’t do that, can they?” Tamara asked. “I remember in Civics about equal protections.”

“Yeah,” Jerome added, “my dad had a case like that a year or two ago. A school—not in Miami—had a policy saying that only mixed-sex couples could attend dances and prom. The school lost the case.”

“I’m gonna call Martin later and find out what happened,” Carlos said. “On another topic,” he looked at the girls, “We haven’t talked about post-prom. There are a few post-parties I know about and some couples even get a hotel room...”

Linda smiled. “We’ll skip on the room, right, Tamara?”

Tamara nodded. “I don’t know about going to another party afterwards,” she said. “The prom ends midnight, right? Why party afterwards?”

“Um, then they can have booze. Even drugs. I know a couple guys who are planning that,” Carlos replied. “But most times, it’s just to continue the dancing...”

“Yeah, and start the making out,” Linda smiled. “Right?”

“Well, that’s been known to happen,” Carlos agreed.

“My sister graduated two years ago,” Jerome told them. “She went to an Edison prom—she did something like I’m doing and that gave me the idea. Anyway, she told me that lots of kids hate when it ends so they try to keep it going. So that’s why there are after-prom parties.”

“I’m not keen on a party starting after midnight,” Tamara told them. “Are there any restaurants or clubs we can

get into that have late dancing? I would do that.”

Jerome pulled out his cell phone. “Let me look.” He searched for a bit. “Here’s one out on Miami Beach, a beach club. It has dancing on the beach. Oh, it says minimum age eighteen. We’re all eighteen, except Tamara.”

She chuckled. “I can be over eighteen if I want. My folks have friends in high places. Because of what I do, it was terribly inconvenient for me to be fourteen or fifteen, so I was given a U.S. passport card. According to the passport, I’m nineteen; halfway to being twenty.”

“Jeez, Tamara,” Jerome said. “What do you do that gets you a false ID from the *feds*, of all things? Is it secret? Are you a spy?”

She giggled. “Not a spy. I have some inventions being tested by the Defense Department. It turned out that a few big-shots wouldn’t take me seriously ‘cause of my age. So I was made older.”

“So we can all get into an eighteen-or-older place? Cool,” Linda said. “Is that beach place expensive?”

“On the higher side,” Jerome told her. “But that’s no problem. Carlos and I can handle it. Should I reserve?”

“Sure” ... “Yes” ... “Okay.”

“Okay, got it. 12:15 a.m. next Sunday. The place is only about six miles from the prom location. The beach club goes to 5 a.m. The dress code is ‘chic,’ so I think we’re covered there too. Okay, now, Tamara, tell us about your invention.”

She briefly told them about her MRI work and how an unusual extension of the work could have a military application—she couldn’t talk about that.

“So that’s why you go to the medical school so much,” Linda said. “I assumed that it was only the study you were in.”

“Yeah, but that’s only part of it. I got interested in the tech part right when I started in the clinical study. I get college credit for the stuff I do there, so that’s a bonus.”

“Cool,” Jerome said. “So you want to be a scientist? Engineer? Doctor?”

“Probably not a doctor, but who knows? Right now, I’m closest to being an engineer, because I design and build stuff, but the person who’ll be my faculty advisor at Hopkins says I’m an engineering scientist. She called it an ‘engineering physicist.’”

“Tamara told me she likes electronics. She’s in charge of the school AV squad and helps the AV tech to fix stuff,” Linda said.

“That’s what I do at the med school too,” Tamara told them. “They have lots of high-tech electronic gear to work with and the medical equipment is interesting to work on. But I like the MRI the best. Seeing inside someone’s head while they do stuff is beyond cool.”

Then she had to explain how that worked. They had lunch and then walked over to the nearby theater to see a movie.

~~~~~

Jerome picked up Tamara at her house on the evening of the prom. He was dressed in a nice black suit, but wore a pleated shirt and a red bowtie. Tamara giggled at seeing him.

“You have half of a tux outfit, Jerome.”

Nadine shushed her. “He looks splendid, doesn’t he, Wilson?” she asked as Jerome stared at Tamara.

“Tamara, wow,” he exclaimed. “You look amazing.” He showed her the box he was carrying. “I didn’t know whether you wanted the corsage on your wrist or dress, so they made it to do either.”

Tamara elected having it pinned to her dress, and then she picked up a box containing a boutonniere from a side table.

“I got a flower for you too; it’s basic white,” she grinned and pinned it on his lapel.

After the mandatory photos were taken, Jerome escorted Tamara outside.

“Oh! You got a limo. Wow,” she exclaimed.

The driver hopped out and opened the door for them.

“It’s a special date, Tamara,” Jerome said. “We’ll pick up the others now. Carlos will be getting his mug photoed at Linda’s. Hope the camera survives.”

“Jerome! Not nice,” Tamara said, smiling.

He grinned at her. “We rag on each other all the time. A male bonding rite, you understand.”

When they picked up Linda and Carlos, Carlos was looking a little angry.

“Carlos got a call just before he came to get me,” Linda told them. “About Tyler. Tell them.”

He nodded. “Yeah, two days ago, Tyler went to Barelo to complain about the tickets. She got it settled and told the teacher that the school district policy didn’t allow any discrimination. She had to sell the couple’s tickets to any couple, according to the district’s policy. But just before I went to Linda’s, I got a phone call that a few guys were heard making plans to rough up Tyler and Martin. Six guys, I heard. I checked with Tyler and he knows about it. Shit, I don’t want this party to get ruined by a big fight; the guys on the team would back up Tyler and there’ll be a brawl.”

Tamara decided she’d try to do something.

“Do you know their plans, like how they’d get Tyler? I doubt if they’d start a fight inside the prom room,” Tamara asked.

“Don’t know; I don’t think my source heard how.”

“You know who the guys are, though?”

Carlos named four; Tamara knew two of them by sight.

“Okay, Diego,” she said. “He’s a bigoted asshole, for sure. A loudmouth too.”

Carlos nodded. “He appears to be the ringleader too. And he’s on the wrestling team, so he’s no pushover.”

Tamara grinned mirthlessly. “And Hugh. I had him to tutor once. He lasted three minutes; tried to hit on me and was disgusting. Creepy. He won’t mess with me after I told him off.”

“He’s a wrestler too, Tamara. You’re not gonna...”

“I’ll handle this, Carlos. Kids like those idiots are all mouth and no brain. Where I grew up, there were kids who were bullies and I know exactly how to make them back down. Oh, we’re pulling into the driveway. If you see them, let me know, okay?”

Jerome looked at her, concerned. “You sure...?”

She put a finger on his lips and looked at him, her eyes boring into his. “I know what I’m doing, Jerome. Please don’t interfere.”

“Oh, shit... suddenly you’re almost scary, Tamara.”

She laughed. “Gotta work on that, then. I wanna be *completely* scary!”

They got out of the limo and Tamara grabbed onto Jerome’s arm and guided-pulled him into the building. Carlos and Linda followed, mouths agape.

They had arrived a little early, so there were only a dozen couples there. Within five minutes, Tyler arrived with Martin and Carlos went over to talk to them. He brought them back to the others and introduced them. While they were talking, Tamara noticed Hugh coming in with a date, followed by Diego with a date on his arm.

“Wait here, don’t follow,” she told the others, and marched off toward Diego and company, who were being joined by several more couples.

As she walked over, she gathered a pinkish-green taste cloud in front of her and “pushed” it toward the group. As she got closer, she could feel the difference in emotions between the boys and their dates. The girls, all of them, had no inkling of the plans.

*Okay, they’re primed now, she thought. Ready for suggestions. Now a touch of greenish-brown for a bit of disorientation.*

She “pushed” that as she arrived.

Hugh noticed her first. “Uh, shit... Damn, I do stay away from you...”

His face started to turn pale.

Tamara fixed his eyes with a steely look and then caught the eyes of several of the other boys.

“Tell us what extras you planned tonight... with Tyler,” she grated. “Tell your dates what you planned. They want to know.”

One of the girls looked around, confused. “What do we want to know?”

*Now for a bit of compulsion.* Tamara added a gray taste to the pink-green cloud now settling on the group.

“Diego, tell your girlfriend what you were planning,” she ordered as she “pushed” a yellow fear-taste at him.

Diego and Hugh began babbling about how they hated “queers” and that they were going to make sure to mess up their faces so they’d be ugly... and the other four boys joined in, reciting all their plans to “teach the queers a lesson.”

The girls were totally horrified at hearing that and Tamara motioned them to move away from the boys. They did, and moved pretty quickly too.

Tamara whispered to the boys, “All of you boys... when you leave, you won’t come back here.”

She went to where the girls had gathered. “Wanna leave your dates and forget what you saw me do here?” Tamara whispered.

Some of the girls shuddered, and five said “Yes!” The last one muttered, “I’m calling my father to come get me!” and ran out.

*Make ‘em sick now.* “One sec,” Tamara said and “pushed” a pink taste with streaks of brown at the boys, who were looking around in fear.

Then she spoke to the girls. “You heard what your dates planned—beat up an innocent kid. If you want to rescue this evening, you can join my group. Also, there’s a few single boys here; they’ll be nicer than those jerks you came with. Speaking of which...”

Tamara pointed to the six boys, who were rushing out the door, looking very sick.

“Come, I’ll introduce my friends,” Tamara said. “I’ve seen you all at school but don’t know any of you. Tell me who you are.”

She walked with the group back to her friends who had been watching the whole thing in awe. No one else in the room had noticed the scene.

Jerome was the first to recover. “Tamara, you just spoke to those guys—and then they ran out?”

“Yep. I can be kinda persuasive. Right, girls?” she asked the five who were meekly following her.

They all nodded, still slightly influenced by Tamara’s cloud of confusion. Gradually, their senses began to return and that’s when they fully realized what their dates had planned to do. Greatly embarrassed, they began apologizing, but Tyler and Martin convinced them that they weren’t at all to blame.

It turned out to be a pleasant evening for the group; everyone got danced with, since Tyler and Martin both were happy to dance with the extra girls and Tamara “suggested” to a number of the single boys to join their group too. Theirs turned out to be the liveliest bunch of tables at the prom.

When it became close to the ending time, Tyler asked the single girls if they had a way to get home. All five needed rides, so between Tyler and a few of the single guys, they all had a way to get home. And the girls, who were delighted at how their Prom experience had been so nicely rescued, were definitely going to spread the word about their erstwhile dates’ plans.

Jerome’s limo picked up the foursome at midnight, right after the last dance. Saying goodbye to their new friends, they left for Miami Beach.

“Now give, Tamara,” Linda demanded as soon as the car door closed. “What the hell did you do in there? Those girls were dazed when you brought them over to us.”

“Sure they were. They had just found out what kind of jerks their dates were,” Tamara replied.

“Well, if it were me, I would have been raging mad and kicked their dumb asses out the door,” she retorted.

Tamara laughed. “Which is precisely why I didn’t get you involved. I told you I had a brief tutoring session with Hugh. I know some things about him and put the fear of the Almighty into him. I also figured out Diego’s vulnerable secret. I threatened to tell it to everyone unless they confessed their plans to their dates. Sometimes blackmail works, if you use it to do good.”

“But why did they all run out looking sick?” Jerome asked.

“Well, I told them what would’ve happened if they did beat up Tyler. They would be arrested and tried as adults. I told them what happens to kids their age while in jail. I really laid it on thick—they’d give up their anal virginities and become jailhouse boy-whores. I figured that they were so homophobic, by telling them that, it would shake ‘em up. It sure did.”

“Jeez, Tamara, I thought you were such a quiet gal,” Carlos said, admiringly. “I never figured you to have such a killer instinct.”

Tamara grinned tightly. “My dad taught me well. ‘Walk softly, leave no sign you passed. But if someone interferes with your passage, then end the threat. And never look back.’ He’s a Marine; that’s what they say.”

“My god; that’s totally chilling,” Linda said, shocked. “Do you actually believe that?”

“Not in a literal sense, but yes. I’ve had stuff happen to me and my family that I can’t talk about. So I’ve learned ways to protect myself. Dad says a good defense is good intelligence and I’ve taken that advice to heart.”

“Huh. I’d hate to think of the stuff you know about us,” Carlos told her.

“You guys? It’s all good,” Tamara laughed. “But Carlos? Some advice. When you’re catching and signal for a fastball, you have a ‘tell.’ You pull on the bottom of your facemask with your hand after you give the signal. Bad habit; it’ll get noticed.”

“Holy shit, how do you know that?” he yelped.

“Observation,” Tamara smirked. “I watch everything. Everything is important; you just need to filter the level of importance. Told you I know stuff.”

“Jeez. You’re really scary, Tamara,” Carlos said. “Anyway, Tyler didn’t get a chance to tell you. He was really happy about whatever you did to stop those morons. He had arranged for some guys as backup, so if it went down, there would have been a big brawl—and he could have lost his scholarship over that. He’ll thank you personally on Monday, he said.”

The four teens had a great time at the Miami Beach club and Tamara rolled in at 5:30 a.m. that morning, tired from the dancing and weary from her mental activities earlier that evening.

### ***Early June***

Graduation day was here. The school held the ceremony in the stadium so they could accommodate the graduates’ families. Tamara was up for several awards: She was one of the top two of her class for her 4.0-plus GPA; the “plus” accounted for the grades in her AP classes. The only reason she missed on being valedictorian was her credits; she only had three years of high school credits, having skipped her sophomore year. The student chosen also had a 4.0-plus GPA but more credits. Tamara was just fine with not getting that honor.

A second award was for service. Her office aide work, tutoring, and AV squad leadership would be recognized. Finally, members of the school’s athletic teams had voted an honorary school sports letter for her in recognition of her tutoring work which preserved the eligibility of a number of the teams’ members.

Tamara didn’t have many people to share her day of achievement with. She had invited the Gilsons, Susan and Dr John, who came, but Dr Beauford had a full schedule and couldn’t. She was now a high school graduate. Her world was changing.

Agent Norris had been in touch with Wilson about the men involved in Tamara’s kidnapping.

He had told Wilson, “We still don’t know exactly who’s involved. The people who hired them still haven’t tried to make contact, even though we’ve kept their arrest secret. They’ve been cooperating—they get scared to death when Tamara’s name is mentioned—and we’ve put together a packet that has fake invention details as bait.”

“Is she in any danger now, though?” Wilson asked.

“Probably not, but I missed the call about the possibility of their using violence when we first heard of their interest in Tamara. She should keep alert. I know that she’s good at that. On a related matter, there’s been some discussion at the agency of whether your family still needs to keep under the radar, so to speak.”

“You mean about our name changes?”

“Not specifically that, but the need to hide your family’s origins may have disappeared. State and the CIA have found no bad actors left in Haiti concerning your case and our agency hasn’t heard anything from our in-country



sources that Nadine, or Tamara, are the object of any interest. Except this recent one about the invention.”

“Do we need to do anything, then?”

“Well, not really, I suppose. You just won’t have to use your cover story anymore. But don’t, you know, take out ads to publicize your new status all over the city,” he chuckled.

“As if. I like the low-profile approach; always have.”

“Well, good chatting, Wilson. I’ll stay in touch. Bye.”

Wilson sat back in the seat. Would this begin a new phase of their life in Miami? Only time would tell.

## Chapter 28 - Motherland

### *Little Haiti, Miami, Florida: mid-June*

In mid-June, Wilson received an email message from his cousin Henri in Haiti. In it, Henri told Wilson that he had been contacted by the Haitian government about the elder Tamara, Nadine's mother. Wilson decided to phone Henri instead of replying by email, and after a day of trying to connect, he was finally successful.

"Hey, Henri—what's up? What did you hear about Nadine's mom?"

"*Bonswa, zanmi*," Henri replied. "You recall that the government had me as a contact for the Bernard family. As part of that funeral that we arranged, remember that I registered myself as Cassandra's... ah, Nadine's next of kin here."

"Right. I made you the executor of her estate, such as it was, and to handle the sale of our property."

"*Oui*. That was done. So, two days ago I was visited by someone from the Justice Ministry. This visit was about Vanessa. Now that she's dead, and because of her crimes, the government has seized her property—no will was found and she has no heirs. So the government is now trying to locate people who were affected by her murders and enslavement, to make restitution. Apparently she left records that name the people who she enslaved or murdered. One of those murdered people turns out to be Cas... oh, I can't get used to that... Nadine's *manman*, Tamara."

"Oh, shit. So she did really murder her."

"Effectively, yes. The ministry guy said that one of Vanessa's *chochés* told the investigators that there had been some magic—or whatever it is that they do—battles leading up to a battle royal, between Vanessa and Tamara. Vanessa had been holding Tamara captive and was trying to force her to join her anti-government group. The *choché* said that Vanessa was trying to beat Tamara's will down but apparently Tamara was really strong. The *choché* told the investigators that, at that final battle, Tamara seemed to be the stronger of the two, because suddenly Vanessa collapsed—somehow Tamara caused her to have something like a heart attack. Her bodyguard rushed her to the hospital and she had to have a pacemaker. But Vanessa really hurt Tamara too. After the battle, the *choché* said that Tamara was very weak and died about two weeks later. Vanessa never got her any medical care."

"Damn, what a story. So one of the junior *chochés* saw all that."

"*Oui*. Also, they found some property at Vanessa's compound which they identified as having been Tamara's. And the government got a court ruling saying that survivors of those who Vanessa had murdered will get compensation from Vanessa's estate. I held the guy off; told him I knew that you, at least, were alive. He said that as Tamara's Haitian son-in-law, you would be eligible for the compensation."

"Henri, you have well-and-truly blown my mind. I suppose I should come?"

"For sure."

"The FBI here says that my family can come out of hiding now. What's your feeling about our safety from what you see there, politically?"

"Cas... *modi*... I mean Nadine. She's remembered fondly here, not only locally. Word got out that she resisted Vanessa. I don't think she'd be in any danger."

Wilson told him that he'd arrange to travel to Haiti as soon as possible.

When Nadine returned with Tamara, they both had been shopping for college clothes for Tamara, Wilson filled them in.

“Oh, *mon dieu!*” Nadine exclaimed when she heard the news.

Tamara just nodded.

Nadine looked at her. “You knew?” Tamara nodded again. “You didn’t tell me...”

“*Manman*, I told you before that I didn’t want to look at those memories. Somehow, *Granmanman* planted them in my head so that I would have to ‘ask’ that I see them. I didn’t want to yet. But just now, Papa’s news brought out that one memory. *Granmanman* had a wicked battle with Vanessa, but Vanessa was starving her. *Granmanman* was saving all of her energies for the fight she knew was coming—and she almost won. But it took its toll, as Papa said. *Manman*, she must have been an awesome person!” Tamara said, tears streaking her face. “There are many more memories in there too but I can’t face them yet.”

Nadine hugged her daughter. “That’s okay, *chérie*. I won’t push you into unlocking them.”

The family made plans for a Haiti trip; both parents had to arrange to get time off their jobs. The soonest they were both able to get time off was in the beginning of August; Henri assured them that the six-week delay would not be a problem.

### ***Early July***

Tamara spent the first part of the summer finishing up her work at the medical school MRI lab. Leaving the lab and the people she had become close to, especially Dr Beauford and Tim Saunders, was going to be particularly painful for her. But they both assured her that this was a step in maturing her as a scientist, because leaving close colleagues was something that frequently happened as people’s careers advanced. Much of her time at the lab was spent in working on the two articles that she and Beauford were preparing for submission to the medical journal he had selected.

She also went out on occasional dates with Jerome during the summer; some dates were solo and some were doubles with Linda and Carlos. Tamara felt that there was no chemistry between herself and Jerome and besides, all four teens were mentally gearing up for college and that planning was consuming all of their mental energies.

Several dates were visits to the beach but Tamara and Linda had vetoed any thought of going to Haulover Beach—even the clothed section. Carlos agreed with the girls.

Then August arrived and with it came the Alexandres’ trip to Haiti.

### ***Port-au-Prince, Haiti: beginning of August***

Their arrival in Haiti started off with a bang—the family used their diplomatic passports at the airport and that attracted the attention of the supervising officials. The commotion increased when Wilson showed his Haitian passport—issued in the Bernard name—and then declared that the whole family had dual citizenship and had changed their names because of the Vanessa threat. Suddenly the family became heroes.

“Now that Vanessa’s gone, I came back to Haiti to close out my family’s affairs here,” he told the supervisor. “We’ll be staying with my cousin in Lafiteau. That’s where I worked when I lived here.”

“Well, we’re delighted to welcome you back to Haiti and hope that your stay is productive,” the supervisor responded.

When they left the customs area, Wilson saw Henri and Julienne waiting.

Everyone greeted each other warmly, and Wilson told them, “Jeez, they really gave us the third degree at customs. Wonder if it was the diplomatic passports.”

“Possibly,” Henri said. “I think the officials get nervous when unexpected diplomats arrive.”

The family visited with Henri’s for a day, and the following day, Nadine and Wilson went to Aubry, to the community center there. Henri had spread the word among Nadine’s followers that she had been misidentified as having died; she somehow had survived the earthquake and would be visiting the community center to meet with her former congregation members.

It was a tearful reunion for all of Nadine’s former congregation members and Nadine had to explain how she and Tamara had been injured in the ‘quake and had gotten help to get to Port-au-Prince and had been airlifted for medical care. The family had fabricated the story that Wilson thought the people in the rubble near his home were his wife and daughter and, distraught and having been injured himself, was able to get to Miami too, where immigration officials had realized they were a family and gotten them together. They had their names changed when they heard that Vanessa was trying to locate Nadine.

Several days later, the intervening days filled with visiting their friends, the Alexandres met with a Justice Ministry official at Vanessa’s compound. He led them to a building behind the main house. When they walked in, Tamara stiffened.

“Oh, hell,” she whispered. “This place still reeks of evil.”

The official pointed to an open door. “They had cages in that room. Vanessa kept prisoners here.”

Tamara walked down a hall to a closed door.

“She was a prisoner in here, *Manman*,” she told Nadine. “I can feel some power left even now.”

The official looked frightened. “You can feel power?” he asked. “From a deceased person?”

Tamara realized that he was superstitious. “It’s not a big deal. Not a *zonbi*. You know how you can sometimes smell someone’s scent even long after they left a room?”

He nodded uncertainly.

“So, like the body gives off its scent, it also gives off something like electrical signals—they use a brain machine, an EEG, to detect them, right?”

He nodded again.

“Some sensitive people can feel those signals. Like me. Okay?”

He grimaced. “I suppose. Okay, Mrs Alexandre. They asked me to show you this place.” He shuddered. “Let’s go to the main house now.”

“One second, I need to look,” Tamara said and opened the door.

It was a bare room, with bars on the single window. A small mattress lay on the floor in one corner.

Tamara shivered. “I’ve seen enough. Let’s go,” she told them.

When they entered the main house, the official led them to a room which appeared to be set up like a sitting room, but it was also filled with religious artefacts.

“The records Vanessa kept showed that she collected many artefacts. Her records show that she removed many possessions from your mother’s home too,” the man said. “She also had a journal. It was like a diary, but she wrote her plans in it; records of her activities, and there were lists of people she had influenced in it, too.”

Nadine was looking around the room as the man spoke.

“*Mezanmi!*” Nadine exclaimed. “*Manman*’s drums! They’re here! That miserable *bòkò—choché*, she stole them.”

Nadine walked around the room and identified a number of other items that had been her mother’s. The official looked at his clipboard and nodded.

“Yes, the record agrees. Vanessa’s notes show that those were your mother’s,” he concurred. “We will have to arrange a formal hearing to transfer the ownership of those artifacts to you. We also have prepared an extract of Vanessa’s journal, which I am sure you’ll want to read. We only redacted items of a sensitive personal and political nature.”

“I would like that very much.”

“I have been told that she died in your presence,” the official went on. “And it was by your capture of one of her ... ah ... agents, that her ambitions were exposed.”

“That is true.”

“In that case, our government owes very much to you, Mrs Alexandre.”

“I’m just thankful that we were able to foil her plans,” Nadine said softly. “It didn’t bring *Manman* back though. Is there any record of the location of her grave?”

“Unfortunately, no. That woman was responsible for dozens of deaths and the government hasn’t been able to locate any of the remains. None of the people who still resided here after we received word of Vanessa’s demise knew anything about the disposition of her victims.”

“Ah. I had hoped...” Nadine said, dejectedly.

“I am very sorry. It is unfortunate that we cannot help further with those issues, but we can help with the disposition of assets. Now to the real estate. Before Vanessa acquired this property, it used to be a small hotel. We had it appraised at 262 million gourdes; that’s about \$1.8 million U.S. Vanessa’s other assets and seized bank balances are another 207 million gourdes. We haven’t finished valuing personal property like vehicles and such, but we expect that amount to be negligible in comparison. You would be eligible for part of her estate as compensatory damages, especially since you provided proof that you had to flee Haiti to escape her.”

“Thank you,” Wilson told the official. “Do we have to remain in Haiti or return for any hearings?”

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary. You have jobs in the U.S. you must return to, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Nadine said.

“I will get your contact information, then. And I will have your mother’s possessions released to you, Mrs Alexandre, just as soon as we schedule a hearing—it’s just a judge’s release, actually, and should happen within the week. You will be responsible for the crating and shipping of your possessions. I have a copy of the redacted journal in my briefcase. Please come to my vehicle and I’ll give it to you.”

The Alexandres left Vanessa’s former compound in a state of shock. Later, when the family was alone, Nadine heaved a great sigh before she began to speak.

“My thoughts are in a turmoil. I thought with Vanessa’s death I’d have closure for my Haiti life, but learning about what happened to *Manman* is reopening old wounds. It’ll be wonderful having the ritual items that I remember *Manman* using—especially those wonderful drums. They came from Africa. Their workmanship is exquisite, did you see?” The others nodded. “I can recall their sound too; it was wonderful... oh... we can fix up the *ounfò* properly now. Can we wait to read that journal until tomorrow? I can’t face that just yet.”

“Sure, darling,” Wilson said and Tamara nodded.

“I still could feel whispers of *Granmanman*’s spirit in that room,” Tamara said. “Not her actual spirit, but its impression on the room itself... like I told the guy. There was no emotion, like anger or fear or anything. Just a whisper of something like I felt when she was with me when she... um... you know, ended Vanessa. She must have had awesome powers, *Manman*.”

They hugged each other and Nadine said, “She was a very gentle, loving person. Many people sought her counseling. She taught me much, but also wanted me to have a regular education and sent me to university in Puerto Rico.”

“I guess I never asked you. What did you major in?”

“Social anthropology—the study of cultures. I took a master’s degree and was close to a doctorate when *Manman* disappeared.”

“Oh my... no wonder you’re so smart, Mom. That’s so awesome.”

“We’ll look at that journal tomorrow,” Nadine told them. “I’ll steel myself to do it—we need to do it while we’re in Haiti.”

The next day, they visited with Henri’s family again, and Julianna took them to a few folk markets in Port-au-Prince.

“Who knows, you might find something for your *ounfò*. You can also get some real ginger tea there—the kind you like,” she told Nadine.

In the evening, Nadine told Tamara and Wilson, “I’m ready to face reading about *Manman* now.”

Wilson picked up the copy of the journal and gave it to Nadine.

“This starts, oh, not important. She writes things about wanting to overthrow the government and set up a figurehead king... ah, also about teaching some *manbos* she’s recruited to do some evil things... ah. Here, it starts.

“The foundation of my plan is to gather a number of *manbo* adepts, women who have the ability to influence others’ thoughts and actions. I have collected the names of a number of *manbo* recruit possibilities and will need to visit them to see how powerful they are and to convince them to join in my plan.”

“One of the names on her list here is Tamara David, my *manman*,” Nadine said. “The other names are blacked out. Ahhh... There’s some more writing, doesn’t apply... ah. Here.

“I located several women this week but did not approach any directly. Only one of them was a possibility; she appeared to have strong skills. I will need to meet with her. I should be able to influence her if I get close enough to touch her.

“Then a bit later, it says:

“I met with *Manbo* Tamara David. She’s one of the most powerful *manbos* I have ever encountered. Almost as powerful as me. I spoke to her about her congregation but whenever I tried to touch her, I found that I couldn’t do it. I’ve never had that happen before. I will have to see her again.”

“Oooh, *Manman*,” Tamara breathed. “It looks like *Granmanman* was doing something to hold Vanessa away.”

“Yes, it does, *chérie*. Let me read more. Okay, here:

“Another visit to David. This time I told her that I wanted her to join my opposition and she refused. I threatened her but she laughed it off. I tried to use my compelling voice but it had no effect. When I reached out to touch her, it seemed like a gray cloud came between us. Then I recall nothing until after I returned to my compound. I must get this woman to join me, even if I need to forcibly take her and bend her to my will.”

Tamara was listening in awe. “It’s her colored auras, *Manman*. See, she was using them like when I ‘push.’ You see? She could do that too.”

“You’re right, *chérie*. Let me read further. Vanessa writes that she had her bodyguards sneak into *Manman*’s house while she was asleep and disabled her. It doesn’t say how.

“I have David locked up now, and she’s restrained. I’ve tried several times to break her resistance but she’s very strong. I even tried to see if I can find any of her relatives. Does she have children? Husband? I can write this, but I now see that whenever I try to act on the thought, I forget. My thoughts become confused. I must find out how she does that.”

“*Mezanmi!*” she exclaimed. “I had no idea that *Manman* could do such things.”

Tamara just shrugged. “I told you, remember?”

“Yes, you did. Let me read more.

“I cannot understand how she does this. I find that I’m unable to act whenever I try to tell someone to look into David’s background. I can’t write out instructions. I can write about it in here, but if I try to take my journal out of here for someone to read, I forget what I’m doing. I must learn more about this ability; it would be a key to overthrowing the government.”

Nadine pointed to an entry. “I’m looking at the date of this part. It’s when I was in university in Puerto Rico and that’s when *Manman* disappeared. She protected me from Vanessa and now I see how. I wondered why Vanessa never connected me with *Manman*.”

“It sounds like she was really impressive,” Wilson said. “I can see how our Tamara has followed in developing her own abilities. She’s very similar to her grandmother.”

Nadine nodded. “This is so hard, reading the words written by that awful *choché*. Listen to this. Vanessa writes that when she tries to force *Manman*, she feels colors come into her and she isn’t able to avoid them. Some of the colors hurt her, she writes. And she tried having one or two of her disciples join their strength, but that didn’t work either. We’re almost at the end of the part of the journal they gave us.

“I cannot break this woman down. The last possibility I can think of is to make her weak. I shall starve her. If she’s weak in body, she’ll be weak in spirit too.”

“What a vile creature,” Wilson growled.

“Her last two entries now,” Nadine said.

“She is very weak, my chief disciple tells me. It is time. I will take Helene with me. I do not want to take chances.”

“I assume Helene is the chief disciple,” Wilson observed.

Nadine nodded. “The last entry is about two weeks later.

“I am home now. She is dead. I am not sorry for her but for me, for my loss of such a powerful possible ally. After the last encounter and while I was still in hospital, Helene reported to me that David was very

ill and failing. I ordered that she be given no aid. That *femèl chen* caused me a heart problem. Doctor said that it was caused by extreme emotional shock. I now need implanted gadget to regulate heart. *Modi*. I must continue the search for another strong *manbo*. I can sense that there are still ones to be found.

“And the excerpt ends,” Nadine said. “There’s a note at the end saying that the rest of her journal isn’t narrative. It’s just lists of people, records of her employees, properties, and government people who she recruited for her takeover attempt.”

“Ah. So nothing about her search for you—that kind of info.”

Nadine shook her head. “Not in here. Maybe she did write something, and maybe it had political material they wanted to keep secret.”

“Right,” Wilson said. “That could be.”

Nadine looked at Tamara. “When we were in that little prison building, you told the guy that you could sense something of *Manman*’s spirit in that room,” she said.

“Yeah. Very faint. If *Granmanman* hadn’t been part of me that day, I never would have noticed.”

“How does that work?” Wilson wondered.

“I’m not sure,” Tamara told him. “She must have spent a long time in that room. There was a bare mattress in there and it must have retained her scent, I suppose. I believe that I’m sensitive to some kinds of scents—pheromones most likely. Maybe that was how I could sense her. Like I told that guy, some people can sense smells long after someone left an area. Also, tracking dogs or drug-sniffing dogs can pick up very faint scents—better than any portable equipment can, I think.

“Beauford’s told me about neuroreceptors and how sensitive they are, especially the ones in the brain. They can fire the nerve cell if just a single molecule binds to the receptor. I learned that the olfactory nerves are virtually part of the brain itself; the nerve fibers from the olfactory tract of the brain pass through a spongy area of bone at the top of the nasal cavity—most of the olfactory nerve fibers are only about an inch or less long and are directly connected to that part of the brain.

“The other thing is that the olfactory tract is really ancient in animal evolution—it’s many millions of years old. The olfactory system is part of the brain’s limbic system; that’s the part of the brain that controls emotion and memory. And remember that I sense emotions as if they are tastes. Tastes and smells are very close in perception. We already know that lots of people can unconsciously tell if someone is scared because they can sense a pheromone or something in their sweat. Lots of living things communicate by scent—even fish and plants—so why not humans? So maybe—it’s a possibility—the brain’s emotional system generates and receives something like pheromones, and I’m sensitive to that? And that’s what I’m tasting—or smelling? This is why I’m so interested in brain research and I think that the MRI is an important tool for that.”

“I do recall the conversation we had with Beauford when he told us about that kid who confessed to being a sexual predator,” Wilson told her. “He did say that parts of the brain aren’t fully understood.”

“They aren’t,” Tamara agreed. “Now I have two areas to research. The first was the electrical fields that the body produces and if there is any structure in the brain that can detect those fields. Now the second one is... chemical? Sure, pheromones are chemicals... I need to read more about that.”

Mom and Dad looked at each other. Then Wilson winked. “Honey, just give her a book. Then we’ll see her surface in a month or two.”



They both laughed.

~~~~~

The Alexandres left Henri in charge of getting Nadine's artefacts in Vanessa's compound packed for shipment to Miami. In addition to the legal release of her goods, Nadine had also gotten a Haitian government release for the export of the items, saying that they were personal possessions associated with her clergy status, in case U.S. Customs would want to block their import or seek to apply a duty charge. Wilson stopped at a Haitian bank and arranged for the international transfer of the payment from Vanessa's estate from the government. When those funds were released and deposited with the bank, they would be automatically be transferred to the Alexandres' Miami bank account.

The following day, after a round of farewells to all of their friends and Henri's family, the Alexandres prepared to leave Haiti to return home.

## Chapter 29 - University

### *Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland: two months later*

Tamara was halfway through her first semester. This was nothing like high school; even her attending college classes while in high school didn't prepare her for the intensity of full-time college life. She was indeed living in one of the freshman dorms, as Jill had told her she would. But she didn't much care for her roommate.

Beverly—she wanted to be called “Bev”—turned out to be a clueless, stuck-up party girl. She also tried calling Tamara “Tammy” on a number of occasions, but after Tamara had corrected her each time with no apparent success, Bev found that the next time that she said “Tammy,” she felt ill. Bev must have been a slow learner, Tamara thought, because it took a whole week of episodes of her being ill before Bev finally figured it out—don't say “Tammy.”

Tamara wondered how the girl had been admitted, since she was so clueless about simple things and seemed to care little for her classes. At least Tamara had never seen her studying.

*The JHU roommate-matching program needs a CPU transplant*, Tamara thought one evening as she was trying to study and Bev was blasting her music. Tamara sighed and wafted a tiny cloud of light pink taste with faint streaks of brown at Bev, who turned pale and rushed to the bathroom.

*This was the fourth time I needed to do that*, Tamara muttered as she turned the music down. *It's too cold to walk to the library. I'm missing Miami already. They say it **snows** here, too. Not looking forward to that...*

Then she thought of what Emma had told her about Alaska and the Program (not happening) there. She shivered—both at the thought of the cold there and Emma's attempts to escape the Program's clutches.

Thinking of Emma, Tamara was getting impatient. Emma had promised her that she'd allow her to begin working with her in the spring semester.

“Tamara, dear, it's way too much to jump into a regular research load before you've even gotten a few courses under your belt whilst living in a uni environment, innit,” she had admonished Tamara after she had complained about being put off. “Believe me, you'll understand after a few weeks of classes, won't you.”

Now Tamara *did* understand. But living with Bev certainly wasn't helping any. And apart from the occasional nausea treatments, Tamara didn't want to use her abilities to influence Bev any further.

*Well, I can only hope that Bev decides to go out for a sorority or something next semester*, Tamara mused. *That might keep her busy and away from here more.*

Although Emma wouldn't allow Tamara to begin on a research project of her own yet, Tamara did have weekly meetings with her, and she learned that Emma was involved in a very interesting battery research project. Emma had funded a research center at Cambridge University to develop new battery technologies and was herself currently working on the quantum theory of electrical energy storage in different substrates, especially using semiconductor-infused polymers as the substrate for embedding molecular lattices which could stably store energy.

At their last meeting before final exams, Emma asked her, “Tamara, I spoke to your profs and they all said that you're doing just fine in your classes; as well, your marks remain excellent as is your participation in class. How do you regard your fitting in at uni socially?”

“Oh, thanks, Emma. I knew my grades were fine. I wasn't sure about the class participation since I tend to be outspoken. If someone says something that's not right...”

“Stop, stop,” Emma laughed. “I do swear, you're just like me. I did the same thing—only stopped when it got

me branded by teachers as a troublemaker. Your professors aren't anything like my teachers were, are they. They say your participation is just fine."

Tamara nodded. "Oh, good. Since they never said anything to me, I never knew."

"And socially? You haven't been holed up in a library cubicle this entire autumn, have you?"

"Um, not really. You know, before coming here, I divided my days between high school, college classes, and the med school MRI lab. So I'm really used to being very busy all the time. So if I tell you the truth, please don't be mad at me, okay?"

Emma grinned at her. "What are you confessing to? Overworking yourself?"

"I don't think learning new stuff is overworking. So, this summer, my family went back to Haiti to close out their affairs there, and I had a whole new insight about my sensory abilities. It occurred to me that animals—lots of plants too—can communicate by scent, that is, chemically. We already know about how nerve cells transmit information; from neuron to neuron, it's chemical too. Neurotransmitters are released at the synapses, from axon to dendrite.

"But there's also a huge electrical component in information transfer in the nerve cell; those are the signals that the EEG can detect. At the med school lab, working with Dr Beauford—he's a neurosurgeon but also has a doctorate in neuroscience—I learned about how nerve cells work. The cells have three parts: the dendrite, the soma, and the axon. The synapses are at the distal end of the axon, and glial and Schwann cells insulate the axons—the myelin. The oligodendrocytes are myelin precursors.

"So this information about neurons triggered my affinity for electrical circuits; I've seen how the nerve cell works like an electrical circuit component. While I was working in Beauford's lab, I came across a new study about how nerve cells work. The key seems to be in the dendrites, which appear to work very much like transistors—switches—and perform binary operations with electrical signals. They receive input from the synapses of axons of other neurons and transmit those signals to other nerve cells and so on to the body's muscles and other body functions, like the endocrine system's secretory cells."

Emma grinned at the lecture. "So all this is in favor of...? It's fascinating, I'm sure."

Tamara gave her a grin back. "So what I was coming to is my insight. I think that the brain can send signals externally in two ways: electrical and chemical. And my abilities are probably based on both ways. So my current extra-curricular research is on neurological stimulation of the endocrine system and the chemicals produced. I've been reading articles in the medical literature on those topics."

Emma sat back and exhaled. "And here I was convinced that keeping you out of the lab would make you concentrate on your class studies. I was wrong again; you're truly too much like me, Tamara. So, back to my original question... any social life?"

Tamara grinned. "Well, in the one free hour I have in each week... Seriously. I do socialize. I get together with some of the Clarke scholars quite a bit; Jill and I hit it off so we meet several times a week. I like Terence and we do study sessions together sometimes. I help him with French since I'm a native speaker and we're both very advanced in math so we're taking the Fourier Analysis class and have a study group for that. I also like Peter and we have lunch together several times a week too."

"Which Peter?"

"Oh right. I forgot that there's a Peter in the junior class. No, Peter Winsberg, my freshman counterpart. The other full Clarke scholar. He's dual majoring in math and Double E and is pretty cool too. We talk about electrical engineering a lot," she giggled.

“Ah, so finally something we differ on,” Emma chuckled. “When I was in uni, I didn’t socialize much, and never with boys. Of course, I completed uni and high school at the same time, didn’t I. I didn’t do much in the social department. Now then. It would appear that you can handle working on a project in addition to your classes...”

She stopped as Tamara exclaimed, “Yessss!”

“... so I’m going to be a taskmaster here and first have you work under my direction. When I’m convinced you can be independent, we’ll discuss the projects I know you’re keen to start on. But good research requires good discipline, clear planning, and reasonable goals, doesn’t it. One doesn’t accomplish much if one just ‘tries stuff.’” She made finger quotes. “Agreed?”

“Oh sure,” Tamara was fairly bouncing in her seat. “I suppose, since you’re doing that theoretical battery work, you want me to try to adapt your ideas into physical structures.”

“That’s precisely it. That will give me the opportunity to see how you are able to discipline your scientific curiosity and as well, give me early indications that show if my ideas have merit. Okay, my dear, I need to hustle off to my Intro to Physics class now, so I’ll see you after the holiday. I needn’t tell you to do well on your finals. Have a wonderful winter break and come back ready for some hard work,” Emma grinned as they hugged.

Emma’s introductory physics class was still one of the most popular science courses at Hopkins; the students loved Emma and she loved teaching them.

### **Late December**

Tamara flew home for the holidays. She was happy to be warm again; the cold gray days of the late-fall mid-Atlantic coast were somewhat depressing, so seeing the sun when she left the airport cheered her right up. She was glad to be heading home for the end-of-the-year celebrations. She was even happier when her dad told her that the kidnapping case was “mostly closed.” Those responsible were now behind bars, but the FBI couldn’t give out any more details other than to say that Tamara was no longer a target.

Tamara recalled the Christmases when she was a child in Haiti—the greetings of “*jwaye Nwèl*” and “*joyeux Noël*,” “happy Christmas” in *Kreyòl* and French, which rang out everywhere on the local streets during the weeks before the holiday. She recalled how, as a child on Christmas Eve, she would clean her shoes, fill them with straw, and place them under the scraggly pine-tree branch that they called a Christmas “tree” next to the nativity scene there, in the hopes that *Tonton Nwèl*, “Uncle Noel”—Santa, would take the straw out and bless her by filling her shoes with gifts.

Some of those customs changed somewhat in her family when they came to America. There was still a tree—far more robust than the pine branches they could get in Haiti. The happy Christmas greetings still abounded everywhere in Little Haiti, but the commercialization of the holiday led to the giving of more substantial gifts than a little candy or a small doll left in or next to her shoes. Or in Tamara’s case, a book.

Now that she was at home, she looked forward to her family’s traditional service in the *ounfò*, which was followed by the Christmas “baths,” a spiritual cleansing of her body of all of the bad experiences she had experienced during the past year. Wearing loose-fitting white garments, the *vodouisants* silently poured the cleansing waters of her mom’s family recipe over themselves to wash away any evil traces that might remain on them. After this was done, they would silently make a brief visit to a crossroads—a nearby street corner—carrying a symbolic offering together with the unused bath preparation materials, and leave those remains behind. Then they would return home, taking a different route—by not retracing their steps, the evil wouldn’t follow them home.

There was also a very late dinner on Christmas eve, which began after the religious observances. Called

“*réveillon*,” from the French *réveil*, meaning “awakening,” since in Haiti (and in the diaspora too), the meal frequently lasts until dawn; in Tamara’s family it usually consisted of fried chicken with rice and beans and didn’t last all night.

Christmas day was a day of rest and the Alexandres typically had an open house for friends and congregation members to visit. Tamara always loved this season and was happy to be home to enjoy it.

Two days after Christmas, Tamara checked her student account on the Johns Hopkins website to see if her grades had been posted yet. They had been, and she was happy to see that she had preserved her “A”s in all her classes. That meant that Emma was sure to let her begin working in the lab for the spring semester.

Tamara decided to see if Beauford was at work, but when she called his office, she learned that he was on a two-week vacation with his family, so she’d have to put off seeing him until at least spring break, since she had to return to school right after New Year’s Day. Even though the spring semester didn’t begin until the last week of January, Tamara was scheduled to return for the school’s “Intersession,” a three-week period when the university offered specialized classes or allowed students to do research projects for credit. Emma had told her to register for two credits of research during Intersession.

### ***Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore: two months later: March***

March was a sloppy month in the mid-Atlantic states, Tamara decided. At least this year it was. After two days of intermittent snow, the weather turned to freezing rain and the snow on the streets and walks turned into slush—a new experience for Tamara—as was her first experience with snow in late January, when her spring semester had begun. That’s when she learned that her favorite roommate, Bev, was not returning to school. It seemed that majoring in parties wasn’t a very good idea for maintaining one’s grades. By March, Tamara was still lacking a roommate, which was just fine with her. A number of fellow students in her dorm wing also found themselves without a roommate; that’s more kids who didn’t take school seriously, Tamara figured.

She was having a wonderful time in school this spring. Her classes were very interesting and the profs were decent. Best yet, Emma had set her up in her lab in the Physics-Astronomy Building. So far, Emma had her working with the materials that Emma had brought from her lab at the APL which they had used during the Intersession period: polymer sheets of varying thickness doped with Emma’s superconducting formula. The thinnest of these sheets, ones only a hundred micrometers thick, were used to make superconducting wires by rolling them into tight cylinders and heat-annealing them to set the inclusions’ lattice structure.

Emma’s current experiment, which Tamara was performing, was to cut the polymer sheets into small squares of a few centimeters’ size and stack them, alternating with thin wedges of silicon semiconductor material, like a sandwich, and then tightly compressing the resulting stack of polymer squares. Some of Emma’s calculations showed that this configuration had energy-storage possibilities. They nicknamed this setup a “pancake.”

A week before spring break, Tamara stopped off at Emma’s office.

“Emma,” she said as she knocked, “I’ve been getting only a tiny response with the latest pancake version. I looked at your math and don’t see why these designs aren’t working. We should get *something*. What if we try amplifying the electron flow? Maybe this thing needs a kick-start, like with using SETs? That’ll move the electrons since they’ll flow with no voltage applied.”

“Hmm. It shouldn’t need that, but why not try,” Emma mused. “Well, you’re the electronic circuit nerd. Try a setup like that and see if the pancake responds.”

Back in the lab, Tamara assembled a small charging circuit using a single SET with its superconducting gate connected to a small power source, a 10 ampere-hour, 12 volt sealed lead-acid battery. She wired the SET’s sink, the device’s output, to the latest pancake device—then had an idea. Recalling how capacitors are made,

instead of using her latest square pancake, she took a very thin sheet of the superconducting film she was using to make the pancakes, covered it with an equally thin sheet of dielectric material, and rolled them up into a tight 50 x 8 millimeter cylinder, slipped it into a heat-shrink tube, and then shrunk it with a heat gun.

She connected the resulting tubular device to the output of the SET circuit and tested that configuration and was delighted to see that her design could indeed store energy and the measured values closely matched Emma's calculations. How much energy it stored, and whether the device could produce any, would have to wait until tomorrow, since it was late now, she suddenly realized. She pulled the connecting wires off the battery and coiled up the tubular circuit assembly's connecting wires, putting the little cylinder and its wires into a plastic shoe box. Then she slipped the battery into its case, put it away, shut down the test equipment, stowing that away, and put the rest of the items she had used back into their proper drawers.

When she checked Emma's office on her way out, her door was locked; she was gone for the day.

*Oh well, I'll talk to her tomorrow,* Tamara thought.

Early the next morning, Tamara's phone rang. It was a worried Emma.

"Tamara, are you okay? I got a call that my lab was damaged last night."

Tamara shook her head to clear it.

"Oh, wow. No, I'm fine. What happened? When I finished working on the pancake yesterday and closed up, I put everything away. Everything was okay then."

"I'm heading in now. The message was that there was some kind of explosion."

"Jeez. Explosion? What could cause that?" Tamara wondered aloud. "I'll go there and meet you. What time will you get here?"

"In twenty minutes. I'll see you then. Be careful."

It was just past 6:30 a.m. Tamara got dressed. It was a short walk to the Physics Building, which was surrounded by fire equipment. She walked up to a firefighter who was helping another put on a respirator and air tank.

"What happened in the lab?" she asked.

"One sec, kid," the man said. "Oh... You know it was a lab?"

"Yes. Got a call from my prof; she said it was in her lab."

The guy turned and called, "Hey, Lieutenant! Gal here says she knows something!"

Then the one with the respirator hustled back into the building.

The lieutenant jogged over.

"Miss, what was in that lab?" he asked.

"Physics stuff," she answered. "Electronics, test equipment, wires, batteries..."

"Hold it. What kind of batteries?"

"A few small sealed lead-acid ones, up to ten amp-hours..."

"Were they connected to anything?"

"No. All put away. I used one yesterday and put it back in its storage box when I finished. What happened in

there?”

Emma came running up.

“One sec,” Tamara said, pointing to Emma. “She’s the prof in charge. Dr Clarke.”

The lieutenant turned to her. “Doctor, do you know how an explosion happened in that lab?”

“I’m totally mystified, so no,” she answered. “Tamara, explain what you were doing before you left yesterday. You were working so intently I didn’t want to disturb you when I left for the day.”

Tamara explained how she had cleaned up when she finished, and then said, “Oh! Right, using the SET did work, Emma. I did the readings and got the expected results. I, um, changed the accumulator configuration a little, too.”

“Well, that’s good news, but details’ll need to wait, won’t it. What’s damaged?” she asked the lieutenant.

“I didn’t go in because of toxic fumes,” he replied. “No fire, no smoke. Just some nasty-smelling fumes. They eventually set off a smoke detector, but the explosion was maybe about an hour before that, apparently. Right in the middle of that big thunderstorm we were having then, I’m guessing. Part of a lab bench was wrecked. I sent a guy with a respirator in to check... ah, here he comes.”

“Hey, Lieutenant,” the firefighter said as he took off the respirator. “The blast took out the top of a bench and damaged the cabinets around it. The ventilation’s sucked out almost all the fumes but I did get an air sample. No traces of any metallic projectiles or container fragments like you’d see with a bomb—if a bomb exploded, you’d expect to see fragments of its container leave impact marks on nearby surfaces. Nada. But I did find a bunch of wires and a shredded plastic-like material in the mess.”

“Which bench was it?” Emma asked.

“Middle. Near the end with the fume hood,” was the answer.

“That’s where I was working,” Tamara said, in shock.

Emma looked at her. “You said you put the equipment and battery away. What did you leave out?”

“The experiment box—the plastic shoebox with the accumulator I was working on, and the SET circuit. I coiled up the wires and put that stuff in the shoebox... Oh! Oh my. You said there was a thunderstorm last night?” she asked the lieutenant.

“Yeah, a big one. Came very close.”

“Shit... sorry. I might have an idea what it was, then.” She looked at Emma. “Sorry...”

Emma put her hand on Tamara’s arm.

“No, don’t be. You thought of something important.”

“Yeah. But I broke a rule. ‘Don’t change more than one experimental parameter.’ I changed two; ‘cause I had a sudden thought.”

The lieutenant was looking very confused.

“Miss, if you can explain it in plain English...” he began.

“Okay,” Tamara said. “I think what happened is that the accumulator must have blown up...”

“Just what is this accumulator?” the lieutenant interrupted.

“Sheets of polymer that contain a superconducting recipe, designed to hold, and hopefully, generate electricity,” Tamara told him.

She turned to Emma.

“I’m guessing that when I put it away, the SET circuit must have kept the accumulator circuit alive. Then the wire coil would act like a huge antenna, letting the accumulator keep charging; it must have sucked up all the free electrons in the area that the storm was producing. For the size of the sheets I used, the energy threshold limit would be... um, let me think... something like a megajoule. There must have been a big impurity I accidentally introduced somehow in rolling up the accumulator; that caused a local breakdown in the dielectric and a short happened, releasing all that energy.”

“Bloody hell,” Emma breathed, “That’s almost 300 watt-hours. In such a tiny package?”

Tamara nodded. Emma hugged her.

“I’m gobsmacked,” Emma continued. “You have any idea what this means?”

“It’s the Energy Bunny on steroids?” Tamara giggled. “Yeah. It’s big. All based on your calcs, too,” said Tamara.

“And your design intuitions, dear,” said Emma.

“Um,” said the lieutenant.

“We need to get back with the leftenant,” Emma told her. “We’ll talk later.”

The lieutenant blinked. “Leften...? Ah, you’re a Brit. So that was an experiment gone wrong?”

“Actually the opposite. The device did precisely what it was designed to do. But electrical storms weren’t considered in finalizing the design. This was a case of too much power with nowhere to go, innit. Is it safe to go in there now?”

A small crowd had gathered outside the building; Emma saw that her chairman, Dr Montern, had arrived, so she got his attention and then quickly told him to keep the crowd away from her lab but everything was under control. Knowing Emma, he knew not to ask further questions just now.

The lieutenant led them into the building, dodging around the fire crew who were carrying their equipment out of the building and rolling their hoses back up. With a sad expression, Emma looked at the lab door, which the fire crew had broken to get into the room.

“Sorry for the damage, but...” the lieutenant began.

“Your blokes had to get in. I know. It can be fixed. Tamara, show the gentleman what you think happened.”

Tamara looked around at what was left of her bench. She was amazed at the power that her tiny accumulator had unleashed. She looked at the door of the cabinet over the bench to the right of the damaged benchtop; it was slightly bent but it opened. Fortunately that cabinet was out of the blast’s main path since the superconductor polymer sheets were stored in there. She carefully took out a sheet; they were somewhat fragile.

“This is what was inside the accumulator,” she began. “I rolled it up with a dielectric—a semiconductor sheet—into a tube, like you make a jellyroll. The wires from the anode and cathode points stuck out the ends. The wires were attached to a tiny circuit with a transistor device; that circuit worked like a switching amplifier. I used all superconducting components. Then I tested it and confirmed that the accumulator’s electrical characteristics matched Dr Clarke’s calcs. Finally, before I left the lab, I disconnected it from the battery, coiled up its power leads, and put it into one of those plastic shoeboxes...” she pointed to a small stack of them on



another bench, “and set it on the bench there.

“I had no idea that those power leads could act like an antenna, though, but in retrospect, the circuit I made to charge the accumulator closely resembles the circuits that power RFID chips. I have lots of experience with those,” she chuckled softly. “What must have happened, since there’s no trace left of the accumulator I built, is that the energy—the electrons carrying the atmospheric charges present in thunderstorms, were collected by the wire leads, which worked like an antenna, and the circuit sent the power it collected into the accumulator. What happens if you try to put more air into a balloon than it can hold?”

The lieutenant nodded. “It goes bang. But how do the electrons get into the antenna?”

“Think of how TVs worked before cable—or how your car radio works. The antennas pick up very tiny signals from the air. Then a circuit attached to the antenna boosts, or amplifies, the signal so it can be turned into sound or pictures. My circuit worked like that. It appears that it’s a very efficient circuit to be able to store so much power so quickly, though.”

“Okay, that all makes sense. No need to get the fire investigators out for this case. I’m calling it an unusual instance of overloaded equipment not resulting from misuse or improper installation. Does that sound okay?”

Tamara and Emma looked at each other and nodded.

Emma reached out to shake the lieutenant’s hand.

“A good way to word it. And thank you for being patient with our explanation. We had to work our own way through what happened, as well.”

As he said goodbye and left, Montern came in and looked around.

“Emma, you’re a solid-state specialist, not a high-energy one. Making big explosions isn’t in your job description,” he joked. “What the devil happened here, anyway? This much damage took a huge amount of energy.”

Emma nodded. “Tamara figured it to be about a million joules, actually.”

“Like a lighting strike?”

“Not that much. About a tenth of the energy of the smallest ones,” Tamara demurred. “I think when the stored charge broke down the dielectric’s resistance, the accumulator probably discharged in about 10 milliseconds. That released maybe 100 megawatts of power. That must be the ultimate storage capacity of that particular design.”

Montern looked at her in shock.

Emma chuckled. “Chet, I told you that we should grab her when she applied here, didn’t I. Tamara’s going to revolutionize power storage. Forget batteries... no, don’t do that. I think batteries will be her next achievement, the way she comes up with ideas. Oh, Tamara... we Brits can use the words ‘battery’ or ‘accumulator’ interchangeably.”

Meanwhile a crowd was beginning to gather at the door, so Montern walked over to the door, briefly explained that the electrical storm had caused the damage (*Not a lie*, Tamara thought), no one was hurt, and they should move along. Then he called the facility maintenance office to tell them that the door needed replacement. The frame was undamaged. They promised that the repair would get done within a few hours; the door was a standard size and was in their stock. They sent someone over to clean up the damage and close the opening temporarily.

Then Emma took Tamara to her office where they sat together on the couch.

“Two design mods, you said you made,” Emma grinned at her. “Do tell—I think I already know the answer.”

“Yeah. I mentioned part of what I had done. Building the SET array to control the accumulator’s charging was the first thing, but then I visualized a far more efficient configuration...”

Emma laughed, “Einstein. Quote, ‘A new idea comes suddenly and in a rather intuitive way.’ Unquote. Right?”

Tamara blushed. “It was so obvious...”

“Well, of course it was. A paraphrase from the great master of physics: ‘... intuition works because it’s helped by one’s sense of the underlying physical order.’ Einstein said something like that too.”

“Okay, stop embarrassing me. I thought of how cylindrical formations facilitate electron storage, you know how that has to do with electromagnetic theory, electrical field formation, magnetic flux, battery design... well, I thought forming the accumulator into a cylinder of interleaving layers of dielectric and superconducting films—just like the way capacitors are constructed—would improve its efficiency.”

“Oh, it certainly did.”

“But I can’t understand how it could accumulate such a tremendous potential. The amount of energy charge—in electron volts—is far greater than the atoms in the lattice structure should possibly allow.”

“That’s why physics is so fascinating. When experimentalists, like you, come across something different, then we theoreticians need to come up with new physics to explain it. Look at what happened a few years back when particle physicists got a really accurate measurement of the mass of the W boson. That’s the elementary particle which carries the weak force; it’s responsible for nuclear processes—what happens in the fusion reactions in the stars. So, a large group of particle physicists—they only hang out in large groups because their equipment is so huge and expensive—made a *really* accurate calculation of the W boson mass based on 4.2 million events over 26 years of measurements. Their calculated mass is within 0.01 percent error of the true value. However, it turned out that the mass they calculated differs from the value predicted by the Standard Model by a *huge* seven standard deviations. It’s very unlikely that their result is an error since so many checks and balances were involved in the work. That means either that there are more fundamental particles to discover or new physics must be developed to account for this disparity. I heartily agree with what the great physicist Wolfgang Pauli once said, ‘The best that most of us can hope to achieve in physics is simply to misunderstand at a deeper level.’

“So, let’s see your notebook; I want to look at the results of your measurements.”

### ***Mid-April***

When Tamara went home for the week’s spring break, she had a lot of things to discuss with Beauford and also with Tim. Much like Tamara, Tim had an innate feel for electronics too and Tamara wanted his impression of what she had discovered.

She also wanted Beauford’s advice about her ideas about how the body’s limbic system could mediate body secretory cells to produce signaling chemicals which were part of the pheromone class or even possibly a new class of biochemicals.

Tamara didn’t expect that both of their reactions would be one of surprise. Tim thought that the ways she thought of using superconducting materials in circuits were extremely creative, but he did give her some good pointers that he had learned from experience.

Beauford was quite familiar with the work being done on chemical signaling; he even pointed out to her an MIT article where researchers had deduced that the length of the dendrites in human brain nerve cells contributed to

what they called ‘distributed processing,’ because the longer dendrite length in human brain cells, as compared to smaller mammals, allowed each cell to be able to handle several binary operations independent of each other. Those researchers conjectured that the evolution of the longer dendrites was the major contribution to the development of human intelligence.

Beauford also gave her an update on the two school district guys whom she had “sentenced” to permanent nudity.

“You might be interested in the case of the two men who had an adverse reaction to clothes—you wanted to hear about that when it occurred,” he mentioned.

“Sure,” Tamara agreed. “Was there any change?”

“Their physicians convinced them to get psychological help. I heard about it—mainly because the cases are being written up for a journal paper. Cognitive behavioral therapy—CBT—was tried, and appears to be having a positive effect. Whatever happened to those two, it must have been a really strong emotional shock.”

Tamara answered, “I guess. I still remember them on the stage complaining about the heat, then stripping. So weird.”

That information led Tamara to consider what she had done to people over the past few years with her ability. Two, perhaps three, officials who had left their jobs because of her “suggestion”; a man had been driven insane from his own evil thoughts turned inward; several teachers had been embarrassed by involuntarily stripping (but that one was okay since they wanted to do that to the kids); a man had died of a congenital heart problem triggered by the stress she had helped cause; the case of those two school district officials (another pre-emptive move to protect kids); the kidnappers who were afflicted with panic attacks; and the prom jerks (they deserved what they got) ... but not Vanessa—that didn’t use her special ability. And quite a few staff members and teachers at her high school, who had followed her “suggestions” unknowingly.

*Does my doing what I did to those people make me feel bad? Tamara wondered. I need to think about that much more.*

When Tamara returned to school after her spring break, her mind was filled with those questions, plus a lot of new ideas.

## Chapter 30 - More Power to Her

### *Three Months Later*

It was now the end of May and Tamara's first college year was over. She had again done well in classes. It was an interesting experience for her to be one of the Clarke scholars to greet and host the next year's crop of new scholarship recipients. None were from Florida. And what she found most interesting was that none of these students came from schools where the Naked in School Program was running. It was, as Emma had told her once, for the students in those schools, "...it was as if they had begun taking stupid pills," referring to kids who had been graduated from the schools where the Program was being run. Although a few of the current Clarke scholars had been from schools where the Program had been running, she realized that they all had similar circumstances to Charlene and had been in special courses outside their high schools and had spent very little time in their schools.

Tamara felt that she should be very happy going home again, seeing familiar people and places, and enjoying the warmer weather, but something felt "off" to her. She didn't realize it, but she had already begun to psychologically separate her life from that of her parents. All of her interests, and all of her future plans, were now in Baltimore. Miami was of the past. Memories were of the past. She was now living in the future and had all kinds of ideas tumbling through her thoughts, each fighting for a share of her attention.

With a startled thought, she realized that it had been months since she had to use her special ability; even her premonition sense had been quiet.

*That's probably a good sign, she mused. But I miss the closeness of the lwa that I used to feel.*

She vowed to spend as much time in rituals in the *ounfò* that she could; advice and guidance from the *lwa* were always welcome.

Tamara had planned to spend only two weeks of her summer break at home; the rest was committed to working in Emma's lab. She would even be paid as a lab tech since she didn't need any more research credits—she had maxed out on the earned number. And back in late spring, Emma had hinted that she might even get a start on a research project for a master's degree in the fall.

"But it'll only be my sophomore year," Tamara had begun to object.

"I spoke to Dr Burger, your advisor, this morning. As of the end of semester, you'll have earned enough credits, plus transferred enough from your Florida schools, to be considered a finishing sophomore. She also showed me that your autumn schedule contains no class lower than a junior level. So the Physics Department considers you a rising junior at this point."

Tamara opened her mouth to say something but Emma continued.

"Hush. The lab work you've done so far clearly demonstrates your research skills. We see very few first-years at this school, despite it being one of the top ten in the world, who are already preparing not one, but two scholarly research papers. Your physics and maths knowledge equals that of any of the grad students in this department, doesn't it. A master's project is certainly appropriate for us to consider for you in the autumn."

### *Little Haiti, Miami: June*

Tamara got together with Linda soon after she got home and Linda invited her to her house to chat about their first college years. She was still dating Carlos.

"Say, girl," Linda said at one point, "the boys—Carlos and Jerome too—will be around after this weekend. Do you want to get together with them?"

“Why not. But not to do something lame like a movie or food court. That’s so high school.”

Linda chuckled. “True. Speaking of, have you visited Edison since you graduated?”

“Yeah, winter break last year. Saw Barelo, Leonard. A few teachers. I was there maybe a half hour at the end of the day.”

“I visited there in the spring. They had that assembly where college kids speak to the kids to tell them about college life. I was one of the speakers then.”

“Tamara nodded. “Yeah, I remember those. Nice you did that. Hear anything gossip-worthy?”

“One thing was how all the Edison kids are bummed that no spirits have visited the school.”

Tamara laughed. “It could be that there’s no nudity—I’m just guessing now.”

“Could be,” Linda grinned. “Barelo also thanked me for the guardian corps idea. When I said it was a group idea, she said, ‘But you were the one who got it organized, right?’ and I had to agree. She told me that it’s still working really good. And she told me that her job is so much better, not having to deal with school nudity, real or potential, anymore. And somehow, girl, about that, I have this feeling that you know way more than you let on, Miss Innocent.”

“If I don’t say anything, then I won’t be lying,” Tamara said with a wink.

“I *knew* it!” Linda exclaimed. “What...”

“Oops. Refer to last statement. I meant those words literally, girlfriend. I won’t say any more,” Tamara grinned. “In spy novels, the secret agent says, ‘If I told you, then I’d have to kill you.’”

“Not even a little hint?”

“Nope. Remember, I didn’t actually *say* I knew anything. Right?”

“Oh, you bitch. Stop teasing me.”

“Okay. Subject change. Let’s think of something to do with the boys.”

~~~~~

The boys convinced them to agree to go to Haulover Beach.

“Hey, we got hassled again at that Miami Beach park,” Carlos had said when Linda called him. “So Jerome and I left there and we went with his friends to Haulover; I stayed on the south end with some other guys who didn’t want to go to the nudie part. It’s really a nice beach.”

“So we can do that when we go Saturday? Not go to the nudists’ area?” Linda confirmed.

“Sure.”

Jerome had told them that he could drive there, so on Tuesday, Tamara went to Linda’s, where the boys picked them up.

Even though it was a weekday, the beach was quite busy; the south end of the beach was fairly full of people. They walked north until they reached an area that had a smaller crowd and spread out their blankets. It was a sunny day but there was a moderately stiff onshore breeze and the waves were rolling in strongly at this part of the beach. There were about a dozen surfers riding the waves here.

They were sitting on their blankets chatting when they heard a call, “Hey, Jerome!”

Jerome looked up. “Hey, it’s Rosa and Gerry,” he told the others. “They were classmates of mine in high school. Hi, girls!” he called to them.

They walked up. “Can we join you? Jeez, we had to walk a ways. It’s really crowded down there near the south parking areas.”

“Yeah, that’s why we’re up here too, but we have to share the waves with the surfer dudes,” Jerome told them. “Go pull up some sand to spread your blanket.”

After about an hour of chatting, the group took out the lunches they had packed and made a little feast, sharing around the extra food that they had brought. Then Linda and the other girls decided to try the water; the waves had settled down quite a bit. Carlos had wandered off to the restroom. Tamara was in the middle of an intense discussion with Jerome, who wanted to visit the nudist area and was trying to convince Tamara to join him.

“You don’t have to take your suit off at all,” he was telling her. “You’ll see how the people there are no different from anywhere else on the beach, except...”

“...yeah, that they’re naked,” Tamara finished for him.

“I take issue with that word ‘naked,’” Jerome said, shaking his head. “The proper word is ‘nude.’ ‘Naked’ has the connotation of vulnerability, defenselessness, and unprotected. ‘Nude’ is simply unclothed and implies something artsy or unencumbered. It’s a psychol...”

He was interrupted by a shout, “Stop that! Get away!”

It was Gerry, who was pushing away one of the surfers. There were only two surfers left and the two of them had started bothering the three girls, who turned and started hurrying away. The guys began following them; they were fairly husky and still wore their wet suits, which gave them a menacing look.

Tamara jumped up. “Wait here. Don’t follow me,” she ordered, and went straight to the two guys.

As she approached them, she gathered a bit of ochre taste and when she got to within twenty feet, she “pushed” it at them, as she called, “You guys! Did you just try to bother my friends?”

They stopped in their tracks, slightly confused; when they saw this new chick coming, they were just about to check her out. Tamara could feel the tastes of their emotions. They weren’t bitter-light-orange, which she knew was caused by predatory lust or something close; their tastes were pinkish-violet. That suddenly recalled Mr Evil—Leger’s taste, but theirs was a somewhat fainter version; but it still was one which told of an intent to harm. Tamara suddenly realized: These guys had raped a girl or girls in the past!

Tamara had stopped about eight feet away, close enough to look into their eyes. She “pushed” a greenish-brown taste with yellow streaks at them, increasing their confusion and adding some fear. The guys’ faces turned pale.

“You both will listen to me and follow my orders,” she commanded. She pointed to the blonde. “You! You’re Blondie.” She pointed to the black-haired one. “And you’re Blackie.”

She came closer to the blonde. “Blondie! Listen! Did you know that Blackie thinks you’re gay? I heard that he’s also screwing your mother,” she hissed at him.

Then she turned to the other. “Blackie! You know that Blondie has a hardon for you and wants your boy pussy? I saw him and your father leaving a motel last week; wanna bet that they were screwing?” she hissed at him.

They were standing there blinking in uncertainty at Tamara as she “pushed” a greenish-gray taste of compulsion at the two and spoke, so they could both hear, “You hate each other’s guts and now you finally realize that you always have. You’re gonna turn each other in for anything bad the other’s ever done. And don’t be alone with

each other, he might rape you too!”

She was done talking to them in about thirty seconds. Turning around, she walked away, back to her blanket. As she got back to the others, who were watching her and wondering what she was doing, she heard voices being raised behind her. The guys had begun shouting at each other; the teens couldn't hear their words, though. After a minute of shouting, the blonde one threw a punch and the fight began. Tamara and her group watched the fight, amazed at how fierce it had gotten. Within a minute of the brawl's start, a lifeguard ran up and tried separating the two, but staggered away when he was slugged.

He had a radio and had apparently used it, because within a few minutes, a beach buggy roared up with two Metro-Dade police officers. They tried to stop the fight too, but when one of the guys shoved an officer, the batons came out and the fighters were quickly subdued, cuffed, and hauled off.

“Goddamn, what the hell happened over there? Tamara?” Jerome asked, looking at her.

“I told them not to bother us,” Tamara told him. “Then one guy muttered something and the other one got really pissed. They started arguing when I walked away.”

Linda looked at her. “There's gotta be more than that...”

But Rosa and Gerry had latched onto Tamara and were thanking her for intervening. That's when Carlos returned. He had seen some of the commotion from afar.

“What'd I miss?” he asked as he came close.

Everyone began speaking at once, but he finally got the story straight. But Tamara had gotten lost in thought.

*What just happened? I tried to get them angry enough to rat out on each other, but they just went totally out of control. I used confusion and fear... but it was a little different this time. Hmm, 'just change a single variable.' I changed two of them...*

“Tamara? *Tamara!* You okay?” Jerome was asking, gently shaking her shoulder.

“What? Oh, sorry, I was thinking.” Then she had a thought, *Distract them.* “I just thought about how I took such a chance with those guys. I had no idea they could get so violent and I was thinking I was lucky that I walked away when I did.”

Jerome nodded and the girls agreed, but way more vocally.

“You need to look before leaping, girl,” Linda admonished her.

“I think I'm done here today,” Rosa said.

Gerry agreed. “That creep grabbed my shoulders,” she said. “I just wanna get home and try to forget this. A hot bath will help.”

They all packed up and began the trek to the parking area. The walk back was silent, which gave Tamara a chance to think. She made a tiny cloud of the tastes she had used and “pulled” it into herself. *Oofff!* She stumbled.

Jerome noticed and reached for her arm. “You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. Need to watch where I put my feet,” she grinned back.

*Shit!* She thought. *That was nasty...*

Suddenly a small part of the memory that she had been given by her *granmanman* popped into her

consciousness.

*Oh, hell, so that explains some things. I need to talk with Manman about this.*

The drive home was fairly subdued, but the two couples did agree to get together on the coming weekend. No beach though. They all agreed to go to a local waterpark.

~~~~~

When Nadine returned home later that afternoon, Tamara grabbed her.

“*Manman*, I learned a bit more about *Granmanman*’s abilities today,” she said with some excitement.

“What happened?” Nadine asked, concerned. “This can’t be good, I think.”

Tamara related what had happened with the surfer creeps.

“And I definitely ‘tasted’ the violence in them, so I wanted to make them confess. I didn’t want to ‘push’ a full Mr Evil at them, but I was rushing—I didn’t want to get my friends suspicious—so I changed the tastes a little. The guys started fighting then; they were really beating on each other. One even tried to slug a cop. When I tried to figure out what I had done, that’s when one of *Granmanman*’s memories surfaced. It was about what she had done to Vanessa in that last fight they had.

“I used a ‘fear’ taste on the surfer guys, but used it a little differently than I’ve done before. It turned out that it’s something like what *Granmanman* did with Vanessa. You know about the ‘fight or flight’ response that stress hormones produce?” Nadine nodded. “So *Granmanman* could do that. Turn on stress hormones, I mean. She did that to Vanessa and it overloaded her heart. Dr Beauford told me how that can happen and how it affects the heart. So what I did to those guys was that I must have turned on their... cortisol... production, big time. And I had given them some nasty suggestions about each other, so their fighting was the result.”

“That’s quite a story, sweetheart. Yes, I do see how you and *Manman* are similar; she would go to the aid of anyone she thought was defenseless, with no regard for herself. Like you do. You really need to control that impulse more, darling. You might not be able to always control what happens.”

“I know. But this time it was like I was almost *shoved* into it. I was on my feet and moving before I realized it—just had the chance to tell Jerome to stay behind.”

“Then you think the *lwa* were involved?”

Tamara nodded. “It felt like that.”

“It seems that they are never far from you, sweetheart. When you come to our rituals, everyone seems to have a better experience.”

“When I came home this week, I wanted to connect better. I think that I have. I asked for some advice but I don’t understand the thought that came in response.”

Nadine smiled. “That frequently happens; sometimes the *lwas*’ response is a riddle.”

“It was something like ‘Great steps come with small changes. Big changes come slowly.’ Is that advice, a prediction, or what?”

“It could actually be both,” Nadine told her. “I doubt that the *lwa* know much formal physics, but I believe they know how nature works. Perhaps the message is similar to what Emma’s told you, not to make too many changes all at once. Or it could refer to your personal life. Or both. When you listen to the *lwa*, you’re also listening to your own intuition. And it appears that you have an *excellent* intuition.”



“That makes sense, Mom. That really helped, too.”

“I’m glad. So are you enjoying your vacation—as brief as it is?” Nadine asked.

“Oh yeah. It’s cool seeing some friends from school and I even got a chance to see Sue and chat.”

“Oh, how are she and Dave? I haven’t spoken to them since they were here at Christmas.”

“They’re good. Sue told me that she liked tutoring me so much that she’s now doing it regularly. I told her that I had used the ideas that she had told me about from RFID technology in my energy-storage research. She got a thoughtful look and then told me that her former company had tried looking into that area but gave up after several years. She said I should keep up doing whatever I’m doing because it seems I get good ideas.”

Nadine grinned. “Your latest good ideas turned into several patents, so yes, your ideas are good.”

“Um, just applications at this point. It takes almost two years to get the actual patents. Oh, Emma’s Cambridge energy company is licensing them. That’s cool ‘cause it gives me a stake in her company now. And I’ll be beginning the work on the battery application of my discovery when I get back to Hopkins.”

Their discussion turned to other matters and the two began preparing dinner when Wilson came in. Then Tamara had to tell him about the day’s events.

All too soon, the time came for her to return to Baltimore.

### ***Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore: four months later: October***

Tamara had found that it was difficult to follow the “advice” she had been given by the *lwa* back during her summer vacation. As she had promised, Emma had given her approval for Tamara to begin on a master’s research project, an extension of her work in the spring on the charge accumulator. What was difficult for Tamara was taking her work in small steps, which was how she and her mother had interpreted the *lwas*’ “riddle.” Tamara, with her intuition, could “see” how a working configuration should look. But just building such a thing without taking some preliminary steps would violate the *lwas*’ valuable—and reasonable—advice.

This fall, Tamara was taking two senior courses in electrical engineering and one in physics taught by Emma, graduate quantum electrodynamics, plus her regular load of humanities and other electives. Since she wasn’t a math major and had completed all of the math courses required for a physics bachelor’s degree, she wasn’t taking a math course this year. Emma felt that Tamara should consider a dual major in physics and electrical engineering; she had made that recommendation early in Tamara’s first year.

Emma had joked with her then, “Hey, engineers can win the Nobel Prize too. Look at Jack Kilby. He’s an electrical engineer. Won the Prize for co-inventing the IC. And John Bardeen; he’s the only person in history to have won two Nobel Prizes in physics. His BS and MS degrees were in electrical engineering. Erm, going back a bit, there’s Paul Dirac, who graduated as an electrical engineer. See, engineers can be smart too!”

Tamara looked for something soft to throw at her. Then she told Emma that she’d consider the idea.

~~~~~

Tamara’s new research project was to design a device based on her cylindrical “pancake” design which could be made to store energy safely. A possible added feature was to figure out a way for it to generate energy electrochemically.

Tamara thought back to her work on the “pancakes” and her adaptation of that design—in the form she ultimately created, it worked, but was too dangerous to be used for any applications. Who wanted a battery that could explode violently if overcharged?

She thought back to the history of the development of the lithium-ion battery. The early ones contained no protection for overcharging, and they did indeed tend to explode if overcharged, or if they got too hot. They also had no protection against being deeply discharged. If this did happen, it wasn't dangerous, since the battery would become irreversibly damaged. But if one attempted to recharge such a damaged battery, then it could explode. So her battery design had to include safeties to avoid similar problems. And the safeties couldn't be something that could be bypassed either, for obvious reasons.

*I need to take small steps*, she reminded herself.

Tamara was seeing boys now, too. The other Clarke Scholar in the Physics and Astronomy department, Terence Dryer, had begun working in Emma's lab now. Emma had noticed his interest in her work on mesoscopic systems when he came to her, asking for advice on his idea for a design for a better detector for radiotelescopes using superconducting devices, so she took him on as a research assistant. Tamara started going out on a few dates with him, but she found that her interest in him was mostly as a good friend; they got along very well working together. He was extremely clever and quite funny too, but neither had romantic feelings for the other.

The other boy, Peter Winsberg, her counterpart "full" Clarke Scholar, was in one of her electrical engineering classes; it was on integrated microsystems and contained a lab. She and Peter wound up dating on many weekends and Tamara was surprised that she felt an attraction to him. He was quite shy, quiet, but incredibly smart and had a wicked sense of humor. Peter and Tamara had started seeing each other over lunch during the past spring term, but this term they had both joined a class study session and spent a lot of time together.

Tamara had finally decided to do the double major in electrical engineering which Emma had suggested; this would involve her taking all the courses required for an EE bachelor's degree. It would bring her back to her research "roots" in Haiti, she felt. But she didn't want the EE program to slow up her progress in the Physics Department. So she did the Tamara thing: she looked to see how she could test out of the required basic electrical engineering classes so she could immediately jump to junior class standing. So she embarked on a campaign to do just that.

Tamara later learned that when Emma heard about how Tamara had convinced the EE department's faculty that she was qualified to be a junior, Emma had gotten a big kick out of the news. It reminded her again of just how alike she and Tamara were.

### ***Six Months Earlier: May***

When Tamara had looked at the sophomore and junior EE course syllabi, she realized that she already knew everything in those courses; between her years of reading EE texts and Tim's work with her in the med school lab, she felt that taking those classes would be a waste of time. Time better spent doing research. So she asked Dr Burger, her Physics advisor, if she could somehow test out of them.

"Tamara, I know you've tested out of some classes, but the faculty of all of our engineering departments here are fairly reluctant about giving credit for subjects not learned in their Hopkins classes. Tell you what. I'll check with the Electrical and Computer Engineering department chair. The ECE department. As a Clarke Scholar, you've got much more 'cred' than any other student of your class standing. I'll let you know what she says."

The ECE department's decision? Testing out wasn't going to be a matter of simply taking several exams; the engineering faculty wanted to make her goal seriously difficult to achieve. So it was Tamara in a room with six professors, who fired questions at her, covering at least four sophomore and junior EE courses. She was asked to answer their questions and to solve the problems they posed on the fly, standing at the whiteboard and explaining her reasoning for each step.

Apparently they thought that she'd be intimidated by that approach and give up; this examination technique was used very effectively in the oral exam preparation of their doctoral candidates, in fact, and ensured that students

were *seriously* well prepared for their orals. But instead of being intimidated, it supercharged her. Tamara began to feel things happening in her head that she'd never experienced before: she found that somehow she could use part of her mind to calculate and solve a problem and another part to plan the problem solution strategy. It was a little disconcerting at first, but she quickly adapted and began working on the second problem.

When she started answering their third question, it occurred to her that one of her math professors back at the University of Miami could do the same thing. He mentioned his having that ability to her when she went to him with a problem; she had solved it in a completely different manner than he had taught. He assured her that her method was better but it was based on mathematics which wasn't taught until grad school. That's when they discussed their own learning backgrounds; Tamara's was basically self-taught.

Tamara pulled her thoughts back to the problem she was working; it was almost surreal how she could detach herself in that way. More than an hour after she had begun, the door opened and the department chairperson came in. Tamara was presenting the solution to the fourteenth problem she was given.

"I came in to see what's up," Dr Swarzman said. "You told me that you'd be done in twenty minutes, max."

One of the profs looked at her, then Tamara, who had paused in presenting her last solution.

Then he said, "I guess we were wrong, Sheila. Miss Alexandre really knows her theory cold and her practical engineering knowledge, while a bit unconventional, is excellent as well. She's worked every problem correctly, even solved a few ringers we threw in from some graduate courses."

One of the others chimed in. "I would have no problem recommending Miss Alexandre to be given junior engineering standing for this fall. I understand that the Physics Department is considering advancing her too. Although she's shown that she's competent in the theoretical aspects of the course work, I'd like to see her become familiar with a fuller range of engineering problems and, of course, do the labs too."

Tamara looked at him and nodded. "Yeah, I agree, doing that is important."

Swarzman looked at her and smiled. "It's good you agree with our undergrad advisor, Miss Alexandre. That's Dr Clifford McIntyre, and if you do a dual major with us, you'll be seeing a lot of him. Did anybody here introduce themselves to you when they began?"

Tamara shook her head.

Swarzman looked at her faculty members. "That might have gone too far with the intimidation factor, guys," she admonished them. Then to Tamara, "They wanted to do your assessment like an oral exam, you know, like with a doctoral candidate. Try to shake up the student. See if he or she is secure in their knowledge. I think it's really academic hazing," she grinned.

Another of the professors commented, "It's just a rite of passage, Sheila."

"All right then, people," Swarzman said. "Introduce yourselves properly now. Miss Alexandre will likely be one of your students during the next couple of years—if you're lucky," she chuckled.

~~~~~

When Emma had heard about Tamara's performance with the ECE faculty, she was amused and mentioned hearing about her "ordeal" to her at their next meeting.

"I did the same thing, Tamara. I had a similar 'ordeal,'" she chuckled, "with faculty from both the maths and physics departments when I wanted to start at my uni, to see if I really was prepared for uni classes at twelve or thirteen years old. Again, you seem to be following my own educational path. It's uncanny, isn't it." She laughed. "Okay, let's go over the last set of calcs I did on electron parity in that lattice structure your latest

polymer formed.”

***Back to Present; Four Months Later: February***

Tamara, Peter, and Terence were sitting around a table in the Student Center, talking about a misbehaving circuit that Terence was trying to get working properly. It was for a telescope detector array designed to operate in the 400 to 1,400 megahertz range and Peter had mentioned to Tamara, when she told him about Terence’s problem, that he might be able to help.

They had finished going over the design and Peter had finished making some suggestions. Then he yawned and stretched; suddenly he exclaimed “Ouch” and grabbed his side.

Tamara jumped up. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Damn. I stretched wrong; got a cramp.”

Terence stood up too. “Ah know all about cramps. Lemme look.”

He felt Peter’s flank, found a muscle knot, and began to knead it, massaging it out. After several minutes, Peter relaxed.

“That’s much better,” he said, rubbing his side. “Thanks,” and sat down again.

Two minutes later, a girl came hurrying up to their table behind Peter and put her hand on his shoulder, startling him.

“Hi, Peter—are you okay?” she asked.

“Oh! Hi, Barbara,” Peter said. “Yeah, it was just a cramp. Gone now. How come you’re here?”

“Passing by and saw you. Who’re your friends?”

“That’s Tamara, you know I’ve mentioned that we’re dating. And Terence; he’s in Physics too. Guys, Barbara’s my big sister. She’s a junior, majoring in psychology. Wanna join us, sis?”

“Sure, if I may. Nice finally meeting you, Tamara. My brother being good to you?” she grinned.

“Mostly,” Tamara joked. “But sometimes he needs a little prompting.”

Peter made an “I’ll talk to you later,” gesture at Tamara and grinned.

Terence looked at Barbara. “Hi, Ah’ve seen y’all around campus, Ah think.”

“Hey, I *know* I’ve seen *you* around,” Barbara said. “You’re a big guy; can’t miss you. You play football?”

“In high school. Ah was okay there, but not college-okay,” he answered. “Ah play physics much better.”

“He’s really good, too,” Tamara said. “Terence is also a Clarke Scholar. We work in the same lab.”

“So are y’all a techie like Peter?” Terence asked her. “Some psych research uses pretty cool equipment.”

“Not really. I find working with objects boring; people are so much more interesting. I want to go for a doctorate and go into clinical research.”

“Cool,” Terence said. “Tamara’s gonna start on some MRI research this term; she’s interested in brain function at the cellular level.”

Barbara looked at Tamara. “In physics? Isn’t that neuroscience?”

“It is,” Tamara told her, “but my idea is to develop detectors to get very high-resolution imaging, not to study

cell function. But I do have an interest in that part too, because the brain does produce electrical energy. I want to learn more about that energy and if it carries any information.”

The group spent a while chatting about their interests and then turned to events around campus. Finally, Terence asked Barbara that, if she wasn’t seeing anyone, if they could go on a date. Barbara looked a little surprised, but agreed.

“Usually I don’t go out with someone I just met,” she told him. “But somehow I feel it’s okay with you. Peter, he’s a good guy, right?”

Peter nodded. “Yeah. We met when we started as freshmen. Terence’s a good guy; he’s cool.”

*I think he’s cool too, Tamara thought. Maybe they’ll hit it off. They’re both nice people.*

~~~~~

The following week, Emma mentioned to Tamara that her Cambridge research group had determined that Tamara’s design of her original accumulator wasn’t very scalable. A larger accumulator didn’t hold a larger charge; the energy capacity began to break down at device sizes only about 10 percent larger in physical dimensions. Putting a multitude of small accumulators into a package was possible but it wasn’t economically feasible. But the design that Tamara had invented was a step in the right direction.

A small step.

## Chapter 31 - Natural Exposure

### *Early April*

It was two months later and Tamara was halfway through the special topics course on quantum electrodynamics taught by Emma and two other physics professors. She had already mastered classical electrodynamics; that was two years earlier. Her ECE courses were progressing nicely too and they gave her access to some engineering fabrication shops in the Engineering School. And through Emma, she would also have access to the shops at the APL in Laurel.

Her work on a battery design had gone through a number of revisions in how she planned to approach the problem. She realized that, although her great intuitive leap had indeed produced an unexpected result, one which needed some new physics to explain, it was too great a step and resulted in chasing up a blind alley. A new approach was needed, so she went back to the fundamentals.

She began with the same polymer sheets embedded with the superconducting formula as she had used before, and tested their electron flow characteristics in all physical configurations including cylindrical formations. She made layers of sheets, similar to the “pancakes,” and tested those in various configurations and noted how their electron flow dynamics were affected. These were small steps, but all of them could eventually lead to the structure she had visualized. In each step she made, however, she noticed how potential efficiencies could be increased and pitfalls avoided. As the end of the semester approached, when she met with Emma, she told Emma about the next design change she wanted to make. It would be a slightly larger step.

“Let me review what I’m up to now,” she told Emma. “I’ve already repeated a lot of this work; the final design should look similar in structure to lithium batteries but the electron flows work completely differently. So far, everything works okay when the parts are tested independently. I made several very small model systems that also work well, so I’m ready to try putting the components together in a full-sized device.”

Emma interrupted. “Using those polymer sheets you had the APL make?”

“Yeah, the tiny ones I made in the Double-E lab worked and when I doubled their size, they worked too. I told you that.”

“Yes, I know. But it’s tricky, micro-printing SETs like that,” Emma pointed out.

“Tell me about it. I got help figuring out that part. What I have now is basically a micro-porous film of polyvinylidene difluoride—PVdF—in which I’ve embedded an integrated circuit. It’s a layered matrix of thousands of SET circuits; each of those acts as a tiny amplifier to produce an increased electron flow through the device from its source to the sink. On a small scale, I showed you that a tiny model of that design could move energy—electrons—with high efficiency.

“Then, for the energy storage, I used the ‘pancake’ idea. I set up an overlay of the PVdF film with an electrically conductive polymer doped with the superconducting formula. I had done some tests, you remember, that shows that the superconducting recipe is awesome at stably retaining electrons. In your Nobel work, you showed how the Pauli exclusion principle can be violated under very limited cases and doesn’t conflict with the quantum field theory. That’s a function of the Cooper electron pairing that your recipe achieves, allowing superconducting current to flow, but also allows a huge number of electrons to pack the atomic lattice structure. To avoid wholesale violation of Pauli’s principle, the combined potential energy of those electrons is huge. Okay, don’t frown, I’ll stop the lecture. Getting back to the design.

“There’s only a tiny amount of chemical reaction in the battery that produces energy compared to its storage abilities, likely because of the limited need for electrolyte. The PVdF layer is not only the charge separator; it’s also an electron movement booster, carrying electrons from the low-energy part of the system to the higher

energy charge accumulator. So this design doesn't need an electrolyte. I've bypassed that by using pressure to squeeze the layers together and can observe good charge movement. It looks like this design can be scaled—much more than the accumulator I made that blew up. The overcharge prevention is built right into the PVdF layer. You saw the small-scale model of this design, but it was all spread out on the bench. The step I think I'm ready for is to try to package a full-sized version of it. The size of an AA battery, to start."

"Tamara, you've done a fantastic job already," Emma told her. "The way you solved the original problem—the Cambridge group missed out on the idea of backtracking, as I told you. You were right—that was a blind alley and full marks to you that you could see that. Where do you anticipate taking your design further? I know that you won't stop here."

"What I visualize, since this thing isn't a 'battery' in the true sense of the word, is to go back to the accumulator idea. A device to store energy, not make it. There's plenty of free energy around; we saw that from that original accumulator's explosion. I'm thinking that I can incorporate a receiver circuit into the new accumulator device similar to the circuit which powers RFID chips and connect it to an antenna which can be printed onto the outside label of the 'battery.' Doing that would allow the thing to recharge from environmental sources such as radio waves and the pervasive electric fields created by all of the wires that carry electricity, from power transmission lines to house electrical wiring.

"Going further, the device which the accumulator powers could itself include a circuit which allows its wiring to function as an additional antenna, allowing the device to be able to recharge the accumulator when it's not in use. So unless the accumulator got discharged very quickly, it could last a long time before needing regular recharging."

"Tamara, what you've accomplished goes way beyond a master's research project," Emma told her. "We need to plan what comes next, and get the Cambridge group involved too."

Tamara realized that her mother's interpretation of the *lwas'* advice was amazingly accurate. "Great steps come with small changes. Big changes come slowly," was the message that Tamara had gotten. Her mother had reworded that message into personal terms: proceed carefully in your work, and "When you listen to the *lwa*, you're also listening to your own intuition."

Tamara's invention would revolutionize batteries, as well as energy storage. It might also pave the way for improving current methods of wireless power transmission over a distance.

### ***One month later: late May***

Summer vacation was here again and Tamara was taking some time off from writing up her master's thesis work. Her research on the latest accumulator design had spawned two journal papers; the second coming when she was able to scale up the battery capacity and voltage delivered by connecting several cells in series and parallel configurations, while demonstrating that the device delivered an equal amount of energy from every connected cell when the battery was under load. Lithium-ion batteries could not do that.

This was only one of the many advantages her design had over the standard batteries: the use of superconducting components made the intra-cell and inter-cell resistances nonexistent. That allowed each cell to contribute exactly the same amount of energy when a load was connected, improving performance and minimizing cell degradation. Also, since electrochemical reactions played a minimal part of the battery's operation, electrode and electrolyte degradation would not occur. The battery even seemed to be tolerant of a wide range of operating temperatures and showed no noticeable drop-off in power delivery until a temperature of 52 degrees Celsius (126 Fahrenheit) was exceeded. As opposed to lithium-ion batteries, temperature gradients over a fairly large range in the accumulator did not affect its individual cell outputs. However, improving its high-temperature operation was an area where more research was needed.

Preprints of her and Emma's papers were gaining worldwide notice. Two of the engineers from her Cambridge battery group were now working at the APL on tweaking the design to try to achieve more efficiency and reduce production costs, while a division of the Cambridge group began work on scaling the device's design to meet manufacturing standards.

### *Little Haiti, Miami, late May*

Tamara had been in touch with Linda and Jerome during the past year. Linda wasn't dating Carlos any more and Jerome was now seriously dating a girl he had met in Gainesville and would be staying there this summer. Tamara met with Linda several times, mostly to shop and gossip a little, but the two girls found that since being out of high school, they had little in common. So Tamara gave up on her resolution not to work on her vacation and spent a large part of her time during those two weeks writing her master's thesis—it was mainly adapting her journal articles into a thesis form.

Since her thesis subject was mainly about electron transport over differential fields in mesoscopic systems, she intended that the degree would be in physics. She had several ideas for engineering papers on the same topics, mainly the methods for building the structures and selecting the proper materials which would allow for such electron transport. She'd speak to Dr McIntyre about that when she got back to Hopkins.

Another thing she'd get to do at Hopkins: Emma had given her the go-ahead to begin an independent project, working on her beloved MRI applications. Her work on the battery-accumulator project hadn't kept her from exploring a number of techniques and circuit devices which she could put to use in developing better detector sensitivity. She had also checked on current and past patents in that area and found that there were several new ones that had picked up on her multiple-source design. She'd met with her patent attorney early during her first week home in Miami to discuss those inventors' possible infringements.

Tamara also thought about her living arrangements during her JHU years. She had no problem with the school's two-year on-campus residency policy. Her only time having a roommate was during her first semester. No one had been assigned to her room in the following spring. For her second year, she had moved to an efficiency apartment in a dorm building across the street from the university campus itself. Now, as a senior, she had to move to a non-university accommodation and she found that there were a number of good choices available; she found a single-bedroom apartment in a close-by building that the lodging part of her scholarship would cover—not that she needed it. Her licensing income could have handled those costs easily.

Tamara's social life revolved around a small group, mostly the Clarke Scholars, since they were all very high achievers, preferred good conversation to parties, and tended to be introverted—they all inclined to be loners. Tamara's closest female friend at Hopkins, Jill, had just graduated and was off to MIT for graduate work. Terence Dryer was still working in Emma's lab too, and the two of them frequently helped each other out. Tamara's knowledge of using SETs in superconducting circuits was helping him with his own project.

Only one of the other Clarke scholars in her entering class had skipped a year like Tamara; her boyfriend Peter had entered with advanced standing achieved by taking Hopkins classes while in high school. Yes, she had elevated Peter to that status now since he had reciprocated her interest in him.

Peter was a local boy; he had grown up in Davidsonville, a small town west of Annapolis. His mother was a naval officer and held a permanent teaching professorship at the U.S. Naval Academy. She had a doctorate in physics and was a condensed matter specialist. His father was a mechanical engineer at the APL, the Applied Physics Lab in Laurel that Hopkins ran; Davidsonville wasn't far from Laurel and through his father, Peter had gotten some summer jobs there as a lab assistant. He had also taken advantage of Hopkins' summer programs for high school kids, so when he started at Hopkins as a freshman, he already had completed most of the engineering school's prerequisite courses.



Peter had also moved off campus like Tamara and was sharing a two-bedroom unit in the same building with his year-older sister, Barbara; her former roommate was in an international studies program and was spending her senior year abroad, so his sister needed a roommate and had persuaded Peter to take the vacant room.

When Tamara returned to campus in mid-June, she was ready for her new challenges.

***Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore: mid-June***

The problem was that the challenges weren't quite ready for Tamara, so when she got back to campus, she had nothing new to work on. The battery/accumulator work had now moved from Emma's Hopkins lab out to the APL and to Emma's Cambridge company, and a team of attorneys were hard at work finalizing the several patent applications Tamara's work had spawned. Emma had flown to England to review and participate in the testing of the company's pre-manufacturing accumulator samples. She'd be back early next week.

*Okay, I'll go see Dr McIntyre, Tamara resolved. I'll find out whether the ECE people have any publishing rules.*

She called his office; he wasn't in, so she left a message. He returned the call a few hours later.

"Hi, Tamara, what's up? Something about a journal article?" he asked.

"Yes sir. Emma and I have two pending articles on electron transport—it's on my battery accumulator design, the physics of how the energy is stored. But there are two possible papers I can make from my thesis. They're more suited for an engineering publication, because they're on design considerations, circuit printing on porous polymers, and using arrays of SETs to move electrons across potential barriers. Do I need an ECE sponsor or something to publish work like that?"

"That's impressive work you've done. I don't recall that any ECE faculty were involved with it. Were they?"

"I got some help when I was trying to print a microcircuit onto a polymer chip. I had designed and scaled it, but had a little problem with the materials I was using."

"Was this part of your class, then? The lab?"

"No... I learned how the equipment worked in the lab when I did the classes' lab projects. This was a side project. Emma wanted to have her APL group do the circuit printing, but I was doing the pilot device study for my master's project."

"I see. So unless Emma was involved in the engineering part of your project, it seems to me that you were working independently."

"I was," Tamara said.

"You really don't need our department's permission to publish your work, but if you'd like, I'd be delighted to read your article's final draft. I'll also be able to steer you to the right journal to submit it to. A thought: Does Emma know you were working on a separate paper?"

"Not for this work, specifically. She did tell me, back when she convinced me to do a double major, that I could publish any of my engineering work where she wasn't involved—being sure of the patent implications, of course."

"Oh, of course. And you have?"

"I think about a dozen lawyers from the university's patent office have spoken to me already. I'm good there. And I'll be telling Emma about doing this when she returns next week."

"Sounds good, Tamara. When do you think the draft will be ready?"

“Two papers, actually. If you don’t mind. They’re just about done, so tomorrow?”

He laughed. “Not wasting any time, are we? I’ll be in my office between 9 and 11 tomorrow. That okay?”

“See you then, bye,” Tamara responded.

She punched the disconnect icon on her cell.

~~~~~

When Emma returned the following week, Tamara greeted her with the news that she had two engineering papers in the final stages of preparation.

“Hi, Emma, how was the trip? How does the manufacturing process look? When will it be ready to begin production? And, oh, I have two new papers. I’m gonna submit them to the *Progress in Quantum Electronics* journal,” she breathlessly gushed in greeting her.

Emma grinned. “And the top o’ the mornin’ to you, too, Tamara. Excited, are we? The trip was... okay, I suppose. I don’t much like traveling. The process people are happy; things are working. They don’t have a start date yet. Two papers? How’s work on the thesis?”

“I finished the writing at home, Miami home. It’s ready for your review. While I was doing the ‘Materials and Methods’ and ‘Results’ sections, I pulled out some of that material and amplified it into a couple of journal articles. The hardest part was that I had to keep referring to the notes from the patent people.”

“Quite right. And watch the submission timing to protect the patent apps, but you know about that. Did you collaborate with any ECE faculty on those papers?”

“No, but Dr McIntyre read them and made a number of good suggestions.”

“Then you must credit him in the article. Not as an author...” Emma started.

“I did, I mentioned him in the acknowledgments. You’re there too,” Tamara said. “And the school, for providing the facilities, and the Clarke Scholars Foundation for my support.”

“You covered it all, sounds like. Okay then, let’s look at the thesis. You did consider my last set of suggestions?”

“Sure. Some of those were just about me explaining it better and not assume the reader has a similar background to me.”

“Exactly. Most of your final changes were in the ‘Discussion’ and ‘Results’ sections, correct? So let’s go there.”

They spent the next hour combing through Tamara’s thesis, putting it into final form.

“Looks ace now, Tamara,” Emma said when they were done. “Put it into the thesis template now and get me eight copies. I’ll give them to your committee and we’ll get the meeting set up.”

Because of the summer schedule and people’s travel, the committee meeting was set for the fall.

~~~~~

Several days later, Emma called Tamara.

“Hi there, Tamara, this isn’t a school call,” Emma said. “I’m having a little barbeque Saturday this weekend, 1 p.m., and I thought that I’d invite you and Terence out; bring your dates too. You’ve met Andrew but the others haven’t. Terence said he can come; can you?”

“Um, yes. Peter and I just planned to visit the Museum of Industry. We can go there another time. How do we get to your house—it’s in Laurel, right?”

“Yes. Terence said that Barbara has a car and they can bring you.”

“Cool. Okay, I’ll tell Peter.”

“We have a pool, so bring your cozy. We have towels and sunscreen, so bring whatever else you need, like a hat and sunglasses.”

On Saturday, Barbara and Terence picked up Tamara and Peter and drove out to Laurel.

“Ah’ve never been out to the APL,” Terence commented as they approached the town.

Barbara replied, “Peter and I know this area pretty well; Dad works there. Say, Emma’s house isn’t far from the APL, so let’s swing by there and you can see it.”

When they did, Terence commented, “Nice campus, looks just like a modern college—oh, there’s a telescope dish. Wow. Ah need to check out their facilities.”

“It is a big place,” Tamara commented. “Emma says they do defense research here too.”

“Yeah,” Peter told her. “They have this crazy high-level DoD security. When I worked here, they did a background check on me. Even though I was a kid.”

Then they drove to Emma’s neighborhood.

“This looks relatively new,” Barbara said as they drove into the community. “The homes are set way back, too. Nice.”

They found the address and drove up the long driveway.

“Must be over an acre,” Terence remarked. “Lots’a grass to mow.”

When they got to the house, Emma opened the door.

“Welcome. My in-laws are here, so I’ll introduce you, then show you around.”

She led them to a sunroom and out onto a deck. Several people stood up as they came out.

“You lot, these are my students, Tamara and Terence,” she pulled them forward, “and their friends, Barbara and Peter. That’s my mum-in-law, Gerry Marshall,” Gerry waved her hand, “and the big bloke is Andrew, my husband. The bigger bloke is Stuart, my dad-in-law.”

They all chorused “Hi,” and went around shaking hands.

Peter was looking around the pool. “Hey, do those dome sections cover the whole pool?”

Andrew grinned, “Sure do. Brill how the sections slide away on those tracks, innit? When it starts to get parky, we pull the sections out, lock them together, turn the heat on, and we can use the pool all winter.”

“Let me show you around, then,” Emma said, and led the group in for a tour of her house.

“I’m keen to have you to meet the whole family,” Emma said as they returned to the deck, “but my older sis-in-law Sam had a job thing come up. It’s rough when you’re a junior lawyer and a senior partner has an urgent research job.”

They walked over to a seating area near a fire pit on the side of the pool across from the house.

“Sam’s a lawyer?” Barbara asked.

“Indeed. She’s definitely picked the right career, too. What a mouth she has. Anyway, Andrew’s younger sister Abi should be here soon.”

They all chatted for several minutes; the Hopkins students telling a little about themselves. Stuart was a political-science professor at the university in Westphalia and Gerry was a middle-school teacher. Stuart had been, first, a Royal Marine unit commander and staff officer and then, the military attaché at the U.K.’s embassy in Washington. When he retired from military service, he was appointed as the head of the mission and served in that post for several years before retiring from his government service. The Marshalls had decided to stay in the States with their children.

There was a call from the house, “I’m heeere!” as a young woman bounded out the door onto the patio deck across the pool from Emma’s group. She was followed by a young man, hurrying to catch up with her.

Both were completely naked.

The girl looked across the pool at them and exclaimed, “Oops! Emma, you didn’t say...”

The man with her looked around in confusion.

Emma called out, “Blimey, sorry, forgot. No worries, Abi, I don’t think they care if you’re dressed or not.”

Emma looked the question at her guests, who all shrugged back, puzzled at this development.

“So put your togs on if you want, or just stay like that. You know the clothing-optional rule here. I haven’t told our guests yet about that.”

Abi thought for a second, then, “Oh, I’ll just nip back in and...”

Barbara called, “I don’t care, stay as you are,” while Peter echoed, “It’s not a problem for us; come join us.”

Suddenly the two realized what they had said and looked abashed.

Emma immediately picked up on their embarrassment.

“Cor, I think two people here have some interesting things to reveal. Okay, Abi, it’s ace; our guests are fine with you two being starkers. Am I correct?” Emma asked her guests, looking at them.

Peter and Barbara answered, “Yes,” while Tamara and Terence just nodded uncertainly. Stuart and Gerry were watching with great amusement.

Abi and her friend came around the pool to where the others were sitting.

Emma grabbed Abi’s hand. “This is my sis-in-law and honorary sister, Abi Marshall. Abi’s starting in med school at Hopkins this autumn. Her friend’s Ryan. Ryan, want to introduce yourself?”

“Sure, guys, I’m Ryan Doyle; I’m Abi’s boyfriend and a second-year med student at the University of Maryland. Abi and I met last summer at the nudist resort we all go to; that’s why we’re dressed like this.”

Everyone laughed.

“This home is known as ‘Emma’s Home Resort’ and has always been a clothing-optional place, they tell me,” he added.

Emma introduced her guests to Abi and Ryan; then she said, “It would seem that two of our guests haven’t shared something of their backgrounds, have they. Do you want to share anything, Barbara? Peter? You don’t have to if you’re embarrassed.”

Peter looked at his sister, who nodded for him to speak.

“Sure, it’s not a problem,” he told them. “Barbara and I grew up as nudists; my dad’s parents and grandparents have been members of the Arundel Nature Society in Davidsonville, all the way back to when the resort was founded. We own some cabins there.”

Stuart chuckled. “Well, you have us beat, indeed. The first resort we ever joined was Pine View here in Maryland when I was posted to the embassy here. Before that, it was nude beaches or public parks in the U.K. or Europe; they are much more accepting of the human body over there, obviously. Here, to be a practicing nudist, you’re mostly forced to go to commercial operations.”

“We never went to your resort,” Barbara told them. “Even to compare. Have you been to Arundel?”

“No,” Stuart answered, then looked at Ryan. “Have you been there?”

Ryan shook his head. “I came to Maryland from California to go to med school, so I’ve only been here about a year.”

Emma looked at Tamara. “So now that the ice has been broken, does anyone else fancy to enjoy the sun unencumbered? Tamara and Terence, I realize that I’m your faculty sponsor, so please don’t think that I am coercing you in any way. Social nudism is just that—having a pleasant social time whilst observing a relaxed dress code, innit. And everyone’s welcome to use the pool, cozy or not. For this time only, because I don’t want you to feel coerced about taking off your kit, we’re suspending the starkers-only rule.”

Peter looked at Tamara. “Sorry this was sprung on you, babe; you cool?”

Tamara, when she first saw Abi and her friend appear naked, had instantly deduced the probable situation. She had realized that the only conceivable possibility was that Emma’s household was some kind of nudist enclave or something. This immediately led her into considering what she should do now.

*If they all undress... I don't think they all will... but what do I say so I don't look like a spoilsport ... this is no sport... I'll just say that I don't feel comfortable yet.*

“Um, Peter? I don’t feel comfortable yet.”

“Not a problem, me too,” Peter responded, and Barbara said, “I’m gonna skip it too.”

“Oh, no! Don’t do that on my account,” Tamara objected. “If you feel that it’s right, then please do what you want. It won’t bother me one bit, okay?”

Peter looked at her doubtfully but Tamara smiled at him and made a shooing “go-ahead” motion.

He chuckled. “I know; you just want to see the goods.”

Tamara laughed. “Just keep thinking that, buddy,” but she nodded appreciatively as he slipped off his shirt.

Then he hooked his thumbs into his waist band and pulled his pants down—together with his swimming suit, which was under it, and stood up. He looked at Tamara, who was watching with fascination.

“Jeez, that’s really nice,” Tamara breathed. “Wow, you look really good all over like that. Oops, did I say that?”

Peter laughed. “You did... um ... damn.” He covered his crotch. “Not supposed to happen. Not supposed to happen. Oh, damn.”

“What...?” Tamara began. “Oh, did you...?”

“Don’t, Tamara, please don’t. If you don’t draw any attention, it’ll go away. You’re just so pretty... I never had

that happen before.”

“Oh, I’m really flattered,” Tamara grinned. “For the record, Peter, you’ve got an awesome body.”

“What? Why do you think that? I’m skinny and...”

“No, I’d call it ‘trim,’ maybe. Wiry. But I see wide shoulders, a hint of a six-pack, nice firm pecs, thick biceps and a wicked cute butt. If you don’t swim or run, then you must lift weights. Jeez, you’re really easy on the eyes,” she giggled.

“I admit to running and lifting,” Peter acknowledged. “Martial arts too. I try to squeeze that in, but school keeps me busy, you know. I started physical activities to help build my confidence. Someday I’ll tell you.”

Tamara felt a taste of an unfamiliar emotion flow from him.

*Shame? No, can’t be that. Not shame, she thought. Whatever could he be ashamed about? I love looking at his body, so it can’t be that. No, Tamara, do NOT pry.*

She looked at him again. He was watching his sister stripping now, as she talked with Abi. There was lots of giggling and gesticulating going on over there. She glanced at Peter again, letting her eyes roam over his body. His penis still seemed to be a little puffed up; it looked quite long, thick too, and really lovely, compared to the other naked boys she had seen...

*But that was back in middle and high school, years ago, and those were just pubescent boys, she recalled. That was then, this is now, she thought. This is MY naked boy now.*

She let her gaze caress his sleek skin, there wasn’t much hair. She longed to reach out and touch that skin, feel its curves, especially the curves of his butt... so tempting... Suddenly she became aware of an unfamiliar sensation.

*Shit, my nipples are tingling! She thought. They’re hard as a rock! I never felt that before—my body’s attracted to him too. Wow.*

Abi had been watching Tamara as she visually examined Peter’s body and grinned.

“Tamara, the looks you’re giving Peter—like you want to devour him! You really fancy him, don’t you. He does have a brill body, doesn’t he.”

Tamara nodded. “I think so, but it seems he doesn’t.”

“Hey Peter,” Abi said to him, “listen to your girlfriend. You got what she fancies. Suck it up.”

Peter just laughed.

Terence was whispering in Barbara’s ear and she nodded.

“It’s okay,” she heard Barbara say. “No one will care and I certainly don’t—except I would like to see what you’re hiding under there.”

She plucked at his shirt.

Terence chuckled and pulled it off. “Ah’ll go that far,” he remarked.

Tamara had to stare. *The guy’s muscles have muscles!* she thought.

Abi let out a shrill whistle. “Bodybuilder alert,” she called, jokingly.

“Okay, guys, enough,” Terence said, blushing. “For now, this is my comfort zone.”

Tamara felt waves of shame suddenly flowing from Terence. She wondered, *Him too? What the hell; whatever is he ashamed of?*

The naturist reveal over, Emma handed out towels to the nudists to spread on their chairs, and everyone sat while Emma told them the plans for the rest of the day.

They would have about two to three hours for swimming, chatting, and sunbathing before the meal would be ready.

“Wear sunscreen, but like at the park, shower it off before you get in the pool,” she reminded everyone. “In honor of our guests, the mandatory pool nudity rule at Emma’s Home Resort is hereby temporarily suspended. As well, no bare arses on the chairs and loungers, right.”

Tamara and Terence were the only two to stay clothed. Terence looked like he was having difficulties trying not to stare at the women, but Tamara just felt weird. She had her suit on under her top and shorts, so she unobtrusively slipped off those garments. Peter glanced at her and gave her an approving nod.

*Okay, Tamara thought. Like the beach. But no further. I’m not sure about being a naturist... nudist ... whatever.*

## Chapter 32 - Psychological Damage

After about a quarter hour, people from the younger group decided to go swimming and soon they organized a chicken fight with the gals riding the guys' shoulders. No one was surprised that the team with Terence always seemed to be the winner. The guy was like a rock and didn't budge an inch even when another team crashed into him. Soon they tired of the playing and decided to talk about a few of the topics that had come up during the pool play.

So Tamara, Peter, Barbara, Terence, Ryan, and Abi dried themselves and decided to go off to a gazebo set away on the back yard lawn, about fifty feet away from the patio and pool deck. Tamara still felt very uncomfortable with the nudity around her; she was surprised she felt that way because nudity itself didn't really bother her. Except when it involved those sad Florida stripped kids. She recalled that, in rural Haiti, naked children were frequently seen, but they would be from the poorest areas and were always malnourished... she pulled her thoughts away from those disturbing memories. Somehow, she'd find a way to help those who were disadvantaged...

The six of them walked over to the gazebo. The parade seemed amusingly unbalanced to Tamara. Leading the way were a nude Abi and Ryan, followed by Barbara, nude, and Terence, who was shirtless, wearing shorts. And here she was, in a modest two-piece swimsuit, with a nude Peter. Her natural sense of symmetry was destroyed as her mind played with permutations of the couples' dress in an attempt to balance their appearances. She shook her head to clear it since Barbara was speaking as they got settled in the seats, sitting by couples..

"So, Abi, exactly how did Emma find you guys with her living in Alaska—a Brit in Alaska is unusual, no? And then she finds a British family living in Maryland. There's quite a story there, I think."

Abi grinned and nodded. "Yeah. Grandpa found our soul sister living way up there. Emma was orphaned as a pre-teen when her mum died in England so she went to Alaska where her uncle lived. Grandpa was the U.K. ambassador to the U.S. back then and when the Naked in School Program was gonna start in her Alaska school, Emma refused to cooperate and led a student rebellion against it. When her school tried to find a way to force her to cooperate, she contacted the local consulate for support, wanting them to say that as a foreign national, she couldn't be made to participate. That's when Grandpa became involved. Turned out he actually knew Emma's grandparents when he was much younger and he was keen to meet her, so he invited her to visit him in D.C. She did, as well she met Andrew, Sam, and me, and adopted us.

Terence snorted. "Somehow, whenever we talk about our backgrounds, that Naked in School crap comes up."

"Oi, it really does," Abi agreed. "A lot. It was a looming problem for Andrew and Sam when Emma moved here to live with us. That's 'cause their high school was gonna start it up that autumn. And that summer, the Program office sent people out, trying to capture Emma, too. They came into our nudist resort without permission."

"Really? I hadn't heard about that before, Abi," Ryan said.

"Ah heard some 'bout those nudist resorts," Terence remarked. "There's a couple 'round the Austin area, where Ah'm from. So they were gate-crashers then? Ah heard that nudist resorts were really safe."

"They *are* safe," Abi replied. "Here's what happened. Our resort refused to let these four guys in, so they climbed over the gate. They were called 'Program enforcers,' and they were sent to our resort by the federal Program Office. But those enforcers were only supposed to enforce Program rules in schools when the Program kids were being disruptive or whatever. Anyway, they snuck in, but a few of our guys, members of our resort, including my dad, overpowered them. Then they stripped them all bollok-naked, drove them to a Wal-Mart store car park nearby and chained them to a light pole there; it took hours before they got freed. It got on the news."



“Nice. But why were they after Emma?” Barbara asked.

Abi giggled. “Retaliation, maybe. A year before, a bunch of those enforcers got sent to Alaska when Emma stopped her school from starting the Program there. When they showed up and tried to strip some kids, she had organized their getting arrested. They got prison sentences and got locked up, so Emma thinks the Program Office was retaliating for that.”

*Oh really?* Tamara thought. *That’s something she didn’t tell me about. That woman is fuckin’ impressive.*

“Hey. Back it up a moment,” Terence said. “Y’all said Emma refused t’ be in the Program, but she’s a nudist now?”

“Well, what she didn’t like was being *forced*,” Abi replied. “And the idea of a forced nudity program in Alaska is right barmy, wouldn’t you say? When we first met her, my sibs and I told her that we were nudists and that we all thought it was ace. We told her then about all the brilliant stuff we did at our resort and how it wasn’t at all like the Program. No one was forced to do anything. So when our family was planning our annual holiday at the resort, Dad told her that we all wanted her to join us, and if she did come, she could keep her kit on. Except in the pool, but you know about that. So she said she’d go with us. The rest, well, here we are, aren’t we?”

“The Program keeps coming up,” Ryan commented. “I wonder who here was actually in it. I wasn’t. I went to school in California and the Program hadn’t gotten to our school yet. It got there right after I left. Even though my family were all nudists, I’m not sure how I would have coped if I had been in it. Abi wasn’t in it either; I know it was running in her school but she had diplomatic immunity.”

Terence put up his hand. “Ah’ll start. Simple; Ah went to a private high school. Since the school got no federal bucks, they didn’t have it and never even considered running it.”

Abi laughed. “Even though I was exempt, as Ryan said, I have a story about what happened in my high school before I got there. Sam was starting as a freshman when the Program began there. They picked her to participate even though they had gotten her diplomatic immunity letter a month before school started. But they ignored her letter. So Sam, bless her, did a one-person destruction act on the Program in her school. When she was called onto the stage to strip at her assembly, she turned her stage time into an anti-Program rally and told the whole school that nobody could be forced to strip off. She announced that kids were legally protected ‘cause being forced to strip was an assault and holding a kid to strip him would be a sexual crime. She threatened the principal that if he touched her, or if any teacher did, she would charge them with sexual assault.”

Tamara grinned. “I want to meet that gal! She’s my kind of woman!”

“Also, she turned the idea of participating in it into a joke,” Abi went on. “She told everyone that she wasn’t refusing to be in the Program. She said she would do the Program but do it while keeping her kit on. The kids all thought she was crackin’ brilliant. That really got the officials’ knickers in a twist but they couldn’t do anything about shutting her gob. She ran her anti-Program campaign for the entire time she was in high school.”

Barbara laughed. “We needed someone like her at my school. Definitely.”

“I’ll go next,” Tamara remarked. “The Hopkins people here know that the Program never got started in my school. But if it had, I would have wanted Sam there for sure.”

“Aye, she was brill,” Abi said. “Andrew saw her on stage, how she made the principal look like a helpless clown... he even started to try to chase her off the stage before he realized how dumb that would look. Then when I got to high school, though, the Program was a little different to the year before. The school officials tried to make it like a game or something, to convince kids to show how brave and adventurous they were. So they tried to tamp down on the forced sexual stuff. Sometimes that worked, but mostly it didn’t. I kept my head

down, didn't I; Mum said not to make waves like Sam did, and I got my exemption ticket punched. Barbara...? Peter...? Peter, you haven't said anything."

Tamara saw Peter shudder. *Shudder? What?* She thought. Then she sensed a faint yellow taste.

*Fear? What's he afraid of?* She put a hand on his shoulder.

"You okay, Peter?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm good. We had the fuckin' thing in my school and it almost put me into the nut house. But my shrinks told me that the more I talk about it, the more it will help me get over those bad memories," Peter said quietly.

"Crap, man, what happened?" Terence asked.

Peter shook his head. "Um, let me tell it my way... I'll lead up to what happened."

Tamara put her arm around his shoulder. She gathered up a calming light green taste and "pushed" it gently around the two of them; she could feel his tension drop away.

"Oohh, your arm feels so good like that, Tamara," he sighed. "It suddenly made me feel better about talking about this."

Barbara looked at him intently. "Really, Peter? You think you can talk about it now? You've always..."

Peter raised his hand. "Something about Tamara. She's giving me comfort; I can feel it coming from her."

*Ohmygod, Tamara thought, he's a latent empath! No wonder I'm attracted to him.*

Barbara looked at Tamara, who nodded back. Barbara made the finger "okay" sign, circling her thumb and finger. Tamara winked back. Peter missed the whole exchange; he was gathering his thoughts.

"I need to say something about me when I was a kid," he began. "I was a very shy and withdrawn kid. I did fine in school except when it came to participate. If I got called on, I got tongue-tied. So my folks got some advice and had me take singing lessons, of all crazy things. Starting when I was seven. And guess what? It worked, not big time, but enough that I didn't pee my pants if I got called on. Anyway, when my family moved to Maryland, living next to me was this girl, I grew up with her, basically, for eight years. Her name's Amy Pierson and we were very close.

"She was as shy as me, but was better in class participation. She and I both took those singing lessons. But we really didn't have friends; we were each other's friend."

Barbara broke in. "They were like the two nuts in a peanut shell. They were cute together. The teachers let them be themselves, too."

"Yeah, until high school, that is," Peter said bitterly. "Amy had developed a physical problem. It was delayed puberty. The two of us were well over 14 years old when we started high school. I still remember how Amy looked at almost 15; she was maybe 4 feet 9 inches and couldn't have weighed more than 75 pounds. That's how big a typical eleven-year-old girl is. And she had zero chest. You can imagine what happened to her in high school. How those bitch girls teased and treated her."

"Peter got into such trouble trying to defend her," Barbara interrupted. "I did too, trying to watch out for my shy, nerdy brother, to defend *him*. I was a year older so I couldn't protect him and Amy all the time."

"She did a good job, though," Peter complimented her. "So Amy went to the doctor's and they did a whole bunch of tests. An MRI showed a benign tumor of the pituitary gland... adenoma? I think."

Ryan nodded. "Yeah, that would be the right term. They're uncommon in kids, the larger sizes, anyway. I'm

assuming it was a non-functioning pituitary adenoma?”

“If you mean that it wasn’t producing any hormones, yes, that’s right. It was doing something to the gland to keep it from her starting puberty,” Peter told him.

“I’ll show off what I learned then,” Ryan grinned. “That’s called ‘hypogonadotropic hypogonadism’ which means that the gonads aren’t producing sex hormones because of a problem in the pituitary gland or hypothalamus. Docs like to show off with fancy words to describe simple concepts.”

The others laughed.

“Did they do surgery or radiation?” Ryan asked.

“The parents didn’t want radiation and the doc recommended against it anyway. Too small a target on her,” Peter answered. Ryan nodded in agreement. “But they wanted to postpone surgery and try hormone therapy first, but they knew that would take maybe two years to show anything. How do they get in there, though? The pituitary is under the entire brain.”

“It’s a little tricky. You can reach that area by going through the back of the upper nasal cavity, through the sphenoid sinus there. The procedure’s called transsphenoidal surgery and it’s done through the nose or from behind the upper lip.”

“Eeww,” a few of the listeners said.

Peter nodded. “So, when they first told us about the Program, they said the selections of kids would be random. What a damned lie. It was crazy; we were both picked, Amy and I, the same week, spring term in our freshman year. Her parents had told her that they requested an exemption for her. Amy obviously still looked like a little girl. I was surprised that I reacted so strongly to being selected since I was brought up being a nudist. But what I saw with the Program going on all that fall wasn’t nudism; it was cruel, disgusting, and depraved, how the girls were treated. And the things they forced the guys to do. The anguish of those poor kids having to go through that shit was just tearing me up.”

*I was right, Tamara thought. A strong empath.*

“But Amy wasn’t a nudist and she also had all that psychological damage done to her by the girls over body-image stuff. When they called her to the office in the week’s announcements naming the Program participants, she fainted. The emotional shock I felt from that was immense, seeing what happened to her, and that’s probably why I had such a strong reaction myself.”

*I was wrong. Not a strong empath. A **super** empath.*

“They had called my name too, but I stayed with her. But instead of taking her to the nurse, a teacher carried her to the office and they woke her with a cold wet towel. Then they force-stripped her; she was shrieking and crying. They stripped me too, but I tried to fight them, so a couple of teachers held me down and they *cut* my pants off.

“The Program official told me then, that he was giving us a second week as a penalty. Amy for fainting and me for not going to the office immediately and for fighting. When they dragged the two of us out of the office into the hall, naked, something in my mind just went away. I was dying inside. I couldn’t help Amy. I could only stand there and watch as the other kids made her into a toy, playing with her body. She was screaming and then just collapsed.”

“I got there just then,” Barbara interrupted. “I saw what happened and just waded in, shoving kids away. Amy was totally unconscious and had bruises everywhere. Not a teacher anywhere, either. I got someone to help me

carry her to the nurse and I called 911 and her parents. Her parents went to the hospital with her. Turns out that Amy responded exactly like a rape victim does—but even worse; she had the previous psychological damage from all the harassing. She couldn't come back to school—her parents sued and even got a big settlement. They moved away within the year, too, and that broke Peter's heart. Peter and I still keep in touch and Amy is a little better, but she's really changed. She's become nervous, suspicious, and can't maintain a relationship. She's still getting therapy. But this is about Peter and what happened to him."

"Yeah, what happened to Amy just tore me up, but I wasn't in my body anymore. I was outside of it, watching. Kids were poking me and pulling on my cock and all, but I felt nothing. The bell rang and I stood there; I couldn't get my body to work. Someone, maybe a teacher, led me to a classroom. I have no idea if it was the right one. During that class, I began to connect with my body, enough that I could tell it what to do. I saw that someone had brought my books. All I could think of was Amy.

"I remember watching myself walking from one class to another. Kids were stopping me for those 'reasonable requests' that the Program requires. I just stood there and watched. I felt nothing. I don't even recall hearing much, except when someone told me to stop, I stopped."

"I saw him like that," Barbara said. "I found him in the hall after I left the nurse's when Amy went to the hospital. She was still crying so hard, her body was shaking. Anyway, Peter looked like a walking dead person in the movies... you know, a zombie. Totally vacant eyes. When he looked at me, I saw a spark of recognition, but it went away. I asked him if he was okay... all he said was a whispered, 'No.'"

"I think I remember that, sis. I was trying to untangle my thoughts. I think it was that day, maybe the next, when a teacher decided I should be an anatomical model. I totally blanked out who the teacher was. It was either in my health class or biology class, but they had maybe twenty weeks of Program kids to use as models before that week so they needed yet another demo? Anyway, someone must have told the teacher that I hadn't gotten an erection yet. So apparently the lesson was to get me to have one.

"The teacher got me hoisted up on the table at the front of the room, and totally unnecessarily, she pointed out to the class all of the obvious external parts. It seemed like I was watching all this from a point about three feet above me. She pulled and pushed my cock, stretching it up to show my balls, while trying to do something to stimulate me. I couldn't feel anything but I saw her fingers working on me.

"When she finished her show-and-tell, she asked the kids in the class to come up, one by one, to get a really close view of me and to handle the parts on display. Then she mentioned that it would be instructive to see if any student had the skill to produce an erection in the subject, me, since the subject did not get one when she tried. See, I thought she was trying to do something.

"The parade began. Kids pulled on my cock. Kids sucked on my cock. Even a few boys. Kids fondled my balls. Kids licked and sucked on my balls. Someone even tried to stick a finger in my ass but she stopped that. I wouldn't have felt that anyway; I felt nothing. I felt nothing even when I noticed the teacher's look of disappointment and defeat when the entire class had a chance at manipulating my parts, and got absolutely no response."

"What a bloody awful story—a terrible experience," Abi said and the others nodded. "What happened to you to cause that... oh, it's an out-of-body experience, right?"

"Barbara knows about that. My experience is one reason she wants to study psychology."

"Yeah, he had what's called 'dissociation'; 'out-of-body experience' or OBE is another term. I'll be writing my senior thesis on dissociative disorders so I've done a lot of research on it so far. There are differing theories, naturally. The arguments are over whether dissociation itself is protective or pathological. Some psychologists

call it a disorder and classify it with schizoid personality disorder or even schizophrenia. The theory I prefer is that it's a normal, in fact, it's a healthy response which humans, in their evolution, developed to allow them to recover from intolerable physical or emotional trauma. That was in a psych journal article I read that discussed the topic extensively."

"What happened with y'all in the Program after that?" Terence asked.

"Oh, it wasn't over yet. My parents were shocked when I got home that first day, as you'd expect. They tried calling the principal who basically told them to get lost. I was still freaked out about Amy; I called her parents and they told me that she had finally quieted down and was resting and was being treated for shock. They were medicating her. The worst problem for me was that when I finally did get to see her some weeks later, she had a bad reaction—apparently seeing me triggered her PTSD; that's something that can happen to a victim if they see a trigger, and I was the trigger since the last thing she recalled seeing when she went into shock was me. Anyway, when I went to school the next day, it was cold out so we were supposed to strip in the commons area. I couldn't force myself to strip anyway; it reminded me too much of what happened to Amy. I got dragged to the office where they stripped me again and got another week added to my sentence. Telling me that drove me further into what Barbara calls my 'zombiehood.'"

"Jee-zus!" Terence exclaimed. "Effin' monsters! Were your school officials that cruel with everyone?"

Barbara answered, "They were awful—many teachers were, but the principal was the chief dick."

"Yeah, seems like I became their chief target that week. Later on the second day, I got called to the office and got yelled at for being unresponsive to reasonable requests and not cooperating in the class demo and not doing the public masturbation that they call 'relief' and yada, yada. I was mentally off somewhere but I must have heard the words 'cause I remember them now, but then? Nothing was getting through. I did hear that they were going to find someone to make me respond.

"I don't even recall the class... oh, yeah, it must have been history. It was Mrs Whelan's; she enjoyed humiliating the Program kids in her class. That's where they had an older girl come in. I recall that the girl was naked. She rubbed herself all over me and tried to get me to rub her breasts. I couldn't; my arms were boneless and they wouldn't work. Then the girl looked at me, she grinned and took my package and fondled it. No response. So she went to her knees to get to my cock better. She took it between her finger and thumb to wiggle it, trying to get me to respond. I felt nothing. She tried stroking it, but I still felt nothing at all. Next, she tried licking the head like a cat and nothing happened then either, so she shrugged and then took it into her mouth, slowly sliding her mouth back and forth over it. After a minute, she gave up.

"That's when she told the teacher, 'I can't get any response at all, Mrs Whelan. Nothing. Look at him; he's not even here. His eyes are—spooky. He's scary. I'm done; let someone else try, not me.'"

Barbara spoke then. "I saw what he looked like when he was in the halls the second day, walking to class. He was stiff, walking like he was on stilts, jerk left, jerk right. I heard kids calling him a zombie, and they began giving him a wide berth. Some kids even looked scared. It was scary to see his eyes. They really looked dead."

Peter went on, "I got called to the office a couple of times that day but nothing they said registered. I suppose if you talk to someone and they don't respond in any way to you, that eventually you realize that nothing is registering. I suppose I was threatened with being put on the Program for the rest of my life, or whatever, but I have absolutely no recall of that. I was somewhere else entirely."

"So obviously you're with us now, so how did that ordeal end?" Tamara asked.

"My grandpa—Mom's dad—has some cool connections I never knew about back then. You know my mom's a Naval Academy grad?"

The Hopkins students did know that.

“So she got her appointment because my grandparents were politically connected. Well, they still are. Grandpa was a friend of the guy who was the governor of Maryland back then. Tuesday, Mom had called Grandpa and told him about me. On that Wednesday morning, my third Program day, a state police car stopped at my house to bring me to school. So crazy; the frikkin’ governor had sent him; it was the deputy commander of the state police. He brought me and my parents to the principal’s office and told him that if I was bothered with any more Program nonsense, the State Police would arrest him and every teacher involved and hold them for investigation of sexual assault and battery on a minor.”

Barbara continued the story. “I was there too ‘cause I had witnessed some of what had happened with Peter. The principal began to say that what the school was doing was all legal and that the police had no authority. The major just grinned and said something like, ‘Okay, this is how it is. One. The Maryland attorney general is starting an investigation of you and your subordinates for violating the state education code provisions for proper student supervision. Two. He’s assembling a grand jury to investigate possible charges against you for sexual assault and battery. Forced stripping of anyone is a felony under Maryland law, your Program notwithstanding. Three. He will be recommending a charge for endangerment of a minor for your treatment of Amy Pierson. She didn’t receive proper medical attention when she fainted. From the information I was given, you knew that she had a medical condition. Her fainting could have been caused by a medical problem, possibly diabetes, not just shock, and in a child, if proper care isn’t quickly received, they can die. You would have been up for negligent homicide charges if that had occurred.’

“And he continued with a warning, ‘So I’d strongly suggest that you stop forcing young Mr Winsberg here to continue to be in your naked Program. If I get a single report that he’s been bothered, I will send troopers here to arrest everyone involved. I really don’t think you’d like to see how we’d treat you, either. We do strip searches of folks who aren’t cooperative, and we will treat you as an uncooperative perp. We might not have a prison jump suit in your size, either. Want to get put into the general population butt-naked? We could arrange that. Want to see if the governor means business? He’s really pissed off that the children here were treated worse than inmates, and I heard that he tore your school board chair a new asshole. You’ll be hearing from your school board soon, I’d imagine.’ Then he left after giving me his card and telling me to call his number direct if Peter was bothered any more.”

“Damn,” Terence said. “That’s... Ah don’t know what to say. So, Peter, y’all were okay after that?”

“It took a long time to get me back to normal—well, my own normal. Especially with how the kids looked at me after those two days, but I had no real friends, anyway. Just Amy and now she was gone. What happened afterwards was that, for several years, I tended to wear lots of layers of clothes when I went to school. I became more withdrawn and isolated, spending all my free time in the library where the books were my safe haven. I went back to being unresponsive in classes.”

Barbara mentioned, “I overheard some of his teachers talking about him; they were really concerned about how Peter reacted after being put in the Program. One teacher said that before the Program, Peter was always attentive and his participation was acceptable, but afterwards he became much more withdrawn, both in classes and in places like the commons and lunchroom, where the kids gather to talk; Peter was always by himself, never with another student.”

“So how did y’all make the cut for getting the Clarke scholarship? Didn’t your classroom grades take a hit? And there’s a big service requirement,” Terence asked.

“My teachers knew what had happened and cut me a lot of slack. I always got top grades. So they graded me just on my work, not class participation. And thanks go to Johns Hopkins for the service requirement,” Peter

answered. "I did a number of community service projects through university groups, along with the summer and special courses I was enrolled in. And I helped in my town's senior program too. It was just in the high school where I had those problems; Barbara says it was how my own PTSD was triggered by being in the classrooms; it brought back the bad Program memories."

"But what about seeing the Program kids after you got out of having to do it?" Tamara asked. "Didn't seeing that crap affect you?"

"Sure... that's why I remained so isolated and withdrawn. It protected me a little from having to experience the suffering the other kids were going through."

*Jeez. I need to think about how to talk to Peter about his empathic sense,* Tamara thought.

Peter looked at Tamara. "Anyway, no more Program talk. I need to talk about something else. What were you asking me about before? You asked me about my body being... um..."

"...toned? Yeah. Nice body," she smiled.

The others agreed.

Terence added, "Hey, guy, Ah'd love to have a workout buddy and y'body shows y'all know what y'all're doing. Wanna partner up this year?"

Peter laughed. "Sure, I could use the discipline. Promise you won't make me muscle-bound?"

"That's a myth," Terence grinned. "Too much muscle won't make y'all so stiff y'can't move. The way Ah was trained included speed and flexibility in addition to power. Partner?"

"Deal."

Barbara smirked, "Don't you love it? Take a joke about being muscle-bound and turn it into a lecture about strength training. That's a geek through and through."

"Y'know, Ah got a question," Terence said. "Ah hate to bring up y'all's bad experience again, Peter, but what all happened in the school to the principal and the others after all that?"

Barbara answered. "Yeah. The governor raised a shit-storm and the school board had to investigate. The principal got canned at the end of the school year and the teachers who were involved with any abuse got reprimanded or fired. The school board couldn't do anything about the Program coordinator; he was a federal employee, but the state AG had him charged him with two counts of aggravated assault. I guess I never heard if there even was a trial, so maybe there was a plea bargain."

"Hey guys," Ryan said, "let's stop rehashing old bad memories now, okay? It's really getting hot out, how about hitting the pool again?"

They all agreed and trooped back to the pool. Tamara looked around the back yard. At the back of the property, there was a tall stockade fence and it appeared that there was a wooded area on the other side of it. On one side of the yard, the trees there were thick, so she assumed it was a natural area. The other side of the yard had a screen of tall junipers; the house on that side couldn't even be seen.

Abi noticed her looking around.

"Checking out my sis' yard's privacy?" Tamara nodded. Abi grinned. "It's total. We're set into the corner of a protected wilderness area on two sides, there's a river back out there, and the next neighbor is way over there," she said, pointing past the junipers. "That's why they bought here, It's close to her lab and really private. That's why we named it Emma's Home Resort. They have friends come out here lots; they're all nudists, so when she

mentioned that she was having people from Hopkins over, I assumed you lot knew about her version of a nudist park.”

Tamara grinned. “And that’s why the two of you pranced out, what did she call it?”

“Starkers,” Abi laughed. “Hard to drop the British lingo.”

“I just love all your accents, though,” Tamara said.

Abi looked at her. “Yours is cute too. Kinda like Jamaican, but... a bit lilting and nasal?”

“I’m Haitian and grew up speaking French, English, and *Kreyòl*. The *Kreyòl* is a lot like the speech in Jamaica sounds—on some of the other islands too. You’re hearing a little of the French lilt and nasal sound too. My dad says the French that he and his family spoke was *occitanismes*; that’s spoken around the Bordeaux area. He thinks his European ancestors came from that area. Dad’s amazing; he can listen to French spoken and tell where they’re from.”

They had jumped into the pool while talking and Peter waded over to Tamara.

“I took a year of French in high school but then dropped it ‘cause I couldn’t participate in the vocal recitation parts. Maybe you can help me learn it?”

“Sure,” Tamara smiled. “*Comment vas-tu, tu t’amuses?*”

“Huh. Let’s see. ‘How you go...’ Oh. ‘How are you doing, um, having fun?’”

“Right, or a closer meaning for the last part is ‘enjoying yourself?’ It’s a reflexive construction. Okay, let’s try to speak French when we’re alone. That should be kinda cool when we do tech stuff.”

“Ooff. I’m sorry I asked.”

“Hey. French tech uses lots of words you’d recognize.”

Just then Andrew came out of the house with a platter, heading for the barbeque grill, and Emma followed with a tray, pitcher, and plastic cups. Tamara stared at Emma. She hadn’t seen her undressing before.

*I thought Emma was a charisma powerhouse before, Tamara marveled. Jeez, Emma’s like a frikkin’ goddess. That glow! Am I seeing an aura here?*

She heard a gasp from Peter. He was standing next to her in the waist-deep water, transfixed as he also looked at Emma.

“My god, is she glowing or is it my eyes?” he wondered. “That’s crazy; it’s not possible!”

Tamara felt something brush her thigh and looked down. Peter’s eyes weren’t the only thing that seeing Emma had stimulated on him.

*Woah, nice, Tamara thought. Oh, I guess that’s the first one I’ve ever seen erect. Gorgeous.*

She nudged Peter and whispered, “I’m really glad the Naked in School Program had no lasting bad effects on that thing down there, stud. Nice one you’re sporting.”

If Peter could have blushed any harder, he would have burst into flame—despite being in the water.

“Sorry... I’m sorry...” he started.

“No don’t be. It’s fine; I like what I see. Anyway, Emma. She’s awesome, right?”

“Yeah. Who would know she’d look like that? Her clothes mask who she really is. I feel waves of happiness and



welcoming just flowing from her,” Peter marveled.

Tamara turned to him. “You really are empathic, aren’t you? And that’s the main reason you had such a bad reaction to the Program, right?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Is that okay? I hope that doesn’t bother you.”

“Not one bit. You know, we...”

Just then, Stuart called; he and Gerry had emerged from the house with a huge bowl and plastic plates.

“Okay, you lot, come get some salad,” he called.

Tamara and Peter found a seat, sitting across from Stuart, and they began to chat. Stuart was interested in her accent. He told her it sounded sort of French. Tamara agreed that it was, and told him what she had told Abi earlier.

“I’ve been to a lot of places around the world—never the Caribbean,” he told her. “Or Florida either. Before you moved to Miami, had you been to anywhere else?”

“Never. And I couldn’t even enjoy my first plane trip; I was on a stretcher in a plane with no windows.”

She told them about her medical airlift trip.

“But soon after, I did get to take another airplane—we went to Washington a few months later,” she said.

“To do touristy things?” Stuart asked.

“Um, not really, but we did get shown around a bit. Dad got the Medal of Honor awarded.”

That news caused a small commotion and Tamara had to give the details. When she mentioned that her dad had used a carbine, pistol, and British knife in the battle, Stuart was all ears.

“British Royal Marines knife?” he asked. “A Fairbairn-Sykes, do you think?”

“Yeah. That’s it. Long thin blade, very very sharp. Scary.”

“Hmmm. Know why he had that instead of the U.S. Marine-issue knife?”

“Yeah, my great uncle gave it to him when Dad was little. Oh, right. He had been in Korea, oh, and in the Royal Marines too. He taught Dad about combat and that’s why Dad became a Marine. But that was way before I was born.”

“Blimey, could it be? A Haitian Royal Marine,” Stuart mused. “Do you happen to know his name?”

“Dad called him ‘Uncle Dan.’”

“Bloody hell,” Stuart exclaimed. “Could it possibly be Daniel Jean-Baptiste?”

“Dad’s mother’s brother... yeah, that was her family name, so yeah.”

“I’m gobsmacked. No wonder your dad got the Medal. Color Sergeant Jean-Baptiste is a legend in the Royal Marines; one of the most decorated Marines from that era. Your dad had one of the best teachers. I served in Afghanistan roughly around the same time as your dad. Possibly we even crossed paths? I’d love to meet him. Is there any chance he’d visit this area?”

“I’m sure they’ll come to my graduation next May. Before that, it’s possible. I’ll ask. And what’s a color sergeant, anyway? Funny name for a rank.”

“The rank goes way back in history and in the U.K., only the Royal Marines have retained that rank,” Stuart replied. “Their original role was to protect the officer who carried the regimental colors in battle; that was a vital position for tactical reasons because in battles, soldiers oriented themselves on the colors. Later, the rank was used to recognize those sergeants who had demonstrated their courage on the field of battle and that’s how it’s currently used in the Royal Marines; plus it’s the top NCO rank, just under the warrant officers. The U.S. Marines use that title too but it’s not a rank. In their case, the Corps’ color sergeant is the commandant’s ceremonial representative and serves as the sergeant of the Corps Battle Colors Detachment.”

“So it’s both a rank and an honor too,” Tamara said.

“Basically.”

Soon the rest of the meal was served and enjoyed. After another hour of socializing, the group began to prepare to leave, thanking Emma and Andrew for a wonderful time.

Nothing about nudism was discussed on the trip back to Baltimore, to Tamara’s relief. She had a lot of thoughts to process about what she had seen and heard.

### Chapter 33 - Mastering the Brain

The following week, Tamara was busy with paperwork. She and Emma had gotten the reviewers' comments on the physics article they had recently submitted. Emma wanted Tamara to read the review and prepare responses or suggest clarifications in the article.

"This is the best writing practice you can get, reading reviewers' reaction to your paper," Emma had told her. "It helps when you do the original writing; you'll know the kinds of questions you'll probably get, won't you."

"Sure," Tamara replied. "Dr Beauford did that with our papers. He was funny; you should have heard him when he read the reviews of our last paper. I didn't know that there were so many synonyms for 'idiot.'"

"Really now? Reviewers generally try to be constructive and suggest ways to make something clearer when it's puddled..." She noticed Tamara's blank look. "Sorry. It means 'confusing.' That sounded like an unusual review."

"It was. Beauford realized the guy... whoever it was... wasn't current in the field. He told the editor to get another review from someone who knew the field."

"Ah, that makes sense. Well, dear, here's your chance to contribute a bit more to the paper. Here's the three reviews; see what you make of them."

And the other item of paperwork that Tamara had to prepare was the proposal for her MRI work. Emma wanted to be sure that Tamara approached her project in a disciplined manner. She knew that if Tamara got one of her creative ideas, she might go off on a tangent. Since the MRI project was likely to be an expensive one, Emma had to teach Tamara how to conserve resources. Also, much of the project would be done at the APL, where Emma had access to the superconducting MRI prototype whose design Hopkins had licensed for commercial use, so Tamara's access would not be as easy as it was to go to the Physics building. The APL ran a shuttle service from Hopkins, but Tamara would have to fit the travel time into her schedule.

She had a busy week, working on the journal paper reviews and preparing her research proposal, which Emma wanted in the format of a research grant proposal. For their physics article, one reviewer wanted the authors to show, in a physical system, how electrons could be made to move against a charge gradient, despite Emma's calculations which showed that theory supported a high storage density in the molecular lattice. Tamara added a reference footnote to that section which referred readers to her engineering article, noting that it had been submitted. For her own project, she already had drafts of her project design which she had previously prepared for Beauford. That was when she learned about the high costs of research. She used those drafts to write her proposal. She was glad when she got those writing jobs completed. And now it was the weekend. She and Peter planned to make their postponed visit to the Museum of Industry. They were seeing each other regularly now.

#### *Early July*

Peter and Tamara were on their postponed visit to the museum, and their conversation had turned to their visit to Emma's home.

"I'm still having a hard time seeing you as a shy, withdrawn kid," Tamara told him. "You seem to be outgoing and okay with social situations. Oh, and let's suspend the French for today; I sense that we're gonna get a bit emotional and that's not good for teaching."

"Okay on the no-French. It's a long story... well, not that long, but it seemed to me that it took forever to get through childhood. Socially, it was awful."

"Jeez, sweetie, that's terrible. Um, just a guess here, but did your empathy play a major part in making your troubles worse?"

“Crap, Tamara. You’re a psychic, you know? Somehow you know things about people and it’s just uncanny,” Peter exclaimed.

“Well, thank you, I think,” she grinned. “Someday I’ll tell... well, how ‘bout this? You tell me yours and I’ll tell you mine.”

Peter laughed. “Now that’s a pretty funny repurposing of that age-old ‘get-into-the pants’ routine, isn’t it? Okay, but I won’t ask you to tell me anything embarrassing about your own childhood.”

Tamara could sense the “embarrassed” taste flowing from him. She rested her hand on his arm.

“I’ve got nothing embarrassing to hide,” she said. “But you don’t have to be embarrassed with me. After all, I’ve seen *all* of you, right?” she joked.

Peter chuckled. “Yeah, I think it’s self-embarrassment, if that’s a thing. I embarrassed myself, I guess. So let’s see. Um, need to go way back. Okay, my parents told me that when I was four or about then, I had taught myself to read. Dad read me books, he told me, and I would ask him what the letters were. I must have memorized what he read, and later, worked out how the sounds matched the letters. Back then, Mom was still on sea duty and we were living in Norfolk at the Navy base. She had a doctorate in physics and was a lieutenant, the nuclear surface warfare officer on a carrier based there, and Dad was a lieutenant commander, the head of the base’s mechanical engineering department.”

“Oh, a military family, then. My dad’s a Marine.”

“That’s right, cool. Yeah, Dad was in Navy ROTC in college and got a master’s. He met Mom on one of their tours and the Navy kept them together. Dad didn’t want to make the Navy a career, so he stayed in until Mom got her teaching job at the Academy when I was, um, five or six years old. Anyway, I went to kindergarten in Norfolk and my parents told me that I would come home from school crying. They found out that my teacher was criticizing how I didn’t learn to read properly. It seems that a lot of the unfamiliar words I came across, I read phonetically. When the teacher stopped me and told me to read properly, the kids would laugh.

“That started me down the path to being shy. I also could feel that the teacher didn’t like me and even though a lot of Navy kids were in the school, the other kids looked down at us. I could feel their emotional hostility. And I was very advanced, too, in kindergarten and first grade, when we moved to Maryland. In first grade, I’d get bored in class and would sneak something to read. The teacher would call on me when she thought I wasn’t paying attention, but I knew the answer. The other kids saw me reading and I could feel their jealousy, ‘cause if they got caught reading something not part of the class, they got scolded and I didn’t. Stuff like that kept happening and it got so that I became withdrawn. If I answered in class, the kids would think I was showing off.

“We moved when Mom was appointed to a faculty position at the Academy and then Dad got his job at the APL. I mentioned the singing lessons; my folks put me on them to help in my confidence, that’s when I met Amy. She lived next door and was also very shy, but we kinda bonded. Since we had each other, and I could still sense rejection from other kids, we never made any friends. When we were in junior high, we found out about the Program and because Amy was so small—she wasn’t growing normally even then—her parents sent an exemption request to the high school. My folks thought that since we were nudists, I’d be okay.

“Oh, and I need to mention my sister. She was like a rock for me. She tried to watch over me at school too. The kids would sometimes pick on Amy and I would get in trouble for defending her. I’ll admit that the only way I had to defend her was physical; I would push kids away from Amy when they were being annoying, so Barbara had to explain that I was protecting my friend. She got me out of trouble a lot. Fortunately, she could be around a lot. We lived in a small community and the high school was pretty small. Less than a thousand kids, total. So that’s how my growing-up years went.”

Tamara shook her head in sympathy. “That’s just so sad. Childhood should be about having fun and making friends. It sounds like a terrible time.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong; it actually got me to here, into the Clarke program. My friends were Amy and books. I learned a lot, and by junior high, Dad was taking me to the lab sometimes. I gravitated to the engineering side of science rather than theoretical. I like things that do stuff.”

“But your reaction to getting put into the Program seemed so extreme,” Tamara commented. “I can see shyness as a problem, but you say you were naked in public—the resort, anyway—so your being nude wouldn’t have been a body-image or exposure problem. Am I wrong?”

“No, you’re not wrong. I think my empathy caused the psychological reaction I had. When Amy and I began high school, a week in, they had that ‘Program assembly’ a lot of schools do to begin each year or each term. They call a bunch of kids to the stage and make them strip. That’s crazy, it’s completely degrading, doing it so publically. When they started the assembly, the whole room was bursting with negative emotions. Both Amy and I could feel it and it was terrifying for us. She was shaking and I wasn’t much better.

“When they called kids up to the stage, most were frightened but several panicked. One boy and one girl really freaked out when they were called and had to be dragged up to the stage. The boy was fighting and he got himself free of the teacher holding him—kicked him, I think, and ran off backstage. We heard the door alarm go off so he got out of the building that way. Some teachers ran out to look for him, but the principal went on anyway, going over the rules and stuff. Someone came over to him and whispered so the principal looked at a paper and said he was replacing that boy and called another name—and that boy got up and dashed out of the auditorium. He got out of the building too.

“The principal got really irritated and got another boy up there. Meanwhile, the panicking girl was wailing. Amy and I were just trying to hold on, but all the emotions were destroying us. They got all the kids up there to strip and the ones who didn’t were held while a staff member pulled off their clothes. The panicked girl was stripped too and she collapsed—fainted, I don’t know, because that sent me over the top. I got sick. I just made it out to the aisle before I threw up... then went into dry heaves. Somehow I wound up in the nurse’s office. They couldn’t reach Mom or Dad immediately so they called an ambulance to take me to the hospital. I found out later that the docs thought it was shock. Maybe it was, from my empathic sense being overloaded.

“Yep, that is extreme,” Tamara said. “I have a strong empathic sense too, but I learned how to... um, compartmentalize it, I guess you’d call what I do. My mom is a kind of therapist and I learned about thoughts and emotions from watching her and talking with her.”

“Man, could I have used advice like that,” Peter mused. “So Amy was really frightened when they took me away and she curled up into her shell. Her parents got called and they brought her home. That was the first day we saw the Program operating. I got put on meds, a SNRI—that’s a serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor—that blunts emotional responses as well as being an anti-depressant. I was given a small dose, just enough to ‘take the edge off,’ as they put it. It must have helped a little, ‘cause I was able to function in school despite the crap I saw happening.

“But my biggest problem was seeing what was happening to Amy. She definitely wasn’t growing and looked just like a ten- or eleven-year-old kid. The other kids teased her unmercifully, asking her if she was lost; the kindergarten was in another school building, stuff like that. And when she had P.E., the girls just tore her up with insults and vicious comments. After a couple of months, her parents got her a P.E. exemption when they got her delayed puberty diagnosis.”

“This is really difficult for you to talk about; I can feel it,” Tamara said. “You want to stop?”

“No, I want to tell you some of the sights that I saw that sent me over the edge. One of the first surprises I had was when I learned that the school was considering having their swimming programs done naked. They were also looking into naked gym for everyone. But I think that got the parents so riled up that they dropped that idea. It was the crazy sex stuff in classes that bothered me the most, because I couldn’t ignore it and just walk away. One of the kinds of orchestrated sex shows was performed in the classroom—they called it ‘relief’ sessions. Starting from the very first day that they ran the Program, I saw those sessions every single day. Anyone ever tell you about them?”

“Not firsthand,” Tamara told him. “But I did I read some descriptions on a website and those were nasty.”

“So a typical one went like this. For a guy. The teacher had him sit in the front, facing the class. He was asked if he wanted solo or help.”

“Solo meaning masturbation.”

Peter nodded. “Yeah. The first one I remember, the kid was nervous but his cock was so hard, it was almost red in color. There had been some girls in the hall teasing him just before.”

“It sounds like the Program wasn’t so terrible for some kids, then.”

Peter shook his head “no,” but then went on, “That’s not it. It wasn’t only the negative emotions that I felt. I was sensitive to really strong positive ones too, and it was the tension between positive and negative that would overload my ability to cope. This one time, it was the first I really watched, made an indelible impression on me. I can’t forget what I saw—I can see it even now when I close my eyes. The guy wanted to get help, so the teacher got a girl volunteer to come get him off. He spread his legs and slumped down in the chair and she took his cock, starting to pump it slowly up and down. His head rolled back and he groaned; then she put her mouth near the tip of his cock and licked the head, then up and down the sides. Finally she put it into her mouth and began sucking and he began bouncing his hips and groaning. Then he howled and she jerked her head back as a jet of cum hit her chin, but then she shoved him back into her mouth again. He finished in her mouth. I could tell since I saw some of his cum dribble out of the corner of her mouth when she walked back to her seat.”

“So the girls just did that?” Tamara asked in disbelief. “Just gave blowjobs in public?”

“Well, think about it. I overheard a girl talking to a friend, saying that it was cool that she could do things with boys, seeing so many naked ones and trying stuff on them, with no risk to herself. Not like if she were on a date and didn’t want to be touched, herself. Looking on the Program that way, I suppose some kids thought it was okay. Except when they had to be the naked ones.”

“That makes sense, in a really twisted way. The girls got a chance to handle a lot of penises with no danger of being forced into having sex,” Tamara agreed. “Did girls do the ... ah, relief thing too?”

“Not as much as boys, but yeah. I remember a few times, but there wasn’t much to see. Guys had their faces in gals’ crotches. Again, I was suffering with all the emotions in the room. Um, yeah, one time in ninth grade, the health teacher did one session with a boy and girl, a quite timid little thing; he made them pose to show their parts. The girl was completely petrified, especially when he told the boy to do oral sex on her. It was crazy; he actually had a camera and projector set up and had the boy take a position so the camera had a close-up view.

“He wanted to show foreplay too so he had the kid start to massage her breasts. Gently, he told him.”

“Um, yes, gently,” Tamara agreed.

“Then he began taking her nipples in his mouth and started to suck on them. The teacher said to fondle her genitals then, so he started to rub his fingers up and down her vaginal slit. The teacher zoomed in the camera on that and we could see his finger begin to massage her clit.”

“Hey, you enjoyed seeing that. Otherwise how would you remember such detail?”

“Guilty as charged. I was still a teen-aged boy, right? Even a bit messed up, seeing that was exciting—but a lot of the feeling came from people around me. I was feeling their excitement too.”

“Sounds about right, I guess,” Tamara agreed. “What then? Jeez, this is turning me on now.”

He looked at her. “Really? Then we...”

“Shaddup and continue.”

“Then he started using his mouth on her and the teacher got the camera right into her crotch too. So we could see the kid licking her vulva and clit and his fingers rubbing her between her lips. She still had her cherry ‘cause when the kid pushed there, she screeched. She was moaning a lot but I’m sure he didn’t get her off. The teacher stopped him and asked the kids in the class to come up for a closer look and to touch her vulva to see how slippery it was. The girl started howling and curled up into a fetal position, crying. I started to get sick again, but the teacher relented and stopped that session with her. That was awful too, but especially the feelings of disappointment I could feel in the room made me feel even worse.”

“Poor girl. Was she okay after that?” Tamara asked.

“Truthfully? Sorry to say, I really didn’t notice. I sort of shuffled my way around from class to class, trying not to see stuff going on around me.”

“Where was Amy when this was happening?”

“Oh, I didn’t mention. We shared classes. Small school, remember? I think her empathic sense wasn’t like mine. As strong. She’d curl up in her seat and not watch that crap. I told her if it got too difficult, she should pretend a seizure or something. The teachers always let her leave when they saw her pale and shaking. I think that they didn’t want to face us vomiting on their floors.”

“That was a good thought and protecting her must have helped you. That’s an... I don’t know what to call it... an awful bunch of experiences to go through. But more vomiting? Where did the vomiting reputation come from? Besides when you were in that first assembly.”

“Oh, that happened enough that I got the reputation for having that problem, and it would trigger Amy too. Sometime during my first freshman month, we had one health-class session that I thought was strange when I went into the room. Instead of desks and chairs, the room was filled with those big gym mats. When we walked in, I noticed that the teacher had written on the board that it was a class to learn about the opposite sexes’ genitalia. We all had to strip naked and get a number from a bowl at the front, a blue bowl for boys, pink for girls. Matching numbers were partners. We were going to work with our partners for a guided exploration of their sexes and then we would have to give the partner an orgasm.

“When we read that, all the kids began to moan and some began crying. I felt the emotions crash over me and got sick again; I threw up all over a few mats. You ever hear about sympathetic vomiting? That’s a real thing. It happens to empathic people. Well, I learned that a number of my classmates were pretty empathic that day, in addition to Amy. My vomiting set off at least five or six others and chaos resulted. They had to clear the room to get it cleaned and aired out, and all the vomiters got sent to the nurse and were sent home. My folks kept me home for several days because I was an emotional wreck, so I missed the make-up class. So did Amy. I never heard what happened in it. Fortunately.”

“Jeez. How they could pack that much misery into a high school is amazing. I’m so glad that the Program never got started in my school. Say, the timing’s about right—the Program person at your school sounds like he was doing his best to terrorize the kids. You know about the sex-traffickers’ scandal with the Program, right?”

“Yeah. The uproar around here was huge—it was crazy. Lots of government employees live all around this area—in the D.C. suburbs area, I mean, where I lived. Do I think that he was in that group?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s possible. He didn’t have a noticeable accent and didn’t have a obvious Slavic or whatever name. So I really don’t know. So, sweetie, now that I’ve revealed all, it’s your turn.”

“A long time ago in a country far away...”

“Cut it out! Are you playing with me?”

Tamara giggled. “So, you know I’m from Haiti?”

“Well, yeah. You’ve mentioned that a time or dozen before.”

“So that qualifies as ‘a country far away,’ and at my advanced age...” Peter snorted at that, “...I consider it a long time ago.”

“Okay, miss ‘once-upon-a-time,’ let the fairy tale begin,” Peter smiled.

“Well, to hear my parents, when they met, it *was* a fairy tale.”

“Grrr. Are you stalling?” Peter asked.

“Nope. Testing your sense of humor. After your story, I can still feel your tension,” Tamara said. “And you still have a feeling of shame. Before we get to myself, let’s talk about you a little more.”

“Damn, you sound like my shrink.”

“I have my mom to thank for that. She does counseling as part of her religious ministrations.”

“Oh really? Is she a church pastor or minister? You never said.”

“Okay, then this could be a shock. Translating it to English, she’s the priestess of her temple and our religion is called ‘Vodou.’ Not *voodoo*, like in Hollywood; that stuff’s all made up crap. Vodou means ‘spirit’ or ‘deity’ in the African Fon language where most of our ancestors came from. And Vodou is really just folk Catholicism. We have similar practices and their saints are equivalent to our spirits, the ones who guide us.”

“Wow, that’s crazy. My mind is now officially blown,” Peter grinned. “So that’s a regular religion?”

“Oh yeah. It’s just gotten a bad rep—mainly as a result of southern slavery in the U.S. when the slaves in Haiti successfully revolted there and became free. Scared the hell out of the southern slaveholders back in the early 1800s so they made up lies about the nasty religion that the former Haitian slaves practiced. People still believe a lot of those lies and Hollywood capitalized on them. So did New Orleans, too; they use Voodoo as a tourist attraction. But Mom is a *manbo*, a kind of priestess, that’s like a spiritual guide, and she knows how to work with people to calm their fears and learn to deal with their life problems. I learned a lot from her. That’s how I can sense your emotional vibes; that, plus some other things. So how were you able to become a cheerful, outgoing genius after the experiences and shocks you went through?”

“So the most important thing was the love and support my sister gave me and my folks were right there too,” Peter replied. “I had to go through three more years of seeing that Program shit at my school, but a tremendous worry was gone—although I lost my soul-mate Amy, I didn’t have her there to worry about, and it turned out that she was an emotion amplifier for me. I didn’t realize how much of an overload she was dumping on me when she was dealing with her own problems. With her not in school, I could tolerate what I saw, and stayed away from where I’d be exposed to more than I could handle. For example, I never went to another Program



assembly thing; my parents arranged an excused absence for me for every one of those. Oh. And Barbara was never picked either. I think the officials assumed that the police warning for messing with me applied to her too.”

“Yes, I can see that loving support is a big factor in people’s emotional recovery. It’s probably the most important one.”

Peter nodded. “It absolutely is. So after I escaped having to finish my Program week, I really withdrew to my books. I also vowed that I would never let anyone manhandle me, like when they stripped me, so I got Dad to get me martial arts lessons. He did and Barbara took them too. My sensei got me started on lifting weights to tone my body—but not weightlifting to build mass, it was to develop mobility, balance, and speed. And he got me running to build my stamina. Those things, plus the friends I made at the dojo, went a long way to help me build confidence.

“But the biggest change came when I first started at the dojo. It was learning meditation. Sensei told me that I needed to be in touch with myself and he could see that my inner conflicts were ‘disturbing your qi,’ as he put it. He set me up with a *senpai*, a senior student of his, a guy in his late 20s, and he got me started in finding my own personal way of meditating. And my shrink built on that. He would tell me one of the triggers that would set off my withdrawal and how to confront that trigger while I was meditating. He did that, a little at a time, until I saw what he was doing. I later found out that this is a technique they use to help people with severe anxiety or even panic attacks. Not specifically meditation, but positive thinking and breathing control—both biggies in meditation.”

“A kind of meditation is also part of our worship services. It’s important to have the mind in touch with the body so you can be receptive to the body’s needs,” Tamara pointed out.

“Damn, that’s awesome! You learned that?”

“I did, even as early as eight. I don’t even think of doing it now, doing it’s become a subconscious habit.”

“Wow, for me too,” Peter said reverently.

“So you did get to make friends, then,” Tamara stated.

“Yeah, just not in my school. I think I mentioned that the school was a huge trigger and seeing Program stuff all the time, I could barely stand being there. Fortunately, Hopkins has these great programs for high schoolers, and I was so advanced that I qualified for them early. That got me out of that school a lot.”

“Right, and Emma told me that, during all her teaching years, she’s seen a huge dropoff in achievement in kids who come to Hopkins from schools with the Program. So I guess getting yourself out of that environment did good things for both your mental state as well as your learning.”

“Absolutely.”

The couple had been talking the entire time they were going through the museum and while having lunch, with the only pauses in their intense discussion coming when they wanted to comment on an exhibit. Now that they had seen everything they were interested in, it was time to leave.

“Say, let’s not waste the rest of our date, honey,” Peter said. “How about let’s have dinner?”

“Love it, there’s also that new indie romantic movie that’s been out for a few weeks. Kids are talking about it. Wanna see it?”

“Okay. I heard about it. In the Charles Street theater?” Peter asked.

“Yeah.”

“Lemme look it up... okay, an 8:15 p.m. show. Let me get the tix... okay, done. We have time for a nice unrushed dinner.”

They went to a restaurant where they could eat a leisurely dinner and not be rushed out. Tamara continued the discussion they had left off at the museum.

“So I had a lovely childhood, kind of carefree. I also loved books and was an early reader—in French and English. We spoke French at home; Dad knew *Kreyòl* but wasn’t comfortable speaking it. He grew up speaking French at home and English in school—lived in Miami then. I found science and got hooked; it seemed like I understood stuff as soon as I read it, so the teachers in the elementary school I was in left me to my own business. They had lots of kids who needed help more than me. There was even a small college near my home and they let me stay in some classes there to listen.

“Then we had an earthquake and my home was destroyed and Mom and I got badly injured. My mom had also become a target for someone who wanted her for an anti-government plot and threatened to harm her. Dad and his cousin got us safe and we were able to get to Miami for medical care. I was home schooled for a little less than a year, then started middle school—oops, let me back up a bit.

“I told you Mom’s a Vodou priestess but she got qualified in Miami as a nurse’s assistant and works for the Miami VA hospital. That’s where we got treated. I also got enrolled in an MRI study at the medical school there and the doc kinda adopted me. Or maybe I adopted him. Anyway, I went to work in his lab as a student and got college research credits for that work. That gave me access to an electronics lab too. When I started school—it was middle school, even though I was only eleven—that’s when I discovered naked kids going to school. That was that incredibly stupid Stripped in Florida program. You must have heard of that?”

“Yeah,” Peter answered. “I did hear about it but could never figure out why parents would do that to their kids. Seems to me that it borders on child abuse.”

“It sure does. When I asked the naked kids about it, most didn’t want to discuss it. They were too embarrassed, but I learned the major reasons kids were put in it were either as some kind of punishment, or to try to make shy kids more outgoing, or that it was somehow ‘cute’ to have your kid being naked all the time.”

“Crazy. Those all sound like total bullshit to me,” Peter muttered.

“So that’s when my science got an immediate purpose and when I suppose I became an engineer,” Tamara told him. “My home-school teacher told me about how the state tried to enforce the nudity for the kids who were ‘stripped.’”

“I heard they had a chip implanted? Is that how they could tell?”

“Exactly. There was a whole expensive infrastructure built around those chips. With my electronics knowledge, and the stuff I could use in the electronics lab, I thought of how to make a gadget to overload the chips. So I bought a really cheap disposable camera and used its flash electronics to make a circuit that would generate a strong EMF pulse. It worked, so I used it all over my neighborhood. It not only killed the chips; it also burned out the antenna circuits of the devices that were supposed to detect the violators. In maybe two years, there weren’t any more naked kids in my whole area of Miami.”

“You didn’t put that in your Clarke app, I’m assuming,” Peter joked. “You didn’t get into trouble for doing that?”

“One time some officials put two and two together, but couldn’t do anything, ‘cause they got into a big ‘disagreement’...” she made finger quotes “...and left before they could do anything. Then somehow it got

dropped,” she said, grinning.

“Ah, I see. And ... um... the ‘disagreement’ ... that was you, then?”

“Can’t say. If I told you what happened, then I’d have to kill you,” Tamara said, laughing. “Seriously, I need to spend a little time thinking about what I did in my misguided youth and how much to tell you about it. I actually broke a lot of laws—with the full concurrence of my parents, by the way. It was to correct a badly tilted balance of power.”

“Now I’m really intrigued. There’s a lot of mischief in that pretty, innocent little head, I’m sure,” Peter grinned.

“I’ll tell you more soon, but not tonight. Virtually no one knows what I did, and I’d like to keep my secrets safe. I sense I can trust you, but there are some more things I need to figure out. Sound okay? You’re not annoyed at me, I sense curiosity but not frustration.”

“Goddamn, Tamara. You’re a walking lie detector... anyone ever tell you that?”

She grinned. “Many, many times.”

“Okay. Just so you know. Hey, I’m ready again to try to do our conversation in French,” Peter responded.

“*D’accord, voyons comment vous vous améliorez, alors,*” Tamara remarked. [“Okay, let’s see how you’re improving, then.”]

“*Allez-vous me donner une note?*” he asked and she laughed. [“Are you going to give me a grade?”]

They left for the movie theater.

### Chapter 34 - Letting Go

When the movie ended, Tamara and Peter decided to stop off at a coffee shop for a quick latte and to discuss the movie. They were still speaking French to help Peter with learning more vocabulary, but a few idioms were still escaping him.

“*C’était une douce romance*,” Tamara said as she sipped her drink. “*Mais je pense que toute cette nudité était un peu artificielle, tu penses?*” [That was a sweet romance, but I think all that nudity was a little contrived, do you think?]

“*Ouais, et comment ils font en sorte que les acteurs acceptent de faire des scènes de nu. Je suppose que les mecs doivent avoir des érections; vous remarquez comment les... um, camera angles? et les, ah... cuts? ont été faits pour suggérer plutôt que pour montrer des choses?*” Peter replied. [Yeah, and how they get actors to agree to do nude scenes. I suppose the guys must get erections; you notice how the camera angles and cuts were done to suggest rather than show stuff?]

Tamara told him the words he didn’t know. Then, she asked, “*Et les scènes du parc nudiste. Est-ce que ces choses étaient réelles—comme si des trucs comme ça se passaient vraiment là-bas?*” [And the scenes at the nudist park. Were those real—like does stuff like that really go on there?]

Peter chuckled. “I got that, but I’m gonna give up again for now—it’s getting difficult to concentrate. English again, please?”

Tamara nodded, grinning. “But you’re getting better and that’s good.”

Peter continued, “At my resort? Stuff does go on, but in private, just like real life. A lot of the movie was just fine. The pool, the sports, stuff like that, they were okay. But even though the park in the movie was supposed to be a family resort, did you notice anyone who looked younger than their mid-twenties?”

“No, interesting. Ah, they can’t show underage nudity, I’m sure. But group sex going on in the hot tub like that? Does that happen?”

“Ha. Not that I’ve ever heard about, but it could happen. At my resort, Barbara and I do know about a few swinger couples who sometimes show up but they’re very discreet. Our hot tub isn’t in a high-traffic area, so what happens late at night—who knows? Um, if something naughty was happening regularly, we kids there would’ve found out real quick, and I never heard about anybody getting caught. Damn, but going to that place is *so* much fun! Oh yeah, that reminds me. I forgot to mention, but now that we’re on that topic, Barbara and I, and all of our cousins—you haven’t met any of them—plan to go to the resort for two to three weeks in mid-August. I’d like it if you’d think about going. It’s a true nudist place, not clothing-optional, and not like the resort Emma goes to where the pool and spa are the only nudity-required areas.”

“Um, I’ll need to think about it first. I may want to talk to Barbara too. And to Emma. I was kinda uncomfortable when I was at her place and visualized my stripping, so I need to find out how she did it herself.”

“Sure.”

They finished up and left for their building.

“Hey, why not stop by my apartment now and you can talk to Barbara,” Peter said as they went into their building.

But when they got to Peter’s apartment, Barbara wasn’t there.

“Guess she’s still... Oh, here’s a note from her.” Peter read the note. “Says she went home and will be back tomorrow. She needed to get one of her nice dresses for that department event she’s going to. What are you

looking at...?”

Tamara had found a photo album and was leafing through it.

“What’s that doing out here? Oh, Barbara must have been looking for a picture, maybe one with the dress she went home for,” Peter said and then noticed that Tamara was looking at a page of nude photos.

“These are really nice—the place is lovely,” Tamara said. “You were how old here? Sixteen?”

He looked. “Yeah, a year or two after my Program torture began.” He looked at a few photos and shuddered. “Look at my face. Not the other parts.”

Tamara giggled, “The other parts look too good not to look at. Oh, I see. You look haggard.”

Tamara felt a wave of embarrassment and grief flow from him so she stood up and hugged him.

“Yeah, it happened and it was bad, but you’ve recovered and it’s all over,” she whispered in his ear. “I know sometimes stuff triggers bad memories but remember, just think of the present, not the past. It’s hard to learn that, but my dad told me all about his PTSD from combat and how he chases the demons away.”

She “pushed” a tiny bit of light green taste to him and he sighed.

“Ahhh, you’re doing that calming thing again. God, Tamara, you’re such a sweet doll; I don’t deserve you.”

Tamara pulled him into a kiss. “Peter, you deserve the best. I’m nowhere the best, but I hope you like me.”

“Mmmmm, I like you a whole lot and in my book, you’re way the best,” he said into her mouth as their tongues wrestled each other’s.

Tamara slipped her hands under his shirt to feel his bare skin.

“Ahh, I’ve wanted to do that ever since Emma’s barbeque,” she sighed. “And that frikkin’ movie turned me on, ‘cause it made me think of you walking around there all naked and everything.”

She pulled up on his shirt. “C’mon, take it off. I want to feel your body.”

Soon they were kissing passionately and had sunk down onto the couch. Tamara kicked off her sandals and reached down to pull off Peter’s slip-ons.

“So we won’t get the couch fabric dirty...” Tamara said between kisses.

After a minute, Peter sat up.

“This is uncomfortable, sweetheart. Would you like... I mean... is it... can we go to my room? If it’s okay?”

“Uh huh. It’s okay.”

He got up and pulled her arms up. Holding hands, they walked into Peter’s bedroom. Tamara’s heart was pounding so hard she could almost feel her eyes throb.

*Will we do it, now? Will he want to? Will I want to?* The thoughts raced through her head.

Tamara stopped and turned him around to face her, with the back of Peter’s legs almost touching his bed. She rubbed his bare chest sensuously, circling his nipples.

“I’ve wanted to do that ever since we were at Emma’s,” she breathed.

“You’re incredible, Tamara. I’m so lucky we met, and even luckier that you like me.”

Tamara smiled at him and caressed his cheek. “You know that we can feel each other’s emotions,” she said.

“We must have been brought together for a reason. And I’m lucky that you like me.”

Peter took Tamara’s face in his hands and looked into her eyes as she looked back at him.

*It’s like I’m seeing his eyes for the first time, she thought. I never realized what an intense look he has; looking in his eyes, it feels like I could fall into them, so deep and dark.*

Their lips met for a kiss; gentle at first but then it grew intense. Tamara began to feel her nipples stiffening, then tingling, and a hot feeling began to flow from them downward.

*Jeez, and he hasn’t even touched me yet, she thought. Please, touch me, please.*

As if he could read her mind, Peter’s hand dropped to her chest and caressed her there as their kiss continued. She pushed herself into his hand to intensify the feeling.

“Tamara? Is it okay?” he asked, fingering a button on her top.

“Yeah... You can.”

Peter undid a few buttons; then Tamara grabbed the bottom hem of her top and pulled it up over her head with one movement. Then with a deft twist, she unclasped her bra and let it slip off her shoulders.

Peter pulled back and looked appreciatively. Her shapely breasts—a full B-cup, he thought—stood out proudly from her chest and her nipples poked out, looking like tall thimbles sitting on the prominent cones of her areola. Her almond skin glowed like burnished gold.

“Jesus, Tamara,” he breathed, “they’re incredible. You’re incredible. None of the naked girls in high school looked anything like you... or at the resort either...”

Tamara laughed, “Your mind was clear enough to notice their tits, then.”

“Well, yeah, um...”

She silenced him with a kiss. Then, looking him in the eyes, she slipped her hands around him, slid them under the waistband of his shorts, and grasped his buttocks. She had also wanted to do that ever since he had stripped at Emma’s. She wasn’t disappointed. She ran her palms over his smooth, silky skin and rock-hard muscles. She caressed him, sliding her hands all around his buttocks and into the crevasse between them. He sighed as her hands explored.

Meanwhile, Peter’s hands played with her breasts, his fingers tweaking her nipples. Tamara’s breathing started to become erratic.

*He’s gonna make me cum just rubbing my boobies!* She realized and pulled away, eliciting a complaining moan.

As she pulled away, she pulled down on his shorts and they, plus his underwear, slipped off his hips, only to get stopped by the large tent poking them out in the front.

*Woo, gonna see that erection now with no water in the way!* she rejoiced.

She pulled the waistbands forward and down, letting both garments fall to the floor. Peter stood there naked as Tamara feasted her eyes on his taut body. She loved his muscle definition, his sleek body lines, the way the muscles over his hips tapered in toward his groin, the way the line of light hair led the eye from his navel down to...

*Ohmygod, it’s huge! And stiff and hard, curving up like that. It’s gotta be over six inches! Thick too, double his soft size?*

Peter brought her out of her daze.

“That’s a real ego boost, sweetie, how you’re, um, ravishing me with your eyes. It’s just a standard-issue boy body, all average—well, a bit thin. A lot of the kids in high school looked kinda like me, a skinny geek.”

“You can’t tell me that monster’s average,” Tamara rejoined, pointing down.

Peter laughed. “Sorry, sweetheart. I’m a little less than six inches. I checked, that’s in about the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile. The seven-inchers plus you may hear about are in the 98<sup>th</sup> percentile. I’m close to average down there too.”

“Well, there’s nothing average about your brain, then. And that was what first attracted me to you.”

Peter laughed hard. “This is so crazy. Are we truly geeks or what? Here we are, making out like the horny kids we are, and we stop to discuss statistics? C’mere, doll. Can I do the great reveal on you? Ever since we were at Emma’s, I’ve been lusting to see all of your delicious body.”

But Tamara pulled him into a crushing hug and kiss first, reveling in the feeling of her rigid nipples boring into Peter’s chest. Then she pushed back.

“*Vas-y, fais la fête*,” Tamara told him, then, “Oops, ‘go ahead; have a party,’ I meant to say. When my emotions start rising, I tend to think in French.”

Peter hooked his thumbs in Tamara’s shorts and pulled them down, leaving her panties on.

“I fantasized about this, darling. I wanted to see you in panties only, first. Am I a pervert?”

“No, I think it’s cute. Maybe because it’s something forbidden. How’s this different than a bikini bottom?”

He shook his head, then ran his hands over her buttocks over the panties and she shivered.

“Wow,” she said. “I got a tingle from that. Very erotic.”

Then Peter pushed her panties down, looked at her pubis, which was closely trimmed, and sighed.

“My god, so gorgeous. Words fail me.”

They moved into another hug but this time, Tamara’s hand quested for and found Peter’s penis. She put her hand around it reverently. Her fingers barely met when she encircled its girth. Meanwhile, Peter’s hand had gently slid between her legs and his fingers pushed up into her vulva, insinuating them between her lips. She was soaked; her juices began flowing along his fingers into his palm. Then he found her clit and brushed it gently. Tamara groaned as she shuddered a little.

“Was that...?” Peter asked.

“I had a little orgasm,” she confirmed. “You’re very gentle. Learn that in the Program?”

Peter snorted. “Sure. I had lots of practice. I didn’t tell you some of the other stuff that happened. Maybe I’ll be able to soon. Being with you is healing my soul, darling.”

Tamara felt his emotions confirming his words and some tears formed unbidden in her eyes. She tamped down her empathic senses a bit to recover her erotic feelings. That’s when Peter dropped his head and began to suckle on her nipples, alternating between sides, and they stiffened and elongated even more, becoming fat, now projecting almost an inch out from their areola.

Tamara felt like another orgasm was building but she wanted to delay it, so she pushed his head away and grabbed him for another kiss. As they kissed, Peter pulled her along with him as he backed into his bed, holding her as he sat down and lay back.

“Ugh,” she grunted as she wound up flat against his chest. Then he rolled her off him onto her back with her legs hanging off the side of the bed. He moved off the bed, squatting at her knees, pushing them apart and leaning in, breathing in her scent. Tamara’s thighs were coated with a sheen of her juices.

Peter stared at the thrilling sight of her vulva. A twinge of disappointment crossed his mind that this was one of the parts of the Program that he had missed out on; exploring the vulvas of helpless girls as they lay on tables in front of classrooms... *stop ... it's just another bad memory*. He wasn’t going to dwell on those memories anymore; that terror was over. He concentrated on the wonderful view in front of him.

Tamara’s outer labia were already bright pink, swollen, and had opened enough to allow the engorged inner labia to poke out. He could see the little pea-shaped bump of her clitoris peeking out from its protecting tissues. Peter leaned in and began to kiss and lick her vulva, causing Tamara to jerk and hiss with surprise.

“What are you doi—oh, shit! Oh, oh, ohmygod, oh OH!”

Peter grinned to himself and with his lips, took her clit between them and sucked lightly. She screeched. Then, using his fingers, he parted her lips and began lapping her entire perineum from her anus to her clit, over and over. He had wondered about the taste—it was a bit funky, but since it was Tamara, that was okay. He tried licking the little star of her anus, worming his tongue into it, and was rewarded by another shriek as her thighs slammed against his ears.

“Peter—that was nasty!” he heard, his ears muffled by her thighs.

So he tickled his tongue there again to see if she meant it, and Tamara’s legs spread even wider as she moaned, “Mmm... ahhhh...”

Then Peter left her anus and started lapping her vulva again, beginning at her vagina, using his flattened tongue, working it between her inner lips while stroking his fingers between her inner and outer lips. He noticed that her hymen was still intact but it only covered about half of the passage behind it. He carefully tried sliding a moistened finger through the hole but after he pushed it in an inch, he heard, “Ouch. You poked in my vaj?”

“Yeah,” his mouth muffled by her vulva. “Sorry.”

He redoubled his efforts on her vulva, doing the things that had made her squeal before and she began panting and squirming, trying to use her hands on his head to pull his mouth tighter into herself. Tamara’s vulva was so soaked now, that his fingers made squishy sounds as he caressed her; her juices were flowing so freely that little rivulets were running down her buttocks.

Tamara was moaning constantly now; her head was thrashing side to side, and she was rocking her pelvis up into his face, so Peter decided it was time to see if he could make her cum. He remembered that her clit seemed to be sensitive, so he tried sucking it in between his lips and using his tongue tip to tickle it.

Tamara began to wail, a high pitched squeal, and when Peter lightly bit her clit with his teeth, she erupted. She let out a howl and her entire lower body convulsed in a huge spasm and a little stream of earthy-tasting fluid jetted out of... where? Peter couldn’t tell because his lower face was bathed in it as he kept lightly wiggling his teeth on her clit.

Tamara howled and jerked as Peter held onto her hips, riding her through what must have been the grandmother of all orgasms. He stopped using his teeth because of her jerking and thrashing around, but he could still use his lips to latch onto her clit again and suck hard... then he thought... I’ll hum! He began humming as he sucked and ticked her clit, which was now so engorged that it was noticeably erect.

Peter could feel her orgasm go on and on as one contraction of her pelvis after another wracked her entire body. Then Tamara’s howls turned into gasps, then moans, and suddenly she lay there, inert, panting. Then a few



additional shudders shook her.

Peter's jaw ached, but he crawled up to her face and went to kiss her. She lay there, panting and glassy-eyed.

"What did you do to me?" She panted. "I never felt anything like... umpf..."

He had tried to kiss her.

"Wait, is that me on your face?"

"Uh huh. The taste is fine. It's all you."

"Well... try kissing again, but if I don't like it..."

"I'll stop."

They kissed and Tamara didn't pull away, although she thought her own taste was weird—like a stale dishtowel.

"Damn, sweetie, I've found my soul-mate," Peter sighed, looking at his lover with an intense expression. "*Je t'aime tellement que ça fait mal quand nous sommes séparés,*" he said, again trying his French [I love you so much it hurts when we're apart.] He went on, "Yeah, I love you so much—I think of you all the time too. Please tell me that you like me too."

Tamara looked at his sad puppy-dog expression and grabbed him for another kiss.

When she pulled away, she told him, "Sure, you dummy; can't you tell? *Je t'aime aussi, mais c'est aussi agréable de l'entendre beaucoup.* [I love you too, but it's also nice to hear it a lot.] Your French is getting better; so you say that it hurts to be apart from me?"

"For sure, yeah, it hurts. And yeah, I'll do what you said, too, and tell you I love you lots." Peter assured her.

"So darling... just before you sent me into orbit with that golden tongue, when you got between my legs and stared at my pussy, I felt a sudden tinge of sorrow or disappointment..."

"Oh god, sweetie! Not at you! It was a shadow of a bad memory that popped up from the shit I saw in the Program. A stupid feeling about how I had missed out on lots of free sex, but as soon as that thought appeared, it was gone, thank god. What I remember from those days are hollow memories and nothing I could have possibly imagined can compare with what we just did here. You're a sex firecracker, you know." Peter said. "The memories are there and you're helping me to forget how bad they were."

Tamara grabbed him for a sympathetic hug, and after another round of hungry kissing, Peter looked at her and hesitantly asked, "Are you disturbed when I compare what I've seen in the Program to how you make me feel?"

"No... I think that telling me those things helps you deal with your memories, so it's all good. But you did me so ... wow. Like you had lots of experience."

"Other than those two Program days as a zombie, no girl has ever touched me. Our kissing before was my first truly romantic kiss. I might admit to a little Porn 101 on the internet, but that's totally empty of feeling. About the feeling, with my empathy, I could sense your pleasure when I did stuff and your responses helped me to keep pushing your sensations higher and higher."

"My first real kisses were with you too, darling."

Tamara felt a wet sensation on her leg and glanced down. Peter's rigid penis was lying on her thigh and fluid was dribbling out of its hole.

"Oh my god, my poor honey!" she exclaimed. "You look like you're in need... um ... but I've never done..."

Peter smiled and kissed her, leaning up. “I’ll guide you, but somehow I think you’ll know what to do. Just follow your instincts and go where your empathy leads you.”

“Okay, sweetie, I hope I can do as good a job as you did.”

Tamara pushed Peter back down onto his back and slid herself down to his chest and caressed his pecs, then she leaned in and took one of Peter’s nipples between her lips and sucked it. She moved across his body and repeated it with his other nipple. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his cock lurch. That delightful organ was her ultimate target; she was lusting after it as soon as she had seen it revealed at Emma’s, and she couldn’t wait to get down to it, but doing a little teasing first seemed the better way. She moved herself down further, and when she got to Peter’s navel, she tickled it with her tongue.

*Now for act two, Tamara thought. But where? I want to see his face when I do it.*

She rose up onto her knees and pushed Peter’s legs apart; then she swung herself over one leg and squatted on her knees between his thighs. She leaned forward over his body, squashing his cock between their bellies, and gave him a quick kiss. Rising up again, she slid lower between Peter’s legs and began licking his inner thighs like a cat, getting ever closer to her target, and watching Peter’s face for cues. He was mesmerized just watching her, and she noticed that his cock, which had flagged a tiny bit when she had repositioned herself, was once again as rigid as an iron rod.

*Now for act three.*

Tamara had licked right up to Peter’s groin; her face was now an inch away from his cock. Grinning, Tamara delicately grasped his cock, squeezed it a bit, and moved it around a little.

*Damn, it’s so stiff and the skin’s so soft and smooth, but it’s like a rock inside.*

Now she started licking the shaft, running her tongue up and down the sides, and stopping on the head to tickle the little hole with the tip of her tongue, while still watching Peter’s face. As she worked her tongue on his glans, his penis twitched and a big blob of precum flowed out of the opening.

*Jeez, it’s kinda sweet, salty, and musky all at once. Not bad though.*

Peter began to moan now and his cock began throbbing as Tamara used her tongue to trace around the glans, tickling its underside, and Peter’s hips began to involuntarily gyrate.

*Here goes nothing.*

Making her lips into an “O,” Tamara slid her mouth over the engorged helmet of Peter’s cock and used the tip of her tongue to flick the pee hole. Then watching his face, she used a couple of fingers to encircle the cock’s base as she plunged her mouth down as far as she could before hitting her gag reflex. Peter grunted in surprise, then groaned as he saw Tamara looking right into his eyes. She began bobbing her head up and down, lashing her tongue around the shaft, while sucking hard and then releasing the suction, over and over.

Peter was groaning continuously now and trying to push his cock deeper into Tamara’s mouth and soon she was taking a third of his length into her mouth. Now she began swirling her tongue around his glans and passing it over the pee hole while holding her lips tightly around the shaft as she sucked.

Tamara noticed that as her tongue moved over the underside of his glans, there was a spot where the skin was a little loose—where the foreskin was attached, she guessed—and Peter’s sensation leaped when her tongue rubbed there.

*Must be like my clit? Let’s see.*

She concentrated on that part, faintly recalling its name, frenulum, possibly, and she began sucking and tickling his frenulum. Then recalling Peter humming on her clit and what it did for her, she started to hum, while sucking and using her tongue. That did it.

Peter tried to warn her but the only thing that came out of his mouth was, “Gaaahh... ahhh... gonna...aagh ... cum ... yaaaggh,” followed by a bellow.

Tamara figured he was close because his body had grown rigid, his hips had stopped thrusting, his balls had contracted, and the fat tube on the bottom of his penis started to bulge. When he roared his release, she could feel the pulses begin and suddenly her mouth was filled with jet after jet of hot semen. She pulled back a little with the first pulse, still keeping the head in her mouth, but the pulses were coming fast so she began swallowing as quickly as she could. Still, some semen escaped and ran down her chin.

Peter’s muscles relaxed as his spasms slowed down and he sunk into the mattress, exhausted. Tamara noticed that his cock was still twitching, and with each twitch, a bit of semen oozed out. She crawled over his leg and sat next to his hip. Peter was panting and gasping.

*Jeez, she thought, that’s hard work... ha, hard! Right. My whole jaw is aching.*

“Oh ... fuck... *pant* ... darling... *aahhh* ... so damned good...”

“Better than that naked Program girl who tried to get you hard, I gather,” Tamara grinned at him.

Peter was getting control of his breathing now.

“Hell, after seeing what you can do, she’s not even in the same universe, sweetheart. And that was your very first BJ? Damn.”

“It was indeed, my dear. I’m so in love with your cock, you know. I love looking at it; just seeing it is an incredible turn-on. I like your body; it’s really nice, but your cock? Just perfect.”

Peter smiled at her. “The way you kept your eyes on mine was a fuckin’ turn-on too—it felt like your eyes were sending me as much pleasure as your mouth and tongue.”

“Well, I really loved doing that, sweetie. I just loved how your cock felt in my mouth as it shot off your stuff like that—it gave my pussy tingles when you came.”

“Damn, really? That’s so crazy. That got you off?”

Tamara smiled at him. “Yeah, it did, a little. Feeling your pleasure got me going too and I think I had a tiny orgasm when you came. I’m flooded down there.”

“I need a kiss,” Peter announced, and Tamara pointed to her mouth. “Don’t care. If it’s okay in your mouth, it’s okay in mine.”

They kissed and snuggled for a few minutes but then drifted off to sleep. That’s how Barbara found them the following morning.

“Hey, Peter, I’m back,” she called. “God, how many times do you need to be reminded... two pair? ...whose sandals are those? Your shirt? Oh, jeez, are you...?”

She knocked on his bedroom door.

“Peter? You in there?”

“Mmmppfff. Uhhhgh... Barbara? Oh!” Peter exclaimed as the door opened.

Tamara smiled and winked at Barbara, waving a little two-fingered “hello” gesture at her. She had woken when she heard Barbara entering the apartment. She lay there, amused, wanting to see how this played out. She looked down at the bed; there was a respectably sized tent pitched at Peter’s midsection.

“Oh. Hi, sis. *Yawn*. Tamara came in with me after our date to ask you about our resort trip next month.”

Tamara giggled. “Jeez, if that wasn’t a classic *non sequitur*, I don’t know what is. Nobody’s embarrassed, it appears.”

Barbara chuckled. “You aren’t either, I see. Caught *en flagrant dilecto*, as long as we’re tossing Latin around. Was he good?”

Peter made a face and Tamara nodded. “We didn’t get to do the nasty but I think that your brother must have the most talented lips and tongue on the planet. He made me cum a dozen times before I lost count. So I vote ‘yes’ for being good. Were you shocked to find me here?”

“Um, saw a girl’s sandals out there and figured *something* had happened,” Barbara answered, then her eyes widened as Tamara got out of the bed.

“Shit, girl, you look like a golden statue... no tan lines...” Barbara started.

“Don’t really tan much,” Tamara interrupted. “But too much sun will burn. The Caribbean sun can be wicked. But thanks...”

She stopped as Barbara whipped the sheet off Peter, whose peter was pointing toward the ceiling.

“Good. I’m glad to see it in full working order,” Barbara joked. “Isn’t it really nice?”

“I just adore it,” Tamara said, grinning and making a back-and-forth hand motion. “When I saw it at Emma’s, I had to restrain myself from grabbing it then.”

“Fuck, you guys, that talk is killin’ me here,” Peter complained. “Tamara, at the resort, Barbara and I’d usually sleep in the same bed, nude. When I went through puberty, my cock was hardly ever completely soft but after my Program experience, I rarely got my morning erection—it’s called ‘morning wood.’”

“Heard the term,” Tamara nodded.

Barbara laughed. “He’s really packin’ the wood now, you did a good thing, girlfriend. Stud, go piss, if you can. That should help it. Tamara, you wanted to talk about the resort?” She nodded. “So freshen up; go use my bathroom. There’s a new toothbrush in the cabinet you can have. Then we’ll whip up some breakfast, okay?”

Several minutes later they were all in the kitchen and Barbara was putting a breakfast together while Peter was getting the items out of the refrigerator.

“Mom, Dad, our aunts and uncles and the cousins are all gathering at the old homestead at the resort,” Barbara said. “Grandpa can’t come; he and Grandma are at some big political thing out west. Gramps and Grams’ll be in Europe still. And hey, I just about got Terence to agree to come too.”

“Jeez,” Tamara said. “I guess that puts the pressure...”

“No, no, no, not,” Peter exclaimed. “I wouldn’t pressure you and I think that they...”

Barbara broke in, “About that; getting nude together. I saw how uncomfortable both you and he were at Emma’s. So I spoke to Terence about your getting used to being nude with others. So Terence wants to talk to you and Emma on Monday. He’s still really unsure of going nude in a group... he’s from a strict southern Baptist family and he says they view public nudity as immoral; it’s a wanton sin. He’s told me about the demonstrations

and picketing that the Baptist church groups would do at the schools with the Program. He told me he's gonna see if Emma can let him do what he called a trial run at her place. You'd be invited. Me and Peter will go for moral support."

Tamara laughed. "Moral? Good one. Hey, the Baptists think nudity's immoral? Then they don't know their Bible's history. John the Baptist dunked his followers in the Jordan River and they were all naked, according to all the early church documents that refer to baptism. A lot of the Renaissance art shows that nudity too."

Barbara stared at her, "Damn, girl, physics and engineering, I get it. But history, religion, and art too? Can I touch you?"

"C'mon, Barbara. I read lots, okay? And I was so effin' advanced in testing out of STEM courses that I had to take electives to fill up the day. So I found I liked history and literature and stuff too and have a good memory. Sure, I know stuff besides science. Okay, I'll give the trial run a trial run."

They all giggled at that.

Breakfast finished, Peter announced that he needed a shower.

"You gals finish your planning for the resort visit and I'll be out quick," he said, and left.

*Do I really, really want to do this—go to their resort? Tamara wondered. Do I really wanna be a nudist?*

## Chapter 35 - The Great Reveal

Barbara watched Peter leave for his shower; then a wicked thought sprang into her mind.

“Quick!” she exclaimed to Tamara. “Go! Get in the shower with him. That’s been his fantasy since forever. When we were younger, he wanted me to wash him in the shower at our resort but I was very reluctant. I love him so much, I’m afraid that I’d get carried away and do something that I’d regret. Go, do it! Hurry!”

Tamara liked the idea. A lot. So she ran into the bathroom while stripping off her clothes. Peter was washing his hair, eyes closed, as she slowly slid the shower door open and slipped in. He felt the cool breeze.

“Wha... Did the door open... Shit! Tamara? Ohgod, ohgod, how’d you know... Barbara must have told you.”

Tamara saw his cock jerk into rigidity, now pointing almost straight up, but she restrained herself from immediately attacking it and treated herself to the joy of soaping his body using her bare hands. She ran them over his shoulders and back, around his front where she caressed his pecs, then to his buttocks where she pushed, prodded and squeezed the muscles. Then reaching between his legs, she soaped up his cock and balls and ran a finger around his anus, tickling it.

Peter was groaning in ecstasy, his long-time fantasy was now finally being fulfilled. He let Tamara turn him around so she could soap up his chest and abs. She stroked and kneaded his pecs and squeezed his little nipples; his cock lurched when she did that. Then she moved her hands to his abs and let them roam over his smooth curves, out to his hips, and around to his buttocks, as she pulled herself close to him and rubbed her firm breasts with their taut nipples against his chest.

She couldn’t wait any longer. Dropping to her knees in front of Peter, Tamara took his rigid cock and pulled it away from his abdomen and without a pause, sunk her mouth down fully onto it. She must have had the right angle, with the rushing water providing great lubrication, because the tip of Peter’s cock passed into her throat without making her gag. Her lips now rested in the light fuzz of Peter’s pubes.

*Fuck! I did it!* she rejoiced. *Now, let’s see if he likes this.*

Breathing through her nose, she lashed her tongue around his cock and applied suction as she slowly pulled her head back, releasing his cock with a *pop*. Peter gasped and his knees shook. She plunged her head down again on his rigid organ and let her tongue play with the frenulum, the part on his penis that she had found last night to be so sensitive. Then she noticed the bottle of body wash on the floor where it had fallen. She let go of his cock but kept sucking it, grabbed the bottle, and squeezed a dollop of soap onto a finger. She brought the finger up to Peter’s anus and thrust it into his rectum up to the second knuckle; then she wiggled it.

Peter howled and she wiggled it again. Peter howled again, louder, and Barbara burst into the bathroom.

“What... Oh shit. Tamara!” she exclaimed. “I thought you were killing him!”

Just then, Peter let go with a roar as Tamara released his cock from her mouth with another loud “pop” and three ropes of cum splashed powerfully into her face as Peter gasped and grunted. There was a pause of a second, and then two more volleys were released. Another pause, and three more followed. Then a river of cum began oozing out of his cock. Tamara nodded with satisfaction and pulled her finger out of his ass.

Barbara was transfixed and stared in awe as Tamara looked at her with a self-satisfied smirk.

“You think I satisfied his fantasy?” she asked as Peter slid bonelessly down to the floor of the shower.

Barbara nodded wordlessly, staring at the scene as Peter tried to catch his breath.

“Oh fuck... *pant, pant* ... you near... *pant* ... killed me ... Never ever cum ... *pant* ... so hard... *pant gasp* ... felt

like ... *gasp* ... my guts were ... *pant* ... pouring out ... *gasp* ... of my dick...”

“Poor baby,” Tamara comforted him, “was that too much for you?”

“Oh no!” he objected. “You can do that ... *pant* ... any time you want ... *pant* ... every day, too!”

Barbara smirked, “I think you created a monster there. Shit, girl, where’d you learn that? I saw all kinds of crazy stuff in the Program, but that just blew my mind! Not one of those girls in school ever got that kind of cum from a guy, ever! Do you give lessons?”

Peter laughed. “Tamara, the sex goddess, *ahhh* ... giving lessons. *Uuuuhh* ... I can see it in lights.”

“Hey, you kids, stop playing now and get all that cum washed off,” Barbara joked. “I’ll be in the living room.”

The two lovers didn’t do any more sexy things; Peter washed Tamara off and they helped each other get dry. A little extra rubbing and patting were engaged in, though. No one complained.

In the living room, Barbara asked Tamara, “Say, girlfriend, for someone who hates nudity—like that Florida Stripped program and Naked in School, and who’s uncertain about visiting a nudist club, you don’t seem to have much personal modesty. Like when I walked in on you two in bed. Or just then, in the shower. So?”

Tamara shrugged. “I guess it’s who I’m with. You’re a friend; you’re safe. I feel really good emotions coming from you and I feel the love you and Peter share. So, in a way, you and Peter are part of the same ... um, emotional construct? You know psych much better than I do.”

“Hmm, I see. There’s this newish theory about ‘constructed emotion’ that argues that emotions are not reactions which are hard-wired in the brain but actually are concepts that get constructed by the brain. Interpretations of experiences that, when combined with memories, produce the particular emotion.”

Tamara nodded. “Makes sense; I think that theory is probably close to the reality. But what I meant is that to me, the emotional entity that is Peter also includes you in a lot of important ways.”

“Ohmygod, you’re gonna make me cry,” Barbara said and stood up to hug Tamara.

They sat again as Peter came in.

“Peter? You okay?” Barbara grinned at him.

“Damn, so crazy; still recovering from the most awesome cum I ever had.”

“Yeah, Barbara, you mentioned seeing crazy stuff. But that was only the second time I ever did that to a guy. Don’t tell me that those other girls weren’t better,” Tamara told her.

“From what I saw, they couldn’t hold your candle, dear. Some of the girls had reps as ‘BJ specialists’ in the school and the boys prayed that those girls would blow them if they could arrange it, like for ‘relief’ in class.

“But there was other crazy stuff too, like the times I saw ‘reasonable requests’ in the lunchroom that turned into couples fucking on the tables. Girl-on-girl action too. Sex in the P.E. showers. I saw one BJ in the girls’ locker room showers where there were three girls taking on a boy; they teased him and worked him up until he was panting. But when he shot off, it was just two squirts and done, plus a little moaning. The girls seemed to be disappointed, ‘cause I heard one say that she had told that kid not to take relief that day; she had a special BJ prepared for him and she wanted him to cum a lot. Crazy stuff like that.”

Peter nodded. “Yeah; I saw a lot of that too. The positive emotions, the anticipation, lust, desire, pleasure, all of that ... and you know, feeling those emotions wasn’t so bad, but they would still get me wiped out. And also they didn’t affect me as badly as the fear, despair, anguish, dread, embarrassment, humiliation, and even

physical pain that happened every single fuckin' week as the new set of victims were sacrificed on the Program altar as they had to endure the crazed student gauntlet looking for fresh meat."

"His words paint a painful picture, Barbara," Tamara told her. "What he just said made me think of Hieronymus Bosch's paintings." At her puzzled look, Tamara said, "Look him up. Dutch painter, late fifteenth century, early sixteenth. Many of the paintings he made show human moral failings; those mostly show nightmarish scenes in hell."

"Damn, Tamara. You're an art critic too. So. On that positive note, Peter, let's see what questions about the resort and next month's visit we can answer for Tamara," Barbara suggested.

*Maybe I can do this, Tamara thought. After all, lots of people seem to be nudists, and if Terence will... hell, I wonder what his bod is like... Um, sorry, Peter... I mustn't be greedy, now.*

The three of them began discussing the resort's activities and facilities and the people who went there. Tamara learned that nudists included people from every possible occupation, and they occupied a wide swath of the social and economic strata. She told the siblings about her brief friendship with a nudist boy at the end of her high school days and his tales about his visiting the Miami nudist beach.

"But did *you* ever go there?" Barbara asked.

"Not to the nude part," Tamara responded. "We did go to the regular swimsuit part though. It was just a beach—a nice one, and people were wearing suits."

Barbara smiled and said, "Nudists call non-nudists 'textiles,' so we call clothed beaches 'textile beaches.' Textile is in the sense of cloth, you know, for clothing."

"But I'm just so nervous about being naked with other people," Tamara sighed. "I think I want to do it, but I still can't get over my hesitant feelings about it."

"Hey, that's a totally natural feeling," Barbara told her. "In one of my psych classes, we used the example of the Naked in School debacle to explore the role of clothes in society and how being forced to remove them caused a tremendous sense of vulnerability. Clothing allows one's mind to create a barrier between people by hiding their natural selves. That's because clothing has become a social marker; wearing clothes—and the kind of clothes we wear—affect the way we see ourselves. So society has instilled in people that the absence of clothes can be perceived as surrendering our sense of morality and becoming vulnerable."

"I saw that in my history readings," Tamara agreed. "In ancient times, conquering armies would strip the defeated people naked and parade them around. Nudity equaled vulnerability."

"Yeah, that was one major source of the perception," Barbara replied. "Social nudism is the direct response in challenging those ideas. Being nude with others reveals our true selves—when one removes her clothes, she also removes all artificial barriers between herself and others. And instead of causing a feeling of vulnerability, nudism gives you a sense of empowerment. A naked person has nothing to hide, it's all there in the open. You can't be judged by anything external, like the quality of your clothes; it's just you."

"What this all boils down to is that your accepting nudism is up to you and you alone. It's overcoming your fear of other people's judgment. Your fear of vulnerability. Your fear of body image issues. It's all in your mind. Because you'll find none of those issues at a nudist resort. Okay, enough, I think. I hope my lecture helps you in deciding what you'll do."

"Thanks, Barbara. That was kinda reassuring, I guess," Tamara told her. "I'll need to think about what you said."



Tamara had just a few more trivial questions, and after they had been answered, she gathered her things to leave. With a hug to Barbara and a huge kiss to Peter, she left for her apartment. She had lots to do and lots to think about.

When she arrived there, she took out her research notes. This coming week would be her first chance to work on the design of the new MRI detector she had envisioned. But she was distracted; her thoughts kept turning back to Peter.

*How much should—or can—I tell him about my abilities?* she mused.

Tamara decided that she needed to meditate to clear her mind. She wished that she were back at home so that she could attend a service to ask the *lwa* for guidance. As she began to let her mind drift away from conscious thoughts and started concentrating on relaxing all her muscles, thoughts not her own seemed to seep unbidden into her awareness.

*The ounfò is not the peristil. The peristil is wherever holiness resides. You are the pwen, the focus of holiness. The peristil is you.*

She lost herself in thought, while trying to maintain focus on the source of those thoughts, but the source was slippery, elusive, and when she felt that she had the source trapped, suddenly it was gone and another of those thoughts appeared, teasing her. She felt the faint whisper of a chuckle. A familiar chuckle. It suddenly came to her: *Papa Legba*! She realized that she had missed the feeling of rapport that she used to have in her mom's services—and now *Papa Legba* was showing her a way to perhaps do it herself? Gradually allowing herself to surface from her meditative state, she whispered a plea of forgiveness to the *lwa* for what she planned to do.

*“The peristil is you,”* the thought had declared.

*How do I do that?* she wondered.

She looked around her small apartment. She would need to improvise. Recalling her mother's ritual preparations, Tamara could provide just the bare essentials. Grabbing a bed sheet from her closet, she spread it on the floor. Then she took a package of baking flour from her pantry and a feather duster, and set those on the sheet. Finally, she took a pitcher and filled it with a little water. As an afterthought, she pulled out a plastic trash bag from its box, opened it flat, and spread it out on one corner of the sheet.

Then she grabbed her phone. She had made a recording of the drumming of the *ountògi* at one of her mom's rituals; that would help her get into the proper mind set. Soon she was ready.

Tamara began by sprinkling the flour on the sheet in a very fine dusting and then, using a few feathers plucked from the duster, traced the outline of *Papa Legba*'s *vevé* in the flour while reciting a remembered prayer. Asking *Legba*'s pardon for lacking a sacrifice and rum and for her improvisations, she pulled the plastic bag over her tracing and sprinkled some water over it. Then she started the recording.

Tamara danced to the sounds of the drumming for what seemed to be hours. She felt first, the presence of *Papa Legba*, who praised her resourcefulness. As his presence faded, she was joined by *Ayizan Velekete*, her guardian, and Tamara felt enveloped by a sense of pride flowing from the *lwa*.

*Pride? In me?* Tamara wondered.

She felt a strongly affirming sense.

Then Tamara began to frame the thoughts of the guidance she sought.

*Can—should—I tell Peter? How much? I think I love him. Is it right for us to love? Then an afterthought. Is it right to go to a nudist place?*

At that last thought, Tamara sensed-heard-felt a chorus of laughs—just how many *lwa* were listening to her, anyway? she wondered. That’s when the warmth of *Erzulie Mansur* enveloped her and Tamara sensed that, indeed, a large number of *lwa* had become aware of something unexpected, a person, not a *manbo* or *oungan*, who had somehow come to the crossroads as a supplicant for advice.

*Erzulie*’s emotional warmth assured Tamara that Peter indeed felt love for her and that the two of them were well suited for each other.

Then Tamara felt the presence of *Ayizan* again as *Erzulie* faded away. *Ayizan* assured Tamara that she could share her secrets with Peter; that Peter himself had abilities which Tamara could unlock. As her presence began to depart from Tamara, *Ayizan* hinted that she was one of the few untrained and uninitiated people who had ever journeyed to the crossroads. She would have made an extraordinary *manbo*, but her role in life was far more important as a scientist.

The drumming stopped then—or had it stopped some time ago? Tamara checked the time. It had stopped about twenty minutes earlier, but for her, it had continued on in her mind as her body was moving to her own internal rhythms.

*Wow, that was frikkin’ intense*, she thought. *I’m so happy that I reconnected with my spiritual guides.*

Suddenly the thought formed in her head, *And you don’t need the special preparations. Your focus is enough. You are a pwen.*

That did it; she began to cry. But now exhausted from her mental efforts, she dropped onto her bed for a nap. Her ringing phone woke her several hours later. It was Nadine.

She answered, “Hi, Mom. Oh! I was supposed to call you an hour ago; sorry.”

“That’s fine, sweetheart. My senses told me that you had quite the experience earlier today. I figured you were exhausted after that.”

“Jeez, Mom, you could sense that?”

“I think most *manbos* and *oungans* felt something, unless they were half-dead. It was a huge disturbance in the spirit world. Not a bad one. But it had the feeling of your presence. Can you tell me about it?”

Tamara explained what she had done; the setup, and about the advice she had gotten.

“Truly, a woman beloved of the *lwa*,” Nadine said after hearing the story. “So you feel like you’ve met your soul-mate in Peter?”

“Yeah, Mom. I could feel it when we first met, actually, but I tried denying it at first. It just seemed to be too easy to be true. But we work together well and think alike, too. He’s an incredibly strong empath and can even feel when I ‘push’ emotions.”

“Um, you don’t...” Nadine began.

“No, no. I haven’t done anything like influencing him. He had an awful high school experience and it scarred his psyche. I’ve comforted him several times when he began to get bad memories and he could feel me doing that.”

“Well, that’s good. So the *lwa* think that you can share your secrets. That means a lot to me about your man, Tamara. Very few of us ever get such definite advice after seeking guidance; much of their guidance comes in riddles.”

Tamara chuckled. “I know, Mom. Been there.”

“Ah, here’s your dad. Love you and we’ll talk next Sunday.”

“Love, Mom and ‘bye. Hi, Dad.”

“Hello, Sugar. You still dating Peter?”

“It’s only last week you asked that, Dad,” Tamara said, exasperated.

Wilson laughed. “I could feel your eye-rolling all the way here. Mom has the full details, I assume.”

“She can give you the scoop, yeah.”

“So this week I looked into what Emma’s ... um, father-in-law, right? said about my uncle.”

“Yep, it’s Stuart Marshall, Dad. He was a colonel or something in the Brit Royal Marines. Now he’s a college prof.”

“He had Uncle Dan’s name correct. It was Daniel Jean-Baptiste. I had no idea he was so decorated; he was really modest. And intense! He worked my ass off. Some of the things he taught me saved my life—my men’s too. I did contact their headquarters in Portsmouth, England and confirmed that Dan was everything you heard about him. Ha, they want me to send my military biography to them; seems they keep ... um... pedigrees of their decorated Marines, listing who they’ve trained and their own decorations. That’s a really small force, but they have an awesome history. Yeah, I’d love to meet Stuart. We might be close in age and I did come across Royal Marine units from time to time. But the officers and enlisted didn’t mix. I’ll see if Mom and I can get time off around the holidays, when you have time off too. We’ll try to come to visit there. I owe a lot of folks in D.C. a visit too.”

“That would be great, Dad. Oh, I gotta make dinner now. I took a nap and overslept. I’ll talk to you next week; love ya.”

“Bye, sweetie.”

~~~~~

The first thing on Monday morning, Tamara met with Emma to discuss Tamara’s research proposal when Terence came in.

“Ah, good, you’re here, Terence,” Emma greeted him. “You mentioned when you rang me Friday last that you were keen to do a trial run, but you seemed nervous and were stumbling in your speech. I gather, from your hesitancy to ask outright, that you want to try nudism and need a friendly place to try it out. Is that it?”

Terence smiled. “Exactly, Emma. Ah had a great time at y’all’s place; so did Barbara. Now she’s asked me to go to her resort next month and all her relatives’ll be there. She said that maybe they’d allow me to wear a swimsuit but Ah don’t want’a be a dork. Also, um, Tamara...”

Face burning, he made a shooing motion for Tamara to speak.

Tamara chuckled. “Yeah, Peter asked me about going too, and I’d rather not be dork number two. Abi said you kinda have Saturday nudist open houses in July?”

Emma grinned. “Ooh, new converts; I love it. We do have people stopping in then, don’t we. As well, they let us know beforehand, so we know who’s coming. And in August, my family goes to our resort. We do cabin rentals there every year. So you want to try social nudism. You said that both your significant others will come with you too, yes?”

They nodded, “Yeah.” ... “Uh huh.”

“Brilliant. I’ll tell you who’ll be coming, later this week, besides my family. Most of our regulars are away this week so there won’t be more than ten, I think, plus Andrew and me and you four. Okay, all set? Good. Tamara and I need to get back to her project.”

### *Mid-June*

It was another week gone and Tamara *still* hadn’t set foot into the lab. Emma was a stern taskmaster and had gone over every one of Tamara’s calculations ... several times. Tamara couldn’t fault her, though; Emma had caught two places where incomplete assumptions changed the limits in area integrations, thus changing the size of the field that the RF generator would produce. Tamara would have caught those problems, but at the cost of a new experimental setup and the delay of a week’s work. She began to have a new appreciation for the value of thorough theoretical pre-planning. Now most of her designs had a sound mathematical basis for their proper function; the remaining parts of her designs needed experimental confirmation of proper field strength and uniformity.

On Emma’s part, she was continually amazed at how strong Tamara’s intuition was for all things electronic. Without doing an entire page of calculations, Tamara could look at a design and be able to tell, within one or two standard deviations, how close the design would come to its theoretical performance. Emma saw that Tamara could visualize an entire system, and in her mind, break it up into the components that would make it function. No wonder she was able to develop ground-breaking devices before she learned the mathematics that governed their performance. Tamara was a true engineering physicist. She just needed to develop a little more patience and to hone a self-critical sense.

Then the weekend arrived.

~~~~~

They went to Emma’s in Barbara’s car again; she was the only one of the four who had a car—not that the others needed one. Public transit in Baltimore was readily available, plus anything that they needed to buy could be found within a few blocks of campus.

When they arrived, they found that they were the first arrivals. For Tamara, that was a relief; she wasn’t looking forward to stripping in front of a group (horrors) or making a naked grand entrance the way Abi did the last time (worse horrors). She was amused to sense the relief that Terence felt when he realized the same thing; the tension in his shoulders let go as he exhaled in a whoosh.

She looked at him as he was getting out of the front seat. “Happy we don’t have to give a show?” she asked.

“Yeah... dang! How’d y’all figure that out?” he asked, surprised.

Barbara laughed. “Tamara’s our human lie detector. She says she can’t do it, but I’m convinced that she’s a mind reader in mufti.”

Andrew welcomed them to his home.

“You lot are the first to arrive. Emma tells me that this visit is your nudism ‘trial run,’ innit? Let me tell you a secret. She was so scared when we drove up to our resort for her first time that she tried to keep her eyes closed. She also didn’t want anyone to think she was staring—but wherever she looked, she started staring!”

Emma came over. “Andrew! Don’t give away our family secrets, now. So since you’re our first guests today, if you get those togs off now, you won’t give a show to our other guests, will you.”

Tamara looked at Terence and winked. “See, Emma’s a mind reader too.”

Emma looked confused. “What did I say? Whose mind am I reading?”

Barbara laughed. “It’s an inside joke, Emma. From a conversation we had in the car. Is there a preferred changing room or area? Or right here?”

“In a hurry, are we now?” Andrew laughed. “There’s a guest bedroom down the hall and that’s the official ‘get starkers’ zone. We even have a clothes tree and hanging rack there for your convenience. Oh, and several Program clothing boxes too, if you want to bring back memories.”

Barbara stared at him. “Shit, really, Andrew? Are you putting us on? Be serious.”

“Ha. I’m totally serious. They really are official Program clothing boxes from my high school, aren’t they.”

Peter looked around at the others. “I guess that I’m the only one here who ever used one, right?”

They all looked at each other and nodded.

“Okay, I’ll look at them and give my verdict. I heard somewhere that the Program office used a standard design.”

They all trooped over to the bedroom, and there, lined up against the far wall, stood three boxes; they were eighteen-inch cubes, painted a bright yellow with the letters “OSA” stenciled on the sides in red. They had a hinged top lid and a locking device.

“Fuck,” Peter exclaimed, “this is crazy; they *are* real!”

“Oh, I’ve seen boxes like that before,” Tamara blurted out.

“You have?” Peter asked, surprised. “I thought your school never had the Program.”

“It didn’t,” she giggled. “But a bunch of those got delivered to my school. They used them to store junk and stuff and I didn’t know that they were supposed to be for the Program. That’s kinda funny, actually.”

“What’s the ‘OSA’ for?” Terence asked.

“It’s for ‘Office of Social Awareness,’ the official name of the national Program office,” Andrew told him. “Nobody called it that; it was a barmy euphemism.”

“So how’d you get them?” Tamara asked.

“It’s a story. My sister Sam nicked them and we wound up with them. She’s coming today and can tell you about it. So are you lot ready to get all bollocks-naked for the Program? Be happy this isn’t your old high school,” he laughed and walked out, calling to them, “When you’re ready, come on out to the patio. Have fun!”

Tamara thought, *Okay, now it’s time for the great reveal*, but then she noticed Peter’s thoughtful look and felt a sense of confusion flowing from him. And she became aware of a strong nervous energy coming from Terence.

“Peter...?” she asked.

“It’s okay,” he assured her. “First I felt a trigger start, seeing those infernal Program boxes. Then seeing them here—uprooted from their former reality—made me feel like I did when I was in my dissociated state. And in an instant, I was back here again, amused that they have those things.”

Terence and Barbara had paused what they were doing and were listening to Peter.

“Bro, that sounds like at least one of your past experiences is no longer a trigger,” Barbara said. “That’s wonderful. Say, Terence is really nervous and I have an idea.”

Terence choked out a shaky laugh. “Damn, Ah feel like Ah used to when Coach told me he was gonna put me in the next play... nervous energy, y’know?”

"I'm feeling a bit nervous too, Barbara. What's your idea?" Tamara asked.

"Let's have each person take one item off the other one," Barbara said. "Tops first."

She turned to Terence. "Do it. And I'll do you."

Tamara took hold of Peter's tee shirt and pulled it off his head and Peter pulled her top off the same way.

The girls, wearing bras, looked at the bare-chested boys and then at each other.

Barbara laughed. "Modification. Boys help with bras."

They turned around to allow the boys access to the bra catches and giggled at their fumbling. A few seconds' of coaching got the job done.

"Shoes and socks?" Barbara asked. "Oh, we all have slippers. Okay, slip 'em off. Then shorts. Boys do us first."

Terence slipped Barbara's shorts down while Peter did Tamara's. Then the girls did the boys. The slow-motion strip tease must have been erotic, because both boys' underpants had huge bulges—but Tamara noticed that Terence's bulge looked enormous. The boys then pulled down their dates' panties; Tamara stepped out of the puddle of cloth made by her shorts and panties and reached for Peter's underpants as she heard Barbara speaking softly.

"Jeezus, Terence, what the hell's inside there?" as she pulled down his underpants, after stretching out the waistband over the bulge. And stretched it out further. And further.

Then, "*OH!*" both Barbara and Tamara exclaimed.

Overall, Terence was a big guy. Interior lineman big. He was six-feet-five-inches tall and weighed around 250 pounds and all of it was chiseled muscle. And his massive size carried over to the size of his penis too; it was simply enormous; mostly flaccid but also somewhat "fluffed," it hung almost halfway down Terence's thigh.

Barbara muttered, "Ohmygod, just wow!"

Terence hung his head; the hurt in his eyes was apparent.

Tamara felt waves of shame flowing from him and thought, *Shit, he expects revulsion and fear from us seeing him. Jeez, he didn't get to choose how big he'd be, body or cock. I gotta say something...*

But Barbara beat her to it. "Terence, honey, don't *EVER* be ashamed of any part of your gorgeous body—even that big boy down there. I think it looks damned amazing and fits your body perfectly."

Terence looked up. "It don't scare or revolt y'all? Really?"

Both Barbara and Tamara chorused, "No way!" and Peter said, "Damn, dude, I'm so envious."

Tamara punched him lightly in the arm. "Yours is just perfect for me, so don't get any ideas that you're inferior."

Terence sighed. "Y'know, Ah've always been a little ashamed of how big Ah'm. In the locker room, lots of guys, like Peter, say they envy me, but every time Ah was with a gal and she felt it—didn't even need to expose it—my size scared 'em off."

"And your cock is the reason you didn't want to get naked last time, right?" Barbara asked.

"Sure. That was why; Ah was afraid of scaring everyone with my cock. When y'all asked me if Ah wanted to strip last week, it 'most freaked me out. The size of my cock actually scared away all'a my prospective girlfriends. When we would make out on dates, they'd rub me, Ah'd get hard, they'd get scared and want

t'stop."

Barbara grinned. "It doesn't scare me. Say, Peter, remember those twins at the resort from about four years ago?"

"Oh, right. Sure. Now, they were really freaks."

She grinned at Terence. "They'd put you to shame. They were even bigger—and nobody was shocked or disgusted. I'm curious, how big do you get... um... damn, that's not a proper question. Forget it."

Terence laughed, relaxed now for the first time all morning. "Huh. Not a lot bigger, actually. Just thicker. Maybe eight inches?"

"Oh, cool," Barbara said. "Say, can we go out now?"

Terence nodded. "Y'all go first, okay? They need t'see me gradually."

*Time to continue my own great reveal*, Tamara thought as she took a big breath and went out the door after Barbara.

## Chapter 36 - Resort Preparations

The four nude teens trooped out through the sun room onto the deck and out to the patio, where Emma was sitting at a table with Gerry, both deep in conversation.

“Oh good, you're here, you lot,” Emma said, turning toward them when she heard them approach as Gerry waved her greeting. “Andrew and Stuart are just getting some more loungers from the garage. The others should be here any time now.”

Tamara wondered how Emma and Gerry would react when they saw Terence's endowment. She noticed Gerry's eyes flick down at Terence's groin but there was no change at all in her expression and her emotional aura remained neutral. Emma just glanced at Terence, her eyes moving up and down as she nodded her head slightly. She pointed toward a cooler and a stack of towels for the newcomers.

“Grab a drink from the cooler and a towel. The towels are to sit on,” she said. “That's a universal nudist custom.”

Tamara had kept an eye on Terence to see how he would react to these new people seeing his size. He had noticed their glances at him and their lack of any reaction. She could sense a feeling of relief flow from him as he relaxed.

They each grabbed a towel, found seats, and Emma drew them into her conversation. Tamara was happy to sit; she wouldn't feel as exposed while sitting.

A few minutes later, they heard voices coming from beyond a gate at the side of the house. Several voices were calling out greetings and there were welcoming shouts in response. A minute later, Andrew and Stuart came through the gate, each carrying a lounge chair, while Abi and Ryan, together with a second couple in their twenties, followed them.

Suddenly Tamara felt a very strong sense of personal presence, very similar to Emma's charisma, as she looked at the new couple.

*Yikes!* Tamara thought. *That charisma may even be stronger than Emma's. It can only be from one of the new people.*

“Hey, you lot,” Abi called. “We're gonna go strip off and be out in a jiff.”

Emma told her guests, “You met Abi and her friend Ryan last week. That was her sister Sam and her fiancé with them.”

Suddenly a breeze wafted through the patio area and Tamara felt it brush her skin. This was a completely new sensation and she once again became acutely aware of her nudity. A sense of being exposed slammed into her and she looked around for something to cover herself. Peter, sitting next to her, reached over to her and took her hand.

“I felt that, sweetie,” he told her. “You got a reminder of your nudity and got self-conscious. It's completely normal; you'll get used to those strange feelings pretty soon and you won't get alarmed.”

“You felt that from me?”

“Uh huh. You kinda broadcast it. Didn't you see Emma look at you with a concerned expression?”

“Um, yeah, but I didn't know why.”

Peter nodded. “She's sensitive to emotions around her too. Why do you think people love her so much? Even her undergrads do. She picks up on how people are feeling and I think she unconsciously broadcasts her



charisma to happy them up. It's that smile too; it has energy in it, I swear. You know, I heard that nobody ever cuts any of her classes."

Tamara saw movement at the house then and Abi came bouncing out.

Tamara chuckled to herself. *Yep, the energy that gal has... bouncing is the right word.*

Ryan and the other guy, both wearing towels wrapped around their waists, followed behind her more sedately but were brushed aside by a blur of motion; a nude girl streaked past them, raced across the deck to the patio, and ran right up to Andrew, grabbing him in a bear hug and kissing him hard. She was the source of the personal presence that Tamara had felt.

"Missed you, Andrew," she breathed as they separated.

"Blimey, Sam, it's only been three weeks," he pointed out.

"Three weeks too long. Hi there, guys," she waved at the four teens who were staring at the scene wonderingly. "Andrew—introduce everyone—jeez, your manners," she laughed.

Andrew shook his head in frustration. "Sure, Sis. Ah, Jay's here now, too. Okay, attention to the front. This streaking fireball here is my sister Samantha—but you'd better call her 'Sam' or you'll get scolded. And with her is her fiancé, Jay Larson."

Jay waved. "Or you can call me 'Jaimison' for short, but not many people do, except my parents," he announced.

Everyone laughed.

"Jaimison? Classy," said Barbara. "Why shorten it?"

"Well, 'cause I can. You know, in 'Guys and Dolls,' Sky Masterson's real name is 'Obadiah,' so I'm on firm footing for wanting a simpler name. So Andrew, who are our guests?"

Andrew rubbed his face, his continued frustration at the newcomers' antics apparent. "Okay, if the comedians will just shut their gobs for a sec, I can finish. Good? Good. The two gals are Tamara and Barbara. Tamara is Emma's student and Barbara's a psych major. The blokes are Peter, Tamara's boyfriend and Barbara's brother, and Terence, Barbara's boyfriend and also a student of Emma's. Any more details than that, get them yourselves."

Sam and Jay walked over to where the four teens were now getting out of their chairs to shake hands and that's when Jay noticed Terence's endowment. He stopped and his face broke out into a huge smile.

"Bro!" he exclaimed, walking over to a confused Terence. "Gimme five!" he said as he whipped off his towel.

Terence had found his match; Jay was even bigger than him.

Tamara felt her jaw drop; this was completely unexpected.

*Hmm. No wonder Terence's size hadn't attracted any undue attention; Jay's size made Terence look like nothing special,* she mused.

Terence, dumfounded, could only follow through and slap Jay's hand before Jay enveloped him in a man hug—and that was when Terence realized that Jay was actually taller than he was—three inches taller.

"Hey man," Terence began. "What...?"

Jay grinned at him. "Sam said this was gonna be your first nudist trial, okay? When she first introduced me to

her family's... um... little hobby, I was petrified. If I was gonna be part of this awesome family, my endowment was obviously gonna be noticed real quick. But even so, I began to come unglued when the time came to drop trou. I thought everyone would call me a freak—the guys in the locker room were merciless—they would look at me strangely all the time and make stupid jokes about me. Sam said not to worry and she was right.”

Stuart and Gerry were back now and were listening in.

“In one of my commands, there was a guy with a big one,” Stuart said. “He was short but built like a tank. Powerful. Nobody thought his size was anything freakish—there was a bit of envy, though. I see that Terence is a big guy too; that’s bloody ace, both of you.”

Terence was looking from one person to another and all he saw was amusement at the situation. There were no dumb jokes or shocked expressions.

Jay laughed, “When you stood up, I realized what you must have gone through to work up the nerve to come here today and strip. Man, you seriously got my respect.”

Now it was Terence who pulled Jay into a man hug.

“Thanks for that, Jay. Y’all couldn’t have possibly done anything better t’ reassure me of my size being accepted.”

“No way. Go to a nudist resort, you see all sizes. We guys, we’re at one end of the size scale. Other guys—some are really small. No one cares. Hey man, play football, right?”

Terence told him about his short career in high school.

“Yeah, I can see it... felt your muscles too when we hugged...” Jay said.

Terence interrupted, “Y’all’re ripped too, guy, so I’ll guess. Basketball.”

“Ha, yeah. Played college ball, center. Actually was an NCAA All-American, third team, five years ago at NC State. Skipped the draft for law school.”

“Work at Sam’s firm?” Barbara asked.

“Actually, no. Another firm. We met in law school. I was third year when she started.”

Other people had been arriving while they were talking; two more couples, friends of Stuart and Gerry, so they had gone off to talk to them. Then they came back over and everyone went through their introductions again.

Tamara had been walking around the patio and deck, mostly accompanied by Peter, talking with the various groups which kept forming and re-forming, before she again became aware of her nudity. And to her surprise, she could feel no self-consciousness anymore. She felt comfortable; actually it was more than comfort, it was a feeling of well-being. The sun and breeze caressing her skin were soothing.

*This must be the sensation that Jerome was talking about when he was telling me what he felt when he went to that nude beach, she reflected.*

After a little socializing among all of the people at the gathering, two separate groups gradually formed, one consisting of the older people, including Emma and Andrew, and the rest of the younger people in the other. Once again, the younger group retreated to the gazebo to chat.

As they walked over to it, Barbara asked Jay, “So what exactly was that Obadiah reference you made before?”

“Ah, yes. It was pretty lame, right? But, see, there is this guy, see? And we hear his name is mentioned on Broadway; it is Damon Runyon, and the guy is a short-story writer, see? Now he writes this one short and calls

it ‘The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown,’ and it gets so much press that it is seven-to-two odds that it comes in as a winner on Broadway. But dolls of the name Brown do not make it into the lights so good. So the handicappers are looking for a catchier name: They pick ‘Guys and Dolls,’ and it is a sure bet...”

Everyone started to laugh when Jay launched into his attempt to sound like a Noo Yawker and Barbara interrupted, “Yeah, I heard of Damon Runyon and read two of his stories in my American Lit class. You sounded just like his stories, so funny. The accent, not so much. But what about Obadiah?”

“Okay. One of the main characters is Sky Masterson, a gambler. He hides his real name, probably because he’s embarrassed by it. But he’s a high roller; other gamblers know that the sky’s the limit for him, so that became his nickname. So if Runyon can make up a sweet nickname, I can too. Besides, it’s easier to spell.”

Barbara looked at Sam. “Is he always like this?”

Sam chuckled. “No. He’s just being cheeky now but still on his best behavior. Usually he’ll have mentioned three authors, four statistical examples, and one legal citation by now. We’re lucky he only stuck to one author.”

Everyone laughed while Jay smirked at them and told Sam, “Hey, you do it too. Get you to tell a story and we’ll even find out about the weather then and what everyone was wearing.”

“You got me there. Hey, details are important. Say, you chappies. Abi told me something that twiggged my sense of coincidence. We have ten young adults here, age 26 and under—which means all of us have been in high school while the Program was going. I saw a statistic somewhere, a few years back, that 70 percent or so of the kids who finished high school in the last eight years were participants in the Program. That means that seven of us here should have been in it. None—sorry, Peter... erm, one quarter of a person among us was in it. That’s just 2.5 percent, not 70. How’d we get so many non-participants to all randomly collect here?”

Abi giggled. “She’s doin’ it again. Sam gets an idea and wrestles it to death. We’d better humor her or she’ll come up with another weird topic.”

Terence grinned. “Ah got an uncle, a lawyer. He’s like that too. Maybe it’s a lawyer thing.”

“I think that the answer is that we aren’t a random group,” Tamara said. “Don’t start me on randomness, ‘cause I can talk for an hour about that. Here’s the answer, Sam. First, three in your family had exemptions. That didn’t stop you from getting picked yourself, but it did get you out of it, after all. Second. Emma also had an exemption, but it wasn’t honored, so she simply got the whole thing stopped before it even started. Third. Three of us came from a school with no Program. Fourth: One got excused after two days for a legal reason and another was a coattails case; they were afraid to select her. That leaves one, Jay. It sounds like you weren’t in it, Jay.”

“Right, it’s another case of not having started in my school yet,” he said. “It didn’t get to Wichita, Kansas till two or three years after I graduated.”

“So you see, Sam?” Tamara finished. “We’re not a random collection of people; also, we’re too small a sample size for any statistical validity. Now, let me address your point a different way. Ignoring that they didn’t fully participate, three of us were selected for the Program: Emma, Sam, and Peter. One person went to a school that never ran it, Terence. And six of us went to schools where they did, or should have, and for one or another reason, weren’t there when the Program should have run. Seventy percent of six is a bit over four. Those four, plus three, makes your seven. So—no coincidence needed, Sam; our group meets your stats. Okay?”

Everyone looked at Tamara in awe and then at Sam, who was speechless.

“Damn, Tamara, I’ve never seen Sam rendered speechless like that,” Jay chortled. “Good job!”

Peter laughed. “See, a scientist speaks so we’d better listen. Never challenge Tamara when it comes to math. Hey, when we got undressed inside, we saw these Program boxes...”

Sam, Abi, Ryan, and Jay all began laughing, Abi harder than the others.

She told Sam, “It’s all yours, Sis. Tell ‘em about your Program days and those boxes.”

“All right then, Sis. Remember, you asked. I’m so long-winded, I’m gonna bore them to tears. You realize that, right?”

“But do you have an off switch?” Barbara giggled.

“*NO!*” Abi, Jay, and Ryan shouted simultaneously.

“Oh, just begin,” Tamara said. “If I fall asleep...”

“...we’ll just toss you in the pool,” Abi smirked.

“All right, you dorks, enough,” Sam said. “You all know that back when I was in high school, Andrew was then too, that Dad was a diplomat? In the U.K. embassy?”

They all said, “Yeah.”

“So when the Program came to our high school, Andrew was starting his junior year and I was a freshie. Abi was two years behind me. We were scared about being in the Program; heard lots of horrid things, both rumors and reports from kids from other schools. But Emma had filled our heads with how she and her mates had bolloxed the Program in her school and got it canned there. But she had found out from a lawyer there that there were state laws that protected kids from being forcibly stripped, so she told me and my sibs that we legally could resist being forcibly stripped. That’s ‘cause all state assault laws are part of the criminal code which supersede the Program rules, and Program rules aren’t part of any law. The federal Program law only applied to schools; it required that schools which received federal funding must run the Program.

“When she came to live with us, Emma had also told my folks that foreign citizens, including children of diplomats, would be exempt from being put in the Program, if their governments said so—that fact was also mentioned in the Program booklet.

“So Mum got the embassy to have the State Department send letters to our school claiming diplomatic exemptions for Andrew and me. But all of us—Andrew, Abi, Emma, and me—had spoken earlier to a bunch of kids at our resort about their Program experiences, and hearing that rubbish got me bloody cheesed off by the very idea of the Program; kids shouldn’t be forced to allow themselves to be humiliated. Emma told us how, in her school, how she had become the leader of the resistance and how that had gotten her into more trouble. So she told us to simply tell the kids what their rights were and not to tell them not to participate.

“When school began that autumn, I told every kid who’d listen, that doing the Program was their choice and theirs alone, and if a teacher touched them, they could claim assault and battery. So when the school held the first Program assembly on the second Monday after school began, the principal was calling kids’ names to come up to the stage, where they would have to strip off. He called my name as a freshman participant. Obviously my anti-Program militancy got someone, probably the Program coordinator person, to ignore my foreign exemption, so my name was put in as a punishment for being so vocally anti-Program.

“So when I got called, I walked up to the stage and proceeded to call out to all the kids in the auditorium, telling them that it was their right to choose not to get starkers and that no one could forcibly strip them without suffering criminal consequences. The principal tried to get me to shut my gob but I guess he didn’t want to be seen chasing after me around the stage, so he just was stood there whilst I loudly warned him that if he or a

teacher touched me, I'd have him arrested.

"Then I got this ace idea. I announced to everyone that I was not refusing to be a Program participant; I would participate in the Program whilst wearing my togs. All the kids laughed at that and when I finished talking, I told the kids on the stage that I was leaving it now and if they wanted, they could follow me. Every single one followed me off the stage, so the principal had to end the assembly and send everyone back to their classes, but he warned everyone that there would be punishments coming."

"But even if you were wearing clothes, what about the touching and demos and stuff?" Barbara asked. "That's part of the Program too."

"Yeah, that's true. I hadn't thought it all through when I announced my 'clothed Program,' so I had to wing it for those things. For the reasonable requests, I told the kids I would pose and they could look all they wanted, but it wasn't reasonable to touch me, even over my clothing. That would be groping and not cool. And class demos? For the rest of the day, when teachers asked why I wasn't starkers, I told them I was doing a new Program version, a clothed Program, and I'd cooperate any way they wanted but I would stay clothed. I just ignored the opposite-sex locker-room tommyrot. The principal and the Program coordinator were right brassed off at me and the principal rang my parents to meet with him; Mum said he was fixin' to give them an earful. Instead, my mum and dad gave *him* the earful. That was the start of my destroy-the-Program campaign."

Peter prompted, "So, the boxes?"

Sam chuckled. "Yeah. I wanted to somehow continue to mock the Program, so the next day, when I got to school, I found that several kids had been bullied into participating and those bloody clothing boxes had been set out there for the stripping show. It was cool that day and I happened to have a sweater on over my top and was wearing a skirt over loose yoga pants. So I stripped off the sweater and skirt and put those clothes in a box and walked off."

The listeners laughed.

"So, the Program coordinator was watching the scene and saw what I had done. He asked what the—insert nasty word here—I was doing. I just smiled and said, 'I'm participating. My clothes are in the box like they're supposed to be,' and marched off. I was called to the office later and got scolded. After school, I got my clothes out of the box. Guess what? The next day, the stripping kids all copied me and we all did a 'clothed Program.' Talk about cheesed-off officials! The principal got on the school PA system during home room and gave another warning about the dire consequences that would befall us miscreants. Thursday morning, the boxes were gone, and when I saw the principal in the hall as I went inside, I asked him about the missing boxes and told him that he was preventing me from participating. The nearby kids loved it but the principal blew his stack at me.

"At lunch that day, two naked kids came into the lunchroom, so I went over to them to find out what had happened. They had gotten really pressured, they told me, and would have to make up a naked day the next week. So okay, I figured that I'd need to keep my anti-Program campaign going. And the boxes were back on Friday morning and I used one again; put my sweater and leggings in it. But when I tried to get my togs out of it after school, someone obviously had tampered with the lock and I couldn't open it. I went to the office to complain and the secretary said that other boxes had damaged locks too but the kids had gotten them open—it was apparently some kind of prank meant to keep the naked kids from getting dressed to go home. So that's where box number one came from; I took it home with me in Andrew's car. Dad got it open, and on Monday I told the secretary that I had the damaged box if they wanted it back. She said it was useless with a broken lock. I never returned it; I kept it and Andrew eventually fixed it."

"That's funny," Terence said. "So how did y'all keep the anti-Program campaign going? And where are those other boxes from?"

“My campaign was all about getting anti-Program information to the kids. During all of my high school years, I wrote essays about the codswallop I found in the Program book and also wrote about things I found in laws, the criminal, tort, and education laws, that applied. For example, I noticed that even though the rules in the Program booklet contemplate that the student will be starkers to comply with the Program, the rules assume that the student will voluntarily disrobe. But the state’s criminal laws don’t permit the use of force, like to forcibly strip a kid. The Program was a conflict between laws and rules, so I wrote in one essay that whilst forced stripping was illegal, that the school did have the right to suspend a student for not complying with rules. But I pointed out that the state education code had rules about suspensions; they had to be in response to a violation of school rules, but only certain classes of rules which the code recognized. Those violation classes include various kinds of bad behaviors, one of which was ‘not obeying lawful orders.’ I wrote that any demand that a kid strip off was *unlawful*; under the state’s criminal laws it was an assault, so a student could properly disobey an unlawful order without risking being suspended.

“Other essays I wrote covered the state laws on school liability for the use of excessive force. There are actually laws which cover this for schools. Force is allowed only to the extent that it’s used to prevent injury to the student or other people, to prevent a major disruption of educational activities where irreversible harm would occur, or to prevent damage to property. If there’s no threat of injury, disruption, or damage, then the use of *any* force isn’t permitted. I used the verdicts from several court cases to show how judges used the reasonable use of force standard, which is derived from the Fourth Amendment. The courts have used another standard as well, it’s the ‘shocks the conscience’ standard that’s implied by the Fourteenth Amendment.

“The ‘shocks the conscience’ standard is a due-process test that’s used for claims of excessive force. I mean, there are laws which cover the use of force and the ‘shocks the conscience’ standard determines if the school—acting as the representative of the government—has violated the student’s constitutional rights. I also wrote about the privacy provisions in the Bill of Rights, that’s included in those two amendments primarily.”

Abi broke in, “See, she was writing legal briefs ‘way back in high school.”

“I guess I was,” Sam answered. “Every week I wrote a new one and posted it. At first, I used the student forum part of the school’s website. It’s like a chat board for kids to make announcements or share information. After a few weeks, the school started removing my posts, so I moved to social media and put the essays there. The school couldn’t touch them, then.”

“But what happened about the Program?” Barbara asked. “Did the rest of the kids do it?”

“A number of them did get cowed into doing it, like that first week,” Sam replied, “but my essays had pointed out that unwanted touching was a sexual battery. And sexual assault is defined as any type of sexual activity or contact that you don’t consent to.”

“How did they get away with it in the Program, then?” Terence asked.

“There was a real disconnect between the federal Program law and state criminal codes. The Program law set up the federal office that ran it, and that law directed the office to write the regulations. That’s how Congress works; it leaves the details to the agency. Then the Program office left it up to the states to deal with conflicts between their regulations and the state’s laws. The kids in the Program were mainly made to strip through the use of threats and intimidation.

“In a few of my articles, I wrote that the Office on Women’s Health in the DHHS—that’s the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services—defines sexual assault as an attempt to force a person to participate in any unwanted sexual contact or attention. It includes any use, not only of physical force or threats of force, but also the use of any verbal, visual, or other non-contact attempts to coerce participation. Every state includes some version of this sexual-assault definition in its criminal code, so most everything that the Program requires kids

to do violates one or more state laws.”

“How could schools run the Program if the stuff kids have to do is illegal, then?” Tamara asked.

“The states, Maryland anyway, since I didn’t research any others, modified the assault laws a tiny bit. The law permits ‘limited personal contact between minors for educational purposes,’ so that was the way that the state dealt with the issue. But that wording is so problematic in either allowing the enforcement of the assault laws or for protecting the school, that it’s almost a joke.

“Anyway, because of my articles, I noticed that the classroom demos just about disappeared; the relief sessions stopped, and it was rare to see any reasonable requests. The school officials’ attempts to rebut my essays were laughable; I’d use their comments and arguments as fodder for other essays. And I kept it up for all four years of high school, too.”

“She really did cripple the Program there,” Abi said. “Even when I got into high school, lots of kids were refusing to do it. Some did, ‘cause the school had tried to turn the Program into a fun game with incentives to join in and teachers tried to limit the abuse and humiliation that were still happening. But in my junior year, new Program people came to the school and they got really nasty in enforcing the Program; Sam wasn’t around to set things right. Later we found out that that’s when that sex-ring took over the Program. But you were gonna tell them about the other two clothing boxes.”

“Right,” Sam said, grinning. “I nicked two more of them. By my junior—maybe senior—year, the school had pretty much stopped with the outdoor stripping ritual and just let the kids put their clothes in their lockers. They started to use the boxes to store junk, in the gym for sports stuff, and even as trash containers. I nicked two of those. They were outside the school, next to the staff car park door, together with two regular trash bins, and were full of trash too. I figured they’d not miss them and they didn’t. By that time, I was recycling my essays—just updating them—and it was keeping the heat on the school for the new freshman classes.”

“Emma and Andrew just loved what Sam was doing,” Abi told them. “Mum, not so much. She was getting tired of the calls from the principal asking her to rein Sis in.”

“What about graduating?” Barbara asked. “Peter and I also went to a Maryland school, and if you refused to participate, they said you wouldn’t graduate.”

“Right,” Abi said. “Sam wrote about that, too. She found other laws and regulations the Program violated.”

“True,” Sam said. “The state education law gives the basic requirements for graduation, and they apply to *every* student. In each state, the state’s education laws allow their education departments to set the classes and number of credits needed to graduate and some states, like Maryland, require some community service too. I had written some essays discussing why the school can’t legally create three categories of students: one that completed the Program, one that was exempt or otherwise was never selected, and one that refused. Allowing the first two to graduate and denying the third violates the education laws, because not everyone is required to complete the same requirements. So what eventually happened in my school was everyone got their official transcripts, but the kids who refused couldn’t go to the graduation ceremony.”

“Could the school refuse to give a transcript?” Terence asked. “My school could, if the student owed money, since it’s private.”

“That’s actually a complicated question, ‘cause each state has its own education laws. If there’s no law that specifically says that transcripts cannot be withheld, like some states have, and since the transcript is technically the property of the high school, then yes, the school could try to withhold it. *But*, and it’s a big but, there could be legal consequences for them if they did. There are ways to get a withheld transcript released. One way is based on the state’s legal duty to provide a public education. The purpose of public education is to prepare the

student for either a job or higher education. Lacking a transcript, the student lacks proof of completing that education, so the failure to give a transcript to a student is equivalent to the state's failure to meet its duty to educate. As I said, it's complicated. If a court found that the withholding was not a result of a material issue, like Terence's example of school fees being unpaid, but was the result of a retaliatory action, such as the case of not participating in the Program, the court could assess both compensatory and punitive damages to the school."

"Okay, time out, guys," Peter broke in. "This is all fascinating, or maybe not, but can we quit harping on Program stuff already? There's way too much morbid curiosity about that stupid thing. It's done. In the past. How 'bout let's talk about how you guys got into naturism; that's what our newbies really want to hear, right, Tamara, Terence?"

Tamara grinned. "That's saying it like it is, Peter. Sure; hearing some nudism stories gets my vote. Sam's experiences were very interesting, but I agree, it's enough now. Hearing about your first nudist experiences would be great."

"Sure," Barbara said. "Our family's been in the nudist movement forever. My great-grandparents on Dad's side came from Germany around 1920 and their family were nudists back then, even in Germany. And they helped to build our nudist resort when it began in the thirties, I think it was. So for Peter and me, we grew up in the culture."

Sam smiled. "That's impressive and got us way beat. Mum's family came from southern England and would go to a naturist beach near Southampton. When Dad was in the Royal Marines, he was stationed mostly at Hamworthy Camp; that's in the south too, so when my sibs and I were younger, we'd go to Eastney Naturist Beach. So I don't really recall a first time either."

"Well, that leaves Jay and me," Ryan said. "I'm another example of benefitting from growing up in a nudist family. I grew up in San Diego; there were several nudist beaches nearby—Black's Beach is famous—and my family has a nudist club membership too."

Jay laughed. "I'm the odd guy out, then. Sam introduced me to nudism. Like Terence, I always found being naked with guys awkward because of, well, it's obvious. The locker-room jokes wear on you after a while. When Sam and I started dating, she told me that her being a nudist was part of who she was and she wasn't about to give it up. So I had to suck it up, chuck my size issues, and take the plunge. Guess what? My intro to nudism was right here, at Emma's Home Resort, just like you guys are doing now. And speaking about that, how's it feel, now that it's been a few hours? Terence? Still okay?"

"Sure. Y'all really pulled me out of my hesitancy, Jay. Now Ah think Ah'd be fine, but Ah wonder if Ah'd still be a bit shy in a big group, like with Barbara's family."

"Cool. The way you adapted here so fast, I'd say probably not. Anyway, other first-timers have told me that their shyness disappeared real quick. Tamara?" Jay asked.

"This wasn't anything like I expected," Tamara said. "The nudist kid I told you about when I was in high school, Jerome, he was trying to convince me to go to that nude beach. He said the best way to work up my courage to get naked was to do it in small steps, like he did. Maybe that would have worked too, but diving right in, like we did today, was okay too. Like Terence, I think I should be okay going to a club now, but maybe I'd feel better easing into being with a group."

"Terence—and Tamara—both said something that brought back a memory," Jay said, looking first at Terence and then at Tamara. "When I went to Sam's resort for the first time, I remember thinking that it would be stressful if I was suddenly put in with a bunch of people I had never met before—like both of you will need to be with Peter's and Barbara's relatives. You'll be with them a lot, I expect. That can be intense for some



newbies; it sure felt it would be like that for me. Terence, you think that you'd still be shy with being in a big group all at once?"

"Jeez, guy, y'all know how to ramp up the discomfort level," Terence said. "Ah'm like y'all; still a bit twitchy. What'd y'all do to get used to bein' in a group?"

"It worked by easing into it, actually. Sam and I went once by ourselves before the whole Coxey's army—all of Emma's family, her friends and their families—there's about two dozen of 'em—came to the resort with us in my first year. Just Sam and I went that one weekend before the gang arrived, that made it way easier. It let us be with different people, but I didn't feel obligated to hang with them. You guys could go a day or two before everyone shows up, like we did. That way you can get used to the nudity there gradually. Be much easier starting out alone, rather than being with a crowd."

"That's a really good idea, Jay. We can go two days early and register then... Oh, wait, crap, I just realized. Tamara, you're not eighteen yet, are you?" Barbara asked.

Sam and Abi looked at Tamara. "Really? You'll be a senior this autumn and not eighteen?" Sam asked her.

Tamara nodded, "Uh huh. I'm seventeen."

Barbara cursed, "Well, damn. You'll need your parents' permission, notarized too—they're in Florida, right?"

Tamara grinned. "It's not a problem. Over eighteen? I'm covered..."

"Nuh uh," Sam said. "As officers of the court, Jay and I can't knowingly allow you to use a fake ID. All nudist resorts check carefully."

"... but my ID is real, not fake," Tamara interrupted. "I got it from the U.S. State Department. My age problem's come up before. Several of my inventions are licensed by the Defense Department and it turned out that a few bigwigs weren't taking me seriously 'cause of my apparent age, fourteen or fifteen; so I was made older. The DoD got State to give me a U.S. passport card and according to that, I'm not quite twenty."

"Shit, girl," Barbara said. "You're just a bundle of surprises. I'm not gonna ask what you invented to have the frikkin' *government* give you a fake ID."

"Okay, age problem sorted," Sam said, grinning. "Tamara, you and me gonna have a little chat soon, aren't we."

"I'm sorry that the four of you won't be able to get to our resort next month," Abi said. "In August our families go to the resort for three-plus weeks. But maybe we could do a weekend here or there later in the season, before it gets too cold. You could either come to our club or we could go to yours, Barbara."

Barbara nodded and said, "That would work. We can figure out some possible dates."

"Hey, Terence and I are heading for the pool," Jay announced. "We got some sports stories we wanna brag about."

"We'll join you," Peter said as he and Ryan got up.

Sam laughed. "Let the blokes do their thing. Testosterone overload. Now I want to hear about Barbara and Tamara. Abi says you both have fascinating stories, and Tamara, you need to tell me about what you've done that got the feds to give you an official fake ID."

Tamara laughed. "Hey, you just committed an oxymoron—if it's official, it can't be fake."

The others laughed.

"I can tell you some of the things that I've done but..." Tamara started.

“...if she told you, she’d have to kill you,” Barbara said, laughing. “Peter asked her about the stuff she did, too, and he told me that she told him that.”

“Oooo, spy stuff,” Abi breathed. “Brilliant.”

“Hmmm, spies...” Tamara mused. “Yeah. I’m not a spy, but I was kidnapped by a pair of them.”

That set off a commotion and Tamara told them about some of her work with the MRI, which led to her inventions, some of which had military possibilities. And how her patent filings had caught the notice of a presumed industrial espionage agent, who hired some goons to steal the records—failing that, they went after the inventor.

When she was finished with her story, it was almost time for the meal. The little group left the gazebo and joined the boys at the pool.

*I’m gonna have to decide just how much to tell Peter this week, Tamara thought. I’ll start with what I told Emma. See how he reacts; then play the rest by ear.*

## Chapter 37 - A Discovery and a Resort Visit

### *Early July*

The next two weeks passed in a blur. After her visit to Emma's, Tamara began working on her chip fabrication. She spent four days at Emma's lab at the APL and used the APL's engineering facilities to build several double-sized prototypes of the patient coil's signal-generator and receiver circuit assemblies on a chip. She started by preparing the IC chips' base substrate, thin slivers of material cut from an ingot of pure silicon, and polishing them to receive the first layer of superconductive media. She then photoetched the first circuit layer, the base layer of the array of SETs, and continued the fabrication steps to build several dozen small RF emitter-receiver coils on each chip. By Friday, she had the somewhat crude prototype coil chips completed; then she mounted the sets of coils-on-chips on a circuit board affixed to a testing jig. The jig was set up so that she could measure the device's RF output and the received return signals.

She spent a quiet weekend since Peter and Barbara had gone with their parents to visit an out-of-state aunt and uncle who couldn't come to the August gathering of the whole clan. Terence had gone to his home in Austin for two weeks and would be returning in time for their visit to Peter's resort.

On Monday, she was back again at the lab and testing her device; by midweek she was getting very odd results and it took close to a day to track down the problem. If she was correct and if what she had seen was a result of her chip design, the implications could be far-reaching. By noon on Friday, she had completed her calculations and was thoroughly confused by the results. She had to speak to Emma. Gathering up her notes, photos, and printouts, she called Emma to be sure that she would be in her office, and then called her car service; she couldn't wait an hour or more for the scheduled shuttle.

"Well, hello there, and what's the bleedin' hurry, Tamara?" Emma asked as Tamara came bursting into her office.

"I ran into a really weird problem, Emma. I was running the coil device setup through several different discharge patterns, firing individual coils and then groups of coils, watching the RF output, and look at this."

She laid out several graphs on Emma's desk, showing the signal intensities from the device.

"This is RF output versus time. See the dropoff?" she pointed. "And then when I checked the single-coil operation again, those measurements were really degraded from the initial runs. I looked for the reason on the chips themselves with that magnifying viewer that we use to examine chips and checked the alignment of the RF coils in the device. Here are the photos."

"So tell me what I should be looking for here," Emma asked.

"Here's the 'before' image. It's from when the chips were finished. Now look at these 'after' images. See, the entire substrate area surrounding these coil pairs is disturbed. The coils actually tried to move out of place, even though they were embedded in the substrate."

"I don't see how that's possible. That silicon substrate isn't at all elastic. It would fracture if disturbed," Emma said.

"So here are a few photos through a microscope. Those coils did move; they kinda pushed the substrate away, and they twisted a bit too. You can see that here." Tamara pointed. "And here. All the coils where that happened were adjacent to each other and were energized at the same time, and you can see that the coil movement happened in pairs, each moving away from each other."

"You mean that those coils were repelling each other?"

"Uh huh. There's more than just RF being generated here. There's some kind of very strong repulsion and

there's no force in the electromagnetic spectrum that can repel that strongly. That's actually a misnomer, electromagnetic, because there's no 'magnetic' frequency, it's just that the passage of an electrical current creates a magnetic field. But those coils, when they create a magnetic field, it would be toroidal according to the Biot-Savart law, and the magnetic field would be strongest in the coil's center. These coil pairs are oriented side-by-side and when I used the Biot-Savart law and Lorentz force law to calculate the resulting magnetic fields and electric fields, there's nowhere enough force being generated to move those coils. The coil orientation is wrong too, to generate any opposing force."

Emma was listening to her and nodding as she was looking at the calculations and photos.

"I don't see anything wrong in your calcs," Emma said. "And as well, you're correct about the coil orientation."

"Emma, I had to race to get here because I couldn't think of anything else to explain how such a tremendous force was produced by such a tiny source. 'Cause the only thing that could explain it is magnetism; that's the only force with sufficient strength to have the effect here. But see, the force is acting as a point source and all magnetic forces are aligned between the poles of a dipole. There's no dipole here; the force is radially oriented and that implies a magnetic monopole. But at a macro scale; that's impossible! Monopoles are only theoretical fundamental particles, aren't they? But the calcs I did show that if a monopole existed, it could have that effect."

Emma was looking at her in amazement. "Bloody hell, Tamara, that's a blindin' brilliant interpretation! But we really don't know if macro-scale monopoles are impossible, even though Gauss' law of magnetic fields says that monopoles don't exist. And you're correct in that the existence of monopoles has only been theorized. In fact, Dirac suggested that the reason that electric charge is quantized and only comes in discrete units could be explained by the existence of just one single magnetic monopole in the universe. The quantization of electrical charge is still one of the major problems of physics. You're also correct in that the monopole is theorized to be a fundamental particle, carrying a unit of magnetism, analogous to the electron, which carries a unit of charge."

"But where did the force that moved those coils come from?" Tamara rejoined. "The silicon has a compressive strength of 3200 megaPascals and an elastic limit of 165 megaPascals. That's about 33,000 kilograms of force per square centimeter in compression. That's almost a half-million pounds per square inch! And the deformation showing in those photos needed more than 1600 kilograms per square centimeter of force."

Emma grinned at her. "Remember what I told you last year? Sometimes when physics can't explain an experimental finding, we need some new physics."

"Yeah. But here we'd need some pretty weird new physics. So, on the way over, I tried to think of what could be happening. I know that superconductors can do weird things, like their ability to expel an applied magnetic field—when exposed to the magnetic field, superconductors induce a countercurrent which completely opposes the magnetic field. You know, the Meissner effect. Superconductors showing the Meissner effect behave like a perfect diamagnet and repel. But I could easily rule that out in this case.

"So I had this crazy idea. That kind of force doesn't exist with the known elementary particles in the universe. So maybe somehow, the coils opened a portal to—like, the universe's dark energy? Maybe some of the 95 percent of the universe that is dark energy and dark matter is monopoles? Possibly something in the superconducting coil circuit, when it was powered, let a monopole send a huge repulsive force through and it repelled the force coming through the adjacent coil. So that's what I fantasized—that's my overall picture. It's just missing a few technical details."

Emma stared at her in disbelief and then started to laugh. She began laughing so hard that tears began to form in her eyes and she almost fell off her chair, alarming Tamara greatly.

"Emma, did I say something wrong? Are you okay?"

Emma, laughing, just waved her hand feebly at Tamara.

“Just... ha ha ... a bloody... ha ha ... second...” she gasped, trying to catch her breath, but then broke out laughing again.

Tamara “pushed” a calming taste to Emma, who caught her breath, giggled a few times, then wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

“Crikey, I haven’t had a laugh like that in donkey’s years. No, my dear, you just quoted something that happened way back years ago involving Werner Heisenberg and Wolfgang Pauli. Pauli didn’t like something Heisenberg had said in an interview, so he wrote letters about it to some of his physicist friends. I read the quote in a book. Let me find the book... um ... ah, here. It’s a quote in this book, ‘The Second Creation: Makers of the Revolution in Twentieth-century Physics’; it’s by Crease and Mann. I so loved this quote that I tabbed the page. Here, page 411. I’ll read it.”

Heisenberg launched, two decades later, a unified field theory that started as a collaboration with Pauli. When Pauli withdrew, Heisenberg pressed on. To Pauli’s fury, Heisenberg claimed during a radio broadcast in February 1958 that a unified Heisenberg-Pauli theory was imminent, and only a few small technicalities remained to be worked out. Rumors swept the press. Pauli responded by mailing his friends a letter consisting of a blank rectangle, drawn in pencil, with the caption, “This is to show the world that I can paint like Titian. Only technical details are missing.”

Then Emma began to laugh again and Tamara giggled.

“Emma, don’t make me out that I can paint like Titian too, please,” she said, and Emma began laughing harder.

The laughing attracted a few faculty members, including Dr Montern, who popped his head into her office.

“What’s so funny, Emma? Everyone’s out here in the hall wondering.”

“Get in here, Chet,” Emma ordered. “See what our resident genius has done now.”

“You mean besides her circuit that has the rest of us trying to figure out why water can sometimes run uphill?” Montern chuckled while Tamara blushed.

“Yeah. Why that oddball circuit of hers allows electrons to flow against a charge gradient. That’s easy compared to what her new circuit here does. Look at these numbers,” Emma said, giving him Tamara’s elastic limit calculations.

He looked for a minute, then, “Okay, that’s a force of 16.8 kilograms per square millimeter. Tamara, what’s the area of the force application?” Montern asked.

“The coil is about 4 millimeters in diameter, so, um, 12.6 square millimeters.”

“That’s ... ah ... over 200 kilograms. Are you saying that somehow this tiny coil circuit developed over 200 kilograms of force? Where was it applied?”

“Yeah, repulsion actually, but it was probably closer to 100 kilograms each ‘cause those two adjacent coils pushed against each other,” Tamara said. “The range of action seems to be small—these are small coils. Look at these photos. See how the areas around the coils are deformed? The coil pair’s combined force was about 212 kilograms for their sizes, acting against each other.”

“Are you sure there wasn’t anything nearby—electrical or magnetic—that could have contributed to their forces?” Montern asked.

“Nothing nearby,” Tamara confirmed.

“As well, she told me that she had ruled out the Meissner effect,” Emma put in.

“Yeah, that’s right. But diamagnetism is really weak anyway. So, at the macro scale, the only forces which act at a distance are electrostatic, gravitational, or magnetic. At the atomic scale, the strong and weak forces. Leave out the weak force; that doesn’t apply. The residual strong force, which binds hadrons, would be powerful enough to explain what happened but of course it’s only active at the scale of an atomic nucleus. Electrostatic forces can’t produce a field strength of this intensity but gravitational forces can, if you’re near a supermassive object like a neutron star or black hole. Otherwise not. That only leaves magnetism, right?”

Montern nodded. “Okay. Go on.”

“So I calculated the field strength produced in the coils when current was flowing; it was in the nano-tesla range. To cause the coil to deform the substrate it was embedded in, I calculated that a field strength of at least 17 teslas would be needed to develop the necessary repulsive force.”

Emma broke in, “Tamara, are you aware that the world record, as of 2019, for a continuous magnetic field, is 45.5 teslas? That was an electromagnet about the size of a toilet-paper core. A magnet, even at a third of that field strength, would need to be bigger than four millimeters.”

“Sure. That’s why I conjectured what I did. Since you love quotations, Emma, how about this one? ‘When you’ve eliminated the impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.’ I probably don’t have the exact words Arthur Conan Doyle used, but I think somehow that circuit somehow generated a monopole.”

“And, Chet, when she told me that, she said it was ‘just missing a few technical details,’ just like Pauli wrote when he said that ‘I can paint like Titian,’” Emma chuckled.

“I know that quotation,” Montern grinned. “Tamara, you do know that producing free elementary particles, and the monopole is conjectured to be one of them, takes extremely high energy?”

“Sure. But I told Emma that possibly my circuit opens a portal or somehow enables dark energy or dark matter to interact with the physical universe. Maybe monopoles and gravitons make up some of the dark matter.”

Montern got very thoughtful. “Well, absent this physical evidence, Tamara, I’d say you were talking science fiction. But to explain this? Maybe science fiction has the answers. Emma, I know you’ll want to explore this new crazy finding of Tamara’s. Hell, I’m still trying to figure out her electron flow problem.”

“As we all are,” Emma laughed. “Can you imagine if we could develop that much magnetic power with the use of so little energy?”

“Sure,” Montern said. “A science-fiction world. Magnetic levitation vehicles. Frictionless motors and turbines. More efficient frictionless bearings, in fact. Well, I’m sure I’ll hear about what you find.”

He left and Emma turned to Tamara.

“I’ll need to get out to the APL with you and have a few of my boffins from the battery project work with you on examining that circuit. First, we’ll need to replicate your findings. Then we’ll need to dissect those IC chips to analyze how their layers were deposited. When we have that information, we can figure out how to proceed. Now show me how you built that chip.”

They spent several hours discussing the chip’s construction and doing further calculations; then Emma had to leave. During the following weeks, Tamara was busy with Emma’s engineers, working on the circuit design and chip structure. They found that the composition of the superconducting coil wires was one critical factor; another was the configuration of the SETs comprising the RF generating circuit, and a third was the thickness of

the tunnel junctions in the SETs. They were able to reproduce the extremely strong repulsive field that Tamara had first observed, but the fields they generated were transient and erratic. Both Emma and Tamara knew that more theoretical work would be needed to show how to stabilize the effect, and Emma spent a lot of time with Tamara going over the further testing from the lab and working out ways to isolate the individual subsystems of the device. At this, Tamara showed that she was a master, having an intuitive grasp of the behavior of the circuits she worked with.

*Arundel Nature Society, Davidsonville, Maryland: early August*

Tamara's visit to Peter's family's resort would be a welcome break during August. All of Emma's APL research group members took off at least two weeks in August; the European members customarily took off a month. Tamara would be spending about three weeks with Peter and Barbara and Terence would also be there.

The four friends had decided to take Jay's advice and get to the resort two days before the rest of Peter's family arrived; they all would arrive on the first August weekend. Peter's great-grandparents had been among the resort's founding members; his grandfather, along with his grandfather's three children, were minority part-owners. Their family's "cabin" was actually a rustic four-bedroom house and the site their house was on also contained three small cabins, each having two small bedrooms—each just large enough for a queen bed and a bunk bed, attached to a common area with a kitchenette, sitting area, and tiny bathroom.

The four friends arrived at the resort about 10 a.m. on Thursday, and when Barbara drove the car through the security gate and past a small but dense belt of trees which hid the grounds from prying eyes, Tamara gasped at the sight that lay before her. The landscape was dominated by a broad field of lush grass surrounded by a stand of beautiful mature trees. She could see a playground close by, and further past that, volleyball courts, a tennis court, and a group of picnic tables. A large, low building stood to the right and sounds of splashing water could be heard coming from that direction. To the left, Tamara could see rows of camper trailers and RVs; further away she saw some large tents and a number of small cabins.

But what really caught her eye were the people. There were people everywhere. Playing on the courts, sitting at the picnic tables, walking across the lawn. A teen group was tossing a frisbee around over there, and a number of young kids were using the playground equipment closer by. All were nude. There were men and women of all ages. Children, tweens, teenagers, all were here, and not a scrap of clothing could be seen. But, Tamara noticed, all the walkers were carrying towels.

Barbara stopped the car in a parking space to the side of the low building.

"This is the clubhouse and the resort office is over there on the right," Barbara told Tamara and Terence. "Peter and I'll bring you to the office and get you registered, so you'll need your IDs."

When they walked inside, Tamara saw that it looked just like a motel office, except that the people behind the counter were nude—there were two women, one middle-aged and another about 20 years old.

"Barbara! Peter!" The girl exclaimed. "We thought you wouldn't be here till Saturday!"

"Hi, Michelle," Peter answered. "We came early to get our friends used to the place. They're first-timers. Hi, Aunt Vicki."

The older woman answered, "Peter, I told you, it's just Vicki. You're an adult now," she grinned. "How've you been? College keeping you busy?"

"Yeah. Too busy even for getting here weekends. Let me introduce you. Vicki, Michelle, this is Tamara and Terence. Tamara's my girlfriend and Terence is Barbara's boyfriend. This is their first resort experience, but they've had some prior experience being nude at a friend's pool and backyard. Tamara and Terence, Vicki Allerman and her husband Ron and their daughter, Michelle, are the resort's owners. Michelle has a brother but

he's in the Navy and deployed now."

They all shook hands.

Vicki told them, "We're just the majority owners, actually. Peter's and Barbara's family own about 20 percent and the rest of the Winsbergs, another 20 percent. Ron's grandparents and Peter's family's great-grandparents built this place back about a hundred years ago. Ron's family also came from Germany and they were naturists back then. The Allerman and Winsberg families met on the ship coming to the U.S. and settled in this area. They went into business together and prospered; they bought this property very cheaply—there was nothing here then—just woods, and through word-of-mouth in the German immigrant community, got enough other investors to help build the first facilities. All of our families—all the old timers—had many good times here. We have many third-generation members, people who grew up here are now members here too."

"So this place is a hundred years old? Wow," Terence said.

"Not quite yet," Vicki told him. "This is the 94<sup>th</sup> year. Okay, let's register you guys. I need a photo ID to start."

Terence gave her his driver's license and she entered the information into their computer. Then Tamara handed her the passport card.

"Don't you have a driver's license? That makes it much easier," Vicki told her.

"No, I don't drive, so I never needed one."

"Well, I need it for your address."

Tamara gave her Baltimore address.

Vicki told her, "Ah, that's your school address. I need a permanent address."

"You mean, like my parents' address? I don't live there anymore; after I graduate college, I'll won't be moving back. I can give it if you want."

"It's okay; it's just that we do background checks on our guests. But you were a minor before starting college, so I doubt there would be any public record for you. Let's finish up these registrations. ... Okay, here are your campground IDs; take one of those wristbands over there and slide the strip in, with the barcode showing. You can use your code to charge purchases at the restaurant, lunch stand, or at our little convenience shop. When you leave, you can settle the charges with us. You're staying with the Winsberg clan and they told us that they will cover the daily guest fee for you. Now comes the last step; you both need to sign these forms. It says that you agree to abide by all resort rules and it also contains a liability waiver. When you leave, just check with us to settle any charges. Okay?"

"Sure," Terence said.

"Got it," Tamara nodded.

Meanwhile, Peter and Barbara were talking with Michelle, and when Vicki finished, Michelle pulled several flyers out of a rack.

"Guys, here are the campground rules, a map, and our activities schedule. Usually we take our first-time guests for a tour, but Peter said he'd do it. He and Barbara know as much about this place as I do," she chuckled. "We all grew up here."

The group left the office after saying their goodbyes and Peter brought them into the clubhouse.

"This is a pretty extensive setup," he told them. "There's the games area. Pool table, foosball, air hockey, and



shelves with board games. That room over there has some video arcade games and next to it is the studio. We use it for crafts, yoga, small classes. Those bookshelves have paperbacks people donate or leave behind. There are DVDs too if you want to borrow one to watch a movie.

“Through that door over there is the restaurant; they have breakfasts and dinners. Let’s go out here. Okay, over there, obviously is the pool and on the other side is the lunch stand. Around behind the lunch stand is the spa; the convenience shop is over that way too. They sell snack food and other stuff as well; you can check it out on your own. But before we go any further, we’ll need to strip off. We allow clothes in the clubhouse, but anywhere else, no clothes. This is a nudist resort; not clothing-optional. Back this way, there’s a changing room with lockers, but we’ll just go to the car and strip there; is that okay?”

“Ah guess.” ... “Uh huh.”

They went to the car and had just finished getting undressed when a stocky guy of medium height walked up.

“Hi, Uncl... um, Ron!” Peter called. “These are my friends...”

Peter hugged the newcomer, as did Barbara, and then he introduced everyone.

“How’s school?” Ron asked. “They treating you okay?”

“Sure,” Peter answered, and Barbara said, “It’s good. Starting our last year.”

Tamara had wrapped her towel around herself, tucking a fold in her cleavage, while Terence had wrapped his around his waist.

Ron smiled at them. “Yeah, Vicki said you guys are newbies. Doing the towels like that is okay for now, but I’m sure that Barbara and Peter told you that we’re a nudist resort.”

“They did,” Terence told him. “We’re still gettin’ used to it but we’re okay. Why aren’t y’all clothing-optional like other places Ah heard about?”

“Yeah, we’re asked about that all the time. That’s how the resort started; the founders insisted on total nudity, weather permitting, and my grandpa said it was because they didn’t want clothed gawkers joining when they opened. Now Vicki and I have visited a lot of nudist resorts, clubs, and campgrounds that say that they’re clothing optional but we noticed that, except for their pool or spa requiring nudity, those places can be as ‘textile’ as any other resort. We don’t want that happening here, so the nudity rule remains. Michelle gave you some flyers about the resort, our history, our rules, and our philosophy. Hey, Barbara and Peter, why don’t you folks walk around the grounds; show the facilities to your friends, and then head off to your family’s cabin? I’ll drive your car over there and park it. Is that okay?”

“Sure, good idea,” Barbara said. “Keys are inside. Let me grab our beachbags so we can put on some sunscreen.”

Ron drove the car off and the four friends helped each other to apply the sunscreen.

“Okay, let’s do the formal tour,” Barbara said. She pointed to the lawn where the frisbee kids were now playing with a wiffleball and bat. “We call that ‘The Meadow’ and people like to sunbathe and play lawn sports there. Some days you’ll see a mean game of croquet going on. One year there was even a group here that played lacrosse. Sometimes you’ll see flag football or even a pickup soccer game too. Let’s go to the other side of the clubhouse.”

As they walked, Barbara had to stop twice to talk to the people who greeted her and Peter; they introduced Tamara and Terence, who received very enthusiastic welcomes from everyone. Continuing, Barbara pointed out the basketball court, tennis court, and volleyball courts.

“They made one of the tennis courts into two pickleball courts last year,” she commented.

“Funny name, pickleball,” Tamara remarked. “What’s that?”

“You can see from the game they’re playing now that it’s a bit like tennis,” Peter said. “The court’s much smaller than tennis, the ball’s plastic, not rubber, and they use solid paddles instead of stringed racquets. The game’s like badminton, ping-pong, and tennis in many rules.”

“Way over there,” Terence pointed. “That looks like a minigolf setup?”

Barbara nodded. “It’s a nine-hole course. Ron plans on enlarging it. There’s a putting green beyond that.”

“What are those long lanes that look like a pathway but don’t go anywhere?” Tamara asked.

“Yeah, those are the pétanque courts,” Barbara said. “That’s like the Italian bocce game except the balls are tossed at the target, not rolled. But they play bocce on them too. Okay, around the corner here, we’re obviously back at the pool. That block building there is one of the bathroom-shower houses. There are indoor showers and you can see the outdoor ones—people going in the pool mostly use the outdoor showers. There are three other shower blocks around the grounds, nearer to the cabins and campsites.”

She was about to continue but was interrupted again by another group of enthusiastic friends of their family and had to go through the introductions again.

When they were alone again, Barbara said, “Whew, I’d like to have an introduction card to pass out to everyone; save time.”

They laughed.

She pointed to the area beyond the shower house.

“Right behind there, see the roofed structure, no walls? That’s the Pavilion. We have live music there and DJ music a lot of nights and weekends. Beyond that is the community firepit and a large barbeque area. You can see some of the RV and trailer sites over there and tent sites to the right. The convenience store is over there on the far right. Over on the left are the guest cabins; there are fifteen of them. They built cabins here because not all of the guests want to stay in tents or have RVs or trailers; they prefer their accommodations to be more ‘civilized,’” she giggled as she made finger quotes. “And beyond the cabins are the permanent resident sites. We have ... um ... 63 sites? Peter?”

He answered, “Yeah.”

“Our own site is back there too and that’s where we’re headed now. See that other blockhouse? Another shower and bathroom.”

They continued walking toward the wooded area and met a few more friends of the Winsberg family, who were also effusive in greeting the newcomers. As they went on toward the Winsbergs’ cabin, Tamara was thinking.

*Jeez. I’m astounded at how friendly and welcoming everyone is; they all wanted to make us feel at ease immediately.*

During the walk, she saw that Terence had unwrapped his towel and now had it folded and slung over a shoulder while he and Barbara were walking, hand-in-hand. He noticed Tamara’s glance.

“Hey yeah, Ah did it. Anyway, it felt weird, wearing it like a kilt.”

Barbara chuckled, “Yeah—it was rubbing the end of his big little head as he walked, to tell you what really happened.”

Terence muttered something to her inaudibly; then he said, “Ah was watchin’ for how folks looked at me. Ah’m still a bit sensitive, y’know? Hard t’ forget that crap. Everyone Ah saw, they looked at me down there maybe once but not after that and had no reaction to my size—well, Ah take that back. One guy, after he asked if Ah played football, said, like, ‘Man, you must have needed a custom cup when y’all suited up; that probably wasn’t any fun,’ and another, who told me, ‘Ah’ll bet kids in the locker room gave y’all plenty of grief.’ No one acted like Ah was a freak; what a damned relief.”

“So you feel a lot better now, right?” Barbara asked. “You can relax; you saw that no one made a big deal about your endowment.”

“Sure. Ah guess Ah knew that mature folks wouldn’t make fun of me—or be shocked—but with dealing with it for so many years, Ah guess Ah was still gun-shy.”

They had reached the Winsbergs’ site now and Tamara looked around. She was impressed; the photos she had seen didn’t do the place justice. The house was a modified log structure; the front was made of fieldstones and logs and the sides used logs for the ground-floor walls. There was a second floor which had apparently been added later; those walls were made of wood cut to look like the logs below. Inside, the first floor had a great room with a fireplace and doors leading to bedrooms and a bathroom, she supposed. One quarter of the floor was devoted to a kitchen and dining area; the rest contained a variety of seating. Above the ground floor, a second level ran around two walls with a balcony overlooking the great room and she could see doors up there too.

Peter saw her looking up at the second level.

“There are two bedrooms up there—no bathroom, though. Two bedrooms over there. This was my second home, growing up. It was also my refuge and where I was able to recover from my high school problems. Let me show you where we’ll be staying; it’s right out back.”

He led her out the door and over to a much smaller cabin about a hundred feet away from the main house. There were two other similar cabins close by. When he unlocked and opened the door, they were greeted by a blast of hot air.

“Whoo,” he grunted. “Gotta air it out. Please help me open some windows—there’s no a/c here, just ceiling fans. Look at the bedrooms and pick one; Barbara will have to make do...”

“That’s not fair...” Tamara started.

“Ha, the rooms are almost identical,” Peter told her. “So no problem. How’re you doing so far with the clothes-free bit?”

She thought for a few seconds. “I’m good. I feel happy that I had no further self-conscious twinges after we stripped at the car—even after I unwrapped the towel after Ron spoke to us. I’m glad we’re getting this private ... that’s probably the wrong word ... maybe ‘limited’ ... public exposure experience under my belt... ha, imaginary belt, that is... before your whole family arrives, though. Jay had a really good idea there. So what kinds of activities will there be?”

Peter put down the beach bag he was carrying and dug into it, coming up with a little folded flyer.

“August’s activities,” he read. “Okay, they have a couple of interesting ones. Next Saturday eve is Polynesian night and they’re having a mini music festival with two bands coming in to play. There will be body painting and a glow party with dancing that Saturday night. Um, there’s a volleyball clinic this Saturday and next.”

“What’s that about?”

“Oh yeah. It’s a skills session to learn or brush up people’s volleyball game. The resort has a couple of teams that go to play at the nude volleyball Superbowl on Labor Day week up in Pennsylvania. They do that every year.”

“Really? Nude volleyball?”

“Oh, sure, it’s a really big event. Some years, more than a thousand people go. The thing runs for more than a week but the competitions themselves are only on the final three or four days. There are NCAA collegiate champions who go; sometimes pros and Olympic players show up. And people from other countries go there too—mainly Canada, but last year some people from Europe, Brazil, and Argentina were there, Rick told me. He’s our team captain.”

“You ever go?”

“No, it’s the week following Labor Day and I’ve always been in school then. But the clinic they do here is fun. I learned to play a bit; they have games following the clinic. It’s loads of fun. Barbara is a really good player.”

“Okay, what else will there be?”

“Stuff to do every day. I’ll read the list. There are the sports you saw out there, tennis, basketball, pickleball, pétanque, minigolf, and of course volleyball. In the pool they have water volleyball games and water aerobics. There’s a nude 5-k cross-country run coming up in two weeks; that’s open to the public to come in and run. Oh, they added an orienteering game too—that’s where you get a map and compass and you try to find all the checkpoints all around the resort’s grounds. And there are yoga sessions and massages. Sometimes they have a couples-massage session too. They also have a crafts schedule; every Friday there’s some kind of crafts project, like decorating flower pots, making concrete stepping stones, sometimes a baking project. It varies. Lots of things to do.”

“So I won’t get bored?” Tamara joked.

“C’mere,” Peter said as he reached for her.

They hugged and were kissing for a minute when Barbara and Terence came in.

“Okay, break it up, kids,” Barbara joked. “We wondered where you guys went. The car is open; get your stuff and bring it in. Oh, thanks for opening up here and starting the fans. We need to do that in the other cabins tomorrow; we got Uncle Dave and Aunt Shelly and their crew coming tomorrow evening.”

Tamara went out to the car with Peter.

“Tonight, honey, when we’re alone, we’ll talk about my own abilities. I’ve hinted about them and I’ll tell you what I can do with them.”

Peter looked at her. “Um... sounds ominous?”

“No. It’s all good, sweetie. You’ll see.”

## Chapter 38 - Coming Clean

Soon everyone had gotten the car unloaded. Barbara and Peter, being old hands at this, had given Terence and Tamara a list of what to bring—and more importantly, what *not* to bring. Prominent in that second list was clothes; they wouldn't need much clothing. One of the dances in August was themed Polynesian and dressing up in costumes was encouraged, Barbara had told them. If the costume was a bit revealing, so much the better.

They had brought food and beverages; Peter and Barbara told the others that while the restaurant and lunch-stand food was quite good, it was pricy. Peter's parents and their other relatives would be providing most of the meals, so the four friends brought enough food and drinks for two weeks of lunches and lots of snacks. And several cases of bottled water.

"We all need to keep hydrated," Barbara had told them.

High on the "must take" list were sun screen, spare towels, sun glasses, and a hat or two. Cover-ups were recommended for Tamara ("Nudist or not, sometimes it can get chilly at night," Barbara had told her). Slip-ons or sandals for the pool area, sneakers for playing any sports or going on a run, and sturdy shoes if they wanted to hike the nature trail. Tamara brought her laptop but promised that she'd keep her working on it to a minimum. She wanted to keep in touch with the patent attorneys since she had developed the details of her latest discovery into two more patent applications.

Earlier that week, together with one of Emma's engineers, she had finished developing a chip which seemed stable and, when energized, could reliably produce the powerful repulsive or magnetic field she had observed. But further work needed to be delayed until the techs working on the fabricator could produce a few dozen for scale-up and destructive testing—this was to learn the operational limits of the circuit. Tamara brought her thoughts back to the present; Barbara was trying to get her attention. They had just finished putting the food away.

"I said, do you want to hit the pool for a bit and then have lunch out there?" Barbara asked. "The guys are stowing the coolers in the car so they won't be in the way in here. These cabins are nice but they have zero storage space."

"Okay, that should be interesting. What do I need to take?"

"Your towel. Always have a towel wherever you go. For the pool, having a second towel is handy. One to lay on and one to dry off with. Sun screen and sunglasses. A hat if you want. And a bottle of water. Keeping hydrated when it's hot is important."

Soon the four friends were walking off to the pool.

When they got to the gate at the pool, Peter told his guests, "Let's grab some lounge chairs and dump our stuff. Then we need showers—using soap. We frown on people who just let the shower water get them wet and hardly use any soap. The idea is to wash off your skin oils and sun screen. That keeps the pool water clean and helps with its chemical balance. You can shower outside there, or inside if you prefer."

Tamara looked at the showers on the side of the building and at the man and woman who were soaping themselves up, and giggled, "I'll go outside. For the experience. Jeez, I never thought that I'd ever be taking a public shower."

They showered and then went into the pool.

"Oooh, nice," Tamara said as she slid off the side into the deep end while Peter cannon-balled in next to her.

Terence also jumped in but Barbara just sedately used the ladder.

“Wow,” Terence exclaimed. “This feels awesome. Better’n Emma’s pool, actually. Jeezus, no wonder skinny-dippin’s so popular.”

Barbara laughed, “I never asked you. You never did this as a kid?”

“Never. Where Ah grew up, there weren’t any likely spots close enough,” he answered.

Peter had paddled back to Tamara and asked her, “What’ya think, sweetie?”

“Damn, it’s really nice. The water feels like silk on my skin, not like Emma’s pool.”

“Oh, right,” Peter said. “This is a salt-water pool. Emma’s uses chlorine—that water feels harsher, somehow. Instead of putting chlorine directly into the water, there are electrolysis cells that break down the salt in the water to generate chlorine so the chlorine levels tend to be less harsh.”

Several minutes later, a few teen girls came to the pool; Barbara knew them and introduced everyone. Then they had lunch at the lunch stand. After lunch, Peter suggested a walk around the grounds and by this time, Tamara had lost count of the number of people she had been introduced to. It was afternoon; the sun was hot; yet there were plenty of people playing on the various courts. They watched part of a tennis game and a highly competitive péntaque game. Tamara was fascinated by the pickleball game that she watched. Then Barbara suggested a game of minigolf.

“Don’t bet on this with her,” Peter joked. “She’s a shark.”

Sure enough, Barbara beat them all handily.

And Tamara realized that ever since they had left the cabin that morning, she had completely forgotten that she was nude. She mentioned that to Peter, who hugged her happily.

“That’s really great, honey. So coming early was a good idea?”

“Oh yeah. Now it’ll feel like your family will be coming into *my* space, rather than the other way around. Does that make sense?”

“Sure it does. The resort and people here won’t be new to you, only my family, so it’s like they’ll be *your* visitors. You have the control of the situation, in a way,” Peter told her.

After dinner, they heard music and noticed some people dancing in the Pavilion, so they went over there. Even though it was still quite warm outside, there were about a dozen couples and they had brought a Blue-tooth speaker and were playing tracks from someone’s phone. Barbara and Peter knew several couples so they all chatted for a while and danced a few times. Tamara even danced with Terence several times, and when, on one of Terence’s dance moves, Tamara felt a soft, wet *thwack* on her hip, she giggled and poked him in the ribs.

“Jeez, Ah’m sorry...” he began.

“Oh, no, don’t be,” she laughed. “When that happened, I got the weird thought, ‘I’m being beaten by a wet noodle,’ so either you’re getting a bit aroused and leaking...”

Terence gasped in shock and checked himself; then he chuckled, “Damn sweat. Yeah, my cock’s wet. Not what y’all thought. And Ah resemble y’all’s suggestion that it’s a noodle. Most gals referred t’ it as a wreckin’ bar.”

The two of them began laughing and of course that attracted the curiosity of some of the nearby dancers.

“Hey buddy,” a guy, who had introduced himself as “Jim,” asked, “what’s the joke?”

A few others came closer. When Tamara told them what had happened and what Terence had said, there was more laughter, and several of the girls told him that they thought that he looked simply awesome and his

endowment was just stunning. And none of the guys made any off-color comments other to say that his high-school dates must have been twits not to appreciate him. Terence was walking a mile high after hearing those comments. After a while, the group began to break up and the four friends decided to get showers before returning to their cabin.

After the shower and while they were walking back, Tamara asked Peter, “Is this how everyone is here? So friendly and open?”

“Pretty much. When I was in high school, visits out here helped me keep my sanity. I had this awful dichotomy I had to constantly face. In school, the Program was running with all of its compulsion and coercion and all those negative emotions beating on me. Anguish, fear, even panic, from a lot of kids. I hated Mondays; new kids were called then, so I could feel everyone’s dread; then kids were called and another round of fear began. Even hysteria in some cases. But on the other side of the coin, coming here, when people got nude, there was serenity, happiness, and pleasure. Respect. No demands that naked people do repugnant things or allow others to do them to themselves. My visits here fortified me for when I had to be back in school, and I was able to use the images from here to help me deal with what I saw in the school.”

“Jeez, that’s an awful picture you’re giving me,” Tamara said. “Your empathy did you no favors. Is it still as strong? I can feel how you respond to people here; you seem to reflect their happy feelings when you greet them.”

“It took me three years, but by my senior year, I had mostly figured out how to throttle down some of the worst of it. Of course, in my senior year, I wasn’t in high school every day; I was in that advanced college program, so I had those classes away from the school two days a week. That was good, because Barbara wasn’t in high school that year; she was in college. She was my lifeline for those three years and would help me whenever I began to feel overwhelmed.”

They had gotten to the cabin now, but stopped to talk on the porch. They sat on a twin seat swing outside there as Terence and Barbara went inside.

“What exactly did you feel?” Tamara asked.

“I guess I made a mistake with Amy. We had opened our emotions to each other and I got carried away. I loved being attuned to her feelings and that she could feel mine. And then things changed when we got to high school and the Program began. It was bad right from when it started. The first assembly, where they made kids strip, was awful and some of those kids were actually volunteers—they did it to get it over with. During the entire fall term, the emotions I felt were bothersome and made me withdraw a lot and I know that the teachers noticed. It was really bad for Amy, though, and that also affected me, so I kept close to her to support her. And those things we did together to help us in dealing with all that abuse crap we saw was probably the reason they picked the two of us.

“It was on that Monday morning when they called both our names that I finally came unglued. I had such a strong empathic bond to Amy that her panicked response cut me to my soul. I told you about that when we were at Emma’s house that first time. Fortunately, after that state cop’s visit, they *did* leave me alone. Completely. The teachers let me be and if I couldn’t stand the Program sights, like if a teacher was using a kid in the classroom, I’d just go to the library for that period. And if a class had a Program kid in it, I’d arrive five minutes late to miss the relief show. No one said a word about that—must have been that trooper’s threats ‘cause they really let me be. I had really good psychological help too and the shrinks I saw were able to help me see that how I responded showed that I had an extremely strong moral sense and my reactions were protective measures, not a mental illness.”

Tamara hugged him. “I’m glad it’s all over for you and also that the Program is all done with too,” she said.

“Yeah... and my cousins—you’ll meet them tomorrow—told me that their local high school stopped it last year. Finally.”

“Were they ever in it?” Tamara asked.

“They live in Frederick now. Mike had just started as a freshman just after they stopped it. He said that in the year before he got to high school, many kids were refusing even then. Janice is a college senior like us, but she didn’t go to high school in the U.S. Uncle Dave and the family were in Germany then and now he’s stationed at Ft. Detrick. So, no. Hey, you told me that you’d spill some of your ‘state secrets,’ remember? The ... ah... mischief you got into.”

“Sure. A big part of who I am is my religion and my so-called ‘mischief’ stems from that—from our religion’s teachings. I told you a little about Vodou and how it’s been criminally misrepresented for over two hundred years or so.”

“Yeah, I remember. It’s nothing like the movies make it out to be.”

Tamara nodded. “Or even the touristy areas of New Orleans, either. Vodou’s a religion that has roots in west Africa and when the slaves who were brought to Haiti tried to continue observing it, their overseers began stopping its practice, so in response the slaves combined it with a lot of similar elements in Catholicism and they were allowed to practice that version. It’s not a formal religion in that there’s no hierarchy; the priests and priestesses teach others in a kind of apprenticeship.

“Okay. So an important part of our Vodou beliefs is how people must act with each other, how they work together socially as individuals and groups. We believe in a very strong commitment to service and justice and the respectful treatment of those who are needy. My mom, as a priestess, embodied those values and I adopted them as well.

“Next, in Vodou, we believe that a spirit world exists and we can interact with it and the spirits who occupy it. We call them *lwa*; I mentioned them to you. But the most important part of this is that the *lwa* actually exist; probably not as actual physical entities but as human-generated actualities. In other words, they don’t seem to exist unless people will them into existence. We do that through meditation and our worship rites. Now, I have a skill or ability to call on the *lwa* that may seem to be like a superpower... don’t look at me like that; you have something like it too.”

“What? That’s crazy! What the hell do you mean? I don’t have a superpower!”

“Sure you do. You’re a super-empath. So apparently was Amy. And Emma’s a super-charismatic, or whatever the word is. Listen. You know that sometimes a person will come into a busy room and everyone stops talking and looks to see who came in?”

“Sure. That describes Emma,” Peter said.

“And consider yourself. You told me that you just about collapsed when Amy was roughed up after being stripped. You felt what she did, right?”

“Um, well... yes...”

“Plus you felt the terror of other kids that were forced to strip. Know anyone else like you? Besides Amy.”

“Um, well... no...”

“So what would you say if I told you that I could do both what Emma does and what you do and also make people experience those emotions?”



“Um, well... freak out time! Tamara, what are you saying?”

“Just this: when I was little, I figured out that I could quote, ‘do stuff,’ unquote,” Tamara explained. “It started when I didn’t want to be disturbed—I was maybe seven or eight. I’d be reading a book and didn’t want to be bothered, so I made it so that I wasn’t. To my parents or other people around me, I wasn’t there. When I suddenly popped up, it scared the hell out of them. I also found that I could affect people’s emotions and stuff when they were close.”

“How can that be? This is crazy. Really?” Peter asked.

“Ah, a demonstration is in order. Please don’t get mad, okay?”

“What are you do... shit, is that you? Stop!” Peter exclaimed.

Tamara had “pushed” a faint yellow taste to him.

“Peter, I sent a ‘fear’ emotion to you. Now bear with me...”

She gathered a greenish-brown taste and “pushed” that and Peter began looking around wildly.

“Where are we?” he gasped. “Why am I naked? Why are *you* naked? What’s going on?”

Tamara removed the tastes.

“I just gave you ‘confusion.’ See? In very limited ways, I can send different emotions to people, but I can also sense their emotions too...”

Peter interrupted, “Jeez, that’s so crazy. Damn, Tamara, but that’s a fuckin’ powerful superpower. You could rule...”

Now Tamara interrupted him, “Nope. Never. I can’t use it for evil or personal gain. I told you that the *lwa*, our spirit mentors, so to speak, allow me to use that ability but I know with absolute certainty that if I misuse it, it will be gone. When I used it in the past, it was always to help those who needed help—or to put evil right.”

“Jee... zus. This is so fuckin’ crazy. Do you know how it works, though?”

“No, but I’m getting ideas. What I sense seems to me to be like tastes, but now I think it’s more like odors, and they have a kind of color that makes up part of what I sense. But my eyes don’t see anything. I read in a medical text that there’s a term for sense confusion, ‘synesthesia’; this is usually used to describe the ability to see colors or hear sounds when smelling certain odors. I kinda ‘hear’ the colors too. My mom told me that *Granmanman* could see people’s auras and a lot of my ability is like hers was, apparently. I’ve done a lot of reading about electrical activity in the brain, neurotransmitters, and pheromones. I got involved with MRI stuff ‘cause I learned that it could show how brains worked and that building better MRIs could help others.

“So in a roundabout way, I’ve come to where I can describe how my ability works... maybe. Still interested?”

“Oh yeah. This is so crazy, Tamara.”

“It sure is. Okay. My mental control—emotion control is more accurate—is fairly close range. If I want to affect someone, I need to make a huge mental effort to, um, I think of it as ‘gathering a taste of a certain color,’ and the color, I guess, is just a tag for the emotion I want to project. It feels like a taste to me, but perhaps it’s really an odor and I’ll explain that in a bit. Then I focus on the target for the emotion and ‘push’ the taste to him. If it’s a pure emotion, like I did with you, then that’s all. The person reacts. How strongly seems to be a personality trait of the person. For example, an evil person will have an intensified response to an emotion which resonates with his evilness. I’m not being boring, I hope.”

“Oh, no. Please. This is crazy.”

“Some emotions have no defined, um, object? Yeah, that’s a good word. Like compulsion. Compulsion for what? So some of the tastes I can ‘push’ have an apparent hypnotic effect; they make the subject open to suggestion, like supposedly happens in hypnosis, so I need to speak a direct suggestion. Now only if that suggestion doesn’t conflict with the target’s personality or morals or whatever, they will very likely do what I suggest. So see? If someone’s conscience or whatever thinks that my suggestion was improper, it would have no effect. That’s why I can’t use the ability to rule the world,” she giggled.

“Still, it’s an awesome power,” Peter said.

“It is, and I did some cool stuff with it too,” she agreed. “I’m still working out how my body makes it happen, though. There can’t be any magic here, since the universe is ruled by physical laws—and that’s cool too, since the term *lwa*—it’s Haitian *Kreyòl* and means ‘spirit’—is derived from the word ‘law,’ but also resembles the Tswana language term ‘to bewitch.’ My first hint that there’s something organic about my ability came from an MRI session. It was a scan when I happened to use my ability, and an atypical and completely unexpected part of my brain lit up. It was along my olfactory tract going up to my hippocampus, amygdala, and hypothalamus. That area basically is the limbic system and it processes emotions and memories, to simplify things greatly. Tastes travel to the brain using different pathways than odors, but the brain areas that process both senses are close to each other.

“But the most significant thing about my taste-smell link that I learned in my reading is that humans mostly rely on what’s called ‘retronasal’ smell, especially when it comes to describing flavor—much of what we consider flavor is actually retronasal smell.”

“And what’s retronasal smell?” Peter asked.

“Oh, sorry. In my lecture mode, I forget to define stuff. That’s when air originating in the mouth is forced into the nose through the passage where the nasal cavity joins the throat. That air carries the odorized air molecules from the food being eaten into the nasal cavity and the olfactory nerves carry that information to the brain. When we say food ‘tastes’ good, what we’re really sensing is its retronasal smell. So I’m assuming that my sensing tastes is really an olfactory function, and that’s why my brain MRI picked up the activity from the olfactory bulbs to the piriform cortex—that’s the part of the limbic system involved in perception of smells. The amygdala is central to that area. Am I boring you yet?”

“No way. You sure you’re a physicist—engineer—you’re... hell, a medical student too?” Peter laughed.

“No, and yes. All the above. Just someone in search of an answer. Biochemist and endocrinologist too, ‘cause that’s where my studies took me next. When I realized that I needed to explain to myself where my ability came from, I recalled something from my biology class about pheromones in nature. Both plants and animals have chemical signaling systems—so why not humans? When I looked into human pheromones, I read that people can unconsciously tell if someone is scared because they can sense it; their olfactory system senses something in their body secretions like sweat—pheromones. So pheromones are biological chemicals that the body produces and they act like hormones in the person whose olfactory system detects them. That’s when I started to look into how the brain directs the body to produce hormones and it turns out that the pituitary gland has a big role in that, but other endocrine glands, like the gonads, do that too.

“One kind of secretory gland—present in the armpit and groin—they’re called apocrine glands—may produce something like pheromones and those glands become active at puberty, so the person’s gonadal hormones turn them on. But the apocrine glands aren’t the best possibilities. One reason is that, although a lot of researchers think that they may possibly produce sex pheromones, most people in northeast Asia don’t have smelly armpits. That’s one fifth of the world’s population. So those people’s apocrine glands, unlike those of most people of

European and African descent, secrete only tiny amounts of the lipids and proteins that skin bacteria break down to make the bad smell.

“I found that the better possibility for a human secretory pheromone gland may be the sebaceous glands. A strong argument can be made for those as a source gland, since in most other mammals, it’s those glands that are most involved in chemical communication, so they should have that function in humans as well. They also have a much wider distribution throughout the body than apocrine glands. For my work, the parts of the body of greatest interest are those with a high concentration of sebaceous glands; those are the scalp, face, and forehead. And there are specialized sebaceous glands located on the lips, nostrils, eyelids, and even in the ear canals.

“I looked for other hormone-producing cell possibilities and came across a class of cells, the neuroendocrine cells, which release hormones into the blood in response to stimulation of the nervous system. These cells are found throughout the body but the major neuroendocrine organs are, guess what? The hypothalamus—part of the limbic system, and the pituitary, which gets its chemical signals from the hypothalamus. I’ve told you that my limbic system is strongly activated when I use my ability. So my current working theory is that my hyperactive limbic system signals the neuroendocrine cells in my body to secrete pheromones, whose chemical structure triggers the desired emotional response in the target person’s own limbic system after their olfactory tract picks up the signaling molecules.

“So this is why I want to build an MRI coil which has a resolution high enough that it can detect increased neurologic activity in groups of cells instead of their ability to image only general regions. Then I might be able to track down exactly how those chemical signals are triggered and especially how I can do it voluntarily. Everything I read implies that pheromone production is an involuntary response to an emotional trigger of some kind. So that’s my ability; I must have conscious control of my limbic system. If I’m correct, then everyone should have this ability—to a greater or lesser extent.”

“Hell, I’d hate to see someone with a greater ability than you have, Tamara,” Peter told her.

“If you mean having the ability to influence people—like charismatic individuals—then I’m a piker. Think of, um, Martin Luther King Junior. Or Winston Churchill. On the other side, how about Adolph Hitler or, well, Jim Jones?”

“I know about three of them, but who’s Jim Jones?”

“A notorious cult leader from the late 1970s. He moved to South America and about a thousand of his cult members followed him. They set up a compound there and things didn’t go well so Jones ordered everyone to drink poison; those who refused got shot. Parents even poisoned their kids and over 900 people died. Most of them blindly did whatever Jones told them to do; he was that charismatic.”

“Damn. I never heard about that.”

“Oh, there are lots of cult leaders like Jones, but that was one extreme case. Another cult was the Branch Davidians—you hear of that one?”

“Yeah, that one I did.”

“So the leader there, David something, was said to have a huge amount of charisma. Some charismatic people use that ability to further their own plans, trampling over everyone else’s rights. I would—could—never do anything like that.”

“Aren’t you concerned about authorities finding out what you can do?” Peter asked, concerned.

“Oh, absolutely. That’s why you’re only the fourth person I’ve ever told. My parents know and Emma does too. The *lwa* told me I can trust you not to reveal my secret. My impression was that somehow they would make it

hard for you to even accidentally talk about my ability. I trust them that they can do that somehow.”

“Jeez, this is so effin’ crazy,” Peter groaned. “How can they do...”

Just then, Barbara’s voice came from inside. “You guys gonna sit and talk there all night? Jeez, it’s after 11 p.m. now.”

“Hey, yeah,” Tamara answered. “We’re coming in.”

They got up and went inside and prepared for bed.

“Hey, tomorrow I’ll tell you the rest of the story—how I used my abilities to help others,” Tamara told Peter as they got into bed.

After snuggling for a while and a few kisses, both of them, tired from the day’s activities, fell asleep.

~~~~~

In the morning, Tamara woke when Barbara called to them. She opened her eyes and saw Peter beginning to stir, then he groaned as he sat up.

“I can’t believe we just zonked out like that,” he groaned. “I was hoping we could... um ...”

“We could screw? Copulate? Make the beast with two backs?” Tamara giggled.

“No, make love. If you’re ready, that is. I can sense that you’re still hesitant.”

“That’s true. I think it’s because I still haven’t shared with you who I really am and my ‘mischief’ during school and high school is an important part of me. Now see, you’re using your empathetic superpowers to read me—right?”

Peter laughed. “Got me. Okay, let’s see what our social czar out there has planned for us today.”

They left their room as Terence was coming out of the other bedroom. Barbara was making coffee.

“‘Mornin’, everyone,” Barbara said. “I need my coffee before anything, so if you want a cup too, grab one. It’s just about ready. You guys, that was a pretty intense conversation you had last night. Is everything okay?”

Peter and Terence got cups, but Tamara took a container of orange juice out of the refrigerator and poured herself a glass.

“Anyone else?” Tamara asked. Getting three negative responses, she put the container back and went on. “Yep, all fine; we got talking about Peter’s empathy. Also, I told him a little about my future plans and how my high-school years influenced my decision to go into science.”

“A little?” Terence asked. “Jeez, y’all were out there two hours jawin’. Ah coulda told my life story in that time,” he chuckled. “Twice.”

“Our gal here’s had a much more exciting life,” Barbara grinned. “Multiple patents, special government treatment... it wouldn’t surprise me if she were a secret agent. A real fake ID. Sheesh! Say, why didn’t you ever get a driver’s license, anyway?”

“The short answer is I never needed one. I was way too busy to take driver’s ed; besides, I was in college classes when it was offered. I didn’t have access to a car, either. And I found that a car service or public transit were far more convenient. Besides, parking in Miami is awful. So what’s on today’s schedule?”

“Okay, let’s get breakfast in the clubhouse. You guys want to try the yoga class they do? It’s a gentle class, nothing extreme. Lots of restful poses.”

“Maybe. When is it?” Tamara asked.

“At 9 o’clock. If we go now, we can get breakfast and do it. We have some yoga mats in the main house.”

They all decided to try it, so they left for breakfast. After breakfast, they went into the clubhouse and Barbara led them to a room next to the games room.

“This is the studio, remember?” she explained. “They do activities here like drawing classes, crafts, parties, aerobics, and, of course yoga.”

There were a half-dozen people there already and mats were lying on the floor around the room. They put their mats down in one area as several more people filtered in. Barbara and Peter knew everyone, so there was another round of introductions. The teacher came in then.

“Good morning; is everyone ready?” she asked and everyone responded that they were.

“Good. Before we start, I want to remind everyone that my partner and I will be giving a class on nuru massage tonight after dinner. If you’re interested, get a flyer from me after this class. Okay, I see some newcomers here; anybody here who has *not* done a yoga session before?”

Tamara and Terence raised their hands as did two others in the room.

“Okay, no problem, people. This is a mindful yoga session; we do basic poses designed to stretch the muscles and we hold the poses for slightly longer to develop the full stretch. I ask that you move deliberately into each pose and remain aware of how your muscles feel as they stretch. Sometimes the full extension of a pose isn’t available to a person; that’s not a limitation. Do whatever your body can attain. Remember, in my class, there isn’t any ‘my body can’t do’ something—this isn’t a competition and we don’t want anyone to have negative feelings about their body’s flexibility. And if something hurts, stop. Do *not* try to overstretch. You will do more harm than good. Now, is there any particular part of your bodies that you’d like this session to emphasize?”

The people in the room mentioned backs and butts.

“That’s good, the poses I typically use target those areas,” she said. “I will be doing the poses along with you so if you aren’t familiar with the names, just look at what I’m doing. Let’s start by standing at the top end of your mats, feet shoulder width apart, and...”

She led them through the class, doing most of the traditional basic poses and ended the class with a five-minute *shavasana*, a supine *asana* to relax the body and free the mind during the session-ending meditation. After the class, Barbara got a flyer for the massage class.

As they walked out, Terence asked her, “Is that the massage where y’all slide bodies on each other?”

Barbara nodded. “Yeah. They give that class twice each summer but it’s for over eighteen and couples-only. I was thinking that if you wanted, we could try it. It’s \$20 per couple.”

Tamara and Peter came over to them. “I really liked that class. What’s that massage one about?” she asked.

Peter chuckled. “Barbara’s always wanted to try that class. Slippery massage using the entire body.”

“Really? How does that work?” Tamara asked.

“Yeah, Barbara. How *does* it work?” Terence echoed.

“Okay, guys. Let me read the intro here,” Barbara said.

“The nuru massage, like tantric massage, is a particularly intimate form of massage. The term ‘nuru’ is a Japanese word which has different meanings depending on usage. As a verb, *nuru* means ‘to paint or to

varnish.’ As an adjective, *nurunuru* means ‘slippery or slimy.’ And that is exactly how the nuru massage is given. An ultra-slippery gel, typically made using a seaweed-derived gelatin, is ‘painted’ on the partners’ bodies to serve as a lubricant for this full body-on-body erotic massage.

The massage recipient just relaxes as their partner uses his or her body to slip and slide all over, stimulating the sensual areas of both, increasing their level of intimacy. Nuru massage mobilizes the tingling sensations of intercourse without the partners actively engaging in it. According to its practitioners, the benefits of nuru massage can include relaxing the muscles and relieving stress. The gel itself helps in moisturizing the skin.

Nuru massage’s full-body contact is soothing, intimate, and arousing, all at the same time, so it’s typically performed in an erotic setting rather than a therapeutic massage session.”

“Dang! Really?” Terence exclaimed. “Y’all want that? Ah’m all in!”

They all laughed.

Tamara looked at Peter, who blushed and looked down.

“Peter?” she asked. “I’m thinking that this is another of your fantasies?” she whispered to him and he nodded, blushing even harder.

“Okay then, four of us,” Barbara said. “There’s a sign-up sheet on the bulletin board—ah, there it is. They’ll charge it to our accounts. It says we need to shower just before the class.”

She wrote their names on the sheet.

“Now, after yoga I like to soak in the hot tub for a bit. Let’s go; it’s on the other side of the pool shower block. We need to shower first, anyway.”

After showering, they went to the hot tub and found a few of their fellow yoga classmates already there. The four joined them and their conversation, which was about the yoga class and yoga in general.

But Tamara was thinking about that nuru massage class. *First, I can’t believe that I’m doing all of this stuff. Second, that I’m doing it naked. And third, that it doesn’t even bother me now.*

### Chapter 39 - Slippery Session

They spent twenty minutes soaking in the spa, luxuriating in the pulsing hot water of the jets. Then they left it, and passing the pool and seeing a few teens batting a volleyball around in it, decided that spending more time in the water would be nice.

“Hey,” one of the teens called. “If you guys all join us, we can get a volleyball game going!”

“Sure!” Terence called back.

The kid called, “Marcia, Theresa! Get your butts over here! We got ten to play now!”

Two girls appeared from behind an umbrella and rushed to the showers, giggling, where the four friends joined them to wash off from the spa.

“Who’s who?” Peter asked. “Which of you is Marcia? And Theresa? You’re new here, I haven’t seen you guys before.”

“I’m Marcia,” the blond said.

“And I’m Theresa,” the redhead answered. “We just began coming. Our families were here for a weekend once last month, but my family only just moved to Maryland this June. Dad got a job at an Army lab about an hour from here. Marcia lives near D.C.”

Marcia said, “This is my family’s first year coming here, though. We’re cousins. Our brothers are in the pool. Mine’s Jack; he’s also a blond.”

“And my bro’s a redhead like me,” Theresa said. “His name’s Toby. It’s really Curtis but he hates that name, so we call him Toby.”

Theresa continued as they walked to the pool, “The other guys are...”

Peter interrupted, “Yeah, we know them. Gary and Herb. Hi there, guys, how long you here for this time?”

One of them answered, “Me ‘n Herb’re here through next weekend. Um, nine more days.”

“Us too,” Jack said.

“Um, this may be a strange question,” Barbara asked Theresa as they were getting into the pool; Peter and Terence had just cannonballed in at the deep end. “How did you get from ‘Curtis’ to ‘Toby’?”

Theresa giggled. “For some reason he hates ‘Curtis,’ and one day he complained to Dad with, ‘I’m glad you guys didn’t pick a name that could be either a boy’s or girl’s like, um, Toby or something.’ So that’s when we began calling him Toby.”

Tamara and Barbara laughed.

Everyone was in the pool now and introduced themselves. There were four girls and six guys, so they divided themselves up evenly and began to play. While they were playing, they shared a little about themselves. Tamara learned that Gary and Herb came from long-time member families and were starting their high-school senior year. The other four were new to club nudism but had visited nude beaches when their families had been on trips to Europe. Last summer, both families had taken a six-week trip to the Adriatic coast and Greek islands. Apparently Croatia and some of the Greek islands had some really great beaches where nudity was common.

So of course the topic of the Program came up—as it always did with teens. Gary and Herb both attended a parochial high school which didn’t have the Program. Jack was just going to start high school, as would be Toby, and Marcia was going into the eighth grade. Theresa would be a junior. They were all very happy that

their high schools had dropped the Program the year before.

It became a spirited game; Tamara and Terence were on the same team and his height and power and Tamara's speed, reflexes, and accuracy dominated the play, so much so that after a few games, the others demanded that they be split up. Peter was completely amazed at how good Tamara was. After their last game, they grabbed some loungers and sat; he spoke to her about her playing.

"Shit, Tamara, you never told me that you were an athlete too," he said, accusingly.

"Really? Well, you know that I run most mornings. And I learned volleyball in high school and got pretty good at it. But when the coach came sniffing around and wanted me to be on the school team, I turned her down. She also wanted me on the track team. When I said no to her, she became the biggest bully, so I had to ... you remember my 'pushing'?"

"Yeah..."

"So I made her feel a bit nauseous every time she looked at me."

Peter laughed. "Crazy, that's a great trick. I could have used you in my school. It would have really helped Amy..."

"You still really feel for her, don't you?" Tamara asked gently.

"I do, but... you know, they never were romantic feelings, like the way I feel about you. She was more to me like a sister—or a very close friend, but not a girlfriend. Being with you now, I see the difference."

About twenty minutes later, Barbara suggested getting lunch from their stock at the cabin. When they got back to the cabin, Peter and Barbara found several text messages on their phones. They opened the apps.

"From the folks," Barbara said. "Mom got delayed at the Academy and couldn't get off this afternoon, so they'll be out tomorrow morning."

"I got that one and one from the Gibsons," Peter said. "They also can't get here this evening. So it looks like the whole bunch will be coming in tomorrow morning."

"Who all's comin', anyway?" Terence asked.

"Okay, here goes," Peter said. "Our folks, they're Scott and Claire. Shelly and Dave Gibson, our aunt and uncle, and their kids, Mike and Janice. Mike's a junior in high school this fall and Janice'll be a college senior like us. They live over in Frederick. Another aunt and uncle, Wendy and Larry Winsberg, and the kids, Susan, JoAnne, and Frank. They live in York, Pennsylvania. Susan'll be a college senior and JoAnne and Frank are in high school, a senior and soph this fall. Oh, and Susan has a serious boyfriend, David Carter. He's probably coming. He's starting grad school."

"And finally, there's Aunt Jo and Uncle Mark Winsberg. They have two kids, twins, Ernie and Audrey. They're both gonna be high school juniors and live outside Wilmington, Delaware."

"Man, y'all got a big family," Terence commented.

"Oh, there's more," Peter told him. "Dad's parents are in Europe. Mom's parents are at some kinda meeting out west. And another family that couldn't come; Mom's brother's family. We went to see them in Richmond, Virginia, end of July. I won't overload you with their names now, but you'll probably hear them mentioned by our cousins."

They had finished lunch now and Peter texted his parents, aunts, and uncles, telling them that the cabins were all opened now, aired out, and ready for them. Then Tamara went over to him.



“Barbara got a text and told me that she needed to stop by the office; something to do with your family’s visit, and Terence went with her. I’d like to go for a run... I missed doing it for two days and I need it. But I need to wait for a half hour to let my lunch settle.”

“Oh, good. Can we run together?” Peter asked.

“Sure, That’ll be nice. If you can keep up,” she laughed. “Hey, while we wait, let me tell you about the ‘mischief’ I got into when I was in Miami. You need to know that part of me—the part that wants to protect kids, or really anyone who’s defenseless.”

“Nice. With your superpowers, I’ll bet you did a good protecting job,” Peter chuckled.

“Yep. That and using some hi-tech stuff I made,” she answered.

*Hmm. I’ll tell him about the school stuff but not the Vanessa stuff. Or how I used the compulsion ability defensively. He doesn’t need to know about that yet,* Tamara thought.

She went on to describe how she had made her first zapper in response to seeing the naked kids at school and how her work on improving the zapper, together with her MRI work, led to her developing a device which had possible military uses. Then she told him about how she had thwarted the startup of the Naked in School Program in her school—the auditorium lockout and the fiery floors.

“Holy shit, Tamara!” Peter exclaimed. “This is sounding more and more like a science-fiction story. It’s crazy!”

“Well, remember that I had the help and approval of the *lwa* or else I couldn’t have done most of those things.”

“Yeah, and that’s the part I have the most difficulty wrapping my mind around. Not that I doubt you, but still...”

“I know. That’s the most difficult part to understand, since you weren’t raised in my traditions. I’m still in the process of trying to understand how what appears to be supernatural fits into the natural world.”

Tamara continued her story, describing her uses of the spirit voices and her maser and how she played on the superstitions and beliefs of the students and teachers in the school. When she got to her description of how she had gotten the teachers to strip. Peter was enthralled.

“That’s so fuckin’ awesome!” he exclaimed. “And you’ve never bragged about that? About how you turned the tables on the teachers?”

“Um, no, why would I need to brag?” she answered. “I was just righting a power imbalance situation. I was showing the people who wanted to hurt kids just what it felt like to be forced to be naked. And it *so* worked, too. After I did that, over 90 percent of the school’s teachers came over to the kids’ side and refused to have anything to do with the Program. I even got to show the officials at the school district office that I meant business.”

She described how she had staged the stripping of the district officials.

“Damn, sweetie, you’re just awesome, you know? I wish you had been at my school; all that nastiness could have been avoided.”

“But, apart from the pain you had, it all did finally work out, right?” she reminded him. “And you learned a lot of important things about yourself. Especially your resilience. Don’t you agree?”

“Ha. There you go again, sounding just like my shrinks. Sweetie, I’d bet that whatever field you went into, you’d be a star. The depth of knowledge you have, it’s astounding.”

“All because of my parents, Peter. Mom is a social-science genius and taught me about people and relationships, and Dad is one of the most practical people I ever met. He has the most steady, grounded, and analytical mind

that I've ever encountered. And he's a mechanical genius too. They're great people to emulate. Hey, let's go run now. Okay?"

Tamara decided that she wanted some breast support for her run. Although her breasts were not large, being on the upper side of a "B" cup, she had still experienced uncomfortable movement when she ran in a bra with less support.

"Peter, I need to wear a sport bra to run. Is that okay here?"

"Um, I would think so. Some women wear bottoms when they need to wear pads, so sure."

"Good. You need any support yourself?"

"Nah. I've run nude plenty of times. I think the package all tends to shrink in and tuck up for protection—never thought much about it. I love running totally nude, anyway; it feels so open and free with everything exposed. Except I do need sneakers."

They went on the run and did five miles; Peter led her on the trails which paralleled the nearby river. He told her that the only direct access to those trails was through the resort, which owned much of that land, the rest was a flood-plain natural area. The remainder of the afternoon was spent at the pool and then, after dinner, it was time for their nuru massage class. As the directions requested, they took showers before going to the studio room in the clubhouse.

When they walked in, they saw a number of pillar candles set out in the room, about a dozen of them. Soft music was playing, and there were a few incense sticks burning in various locations. There were queen or twin-sized air mattresses randomly arranged on the floor and a couple, a man and a woman—the yoga instructor—were carrying bowls of water to place near the mattresses. The friends had been the first to arrive and noticed that they were ten minutes early.

"Hi, guys," the man said. "I'm Robert and that's Renee. Can you give us a hand? We'd appreciate it."

Peter answered, "Sure. What should we do?"

"Baskets over there have towels," he said, pointing. "Put five towels at each mattress near the water bowls there. That's the head of each mattress. Then take one towel, fold it over in half, and lay it on the mattress at the head. And in those boxes are spray bottles with water; put one in each water bowl. Thanks."

They noticed that the water in the bowls was quite warm and watched the couple as they poured packets of a powder into additional bowls and slowly added water.

"If you're done with the towels," Richard said, "could you carry these bowls of mixed gel over and put one next to each water bowl? These are on the hot side but not too hot, just so you're not surprised. By the time we begin, the gel will be nice and warm. Thanks."

They carried the bowls over to the mattresses as more people began to arrive. Soon there were sixteen in the room, eight couples.

"Welcome to our class. I'm Robert and my partner is Renee. As we said in our announcing it, this class is for couples and we'll be teaching a form of erotic massage. So if this isn't what you expected, you're either welcome to stay or go, whichever is your preference. All staying? Good.

"Now you all read the description in the flyer, I assume, or else you probably wouldn't be here. Unless you were curious and just dropped in."

Laughs.

“Okay. Grab a mattress and sit down. We’ll do an intro first.”

Renee began speaking. “Nuru massage is a sensual and erotic massage technique,” she began. “It’s a great way to connect with your partner and increase your intimacy. The sense of touch in nuru works both ways; it heightens the feelings of both the giver and receiver, but in regular massage, the giver’s sense of touch is limited to the hands; and in some other massage techniques, the forearms and elbows, or even feet, can be used. In nuru massage, the entire body is used by both giver and receiver, and this heightens your mutual pleasure.

“As you explore your partner’s body with your hands and glide your body along their skin, your gentle and sensuous movements will transport both of you to heights of tantric fantasy. This ignites the fires of desire and brings greater excitement and passion into your romance. You will also learn what touches and stimuli most please your partner. When a sensual massage becomes erotic, the passion and desire of both partners builds until you both are lost in the heights of sensuality.

“Nuru massage is one of the more difficult massage techniques to do in the home because it can be messy. This class is designed to show you how you can overcome some of the technical problems in getting set up to do it. We’re actually all properly dressed for this class,” she indicated everyone’s nudity and they chuckled, “and you have all showered before coming here, as the directions mentioned. Right?”

There was a murmured “yes” and a few head nods.

“Good. It’s important to have the skin slightly damp to begin; it helps in spreading on the gel. When we start the hands-on... oops, I should say body-on, part...”

More chuckles.

“... we have some spray bottles of warmed water to use to refresh your skin’s moisture. Let’s start out with the preparations you’ll need to begin with. I don’t need to go over the background about the nuru massage, where the term comes from, and about its objectives, since the flyer covers that. As I said before, the basic purpose of nuru massage is to enhance the eroticism within couples.”

Richard resumed the instructions. “But it’s the mechanical trappings about the massage setup that make it more complicated to set up to do in a home. First, there’s the mood setting. You can use candles, incense, and soft music like we’ve done here to set the mood and stimulate three of the senses before the massage stimulates a fourth, the touch sense. You’ll need to prepare the massage surface—be it on a bed or the floor—to protect both the massage and floor surfaces. There are nuru sheets available that you can buy but those can be expensive. We’ve provided these thin plastic air mattresses for your class today. See, the surfaces have a slight texture so the gel will tend not to run off by itself. And their plastic surface allows for easy cleanup.

“You can also put a plastic or rubber sheet on a bed, but be sure you take precautions to keep the gel from sliding off onto the floor. It’s very slippery, as you’ll find out. You could, for example, put pillows or rolled-up towels or blankets along the edges of the bed, underneath the sheet, making kind of a bowl in the bed’s center. That will create a barrier that keeps the gel pooled in the center of the bed, rather than having it sliding off. And, hey, it’ll also keep *you* from sliding off! That’s known to have happened before and can happen to you too, folks!”

Everyone laughed.

Renee took over the introduction. “Planning for cleanup is important too. Whichever you use, either a bed or an air mattress on the floor, you should still lay towels on the floor around the massage surface—especially if the floor’s carpeted. The gel won’t stain but getting it out of carpet would be a real pain. Put towels down there, because as soon as you get off the bed, the gel will drip off you onto the floor. So put towels, or sheets, down on the floor to step on. Have extra towels on hand too, to wipe off your hands and feet. Gel on feet on smooth

floors is a recipe for falls.

“We suggest that you also lay a towel in the area where your partner’s head will rest, as we’ve done here. That’s to do several things: be a comfortable cushion for their head; when prone, it keeps the gel from sliding into their face; and it gives their head a slip-free surface.”

Then Richard took over. “Next in the prep is the nuru gel. Don’t use that personal lubricant stuff; it dries quickly and gets sticky. You want the seaweed-derived gel with no, and I mean no, additives like perfumes or colors. Products with green-tea extract are okay. Or you can make your own; there are on-line recipes. If you do make your own gel, use only food-grade ingredients, because, well, I guarantee that you will be using your mouths on your partners at some point.”

There were a number of embarrassed titters at hearing that.

“We make our own gel for these classes. We use seaweed extract, that’s what gives the gel its slippery texture; disodium EDTA, which is a food-grade stabilizer that adds to the silky gel texture and as a benefit, helps in improving skin health; and sodium polyacrylate, also food-grade, which helps to retard the water from evaporating from the gel. The gel starts as a powder, and we gradually add the powder to hot water to until the right consistency is reached.”

Now Renee spoke, “If you use bottled gel, you’ll want that gel to be warm, too. Warm it up using hot water in your sink, or better, get a large bowl and fill it with very warm water and put it near the massage surface where you can easily reach it. Put the bottle in the bowl to allow it to heat. If you mix your own gel in a bowl, then keep some warm water close by too, so you can thin the gel as needed.

“Now that your setup is ready, your next step is to take a shower. Nuru massage works best when your skin is damp; that way the gel will stay slippery and smooth when you start out and as your massage progresses. Also, a nice hot shower helps relax your muscles and prepares your minds for the erotic session to follow. You people here have already done that, but your skin’s dried out a little now, so we’ll get it wet in a different way.”

Richard spoke now. “So let’s begin. You’re on your mattresses already and next to you is a bowl of warm gel and a bowl of warm water; there’s a spray bottle in there. We’ll use that spray instead of a shower now, and later to thin the gel if it’s needed. So gals, you’ll be the masseuses. Take the spray and lightly mist your guy, not too much, do it just like you do your house plants. You don’t want to drown the plants—just to help them grow. But watch where you spray—we’re not looking for any growing in here just now.”

Everyone laughed at the lame joke.

“Renee will take over now, since it’s hard to talk when your face is in the mattress. Guys, lay down on your fronts with your faces on those towels. Feel free to adjust them for your comfort.”

Renee took over. “Okay, gals, grab some handfuls of gel—see how slimy it is?—but in a smooth, silky way. Now drizzle it over your guy’s back, legs, and arms. Take a little and rub it on your front. Don’t be afraid if it slops around; that’s part of the fun. Get sloppy! Now, using your hands, spread the gel around and explore your guy’s body as you do that. Rub your forearms along their muscles while you gently slide your skin against your guy’s skin. The nuru technique uses your ability to glide your arms, legs, and your entire body over your partner’s body. That close and intimate contact’s the heart of the nuru massage.

“You want the pressure that your weight gives to be sensual, not be crushing or even squeezing somewhere uncomfortably, so make sure your hard parts go on soft tissue and that your soft tissue areas go on hard parts. The hard parts are the forearms, elbows, knees, and shins, and the soft ones are chests, breasts, bellies, thighs, and buttocks. But seeing some of the guys here, I’d have to class their thighs and butts as hard parts.”

There was a lot of laughter at that.

“Okay, gals, that’s right, slide your breasts and body up and down over their entire back, using your hands and arms, or elbows and upper arms, to support your weight as you slide up and down their skin. Also try using long glides up and down, wiggle around in side-to-side circular motions, and try undulating your body in wave-like motions. Explore different movements. Do what feels good.

“That’s right; get creative. Use different body parts for your contact. Move up his back and use your thighs to massage his butt. Use your boobies and nipples on his neck. Use your elbows to massage his butt crease—make sure that you get some gel in there. And watch out for his junk down there—I don’t want to hear any ‘ouch’ sounds.

“You can straddle your partner’s legs or butt with your knees, lightly gripping him with your legs, and grind your pelvis and groin area on his buttocks, while you sway side to side or rock up and down. Good, you’ve been using your front for the massage pressure. Now try this. Facing his head, straddle his back and use your buttocks and groin to slide back and forth over his back, buttocks, and legs. You can even lay back-to-back and do the whole back-and-forth gliding, sliding, and wiggling motions. Don’t neglect any body part. And keep using more gel; the more slippery you are, the better.

“Okay, we’ve been facing their heads. Rotate around to face their feet—don’t lift up! Keep that body contact. Slide around and use your hands and forearms to slide on his butt, thighs, calves, and ankles. Sit on his butt and trap one of his thighs between both of yours like a pincers and slide up and down; then do the other leg. Use your hands to rub and massage another body part as you work your legs. Keep him guessing.

“Another suggestion to keep yourself stable—I see some of you tending to slip off your partner when you’re doing the back-on-back. Have your guy make a cradle with his legs—like Richard is doing—and nestle into that cradle like this, using it for balance as you do your reverse body slide. You can even use the cradle idea when you do the long frontal glides.”

All this time, Tamara had been hearing sighs and groans coming from all around her—and then she realized that a lot of the sighs were her own. She was lost in a sea of sensuality and while she was following Renee’s instructions, she found herself adding to the touching—she just adored the feeling of her skin sliding on Peter’s skin. It was orders of magnitude better than just stroking his body with her hands. And then came another instruction.

“Okay, gals, now it’s time to amp things up. Now your massage will really get hot. Guys, flip over onto your backs. And, if you’re even just a bit endowed, be careful not to hit anyone with your ... goodness ... yeah, don’t hit anything with it.”

The other girls in the room looked around and there were several gasps. Tamara tried to stifle hers.

*Spirits! Damn, but Terence is huge! That’s gotta be over eight inches, but fat too! I wonder if he and Barbara...*

Renee was speaking again. “Now that you’re settled, we can do the frontal massage. Get some gel and if it seems thicker, spray some squirts of water into the bowl. Not much—a little water goes a long way. Mix it in with your hands, grab some, and drizzle it and massage it all around him. But now, you’ve got a toy to play with too.”

Laughter.

“But hold off on any direct stimulation. You want the massage to last. Straddle him—watch out where; we don’t want anyone accidentally impaling themselves...”

More laughter.

“...lean forward, and gently start gliding your body over his, trying to hit his most sensitive spots—I’m sure you know where—and be sure to keep as much full-body contact as you’re able to hold. Watch me and follow as I go through all of the sliding we did on your guy’s back. Do your rotations and undulations, keeping your hands moving too. In this position, you can move up for a steamy kiss too. But don’t rush to get to his intimate areas. That will be soon, though. Guys, this is when you can use your hands on your women. Caress them and help them move around too.

“As you glide, press your boobies and nipples into his chest, his face, and his groin. Rotate your chest around to stimulate the both of you. You can flip over onto your back and use your butt to slide over his chest, groin, and thighs. If you press down on his thighs as you glide there, you may get some nice tingles yourself. Watch me and copy what I do.”

Tamara watched as Renee moved all over Richard, using her body on his, almost like a gymnast moves in the floor exercise or a male gymnast uses the pommel horse. Tamara was feeling like her senses were screaming, she felt so horny, and she saw that Peter was in a no better condition; precum was just pouring out of his cock, which was so hard it was almost purple. With every one of her sliding movements on his body, he gasped, and his hips were pushing up and twitching like he wanted to be humping something—anything.

“Now, let’s straddle our guy’s chests, facing their feet,” Renee said after several minutes. “Lean forward and rub your boobies and nippys on your guy’s pubes, trapping his penis in your cleavage. Use more gel—this works even for gals who don’t have big bazooms, and it feels great for both of you. This is a nuru tit-fuck and I think you’ll agree that it’s awesome.”

The groaning in the room was louder now but the squishing sounds were almost drowning out the groaning.

*Jeez, Tamara thought, I never knew my nippys were so sensitive—I’m almost cumming from this sensation!*

“Okay now, from here, it’s just a tiny slide to move into a soixante-neuf—a 69, so if you’re inclined to do that, you can, or just keep up with your gliding on your partners. If this were tantra, we’d say to hold off the climax, but it looks like you guys are really primed now, so enjoy.”

Peter groaned, “Please...” so Tamara moved so that her knees were on either side of Peter’s head and her face was at his groin. .

When she tentatively licked his penis and discovered that the gel had no taste—it actually was a bit sweet—she slurped the organ into her mouth and began to mouth-fuck him. And then she felt him licking her vulva. When his tongue reached her clitoris and he nipped it with his lips, a fireball exploded in her groin, followed by a second, then a third. As her fourth one began to die out, Peter erupted. His balls were already pulled up tight against his perineum, but Tamara felt his entire groin pulse, the tube under his penis swelled, and as Peter heaved a huge grunt, a jet of cum rocketed out of his penis into her mouth. It was quickly followed by about five more pulses, the last two much weaker—but lasted longer—like his body was trying to prolong his ejaculations.

Tamara lay there bonelessly on Peter’s chest, breathing hard, and she felt that his muscles had gone slack; his arms had dropped away from her crotch, and his knees, which had risen off the mattress, had slid back down again. With a great effort, Tamara twisted around and slid up on Peter’s body; then she laid a big, wet, sloppy kiss on him.

“That was awesome, honey,” she breathed.

“Yeah,” he panted. “Sure was.”

The room was filled with the sounds of panting and sighing when Richard began speaking again.

“In a lot of nuru sessions, it would continue with partners switching roles, with the guy gliding on top of the

gal—but some of you guys are really well built, so you'd need to be very careful about supporting your weight. We'd recommend your doing the guy-on-top version on a very firm mattress or thin air mattress like you're on now, so that your arms can keep most of your weight off her.

“Okay, it looks like you all had happy endings, right?”

There were sounds of agreement from everyone.

“Good. Now you'll see how your advance preparations are important for the cleanup. Notice how the mattresses kept the gel contained. Grab clean towels from the stack at the head of the mattress and help your partner dry their feet. Then put the towels on the floor and stand up on them—hold onto each other. The gel will run off of you onto the towel. We'll carefully walk out the door, watch yourself on the smooth wood floor here, and go to the shower block. You'll be walking on concrete out there, so it's safe, but still, be careful.

“Watch yourselves in the shower too—the gel can dry on your feet and the shower water will make it very slippery again. At home, be very careful how you walk on smooth floors and in the shower, use a non-slip mat or even a towel on the shower floor. After the fun, falling is no way to end the session. All right, let's go shower the gel off now. Then we'll come back for the rest of the cleanup.”

They all trooped out to the showers and came back in several minutes.

Renee finished the session then.

“Cleanup goes quick when you prepare properly. If you used a plastic sheet on the bed, just fold it over, keeping the gel pooled in the middle. You can dump that out in the bathtub or hose it off outside. What we'll do here is to spread this plastic sheet on the floor and slide the mattresses onto it. Then we'll hold the corners and raise them up, keeping everything inside. We'll carry-drag it out the door to the lawn and hose it all off out there.”

When that was done, the group reassembled in the studio.

“So that's our ‘How to do nuru massage at home’ class. Any questions?”

Everyone applauded the couple, who did a slight bow.

“Thank you,” Renee said. “We do sell the gel powder and other nuru supplies, as well as massage oils and aromatherapy products. The office has the price list and order forms. We're members here and can have your orders to you within a day of your order if you're staying here. We also have an on-line store and can ship product to your address. Thanks again for coming.”

The four friends packed up the little they had brought with them and left. Each was lost in his or her own thoughts.

Walking back to the cabin, the four friends spoke little; they were deep in thought. But when they got to their destination, Barbara broke the silence.

“Hey, are we all okay with that experience? If it was as intense for you as it was for me, I get that you guys may be reluctant to talk about it.”

Peter shook his head. “No, that's not it. For me, I was just reliving the experience in my head. I didn't want it to be over.”

“And Ah think Ah lost my tongue—my jaw too—when someone's thighs clamped down on me,” Terence chuckled.

“Eeww, TMI,” Tamara giggled. “I was also processing my thoughts. My folks—hell, my whole culture—we're private people, and that much public eroticism, in retrospect, kinda overloaded me. But that session was

incredible. The sensations I felt were unbelievable.”

“I can second that,” Peter said.

“Um, Ah got really embarrassed when we had to flip over,” Terence ventured. “Ah got scared...”

Tamara interrupted, “Hey, when you did, all the gals, including Renee, were looking impressed, not disgusted or anything. I think they were envying Barbara,” she giggled.

“Sure. Terence, you made me feel so proud,” Barbara praised him. “You were all mine, and they couldn’t have you,” she laughed. “I’ll have you know that I’m not a swinger. It’s not much of a secret that there’s a small swinger group that comes here. I didn’t see any of them so far, but they hang in a group at the pool and spa. But they’ve always been discreet and there’ve been no complaints.”

“Hey, I’m for turning in early,” Peter said, yawning. “I had more activity today than I’m used to and I’m tired.”

“Getting old, you old man,” Tamara laughed. “Yeah, me too. Let’s get ready.”

They went to their rooms and prepared for bed. Soon all four were asleep, each couple cuddling together.



## Chapter 40 - Volleyball Master

The following morning, everyone was up early and Tamara and Peter went out for a run.

“Damn, Ah don’t like to run,” Terence muttered when they left. “Ah need to get some exercise, though.”

“Oops,” Barbara responded. “I forgot to show you guys. We forgot to tell you about the little exercise room on the back side of the pool shower block. It has a multi-gym exercise machine thing, a set of free weights and bench, and an elliptical trainer. And I haven’t been doing my tai ch’i forms, so I’ll show you the equipment and then do my forms.”

“Y’all do tai ch’i?” he asked.

“Yeah. Peter and I started with it years ago. That was after they stripped him at school—he wanted to learn self-defense. We both started taking judo and tai ch’i then. My judo’s a bit rusty since I haven’t kept up at the dojo this last year, but I like the discipline that I get from tai ch’i.”

They spent an hour at the exercise room and showered; as they were finishing their showers, Tamara and Peter came in to take theirs.

“Oh good,” Barbara said. “I wanted to remind you that the volleyball clinic starts soon. We have just enough time to grab a quick breakfast.”

After breakfast, they went to the courts. There were three, one sand court and two hard courts. When the event began, a guy called them over to the hard courts.

“Hi everyone. I’m Rick, and I’m on one of the teams that the resort sends to the Naked Volleyball Superbowl. For you newcomers, the teams play others of the same skill level. The top players are ranked ‘A’—but the best ‘A’ players have their own rank, ‘AA.’ Then there are the ‘B’s—some leagues recognize a ‘BB’ level. and then ‘C’s. After them are the novices. The teams are ranked according to the skill levels of their members. Our teams are okay; we’re mostly ‘B’ and ‘C’ players but two of us are ‘A’s; we have a men’s ‘B’ team and a coed ‘C’ team. Not enough ‘B’ gals for a gals’ team, though.

“Here’s how we’ll do the clinic. First, the more experienced players—you know who you are—you guys get into groups of three. The others, any learners or those who want to brush up on their passing, will partner with one of my team members. This is a warmup drill for passing the ball, you triplet groups. Pass the ball to a random person in your group. Newbies, go to one of the people who has their hand up.”

They separated into groups. Tamara joined two other people and introduced herself. She noticed that Barbara had also formed a triplet group, while Peter and Terence went to the team members. They would learn how to strike the ball with their forearms—or brush up on their skill; Tamara didn’t know if Terence had ever played. Soon she was involved with her group, passing the ball between each other.

After fifteen minutes, Rick announced, “Seems everyone has had at least some fundamentals; that’s good. You’re all passing the ball decently. I see some newcomers who are quite good, too. Okay, we’re warmed up, so we’ll start with serving and receiving. Half of you go to the opposite side and make a line. I want the first two people in the line over there to serve to two receivers here. Receivers, when the ball comes to you, try to pass it to JB near the net; he’s the setter. Now, if it’s a bad serve—out of bounds or in the net, that server goes to the back of the server’s line. If it’s a good serve but the receiver shanks the ball or makes a bad pass, then they stay serving and the receiver goes to the end of the receiver’s line over here. Three good serves or three good passes, then those people go to the back of their line. We’ll do this drill for a bit, and then switch around so the servers become receivers.”

The drill progressed for some time as the team members watched and coached the participants, showing them

how to handle the serves and pass properly. Then they switched. Tamara was enjoying herself immensely and she noticed that Barbara was doing very well too. Peter was also fairly good, but Terence was struggling. The huge muscles in his forearms were so hard that when a ball hit his swinging arms, it would rocket off them. The coaches were showing him how to hold both of his wrists together with both thumbs side by side and pointing to the ground and his elbows straight, and to just let the ball contact the front of his forearms with minimal swinging. They told him to keep his shoulders loose as the ball made contact, to absorb most of the ball's momentum, and to allow him to softly loft the ball over in a high pass to the setter. Keeping his body square to his passing target, the setter, was very important, too. When that drill was finished and everyone had gotten multiple chances as a server and receiver, Rick stopped the exercise.

"Again, I'm kinda impressed. We got some good people here, folks; thank you for coming. It makes doing this fun. The next drill up will be setting and spiking. Again, I want you to line up, half of you on each side at the antenna on your left as you face the net. When I say 'go,' the first person in line on this side will run to the center of the net and JB will toss you a pass to set for the second person in the line to run up to the set ball and spike it over the net. For the players on the other side, at my word 'go,' the first person in that line will run to where the hitter is taking the set and attempt to block the spike. Got it? Then those three, the setter, hitter, and blocker, run around the net to join the end of the line on the opposite side and the other side does the setting and spiking. Ready? Let's do it. Go!"

This drill was far more active; there was movement everywhere. Balls were flying, being smashed down hard, hitting into the net, flying wild. Some hitters really were trying to kill the ball but they had the least control; the ball would fly out of bounds or hit the net. Some hitters showed very good control of their ball placement.

Tamara's running had made her legs quite strong; she could jump really high, and her 5 foot-10 inch height worked well at the net. Every one of her spikes evaded the blocker. For some hits, in fact, she faked a hit with her right arm, drawing the blocker that way, and then used her left to smash the ball down in the opposite direction. When she did that, it drew some gasps and applause from the watchers. Other times, she'd fake a smash and just dink the ball right into the blocker's chest as they jumped.

Rick took her aside when that drill was finished and called to JB, "Hey, set them up for the passing, setting and hitting drill now. Okay?"

"Got it," JB called back.

"You're very good. What's your name?" Rick asked Tamara.

"Tamara."

"You've played before. College team?"

"No, high school P.E. classes. I enjoyed it."

"Damn... no coaching, just natural skill?"

"Um, I guess so," she answered.

"Well, the skills I've seen so far are at a 'B' level, maybe even higher. You're just about a perfect opposite hitter 'cause you hit well with either arm and your speed to the set ball makes for a good middle blocker too. Hell, you're even a good outside hitter as well. Your footwork and body position are almost flawless—and you didn't miss a single block; it was like you knew where the ball was going."

"Well, I watch the opposite set and see how the hitter reacts to where the ball's going. When their arm goes to strike, that shows me exactly where the ball will be."

“You can react that quickly? Amazing. Well, join back in with the others, but I’d like to have you play in our teams’ practice games this afternoon. Can you?”

“I’m pretty sure,” she replied and he nodded with a smile.

The drill now had a receiver on each side taking a serve, passing it to the setter, and having a hitter run from the antenna to take the set and spike it. On the defense side, three blockers were at the net to block the spike. Then the other side did that play sequence. Tamara joined the rotation and continued to show her skills.

After the workshop was finished, Rick called everyone together.

“Folks, I’m really impressed with all of you, even those who are somewhat new. You all have at least the fundamental skills, and a number of you have certainly impressed us. We on the team know four of you; Barbara’s been playing v-ball at the resort here forever and her brother Peter is pretty good, too. It’s too bad that their school schedules don’t allow them to be on our traveling team. And the other two players I want to name for special mention are Rhonda and John. Very well done, you guys! But we appear to have a new star here now. You all noticed how good a player Tamara is...”

There was a bit of applause.

“...and we’ve asked her, together with Barbara and Peter, to play with our resort teams in the practice games this afternoon. Thank you all for coming and participating. We’re having another workshop clinic next Saturday at the same time. Hope you can make it for that.”

As the group broke up, Peter went over to where Tamara was speaking to Rick.

“Tamara, you’re an excellent player,” he was telling her. “I rarely see a player react so quickly—especially when you’re playing middle and get to the set ball an instant after the setter releases it. And then you even did it once lefty! Those kills are completely unstoppable; you catch the defense flat-footed.”

“I’ve always had quick reflexes,” Tamara said. “I also watch the setter’s body position when they take the pass. Then how quickly they move their arms when they do the setting. Those things tell me where the ball’s going and how fast. With a good set, the arms move smoothly along a path which tells me the ball’s trajectory and that’s when I go to where the ball’s about to clear the net on the way up. Then it’s an easy spike to put away; the defense can’t react.”

“Well, damn. I can’t wait to see you in actual play. We’ll see you later.” He waved as he walked away.

“Yeah, Tamara,” Peter said. “You have any more secrets to reveal? You’re a damn good player.”

“So’s Barbara and you too. I saw some cool plays you guys made—both of you are good.”

“Yeah, but we’ve had coaching here from the team members every summer and play a lot here too. When did you play v-ball last?”

“Ha, yeah. High school, senior year. So three years ago.”

“And were those games against kids with skill?”

“Nope. Just average kids.”

“I rest my case. You’re damned good naturally.”

Barbara joined them and also praised Tamara’s skills, then suggested a quick dip before lunch.

“Got a text; everyone’s gonna get here between 12:30 and 1:30,” she told them. “Let’s go; we can eat, then meet them, and then get to the v-ball thing at 2.”

While they were in the pool and eating lunch later, their conversation continued about Tamara's prowess. And at lunch, Terence was holding forth about her.

"It's real apparent that y'all have great reflexes," Terence told her. "And y'all sense people's emotions and read minds too," he laughed. "So, introducing... Supergirl!"

Tamara blushed. "Will you guys quit it? It's embarrassing. I can point to other people who have special abilities."

"So? Who?" Terence challenged her.

Tamara grinned evilly. "Okay. Number one. Terence Dryer..."

"What? Ah'm..."

"Shaddup. Point one. Had a four-point cum and was high school valedictorian as well as getting two varsity letters. Check. Two. Presses 225 pounds for 36 reps. Close to a college record which is 51. Check. Three. Squats, 410 pounds, ten reps. Check. Four. Cock... not goin' there. Skip."

Everyone laughed, even Terence.

"... Five. Close to finishing a revolutionary design for a high-resolution telescope detector. Check. Those are superpowers in my book," she finished.

"How'd y'all know some of that stuff...?" he asked.

"I'm observant and curious," Tamara retorted. "And Barbara told me," she giggled.

"Well, those weren't the kinds of powers Ah meant," Terence objected.

"So? Let's do number two. Barbara Winsberg," Tamara grinned.

"Oh, come on now, Tamara..." Barbara started.

"Shaddup. One. Excellent v-ball player as demonstrated. Check. Two. Four-point high school average. Check. Three. Minigolf shark. Check."

Laughs.

"Four. Extraordinary super-empath. Check..."

"What? No!" Barbara objected.

"You need proof?" Tamara asked. "Okay. A big tell was how you reacted to Peter in high school. To Amy also. You rescued her when she was abused and stayed with her because you sensed that she needed someone she knew to stay with her. And you came to her rescue when she was being tormented by the other girls. It seems you were always there when they needed support. Am I right?"

Barbara looked at her in shock and Peter's mouth hung open.

"When Peter—or Amy—needed you badly, somehow you always turned up within a few minutes, as I heard from your stories. Even though you were in different grades and therefore had different schedules. Am I right?"

"Well, yeah... maybe..." Barbara said thoughtfully.

"No 'maybe' about it. Next, remember when we first met? At the Student Center? Peter got a cramp and like magic, you appeared out of nowhere and seemed to know that there was something wrong. You weren't just passing through as you said—I saw you rush through the door to the Student Center and look around. You

spotted Peter and made a beeline for him. Remember? I do. I told you once that you're as much a part of Peter that you two could be joined at the hip. So four. Extraordinary super-empath. Check. Five. Studying psychology. The best ones are very empathetic. Check.

"So we have Barbara, another person with superpowers. Peter also does, and he's a super-empath too. I know that you guys know that from his Program stories. My point is that we all have special skills and what looks like a super-skill might simply be a small improvement over what you yourself can do. Can you see that?"

They nodded. Tamara was captivating them.

"Do you *really* see? *Everyone* is special, in their own special way. Sometimes that specialness is easy to see and sometimes you just have to look for it."

"Damn, Tamara," Barbara sighed. "That's a lecture most psych students should get."

"Correction." Terence said, "*every* student should get."

Peter's response to her was a hug.

They were finished with lunch, so they went back to the cabin. There was a car parked next to Barbara's.

"Mom and Dad's here," Peter declared, and they trooped into the house. "We're back!" he called.

"Be right out," a female voice replied from a back room.

About a minute later, two people emerged from the bedroom and Tamara wasn't at all surprised to see that they were nude. Of course they were.

*I'm so used to this that if I see a clothed person, I'll think it's strange*, she mused.

"Hello, kids," the man called out as he came into the great room.

Peter and Barbara had rushed over to hug the woman. Then they introduced everyone to everyone else. Tamara was told again that their mom's name was Claire and their dad was Scott. They both insisted on their kids' friends using their first names.

Claire took Tamara's hand. "I'm so delighted to finally meet you. You've totally captivated Peter, you know. He never stops talking about you..."

"Mom!" Peter objected.

"As you were!" she said in a command voice, then chuckled as Peter clamped his mouth shut. "Hard to break officer habits," Claire chuckled. "So you're a physicist like me. That's really cool, you know."

Scott broke in, "And an engineer like me. Honey, we'll never lack for a conversation partner now."

They all laughed.

"So Tamara, word in the physics community is that you've upset some basic theories in electromagnetism. Somehow you've managed to build a circuit to allow electrons to flow against a charge gradient. And second, an atomic lattice structure which not only traps free electrons, but sequesters them in such numbers that the Pauli exclusion principle is violated locally," Claire commented.

"Ha. Guilty as charged. I'm trying to learn enough mathematics so I can figure out how those things can happen."

Claire laughed. "That actually may even require that some new mathematics be invented to do that. Those problems are fascinating and any theory that arises from their solution may open new research areas."

“And the things you’ve done with energy storage,” Scott continued. “That has folks at the APL buzzing. The new battery—what you’ve called an accumulator—is so interesting that some engineers have been talking about jumping fields to work in energy. So cut that out! We still need mechanical engineers, you know,” he laughed.

“Yeah, you mechanical types are needed to build the stuff that the batteries power. Motors, transmissions, generators, bearings, all that stuff. We won’t put you out of jobs,” Tamara countered, grinning.

“Well, you’re doing impressive work, anyway, Tamara. And hey, kids, thanks for getting the cabins ready,” Scott told them. “We got some stuff carried in already—the fridge and freezer items, but could you give a hand for the rest of the groceries?”

Once that was done, Barbara told them about the volleyball games later.

Claire looked at Scott. “Let’s go watch. Text and leave a note for the others; when they get here, they can come out to the courts too.” Then she looked at Barbara. “Mark and Jo will be here around 4 p.m. The others’ll be anytime now.”

Soon they left for the games. The standard game is played with six on a side, although there are versions for two, three, or four per side. For the first two games, Tamara was slotted into a team as the middle blocker. Her team members went over their offensive setup. They had one good setter so they used the 5-1 offense with three hitters at the net. In the first rotation, the outside hitter was at the left antenna and the opposite was at the right. Tamara was in the center. The back court had the setter, libero, and another hitter who was also good at defense.

In their play, the libero was almost always the service receiver and passer. She was small but incredibly quick and accurate in her passes. Tamara kept close to the setter as the pass was made and frequently was able to leap and nail the set ball while it was still on its upward arc. If she saw the defenders bunch up to try to block her when she made that move, she made a fake and let the ball go to the outside hitter, who had an easy spike for the point. She had several other chances to attack from deep sets, when the setter was pulled out of position by a mis-aimed pass. Any high ball set within her reach was a target for either of her arms, so the defense didn’t know which angle to block. Eleven of the points were hers, a large number for a middle blocker. On defense, she accounted for eight blocks. They won the first game 25-2.

After the first game, her teammates surrounded her to congratulate her. The second game was closer as that team tried to put together a strategy to contain Tamara’s ability to hit spikes at will. Still, her team won 25-13; they won the next two games too, 25-10 and 25-14.

There were other games going on at the time and both Peter and Barbara were playing on the sand court; that was their preference. The sand made the pace of the game a bit slower but the defensive moves, like dives for the ball, tended to be more spectacular.

They were all quite tired after an hour and a half of steady playing. The resort team members began an intensive campaign to try to persuade Tamara go the Superbowl with them.

One of the resort guests turned out to be on the Hopkins athletic department staff, a woman’s basketball assistant coach. She spoke to Tamara after the games.

“Say, Tamara, I’m Joyce Boyers and a coach at Hopkins and I watched you play. You look like an eighteen-nineteen-year old, so I imagine you’re in college?”

“Yes ma’am. I go to Hopkins, actually. But...”

“Well, you’re seriously talented. We definitely can get you on the Hopkins volleyball team and even as a freshman or sophomore, you’d be playing with the first team.”

Tamara laughed. “Oh, I’m sorry. It’s that first, I’m going into my senior year now and second, I have a Hopkins scholarship—the Clarke scholarship, actually.”

The woman looked crestfallen. “I see. You looked so much younger; I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be; that was perceptive. I really am just seventeen. I’ve been jumping grades regularly.”

“Oh my, just seventeen? You could’ve been an NCAA star if you took the college athletic route. I heard them asking you to go to the Superbowl,” she said. “I hope you can do that. Some years, a few brave girls on the volleyball team go, unofficially of course. The resort requires that all players be nude when they play.”

“Have you been there?” Tamara asked.

“Yep. A few times. It’s like a carnival—a volleyball carnival. Games everywhere. They have something like ten courts, I think. Grass, sand, and hard surface.”

Gradually the groups dispersed and Tamara heard how Barbara and Peter’s games went. Barbara’s team had won all four and Peter’s had won three and lost one. They walked over to where Peter’s parents had been sitting; they were standing now and talking to some people as a bunch of young adults rushed over to Peter and Barbara and began hugging them.

Then Peter began the introductions.

“This is Tamara and Terence. My girlfriend and Barbara’s boyfriend. Okay, first, this is JoAnne and Frank Winsberg. They’re in high school. Their sister Susan is still at their cabin—she’s waiting for her boyfriend to call. And this is Mike and Janice Gibson. Mike’s in high school and Janice is a senior like us.”

They all circulated, greeting each other. Then Barbara dragged them over to meet their aunts and uncles, Shelly and Dave Gibson and Wendy and Larry Winsberg. Tamara was filing away all the names in her memory and she thought she had them down. She glanced at Terence and he looked lost.

“Have problems remembering names?” she whispered.

He nodded.

“A trick. Find something on them physically and use it for a mnemonic. Like see how Mike’s mouth curves up in a permanent smile? Mouth—Mike. Like that.”

“Thanks. That’s good.”

“Hey. Don’t pick a body part that clothes cover or else the trick only works naked.”

Terence sputtered, trying not to laugh.

Then he whispered to her, “Y’know, not a single one of them looked. Not one!”

“Your, um, endowment,” she whispered back and he nodded. “See, we keep telling you. You’re just a normal guy. You got a *lot* of normal, but still normal.”

He laughed. But Tamara could tell that the slight cloud of anxiety and doubt that had been hovering over Terence like an incipient rainstorm was now completely gone.

Peter was talking to all his cousins; they were commenting on his and Barbara’s games.

“Yeah, but did you see Tamara playing? She was on the far court,” Peter asked.

“Oh yeah! Yeah, I did see a really good player. Hot too,” Mike said. “Man, that’s Tamara, the gal you’re dating?”

“You can speak to her—she’s right there,” Peter said, grinning.

Mike turned around and stared, then blushed royally, and finally gasped as he wrapped his towel around his waist.

“Damn. Hi, Tamara... Um, I guess I wasn’t really looking at you when Peter introduced everyone.”

Tamara chuckled. “I know. I saw where you were looking. I agree, those two girls were darn cute, right? And thanks for your compliment,” Tamara waved at his towel, which had a big bulge about midway down its length.

“Shit, sorry. I watched you playing. You’re really an awesome player and so cute too. ... Man, Mike, stop it. You’re making a fool of yourself again,” he muttered but Tamara could hear him.

“Mike, come here,” Tamara said.

He walked closer, tentatively.

Tamara wrapped him in a big hug and kissed his lips. He stared at her, wide-eyed.

“Now Mike,” she whispered to him as she held him, “you’re a really good-looking guy. You don’t do so good with the girls, though, right?” He nodded. “Are you a little shy?” He nodded again. “Okay. Stick with Peter and me for a bit. We’ll help you build your confidence. You’re a good way along on the confidence road, though, since you’re a nudist.”

He chuckled at that and Tamara released her embrace. Then he walked over to his cousin Frank, practically bouncing and beaming with pride.

Aunt Shelly had been watching Mike and Tamara with a broad smile and when Tamara released her embrace, Shelly gave her a thumb’s up gesture.

The group began walking back to the cabins and Shelly came over to Tamara.

“That was really thoughtful,” she said. “However did you know what to do to bring him out of his funk? He’s been depressed all spring; he’s asked girls on dates and they’re always ‘sorry, busy.’”

“I saw that he needed some reassurance—his body language was crying for it,” Tamara responded. “I’m gonna work with him on that. Is he a soph or junior?”

“Junior this fall. God... I don’t know what to say... except thank you. That would be a miracle for him if you could help. Look at him, how he’s walking—smiling, head held high. Whatever your magic, it’s already begun.”

The plan was to have a family barbeque for dinner that evening, so it was all hands on deck now to prepare. When they got to the cabins and Scott looked at his phone, he saw a text from the last group, the Delaware Winsbergs, that said that they would be arriving soon. And Susan Winsberg had come out to greet everyone.

“I was waiting for David’s call or text,” she said. “I wish they’d let us have our phones with us...”

She got a stern look from her father Larry.

“... I know, Dad. They don’t want people sneaking photos. I get that. But I missed their playing—hi, Barbara, Peter,” she said as she hugged them, then hugged Claire and Scott. “And you’re Tamara and Terence,” she continued.

“Oops,” Peter said. “Forgot to introduce you. My bad. Yeah, I had mentioned Tamara and I guess Barbara told you about Terence. We’ll get to...”

Susan’s phone buzzed and she excused herself to answer it. After a minute, she said, “He stopped for gas at the



highway exit so he'll be here in about ten minutes."

"You check him in?" Larry asked.

"Yep. They just need to scan his license. I gave the office all his details."

Everyone got to work setting up for the dinner. One group dragged the picnic tables from each cabin together and brought out a few folding ones. Some of the guys cleaned and started the grill up, while others went inside to help assemble the salads, side dishes, and drinks. Then two more cars rolled in and everything stopped for more introductions. Tamara was very happy that she had come here two days early; it did feel exactly like she was welcoming guests to her own little slice of heaven. For that was how she was beginning to think of the place. She hadn't had a stitch of clothes on in more than two days—and she didn't even miss it.

The newcomers were Scott's youngest sibling, Mark, and his wife Jo. Their kids were sixteen-year-old twins, Ernie and Audrey. In the other car was Susan's boyfriend, David Carter. The introductions were duly made, the newcomers were told where they were to sleep, and they retired to those rooms to strip off.

The Winsbergs returned first and collected a crew to help them to unload the groceries that they had brought. Tamara had wondered how all the cousins would sort out where they slept, but Barbara told her that they had a system. Couples would share a queen bed, the boys bunked together, and the girls bunked together. That system had to be modified if all the grandparents and the fourth family were all at the resort at the same time, which happened rarely. There was a space that a camper trailer could be parked for overflow.

Then Susan came in with a nude David and Tamara's eyes nearly bugged out. Terence was big, Jay had been bigger, but David was simply enormous. David was about 6 feet-4 inches tall and had a wiry, but not thin, build. His arms and legs were very muscled, but the muscles were sleek, not bulky. His penis, though, was astounding; it was fairly thick and hung halfway down his thigh.

Terence, she noticed, looked thunderstruck, but everyone else seemed not to even notice his size.

*Actually, she thought, they must notice, but maybe he's nothing special? I wonder if Terence feels inadequate now, she laughed quietly.*

Terence looked at Tamara and blushed and Tamara simply shrugged back.

Barbara began to mobilize everyone to start setting out the food, beverages, and serving utensils and then the people manning the grills began dishing out the meats. The younger set sat together and mostly discussed the things that they hoped to get to do that week. After dinner and cleanup, it was still fairly warm and still early, so the younger group decided to go to the pool.

On the walk over, Tamara made sure that Mike was walking next to her, with Peter on her other side.

"Mike," she told him, "you're a good-looking guy and can certainly hold a conversation—way better than the high-school kids in my school could, in fact. Your girl problems aren't you, it's those girls. Let's see what we can do about that."

When they got to the pool, there was a group of teens already there, and Tamara realized that she had met all of them. Among them were Marcia and Theresa; they were in the pool with their brothers.

Instantly, a plan leaped into Tamara's mind.

## Chapter 41 - Philosophy, Nudist and Religious

Tamara glanced at Mike; he was following her but holding back a bit and looking down.

“Hey,” she whispered to him. “Those are the gals you were looking at when I met you after the games, I’ll bet.”

He nodded.

“Let’s get a shower and jump in,” she told him as her whole group went over to wash off.

When Tamara, Mike, and Peter started down the pool steps at the shallow end of the pool, Marcia and Theresa glanced idly over at them to see who the new arrivals were.

Tamara could feel him tense with nervousness, so she gently urged him, “Mike, loosen up. They won’t bite. Probably.”

He giggled.

Suddenly she had a thought. *I feel some curiosity from Theresa; she’s interested in Mike, it seems. I could “push” a teeny bit of interest to her but that would be a big no-no. I don’t want to interfere with anyone’s feelings that way...*

Suddenly a powerful flood of warmth and love flooded over Tamara and then she noticed that Peter had staggered a bit.

*What’s with Peter?* she wondered. Then she recognized *Erzulie Mansur’s* signature emotion.

*I’ll see about Peter later. And whatever is Erzulie Mansur doing?... she couldn’t want me to interfere?* she wondered. The feeling grew greater. *She does!* And with the sensation of a kiss, the feeling departed.

Tamara gathered a tiny bit of a taste of light green filled with flecks of gold and “pushed” it toward Theresa and Marcia as she called to them, “Hey, guys. Theresa. Someone you should meet.”

Tamara had never used that taste before—a tiny amount of a well-being feeling and a possible romantic interest—but she sensed it would work to make Theresa at least a bit forgiving for any of Mike’s likely clumsiness in introducing himself. Tamara had guessed that it was the first impression of the girls in Mike’s high school, about how he approached and spoke to them, that had earned him their rejection.

Tamara sloshed over to Theresa and Marcia, pulling Mike along with her.

“Hi again, you gals. Theresa and Marcia, this is Mike; Mike, the girls are cousins. Theresa, I’m thinking that you and Mike have something in common.”

Tamara had noticed how Theresa had been watching Mike as he came over to them; the way she was looking at him revealed her interest.

“Really? What do we have in common?” Theresa asked.

“Several things... you live in Frederick; your dad’s at the lab there; and you’ll be a high-school junior there too. Same with Mike here.”

Both Theresa and Mike looked at Tamara in wonder.

“How’d you know that?” Theresa asked, her eyes wide.

“You told me some of it yesterday and I figured out the rest,” Tamara answered. “You’re also new to the area. So’s Mike, but he’s been living in Frederick for two years now, right, Mike?”

“Ahh, yeah. We, er, my family, that is, moved to Frederick from, er, Germany two years ago. I, um, can tell you all about the school if you want, Theresa. But, um, I don’t want to ignore Marcia or have her felt left out...”

Theresa beamed at him, “Oh, that’s so thoughtful, Mike. Yes, I do want to hear about the school. And I’d like to have you meet my brother and Marcia’s brother too. We can get to know each other better.”

Mike nodded happily. “Yeah. That’d be dope. Hey, I wanna thank Tamara first. I was a little shy to come over to meet you but she said she’d introduce us.”

He turned to thank Tamara but she swept him into a big hug and kiss.

“You’ll be fine now,” she whispered in his ear. “Just be yourself.”

Then Tamara was surprised when Theresa came over and hugged her too.

“Thank you for introducing us, Tamara,” she whispered. “I feel like I like him already.”

Tamara and Peter left the kids chattering happily together as the two went to see where the rest of their group had gone.

“Peter, just before we went to introduce Mike to the girls, you gasped and stumbled. You okay now?” she asked.

“Oh, sure. But that was crazy, so strange. It was suddenly like I was flooded with an overwhelming sensation of love—it swamped all of my senses.”

Tamara stopped and stared at him.

“Jeez! You could feel that?”

“Um, yeah? I sure did. You felt it too?”

“Oooh... this is awesome. Peter, you felt one of the *lwa*, one of the spirits I told you about. That was *Erzulie Mansur*; she’s the spirit of maternal love and the guardian of children. She came to me to advise me about Mike and you actually felt her presence! That must mean that the *lwa* have somehow accepted you; usually only people who have been trained and are sensitive to how the *lwa* can make them feel are able to sense them. Wow, we need to talk about this later.”

“Is this good? I mean, if...”

“No, this is *excellent*. You’ll see. Now let’s go find the others.”

They found the others sitting in the Pavilion. There was a DJ there, playing light dancing music, and the group was listening, talking, and a few were up dancing.

Peter pointed to Susan, who was waving at them.

“Honey, Susan wants us to go there,” he told her.

Barbara, Terence, Susan, and Susan’s boyfriend David were sitting together, and sitting close by were Janice, JoAnne, and Audrey.

When they got to where Susan was sitting, she told them, “David was telling us a little about himself and he’s got some wild Florida stories. He lived there for a bit. I told him that Tamara’s from Miami. Tamara, you want to hear some of them?”

“Sure,” she answered. “But I only moved there when I was ten years old—so, not a native.”

“Okay,” Susan went on, “So David and I go to Penn State and David’s starting grad school for a doctorate in

psychology...”

“And I’ve been wanting to pick his brain,” Barbara laughed. “He’s given me same good advice about choosing schools.”

David responded, “For what it’s worth. I had offers from several grad schools but I stayed with Penn State because of Susan. They do have a really good program there, though, so that was my top choice anyway.”

“So what’s the Florida connection, then?” Tamara asked.

“Mostly my parents, not me as much. They’ve told some wild stories about when they lived there. They grew up in St Louis; after they married, they moved to Florida, spent a few years there and then Dad got a job in Chicago, where I was born. I did spend a fair amount of time in Florida myself while growing up; my aunt and uncle live there and I spent a number of summers there, especially as a teen.”

“Where in Florida? I only know the Miami area,” Tamara said. “But if you wanna talk about Florida weirdness, you’ll need to get in line. Lots of things that happen there are seriously crazy, and that’s from personal experience.”

“Good, then you’ll enjoy some of what my folks told me about when they lived there. As I said, my aunt and uncle live there—Plant City, just outside Tampa—and I spent some summers with them and my cousins as a teen. I also had summer jobs there my first two college years. Let me tell you, in Florida it seemed like everything was slightly out of whack. Obviously it’s a southern state, but there are plenty of people from up north there. There’s even more in the winter but I wasn’t there then. But even though there are lots of transplanted northerners, Florida’s got this weird feeling of a northern attempt at efficiency but a southern resistance to anything approaching it.

“My parents lived down there from 2000 to almost 2003 and told me some of their recollections about that time. You know, the biggest news stories in the whole country from those three years all had something to do with Florida? My folks told me about some of them. Number one was, of course, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. The next was Florida’s 2000 presidential election ballot recount. Another was the custody case over a Cuban kid whose mother had drowned trying to get her and her kid to the U.S.—the kid was saved from drowning himself—and the kid’s father in Cuba wanted him back, but his grandparents in Miami wanted custody and the U.S. government got involved. And another big news story was about some packages of anthrax spores that were mailed to lawmakers in D.C., and media outlets in New York and ... yes, Florida too—Boca Raton.

“The fight over that election, they told me, was epic. It brought new terms into the vocabulary. The Florida elections used punch cards. The voting booths had a kind of stylus with a pin that was used to poke out a little perforated square in a ballot card. The little piece that got punched out was called a ‘chad.’ Sometimes, the entire chad didn’t get separated from the card, so all kinds of terms were created to describe it: if three corners got detached, it was ‘hanging’; if two, then ‘swinging’; one was called ‘dimpled’; and if it was just bulging out, it was a ‘pregnant’ chad. There were legal fights over how much of a chad was needed to be punched out to be a valid vote. My folks told me that they even heard of cases where entire boxes of ballot cards didn’t get counted and some got counted twice. That was how that Florida election went. And guess what? Again, in 2002, they had similar election problems.

“The September 11 terrorist attack had some Florida roots too. The terrorists learned to fly those planes in Florida—in a flight school in Venice and a couple other places. And that craziness with the anthrax scare in Boca Raton—you’d figure that there’d be targets in Washington and New York, but why in Florida? My folks told me that they frequently wondered about the sanity of a lot of people there—it was the lack of seasons, they thought, that perhaps having no seasons unpins people from a sense of reality. Or possibly it was the

rootlessness of the transplanted people who moved down there. Maybe they lost their sense of balance. There's an Asian term—*feng shui*—that basically means a balancing with the natural world. I always felt things were out of balance when I was living there. Maybe that's what's wrong with the place. Someone upset the state's *feng shui*."

"I'll go with the out-of-balance idea," Tamara said. "The whole Stripped in Florida kids' nudity thing that the state started up came totally out of unbalanced minds. How could they think it would increase revenue? Hey, even the wildlife is unbalanced, my dad tells me. There are reports of giant snakes like Burmese pythons and green anacondas, and giant lizards, and lots more species that don't belong there. People get illegal pets and let them go when they grow to be too big or dangerous. Dad told me that Florida's the only place in the world where both crocodiles and alligators live in the same habitat. You don't wanna skinny-dip in a random pond, either; they warn folks that every pond or lake has a 'gator or two."

"Eeww," said a few girls.

"Hey, Dave," Audrey chimed in. "I'm with you on that Florida-is-weird idea. I'm an SF buff—science fiction—and one of my fave authors is Piers Anthony. He wrote a series of books about a place he called 'Xanth.' I remember reading that he said that Florida helped inspire his idea of Xanth. He claimed that Xanth was real—he said it was as real as the images on a tv or monitor screen are real; the dots of light mean nothing until your mind puts them together to make something. He also claimed that Xanth really *is* Florida, you just have look at it a different way to see that it is. I love his Xanth stories 'cause they make fun of Florida in a fantasy way. The magic that the characters do is way off the rails and he writes about these weird creatures that live there. The stories have puns everywhere.

"Also, his books have a map that shows that Xanth looks just like Florida, only the places have weird names, like Okefenokee, which he calls 'Ogre-Fen-Ogre Fen'; Kissimmee River, his name is 'Kiss-Me River'; he calls Lake Okeechobee, 'Lake Ogre-Chobee.' And there's Tallahassee. His name for that is 'Tall Hassle.' Almost all of his place names are puns on the Florida name."

"Hey," David said, "that's cool. That sounds like fun to read. I'll get the book titles from you later; I'll check out those stories."

The music had been getting louder and Barbara still wanted to speak to David about his graduate program, so they picked up their towels and told the others that they were going to a quiet location to chat but the others could come along too if they wanted. Some did, so Barbara led a little group of six, David and Susan, Peter and Tamara, and Terence and herself, to a small gazebo near the hot tub.

Barbara set off with Tamara and Susan to show the way and, at a distance behind them, Terence was walking with David as they were talking about sports, of course. Barbara turned around to say something to Terence; then she just stopped and stood with her hand at her mouth. Tamara looked around to see what Barbara was looking at, but when Susan glanced back at the scene, she just giggled.

Terence and David were slowly strolling along and their penises were gently swinging, side to side, left to right, like elephants' trunks do when the animals are browsing as the herd walks slowly along. The side-to-side swinging was almost mesmerizing, but it was funny to see too.

Thoughts were rushing through Tamara's head at the sight, but the most insistent one was about David. *How the hell does he pack all that into his pants?* She already knew how Terence did; he was a big guy with tree-trunk thighs and the loose pants he wore hid a lot. David, on the other hand, had a sleek but well-muscled body and his penis truly looked like a third leg.

David saw the two girls looking at him and laughed, reaching out to take Susan's hand. She was still giggling.

“You guys have studiously been avoiding what truly is the ‘elephant in the room,’” she giggled and then her mirth turned into a belly laugh. “I’ve seen you guys trying to look at him without seeming like you’re looking. Look, okay, Terence is really big. So David’s a little bigger. So?”

“Um, I’d say David was in a class all by himself, Susan,” Barbara said. “Is it terribly rude to ask...”

David laughed and said, “No,” but Susan said, “It is, but since you’re naked too, maybe. Sweetie, go tell them.”

David nodded. “Just so you know. When cocks are soft, they’re affected by temperature a lot—and also when guys are physically active. When it’s warm, like now, it gets longer and vice versa when cold. When I’m running, it tightens up. So measured soft, it’s kind of a guess. Somewhere around nine and a half inches. Don’t ask me about hard, ‘cause I’m not sayin’.”

Tamara was sniggering. “Say, I thought nudists weren’t supposed to notice stuff like that. Not that I don’t appreciate how you and Terence look. So nice. But I much prefer Peter. I adore Peter’s peter.”

They all started to laugh, with David laughing the hardest.

“Tamara,” he said, wiping his eyes, “nudists are simply people who celebrate the nude body and take delight in the beauty of everyone who chooses to shed their clothes. When someone is nude, most of the artificial barriers that separate them from others are gone. Like the kind of clothes they wear and their quality too. Those can be economic or ‘class’ signals which can come between people.

“Body image can be a big hangup with people. Positive, negative, and uncertain body image can be the cause of a lot of psychological problems, as I’ve learned in my studies. But I’ve seen the most positive attitudes about body image among nudists—by and large, they are simply not judgmental about how a fellow nudist looks. Terence, you look like you want to say something.”

“Yeah, Ah do,” he said. “Ah had lots of embarrassin’ times in the locker room in high school with guys funnin’ me and my package. The guys used nicknames for me and my cock and thinkin’ up new ones became the thing t’do. And, shit, the cock scared off the gals, too. They didn’t wanna date me when they felt me down there. How did y’all get by in school?”

David paused for a few seconds, considering his words. “Okay, that’s a fair question and I can see that your size still is an issue for you. Remember I used the term, ‘uncertain’ body image? I’m guessing you’re very proud of your body build—you worked your ass off to get it and you work hard to keep it, right?”

Terence nodded.

“I got by in school because I felt proud of my body, including my dick. True, I did work to develop my muscles, but my dick—and my height—they were all *me*. I didn’t do anything to get them, they were just *me*. Yeah, kids looked at me in the locker room. When they did, I just told them something like, ‘Get a good look; it might be big, but it works just the same as yours. I’m proud I got it, but you shouldn’t be envious.’

“So Terence, you’re right, I knew some gals who were afraid of big dicks. But I let my positive body image work for me and what happened was that word got out, in a positive way, that I was hung but modest about it. Some gals were curious; we dated, and they got their curiosity stoked. And no girls were hurt in the stoking of said curiosity,” he finished and the others laughed.

“I saw your self-confidence in action when you were walking around the resort,” Barbara said, indicating his package.

“I guess I do. I love how it feels when it’s free to move around—being captive in underpants isn’t very comfortable,” David remarked. “And I’m sure Terence will attest to that.”

Terence nodded.

“Well, I’m proud of it, maybe even a bit vain, because I like it when people look at it. I like to imagine that they find it sexually appealing. I wish the rest of the world would let people go naked when and where they wanted. Truly, I’d rather not hide it away. I’m a dyed-in-the-wool exhibitionist because I like it when people look at me.”

Tamara was “tasting” David’s emotions as he was speaking and she was impressed at his honesty and directness. But his reference to “sexually appealing” disturbed her a little.

“I was under the impression that nudism wasn’t supposed to be sexual,” she said. “How does wanting to be ‘sexually appealing’ fit into that?”

“Oh, good point, and one where I can show off my psych smarts, such as they are,” David answered, grinning. “Even when clothed, you can’t ignore sex and sex appeal; it’s simply that people are sexual beings. Look at advertising. Fashion design with provocative clothes—for both men and women. Movies. Music groups. Wherever one looks in the textile world, you’ll find appeals to sexuality.

“Now to nudism. We like to say that nudity doesn’t equal sex, but if you believe that, I know about a bridge that might be for sale. Again, people are sexual beings. Social nudism is based on people’s *acceptance* of the sexuality of their nudity. They *accept* that lots of people like to look, hell, they like to look too, lots of them. But the appeal to those folks is never exhibitionism or voyeurism—the appeal comes from the incredible joy of feeling the sun, breeze, and water on the bare skin and the wonderful peace and relaxation they get from being one with nature. And since we’re social beings, sharing that experience with others makes it all so much better.

“I’m not saying that sex never happens in nudist resorts. It certainly does. But in family resorts like this, there’s an absolute prohibition against public sexual activity. They won’t allow overt exhibitionism like men walking around with erections or people wearing provocative clothing either. But whatever happens in private, stays private, just like it does in the textile world.”

“While y’all were answering Tamara, Ah had a chance to digest what y’all told me about body image,” Terence said. “Y’all hit the nail on the head with that. Ah should’a let those guys know that Ah *owned* how my body was built but Ah let their teasin’ get to me. Ah guess Ah got defensive.”

“And probably the gals sensed that about you,” David suggested. “Try to think about any interactions you can recall.”

“Um, well, shit! Goddamn, David. Damn. Hey, Ah vote y’all hang up your shrink’s shingle now. No need for any more school.”

“Thanks, buddy, but I’m more inclined to the research side. I’m going for social or experimental psychology. In fact, my senior thesis was in social psychology.” He chuckled. “It was a bit ... um, controversial, let’s just say.”

Barbara perked up at that. “Ooh? Mine’s gonna be on dissociative states. My advisor already approved the topic. We had to turn in a prospectus by mid-May. What was controversial about yours?”

“The whole study was. I did a social study—partly retrospective. That means that some elements in the study had already happened. The study was to answer the question, ‘Does early sexual activity affect how a student performs in college?’”

“Wow,” Barbara exclaimed and others did too. “You mean they let you do that?”

“It took several meetings but I assured them I had worked out a way to anonymize the data. That was a major hangup but not the only one. Another was the data questionnaire. Then I had to explain why my study was

different from many others that asked similar questions. And since this study used human subjects, there's a committee of faculty that had to go over the entire research protocol to ensure it met privacy and safety standards."

"Well, obviously they did accept it," Tamara said. "What did you ask participants?"

"So, first I need to say that the key part was keeping me from knowing the actual identity of the subjects, and the subjects from knowing about the purpose of the research. That's a so-called 'double-blind' method and keeps personal biases out of the results. Each subject was assigned a unique code and the only place where that code and the subject's name were together was in the registrar's office. Volunteers could download the questionnaire and drop the completed ones at the registrar's office. When I got them, I sorted them by different factors, like sex, age of first sexual activity, kinds and frequency of contacts, numbers of partners, ages of partners, whether or not coercion was a factor, whether or not the contacts were with longer-term partners, all kinds of factors like those. The questionnaire also included demographic questions like age, race, economic status, family status like siblings and parents or guardians, housing; questions like those. Their grades were given to me by the registrar's office using just the subjects' code. I could only get the GPA, the grade-point average, because they said that more detail could reveal identities."

"And the result?" Barbara pressed. "Curious minds need to know."

"So obviously nothing was clear-cut. Whenever people are involved, you find stuff ranging all over the realm of possibility. I figured that I would get results that showed only trends or tendencies and that's just what happened. I didn't get to use high-school data, just college, and virtually all of the similar prior studies I could find had looked at high school students only. Not much has been done at the college level. So, I found that in general, the group whose GPAs seemed to be the most adversely affected by early sexual activity were those who were economically disadvantaged, had multiple partners, experienced coercion, and whose first experience was before age fifteen. About what you'd expect."

"Can y'all publish the results?" Terence asked.

"No, there were too many flaws in the design. I knew they were there; it was a simplistic assumption that any low grades could be uniquely tied to sexual activity. Low grades could have been caused by other than academic reasons, for example, worry over finances or a medical problem. There's a well known saying in science, it's 'correlation does not imply causation,' and it means that if you observe an association between two events, it's a fallacy to assume that a cause-and-effect relationship exists between them. Also, I only had 153 subjects, which is way too small a sample for statistical validity. The project was more about my learning about the process of designing a project and executing it—not about any significant results I could obtain."

"Still, that seems like it was interesting to do," Barbara ventured.

"For sure," he answered, then laughed. "Some of those responses, jeez, a twelve-year-old having sex regularly? It's too bad that I had to destroy the materials after the survey was done—that was one of the conditions for approval. Some of the things people wrote... well, keeping that stuff would be unethical anyway."

"Say, y'all gonna start the next Masters and Johnson sex study?" Terence chuckled.

"Nope. Not me. There already are people and even organizations doing that kind of work," David retorted.

"Okay, I've had enough with discussing schoolwork now," Barbara said. "We'll be back in the grind in a couple of weeks. I never heard how the two of you met, only that Susan was dating a guy steady now."

"Sure," Susan said. "We met through my ed psych class; David was a TA and my recitation section leader. I'm getting a bachelor's in education, with math specialty, to teach in high school and that was a required class."



“Susan caught my eye right away,” David continued. “She was very outspoken in class. I wanted to get to know her better, but as her TA, that was verboten. So for the spring semester, she switched sections and then we could date. But she made my recitation section very lively that fall.”

“Details. We need details,” Barbara demanded.

Susan laughed. “One of the first topics the class discussed was how poor psychological theories could interfere with effective educational practices. Three guesses what the poster child was for that discussion?”

Everyone shouted, “Program, Program, Naked in School Program!”

“It took you guys three guesses?”

She got a number of middle-finger salutes for that.

“So in all the recitation sections, everyone was asked to share their experiences in the Program and how they thought it adversely affected the teaching and their learning,” Susan went on.

David continued. “Only about half of the people in my section had gone through the Program. Strangely, all of the kids who had been in the Program were just from the Philly area or Pittsburgh area—the PA students, that is.” He pronounced the Pennsylvania term “PA” as “pee-ay.” “We had 32 in the section; eleven from PA were in the Program and five from out of state. None of the kids who went to high school in central PA had been in it—those kids told us that there had been a religious uprising against it, led by the Mennonite, Lutheran, Quaker, and evangelical churches. I remember reading somewhere that James Carville—he’s a political commentator—once said that the state of Pennsylvania is really just Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, with Alabama stuck in between them. Central PA is *extremely* conservative.”

“Yeah, sure is,” Susan confirmed. “I live in York and the York and Lancaster counties have a huge population of Anabaptists—Amish and Mennonites, mostly. For years, my high school’s nominally been running the Program but nobody has ever participated. It was about ten years ago when they first started the Program there; it ran for just one term, but then in the spring term, every chosen kid refused, claiming it violated their religious rights. So that spring, no one was in the Program. That was also when two of the churches took my school district to court, got a restraining order, and the state court eventually ruled that the religious kids had to be exempted if they claimed that participating violated their beliefs. From that time on, *all* the kids in all the area schools suddenly got religion.”

“That’s funny,” Tamara said. “Instant converts. What was the reason the courts did that?”

“Religious freedom,” Susan said. “All of the fundamentalists, the Anabaptist sects in particular, are very Bible-observant and personal modesty is a basic tenet of their beliefs. Boys typically wear plain dark-colored slacks and white long-sleeved shirts and girls wear long plain dresses and cover their arms too. Some even cover their hair. But others, mainly the Mennonites, will dress in more stylish clothes but still, their dress is always quite modest. So even the kids who didn’t attend one of those churches were claiming that they were religious too and opted out.

“In my four years there, not one single kid participated. Every Monday, the office would post a list of names of that week’s Program participants on the main bulletin board, but nobody paid that list any attention. Also, the state stopped trying to do anything about forcing Program participation in my county and over in Lancaster County too. I’m not sure about any of the other counties, but if the state didn’t do anything in our two counties, they wouldn’t try it in others. We did hear about occasional threats the feds made about withholding education money, but that never happened. And now, of course, the Program’s all done with.”

David continued, “Back to the class. When the kids who had been in the Program heard about the others not

having to do it, shit, with all their pissing and moaning, their frustration about it, we never got to fully discussing the topic, especially since so few kids had anything important to say about their personal experience. Other class sections had just about the same thing happen. But Susan caught my attention when she told the class that even though she had never been in the Program, she was a nudist, and then she began listing all of the reasons why the ideas behind the Program were psychologically flawed. I thought she made some excellent points. Well, we certainly got off the topic of how we met, but that's how. In a college class."

"That connection of Program resistance to religion is really interesting," Tamara said. "In my school, when they tried to start the Program there, there were manifestations of the spirits that many of us Haitians believe in, and because of the chaos that caused, it never got started..."

Then she had to briefly explain about what happened, using the version she had concocted "for public consumption."

"... so do you know how those churches actually used religious beliefs to keep the kids out of participating?" she finished.

Susan laughed. "Sure I do. Kids in central PA probably know the Bible better than most kids anywhere else. Because the churches got the legal exemption, all the kids, whether they were members of those churches or not, were claiming that their faith required them to follow biblical precepts, so we kids all got the Bible's modesty verses down pat and I still remember most of them. The biggie is Adam and Eve, of course. The Bible says that when they learned they were naked, they were embarrassed. That teaches that nakedness is wrong. It actually doesn't, but that was the argument. Another one was in chapter 16 of Ezekiel, where it says that one of the signs of being a righteous person is covering the naked with clothing. In Nahum, Chapter 3, God says that when one exposes their nakedness, it makes them shameful, filthy, contemptible, and a spectacle. I knew a whole slew of additional verses that I could spout off if my beliefs were challenged. But if you look at those verses carefully, they're either quoted out of context or misinterpreted, or they're allegory, metaphor, or mistranslations. Still, it worked—because religious beliefs don't have to be based on logic.

"The churches gave us non-member kids a tremendous amount of ammunition to back our own religious claims, too. One of the most important cases they used in getting the court to agree to require religious exemptions was a big Supreme Court case out of Wisconsin which involved the Amish and that state's mandate that their kids be required to attend public schools. The court agreed with the Amish that their traditional way of life wasn't just a matter of personal preference, it was driven by the deeply held religious convictions of the entire community and was an intimate part of their daily life. So, in the Pennsylvania court cases, the courts held that a personal, deeply held religious belief in modesty must be allowed as an exemption from being forced to be in the Program. I'm really grateful for how the churches used the courts to stop the government's interference with their members' personal beliefs—and ours too. They got the Program effectively shut down in our area. Oops, sorry for the lecture, but talking about that Program shit just winds me up."

"Well, I for one enjoyed the lesson," Tamara said. "I'm learning all about how kids from everywhere in the country were able to stop it. The four of us..." she indicated Peter, Terence, and Barbara, "know someone who was in Alaska and got it stopped at her school. I told you about my school, what happened there. And I read on line about how kids at lots of other schools managed to escape doing it. Your story might be the best one, though, because the resistance was driven by religious faith. I'm all for that. I don't care which faith you practice; they're all important."

It was getting late now, so the group decided to head back to the cabins for the night. When they got there and after their evening washup, Tamara and Peter went into their room.

"Peter, I've been thinking about your visit from *Erzulie Mansur*. In our faith, the *Iwa* only appear to us in the

context of a worship service, but a lot of priests and priestesses are trained to be sensitive to the spirits' presence. I'm not trained, but somehow I've become a spiritual focus and the *lwa* sometimes will approach me. So tell me, when you felt that love flow over you, did it just suddenly appear or did it build up? You remember?"

"Hum. Now that you mention that, let's see ... it was like a rushing sensation, almost like a big wave approaching and washing over me. Damn—it came from you, Tamara! Yeah, I was watching you looking intently at those girls and suddenly, *bang!* This wave kinda flowed from you and smacked right into me."

"Oh, wow; that's amazing, Peter; I think that was your own empathy that drew *Erzulie Mansur* from myself to also wrap you in her love. She's a way distant ancestor of mine, from thousands of years ago, my mother's family descended from her. That's a story for another time. The point is, that it looks like the spirits—at least *Erzulie*—have accepted you as they have me. She doesn't speak in the usual sense, but she does leave impressions of a message. After she left, did you have any thoughts that weren't there before?"

"Damn, Tamara. This is crazy; it's deep shit. Yeah. It was a sudden desire to be a matchmaker, but I have no idea what or how or who that was about."

Tamara clapped her hands with delight. "*Perfect*. What happened is that *Erzulie*'s visit was about Mike and Theresa. I sensed that there was chemistry there; I wanted to help, but I'll never use unethical methods and my interfering would be unethical. *Erzulie* came to tell me to do it, to push them together a bit, because there's an attraction between them. And you felt *Erzulie*'s message too. That's awesome. I'm gonna work with you and see just how sensitive you are. My dad's extremely sensitive—he's had no training, but he *is* the son of a priestess, and one of the *lwa* 'adopted' him years ago and guided him ever since. Dad only recently learned about that. So, Peter, it looks like your superpowers may actually be useful. Now come here, I need a kiss and a snuggle."

The two of them wrapped themselves up in a passionate embrace as they kissed for several minutes, but after the activities of a full day, Tamara drifted off to sleep in Peter's arms. He was tired too and closed his eyes, thinking about nothing in particular. Except that tomorrow would be a busy day.

## Chapter 42 - Crimestoppers

Noises from outside their room woke Tamara Sunday morning. It felt early, so she reached for her phone to check the time. It was 7:08.

*Jeez, it's early,* she thought. *Who's up now?*

Then she realized the sounds were actually coming from outside the cabin. She sat up and peered out the window. It was Barbara, and she was speaking quietly. Craning her neck, she could see Terence and two others; they were facing away so she couldn't tell who they were. And Barbara was apparently leading a little tai chi lesson. That was interesting. Now fully awake, she ran her fingers through Peter's hair and kissed his ear. He muttered something in response.

"Okay, sleepyhead. Your sister's out greeting the sun and you're vegetating in here? Up and at 'em!"

Peter groaned. "Yeah, yeah, okay. I'll bet she's doing tai chi. She does that early when we're out here. She says doing it in the open is spiritually refreshing."

"Well, she's got a group doing it too."

"Last year she got Audrey and Janice into doing it," Peter yawned.

"Okay, that's who those are. And Terence. I'm a bit stiff; let's stretch out and go for a run. That gets my body revved up for the day."

"Slavedriver," Peter muttered.

When they left the cabin, they waved at the group outside, and did ten minutes of stretching on the lawn. Then, just as they were to begin a light jog to the trailhead, three of the cousins emerged from the cabin next door, Susan, Ernie, and Mike. Then JoAnne popped out of her cabin wearing running shoes and a sports bra.

"You guys going for a run?" Ernie asked.

"Yep," Peter answered. "Want to join? Need to stretch?"

"I already did," JoAnne said. "I'll run with you to start."

"We did a little stretching inside," Audrey answered. "You run on the river trail?"

"Right," Peter replied. "Let's let Tamara set the pace; she keeps a good one and she's steady. JoAnne, you can run ahead if you want. I know you other three were good for the five miles last summer. Still good?"

"Sure," Mike replied.

They began the run and Tamara started out next to Mike, both running in front of the group.

"How are you doing with Theresa?" Tamara asked him as she set a moderate warm-up jogging pace.

"Oh, it's awesome. She's great and so is Marcia. I like them both but Theresa's special. I think she likes me."

"I think so too, but don't push her and don't be a jerk either. I'm sure you're not like that, but I have the feeling that she's a bit sensitive; maybe she's had a bad relationship."

"Damn, Tamara, how'd you know that? She tell you?"

"Nope. So she shared a painful personal experience with you already? Mike, she really trusts you, you know, if she did that. She's telling you two things. First, that she's been hurt and wants your support to help her heal. And that she likes you enough that she trusts you to be that support."

“I know what you mean. Marcia told me something like that too.”

“Well, stud, looks like you have two conquests, then. But be careful; romantic attachments with two gals can be awkward. Did you talk to their brothers?”

“Oh yeah, and they’re tight. Jack and Toby are both gonna be freshmen and Toby’ll be in my school too, so I told him and Theresa all about it. Say, you know about Toby’s real name?”

Tamara laughed. “Yeah. I do. Funny. Okay, enough jawin’, as Terence says. Here’s the trailhead; time to pick up the pace now.”

As Tamara picked up the pace, JoAnne took off, sprinting, and quickly left them behind.

The remaining five of them finished the run mostly in silence now; only a few words of encouragement were exchanged when one or another of the runners began to flag during the last mile.

They showered after the run and when they returned to the cabins, the odors of breakfast cooking drew them to the main house.

When Tamara walked in, Shelly, Mike’s mom, looked up from the bowl of batter she was mixing and rushed over to her, grabbing her in a big hug.

“I want to thank you, dear, for helping Mike. He’s like a new person now.”

She looked over at her son, who had gone over to his father and sister and was talking happily with them.

“He told me how you helped him over his shyness and introduced him to, um, Theresa, right? And her dad will be at the labs. Dave and I are going to invite her family over for dinner here in a few days. Maybe you could come too? Mike says that Theresa likes you too.”

“Oh sure. She seems to be a sweet person and her brother is a real hoot. Too young for Janice though; he’s just starting high school.”

Shelly laughed. “Yeah, well, Janice has her eye on someone. She met him in her accounting class last spring and they’ve dated a few times. We’ll see how that goes.”

After breakfast, Ernie and Frank grabbed Peter before he and Tamara got to the door to leave the house.

“Hey Peter,” Ernie asked, “Question. Frank and I were talking to a couple of your friends yesterday, Herb and Gary...”

“Yeah, I saw you guys talking... what’s up?” Peter answered.

Ernie went on, “Gary’s family is having a reunion later this week at the resort. He’s got cousins in the Atlanta area goin’ to high school there and they have a new kinda program that started up there. It’s called the ‘Avery Program’ and Audrey and I heard that my school was lookin’ into startin’ it up.”

“Is it like the Naked in School crap?” Peter asked. “That’s just what the world needs, a new social-engineering program in schools.”

“We don’t know anythin’ about it and neither does Gary. But his cousins came in yesterday evenin’ and he said they’d all be hangin’ at the pool around 9:30. All of us are gettin’ together—us high-school kids, that is. I wonder if you can meet with us, talk to them, since you were the only one in the naked Program, so you might know what to ask.”

“Sure, I could try to think of something, when I hear a bit more about it.”

A little while later, the cousins' entourage left for the pool. With Peter and Tamara were Audrey and Ernie, Mike, JoAnne, and Frank. Barbara decided to come too and Terence followed. When they got there, they found Gary talking with five new kids. He introduced them.

"Hi, Peter, all you guys too. These are my cousins from Atlanta and Athens in Georgia. Joe and Grace go to high school in Athens, they're a junior and freshman this fall, and Nora, she's a senior and Nate and Nick, sophomores—you can see they're twins. They live in Chamblee, right outside Atlanta."

Everyone introduced themselves to each other and then Gary spoke. "So the high school that our Atlanta cousins go to started this new thing this past fall, the Avery Program—it's named after the university there—and Nora told me that it was the brainchild of an Avery student two years ago? Right, Nora?"

"Yeah," Nora answered. "The official name is Avery-Denison Program. This gal and a few of her classmates had an education course project. They had to do some kind of curriculum design using the Naked in School Program as the design basis. But we heard that her group objected to that, and since the naked Program was being dropped all over the state, they came up with this new version. It has her name on it 'cause she organized their project and was the primary designer of the whole thing."

"So there's no nudity in it?" Ernie asked. "My school is considering starting it."

"Nope, all textile," Nate said. "And we think it's pretty gucci, too. We had it this past fall, right when we started high school. Nora had it in the spring. The whole class does it together and it was wicked fun."

"What do you do in it?" Audrey asked.

"I'll tell them," Nate said and his siblings nodded. "It was like two weeks long, ten school days with a double period each day. It was instead of the P.E. class but there was P.E. as part of it. We began with this kinda bonding exercise—like making out with your girlfriend but no kissing, just touching in 'safe' places," he made finger quotes. "And almost every guy gets to pair up with each gal, to hold her and caress her. And all the gals get to do that with the guys too, caressing us, that is, caressing our hands, arms and backs. That was wicked awesome—some of the girls in my class are stone foxes. That was only a little part of it, too."

"Damn," Ernie said. "This sounds really good."

"Yeah, it was. The next part they had us doing had lots of tough physical activities and the bonding part helped lots, 'cause we had lots of boy-girl close contact, like guys needed to pick up and carry girls—and a few times, a gal even carried a guy. That was frikkin' awesome. That was part of doing some problem-solving games and most of them were super-hard, both mentally and physically, but were really fun to figure out how to solve it and then to do it. Another part was role-playing as a whole class. In those sessions, we learned about how to ignore peer pressure to keep someone from trying to make us do something dumb. Another thing we learned was how to set sexual limits like on a date, if someone gets too pushy. And we also had some role-play sessions about gossip and slander and the damage they can do to reputations and relationships."

"Wow," Peter exclaimed. "This is nothing at all like the Program—in fact, it's just the total opposite. And this was invented using the Program as a design template?"

"Well, I told you that the Denison group was opposed to the naked Program," Nora said. "We were told that they used the official Program objectives and followed them exactly and came up with this version. It was designed to build a trusting and respectful relationship between the kids and emphasized teamwork through cooperative problem solving and taught how social stigmatization of other people hurt not only them, but you too."

"Again, wow. Nate, was that all? This sounds like you all had a great time with it," Peter said.

“For real. We absolutely did. You know, we even had sessions where we learned how to give each other massages. We did the girls and the girls did the boys. That taught us how to give pleasure to each other with our hands without needing to do any sexual stuff. We wore bathing suits or some girls wore sports bras and yoga pants for the massages. The best part? Maybe after three or four days, I felt so close to everyone in my class, that I hated to leave school every day. And after doing the Avery Program, it feels like all my classmates are like family—brothers and sisters. Nick and I can’t wait till we get back to school in a few weeks to see everyone again.”

“That happened in my classes too,” Nora said. “Most of the kids really liked it, but a few kids in my year had problems with some of the more intimate stuff.”

“What kinds of problems? How intimate did it get?” Barbara asked. “It sounds to me, like, how the Avery Program works in schools would be a fascinating thing for psychologists to study.”

“Some kids didn’t want to do the bonding part,” Nora answered. “That was the most intimate part and there was lots of cuddling and close body contact with the kids just wearing their P.E. shorts and tops. A few kids in my group were squicked out by that and refused to do some of the cuddling stuff.”

“But they weren’t forced?” Peter asked.

“Oh no. The teacher let them do as much as they were comfortable with. They did do all the games and role-play parts just fine. They skipped the massage parts too. They just didn’t want to do anything that came close to personal touching—the two girls had serious boyfriends, but a couple boys didn’t like it too. All the other kids were fine with them skipping those parts; no one cared that they didn’t want it.”

“Oh, wow,” Audrey sighed. “I was worried about that program coming to our school. Now I’m not. Ernie? Whatta you think?”

“It sounds good to me. So this is like a P.E. class, like in the gym?”

Nora nodded. “Yep. That’s how it was done last year but we heard that this fall, they’re gonna stretch it out over the full term instead of concentrating it all into two weeks. Makes the scheduling easier and if a kid is absent one day, he won’t miss so much.”

“Well, it sounds like a great activity, so I hope they start it by us,” Ernie commented as Audrey nodded.

“Hey, guys,” Gary piped up, “if you’re done asking questions, how ‘bout some water volleyball? We can play till lunch. But don’t let Tamara and Terence be on the same team or we’ll all get creamed!”

Everyone laughed at that and after showering off, they got in the pool and began playing. That’s when the group learned that having Tamara and Barbara on the same team was bad news too. For the opposing side.

Soon it was lunchtime and the group broke up to go to their respective sites. Tamara’s group walked back, discussing what they had heard about the Avery Program. Barbara resolved to look into the Avery Program when she got back to school. Maybe there could be a research project in there somewhere; that would look good on grad school apps.

After lunch, all the kids had decided to split up. Some gals wanted to do the minigolf and the guys wanted to shoot some hoops. Tamara decided she wanted to take a dip in the pool and just lay out for a while. She asked Barbara what she was doing.

“I need to find Nora to pick her brain. I thought of a few questions; I might check out the Avery Program as a research topic in school. Gary said he reserved a pickleball court for his gang after lunch, so they’ll be there. Then I need to stop in the convenience store. I’ll get to the pool after that.”

When Tamara and Peter arrived at the pool, the area around the water slide was busy with about eight tween girls who were using it and frolicking in the water below the chute and on the deck next to the slide's ladder. Tamara and Peter got showered off and then went down the steps into the water.

Peter looked at the girls, then told Tamara, "There's supposed to be an adult here to watch them, but I don't see any of their folks around... oh, there's Jamie."

A teenaged girl had just rounded the corner from the snack bar, carrying several bags.

"She must have left them to get some food," Peter went on. "She's fourteen and I know that she's had junior lifeguard classes, so the kids are okay with her. The other people on the deck weren't paying any attention to the kids."

"Yeah, but look at that guy sitting opposite to the slide," Tamara said. "He's been watching them but in a, well, covert, way. And he's a little too far from us for me to read him, but I'm getting some bad tingles when I look at him."

"Yeah, I also noticed him when we got here, and something's been bothering me about him too. Let's keep an eye on him and see what happens," Peter said.

A few minutes later, Jamie called the girls over to a table where she had set out the bags and the girls in the pool hopped out and the others ran over to her. She had brought them drinks.

"You guys need to get drinks now—keep yourselves hydrated," Tamara heard Jamie say, and then felt Peter stiffen beside her.

"What?" Tamara asked.

"That guy," Peter said. "When the girls went over to Jamie, he reached over to his cooler box and shifted it a little. I noticed him doing that a few times, but he never opened it to take something out."

"Now that you mention it," Tamara replied, "I remember seeing that guy at the volleyball games yesterday. I thought it was strange how he had that cooler sitting on a folding chair next to him. Everyone else's coolers were on the ground—if they had one with them at all."

"Damn," Peter cursed. "I heard about guys concealing cameras in coolers or beach bags before. I'll bet that's what he's doing. Let me go find out."

"Will you be okay?" Tamara asked. "I'll stay a bit behind you and back you up. You know, my superpowers."

They both chuckled. They got out of the pool and Peter walked over to the guy.

"Say, mister," he addressed the guy, "I represent the resort owners; my family is an owner here, and I'd like to do a rules check."

"What'ya mean, 'rules check'?" the guy responded.

"We have a strict 'no cameras/no photography' policy. You need to open your cooler so I can check it."

"Hell, no, you have no right to..." he started and stood up.

Peter interrupted, "When you registered here, you signed a form that said that you agreed to follow the resort's rules. One of those rules gives us the right to examine the contents of any bag, cooler, or container you possess while you're in our community areas. That, sir, is a legal contract you signed. Please open the cooler or I will."

"Fuck off," the guy growled and reached to pick up the cooler.



Peter put up his hand. “No, you’re not leaving until I see inside that...” he began but quickly reacted as the guy swivelled around and threw a punch at him.

Peter used his open hand to intercept and block the punch, pushing the guy’s arm off to the side. Now the guy was unbalanced; his weight had moved forward slightly with his arm to the side. Peter grabbed the arm and used the guy’s forward momentum to execute a basic hip throw. The guy threw his arms forward in an attempt to break his fall but still landed face down on the concrete deck. He screamed in pain as Peter dropped his knee to the man’s back to pin him.

Tamara was watching, impressed. *Shit, Peter’s good! That jerk’s nude, and hitting the deck like that? Serious road rash, baby,* she thought.

All of the other adults at the pool had seen the encounter and one of the men ran up to Peter.

“Need help?” he asked.

Peter looked up at him.

“Oh hey, Tim,” Peter said as he stood up. “You saw what happened, right? Hang on, yeah, help me restrain this jerk.”

The guy was trying to roll over to sit up, moaning in pain and cursing, but Peter put his foot on the guy’s back, holding him down.

“You little shit, I’m gonna fix you for that...”

“You just stay right there and shut up,” Peter growled at him. Then to Tim, “Hold him there for a sec.”

“Yeah, I saw him try to sucker-punch you,” Tim said. “What the hell was that all about?”

“Tell you in a bit.”

Peter pulled a bungee cord off of a nearby umbrella; it was used to keep the wind from lifting the umbrella out of its stand. With Tim’s help, he grabbed the guy’s arms and tied them behind him with the bungee. The guy was trying to struggle but Peter showed that he was much stronger.

“I asked to look inside his cooler,” Peter said. “He was acting suspicious.”

Meanwhile the guy was yelling and cursing, attracting a crowd. Someone must have gotten word to the office, because Ron came running up just then.

“Hi, Ron,” Peter called as he saw the owner appear. “Guy here tried to slug me. I think he’s been taking photos. I asked him to open his cooler.”

Ron went over to the table and opened the cooler.

“Damn!” he exclaimed. “That looks like a fuckin’ professional movie camera! The opening in the side of the cooler is really well hidden too.” He reached inside. “It’s even shock-mounted... and there’s a little control pad inset into the top lid, damn.”

Peter nodded, “Yeah. Tamara saw him with the cooler at the volleyball games yesterday and it looked like he was using it to shoot the kids over there just now,” he said, pointing at the group across the pool, all of whom were watching in fascination.

The guy was still cursing, but several other men had arrived and finally convinced him to stop yelling by threatening to gag him.

“Where’d you learn to take him down like that?” Tim asked. “You moved so quick.”

Peter shrugged. “Judo. Took it for about six years regularly but now I only do refreshers from time to time. That was a *chudan uke* block and hip throw. Basic defensive *kata*.”

Ron had figured out how to play back the camera’s memory on the view screen.

“Okay. He’s got a lot recorded here. The kids too,” Ron said. Then to the guy, “What’s your name?”

“You can’t do this to me,” the guy said. “I have a private investigator license and that allows me to take photos and videos.”

“Not on private property and not when you signed an agreement that you wouldn’t use any device capable of taking images,” Ron retorted. “We can get your name from our records. I’m going to call the police; we’re charging you with criminal trespass, assault, and attempted battery. The DA may also decide to bring you up on child porn charges. And, according to the agreement you signed, you’ve forfeited the ownership of the devices you used for the photographs.”

The guy started in again to threaten everyone with lawsuits.

“Shut the hell up!” Ron ordered. “Peter, you want to press charges?”

“Absolutely. We also need to find out if he used a cell phone and if he’s uploading the images.”

“You’re right. Hey, Tim. Look in the guy’s bag. See if there’s a cell in there.”

As the guy howled that it was personal property, Tim went to the table where the guy’s backpack was sitting on a chair and dug into the bag.

“Cell phone,” he announced as he pulled it out. “It’s locked. Hmm...”

“Maybe his face will unlock it,” Peter suggested. Then he noticed the look of alarm on the guy’s face. “Yeah, his face will work. You know how to do that?”

Tim said, “Yeah.”

When Tim unlocked the phone, they did discover additional photos on the device, plus ones taken at other locations. They also found his web-storage site and got its address.

“Let’s not go too far, guys,” Peter advised. “Change his phone unlock to a PIN and we’ll give that to the cops. If we dig much more, we can hurt the DA’s case. The jerk’s got some deep scratches too, so when you call the cops, mention that he’s got that road rash.”

“Sure,” Ron said. “Okay, let’s go. Give him a hand to stand. We’re going to the office.”

The guy began resisting, so Ron told him, “You’ll walk there, or we’ll dump you in a wheelbarrow and cart you there. Either way, you’re going to the office.”

When they got the guy to the office, Ron called the police. Peter went along and Tamara followed.

“This is exciting, Peter,” she told him. “I didn’t know you were so good at martial arts. I can’t wait for you to meet my dad. What will the police do?”

“Oh, the resort has a great relationship with them. The county police have their training facility not far from here and a few resort members are on the force. We rarely need to involve them with rule-breakers. We just confiscate the photo device and kick them out. They get black-listed here and we let the national organization know the details. We contact the other local clubs to let them know, too. If we need to call the police in, then

they know it's serious."

About a half-hour later, a patrol car pulled in, followed by a detective in an unmarked car. One officer began questioning the guy, whose name from the resort registration was William Foster. Foster refused to talk, even to say where he was camping—but the office record showed he was a tent camper and gave the site number. Ron gave the officer a printout of the digital image of his driver's license; it was from out-of-state, but a quick check with that state's licensing department revealed that the licence was an excellent fake.

Vicki went with the other officer to Foster's tent site; his car was parked there and was unlocked. A quick search of the car found two more fake driver's licenses but also the car's registration form. It revealed Foster's probable real name, William Henderson, and an address in the state that matched the plates. The officer ran that name and Henderson came up as a sex offender.

Meanwhile in the office, the detective was getting the statements of the witnesses to Henderson's attack on Peter; then Ron and Peter led the detective to the pool and showed him the scene. They had left everything just as it was, with a few adults stationed there to keep the curious away.

Among the curious now were Barbara and Terence.

Barbara went over to Tamara, who had tagged along with Peter.

"What's all this about?" Barbara asked. "A guy tried to punch out Peter?"

Tamara told her what had happened.

"Shit, my little bro still got it in him. So he did a judo takedown, then?"

"Yeah, it was sweet. The jerk tried to throw a punch and went flying onto his face."

Vicki came back then with the other officer and he spoke to the detective.

"Sergeant Lynch, can we get someone to pack up that camping site, get the stuff into the car? I found more fake ID in the perp's vehicle but got a hit on the registration. Got the real name and he's a listed sex offender. Do you need to check out his camping site?"

"Well, I think not, Larry. To search further, we'd need a warrant. You're okay as far as looking for the perp's ID because we've got probable cause over the fake ID. You'll need to supervise the campground people putting his possessions in the vehicle and certify that only the possessions from his site were loaded. Then I'll get a warrant for the vehicle. Is it a big tent?"

"Negative. It's a popup, three-person size; air mattress and sleeping bag."

"Fine," Lynch said. "We'll get everything secured and tow the vehicle. Say Ron, can you get some guys to go with Larry here to break down the perp's site?"

"Sure thing, Gary. Are we finished here? Do you want to take custody of this stuff now? I had Michelle take some photos of the scene here, showing where the guy was sitting and the view of the pool and slide. I'll give you those."

"That's good thinking, Ron. Sure, we can load it up. I don't have an evidence bag big enough for the cooler, though."

"How 'bout I give you a 40-gallon trash bag? It'll fit in there."

"Sure. Thanks. And Peter?"

"Yes sir?"

“Good work, son. Both being observant and your judo; glad you’re keeping up with it.”

“Thanks.”

Ron called a few guys who were standing around watching and asked them to go back to the tent site with Vicki and Officer Larry to pack it up. Then Larry told them that he needed to write down each item as they put it in the car, and to break down the tent last.

Soon the turmoil died down as everyone left to do their assignment, leaving only Tamara, Peter, Barbara, and Terence. And eight tween girls with their chaperone. Who all came rushing over when the detective left.

“Peter! Peter! Peter!” the shrieks came as the girls surrounded him, all trying for hugs.

“Okay, you rugrats,” Peter smiled, “calm down.”

“We’re grown up now, so we’re not rugrats any more,” one of the girls groused. “That was awesome, how you knocked that guy down—he was much bigger than you!”

“I was taught that, Steffie,” Peter said. “You can learn it too; Barbara did. Ask your folks; it’s called judo.”

“Oh, I heard of judo,” another girl piped up. “So he was taking pictures of us?”

“Yep, Marie. He had a hidden video camera,” Peter answered. “Let me introduce you all, okay? Tamara, Barbara and I know these young ladies since they were little; they’re all grown up now, but Barbara’s like their big sister...”

They all screamed, “Yeah!” and one girl said, “We were just talking to her and... um ... Terence, right?”

“Right, and this is Tamara, my girlfriend.”

“She’s soooo lucky,” another girl sighed.

“I sure am,” Tamara grinned. “So who are all of you gals?”

Before anyone could respond, Peter pointed at each girl and gave her name.

“And their fearless leader, Jamie,” he finished. “The girls listening to you okay, Jamie?”

She snorted. “Like herding cats. I told them to stay out of the pool while I went for the drinks, but...” she spread her hands in frustration. “But that guy over there... I never noticed him until you walked up to him over there.”

A few girls piped up that they hadn’t seen him there either and Tamara got a thoughtful look. Peter signaled a question to her with a little gesture and Tamara said, “Later.”

“So he had a camera in his cooler?” Wilma asked. “How’d you know that?”

“Hey, now that’s an awesome question,” Peter answered. “And it’s important for you guys to know this, okay?”

He got a lot of solemn head nods.

“Nudist resorts are about the safest places for kids, you know,” he began and there were more nods. “But we can only keep them safe by watching out for you, all of the time. And I mean, *all* the time. You ever notice that when adults are around, they keep an eye on you—even if they’re not your parent?”

“Sure—so annoying,” Melodie grumbled.

“Well, that’s for your own safety, not that we want to keep you from having fun. What you don’t notice, I think, is how we watch over you when any strangers are around. If we don’t know someone, we kinda watch out what they do, particularly when kids are nearby. So that’s how Tamara and I noticed him. He wasn’t behaving like

other resort visitors; he seemed more furtive, in some way. When Tamara and I saw him playing with his cooler, I remembered from somewhere that people have been known to hide cameras in things and secretly take pictures. So that's what caught my attention. Any strange behavior around here needs to be checked out. That's so you guys can enjoy being here and not have to worry about bad people."

The kids all thanked Peter, got another round of hugs, and went off to play again.

Tamara turned to Peter. "I'm learning more and more stuff about you all the time, and I'm liking everything I'm learning," she told him. "Those girls really love you, don't they?"

Barbara, who had been listening, spoke up. "Peter's been their unofficial big brother since they all were tiny."

"Yeah, and I mentioned that Barbara was their big sister," Peter said. "They were a big part of my recovery. I could be with them and be myself. I used to sit with all of them and read them stories and Barbara and I would watch them at the pool when their parents were busy."

Tamara chuckled. "They all have a big crush on you, Peter. I was watching them. And the fight, such as it was, made it into a little hero worship."

Peter made a dismissive gesture.

"No, it really is," Tamara insisted. "You're a good role model for them for a future boyfriend. Anyway, you heard what Jamie and a few others said about not noticing that jerk?"

Peter nodded.

"So, I felt something about him when I got closer to him and wasn't sure what it was. Now I know. He has an ability similar to mine, but I think the only part that works for him is the ability to not be noticed. He can be like a chameleon and become part of the background. That's how he's been able to get away with filming stuff at resorts, like you saw on his cameras. Our own empathic senses could cut through his screening—which is probably something he's not really conscious of—so we could notice him. Now I *really* want to get back to work to find out how I can do this stuff."

"Okay, now some of that stuff I haven't heard about before," Barbara said. "When were you planning to spill *all* the beans?"

"In good time, girlfriend," Tamara grinned. "Say, Peter, it appears you know the detective pretty well. Right?"

Peter shrugged. "You pick up on everything, Tamara. Yeah, Barbara and I learned at the dojo Sarge Gary goes to and sometimes we got to be sparring partners, despite our age differences. The dojo didn't have many teens three-four years ago. There are more there now. Anyway, Barbara's much better than I am."

"Really? I saw you, remember?" Tamara objected.

"Ah, that was just one move and a basic kata. It's a form we got drilled in a lot. She's more athletic than me—look at her volleyball playing. I run and lift. Judo frequently needs explosive movements and volleyball certainly helps developing that."

"Well, Peter and Barbara," Tamara giggled. "Any more exciting events scheduled this week? You never told me that this vacation would include an episode of 'Crimestoppers.'"

They all laughed and settled down in some loungers to catch some sun.

### Chapter 43 - Playing and Passion

“There’s gonna be a gathering at the community fire circle after dinner tonight,” Barbara told the family when she got back to the cabin a little later. “And they also had some excitement at the pool a little earlier today; a guy was secretly taking videos of the kids there.”

She explained what happened as Peter came in and Peter had to give the blow-by-blow description of what had happened.

“That was a good job, Peter,” Claire told him and the others agreed. “Anything special happening at the community fire tonight, Barbara?” she asked.

“Yeah, Mom. I saw Roy and Jill Garfield at the convenience shop; they just got in, and they’re gonna sing and lead in some group songs. They asked me to help spread the word.”

The adults were all smiling at that news and the kids were excited; Tamara and Terence looked puzzled by the enthusiasm.

“They’re well known local singers, Tamara,” Peter explained. “They play guitars and do country-western and folk songs, and they’re really good. They lead sing-alongs too.”

After dinner, the group went down to the fire circle. Vicki was there and saw Peter, so she gave him some news from the county police.

“We heard from Gary; he got a search warrant and a quick arraignment hearing from Judge Hooper. Your afternoon’s ‘sparring partner,’” she made finger quotes, “tried to claim that you attacked him without provocation, but it seems that his video caught the whole thing. Gary told me that he’s giving that video sequence to Sensei Frank so he can critique your form,” she giggled.

Peter grinned. “No fair! He’ll tell me I wasn’t wearing the proper uniform!”

Vicki laughed. “Gary won’t, really. It’s evidence. They found a lot of incriminating stuff in that jerk’s possessions, he said, so you most likely won’t even be needed as a prosecution witness.”

“That’s good.”

There was a nice crowd at the fire circle that evening and Peter found out that he was a minor celebrity; six of the pre-teen “rugrat” girls from the pool incident were there and had been bragging on him to everyone they saw. Of course they all insisted on sitting with him at the fire, vastly amusing Tamara. When it got darker, the girls got a bit more adventuresome and, still naked, they began taking turns sitting on Peter’s legs while he and Tamara were sitting on their blanket, listening to the music. Then the girls started pushing him to lay flat and several girls began straddling his midriff and wiggling around. Peter got alarmed at that, his penis had noticed all the nubile flesh rubbing against him and threatened to do more than just get a bit fatter.

“Okay, Cindy, Marie, that’s enough,” Peter groaned as the last pair were gyrating their little bottoms on him for about a minute. “You guys are too damn sexy, you know, and it’s gettin’ embarrassing.”

Cindy looked at him with a devilish gleam. “We saw one of the nuru massage flyers, so we all wanted to see what it felt like.”

Tamara was enjoying this way too much, but she decided to come to Peter’s rescue.

“Cindy, if you read the flyer, you saw that nuru massage is erotic and for couples, no?” Tamara asked.

“Yeaahhh...” she whined. “But we wanted to see and...”

Tamara laughed. “And Peter’s safe, right?”

Every one of their heads nodded vigorously.

“Yeah. And we all love him,” Melodie chimed in and Rachel sighed, “We do.”

Peter put his arms out, circling them. “And I love all you guys, too. Let’s do a big group cuddle and hug, okay?”

With little squeals, the six crowded around and there were arms everywhere.

Peter spoke quietly to them, “I love all of your attention; don’t get me wrong. But, see, we have a big rule here about doin’ sexy stuff like you guys were doin’. The rule is, ‘no.’ And another thing is your age; even though you’re all big girls now—almost all grown up...”

Tamara saw many chests swell with pride on hearing that.

“... you’re still a little bit too young to do sexy stuff with someone as ancient as I am.”

There were a few giggles and Steffie piped up, “As if! You’re a hunk, no way you’re ancient.”

Peter grinned. “Okay then. *Almost* ancient, okay? Still, see, what you were doing was starting to give me a boner, and we talked about that last year, remember? When guys see sexy girls like you, sometimes it’s tough not to notice how pretty you are and our penises react by growing and getting hard. Several of you asked me about that, right?”

There were murmured replies, “Yeah.” ... “Uh huh.” ... “Sure.”

“So when you all were trying out what you read in that flyer, my body had trouble with keeping my penis soft, ‘cause that massage is *supposed* to get it hard.”

“Eeww.” ... “Really?” ... “Wow.”

“That’s what happens, guys. But in public here, it’s a big no-no.”

Tamara broke in. “Gals, Peter’s right. I’m new to nudism, so help me out. Going nude together like this is something you’ve done for years, right?”

She got a bunch of “yesses.”

“And I assume your folks told you a little about sex acts, like maybe they called it ‘making love.’”

More “yesses.”

“So part of making love is the rubbing and caressing, kissing too, and that helps get the body ready. In a boy, that makes his penis grow—his body makes that happen. It’s not something he has much control over. You girls started to make him get hard and that shows you how much he loves you too.”

There were a bunch of squeals at that, the girls all hugged Peter again, but then they swarmed over Tamara, hugging and kissing her.

Then Marie asked, “Tamara, you’re wicked awesome and so pretty too; can you be our honorary sister too, like Barbara?”

The other girls chimed in, “Yes!” ... “Please!” ... “Oh, can you?”

Tamara’s eyes felt a bit damp. “Oh sure, that’ll be a real honor...”

Their cries, “Yay!” ... “Yes!” ... “Goodie!” were followed by more hugs.

They all settled back to enjoy the music again, but this time, a mass of bodies occupied that blanket. When the music finished, six very reluctant girls left to find their parents, and Tamara turned to Peter.

“Jeez,” she said, “that was intense. Were they like that last year?”

Peter shook his head. “Not like that. They’ve always been very affectionate and demonstrative, but that was a new wrinkle. I’m guessing they’ve found their sexuality and are trying it out.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet that they’ve all started into puberty now. But the emotions of love and adoration I felt coming from them was simply stunning. I didn’t feel lust or anything sexual—it was pure love.”

Peter sighed. “That was some of my best therapy, those girls. They were five or six years old starting back then, and just showered me with their love. Like you, I felt their emotions directly and it was very healing.”

“Are you a sibling substitute? Do they have any brothers or sisters?”

“Oh, sure—they all have siblings, and... as of last year, anyway, they all get along fine with them. Some have older brothers or sisters, some have younger ones. Two are middle kids. So I doubt that any of them think of me as a brother they don’t have... Well, maybe some do, since Barbara and I have known them since they were toddlers.”

Tamara laughed. “The image I got, watching them, was like a litter of kittens all swarming the mom. Except you’re no mom.”

He laughed.

“So how’d you keep from getting a full-blown erection, anyway? I was trying to read your emotions, but what I got was static. It was strange, like, ‘station’s off the air now; tune in during regular hours,’ kinda static.”

“Really? That’s interesting. I was distracting myself with a combination of meditating and also re-enacting in my mind when I used my judo on that jerk today. I surprised myself about how I reacted and my rehashing it took my mind off those vixens.”

“Yeah, they really are precious, aren’t they?”

Tamara and Peter stopped off in the shower block near their cabin and got washed up. Discovering that they were alone, Tamara offered to wash Peter’s back, and predictably his penis sprang up like a steel rod.

She giggled, “More fantasy fulfilment, darling?”

He grunted. “More than that, sweetie. I’m still thinking about those little vixens and how they were rubbing themselves on me. They’re forbidden fruit, but man, they are damned cute, all of ‘em.”

Tamara sighed, “You know, watching them with you turned me on something fierce. And how you treated them—not sending them away in shame for coming onto you, but turning it into a lovely teaching moment. Peter, you’re simply awesome, and you’ve got me so hot now I can’t stand it.”

She drew him into a fierce embrace and they stood there, under the water, kissing. Peter reached down to her vulva and slid his fingers through her lips, making her shudder.

“Jeez, you’re soaked in there and it’s not the shower water—it’s slippery,” he breathed.

“Let’s dry off and get to the cabin,” Tamara panted.

When they closed the door, Tamara attacked Peter, pushing him down on the bed on his back; then she pounced on his lower legs, straddling them, leaned over, and sucked his penis into her mouth. It had never lost any of its rigidity, and when her lips encircled its crown, Peter groaned and his whole pelvis lurched.



“C’mere,” he gasped as he sat up and pulled Tamara around so her knees straddled his chest.

Then, as she sucked him, he dove into her crotch and used his tongue and fingers to caress and stimulate her clit and lips. Precum was pouring out of his cock, and Tamara had a thought.

*Shit, when we did the nuru massage and I tit-fucked him, that was incredible.*

She moved down Peter’s body and nestled his rigid penis between her breasts and began sliding up and down; Peter gasped. There was so much precum and saliva there now that the feelings for both were stunning—and then Tamara realized that, once again, she had begun feeling what Peter was apparently feeling. She felt her erect nipples rubbing on Peter’s pubes, but also felt as if there was a strange sensation stimulating something at her own crotch; a feeling that seemed to be originating outside her body—not part of her body either. It was as if she had a penis too, and it was being stimulated—being stroked. Her mind whirled.

She spun around on Peter’s chest.

“Let’s try doing what the tweens were doing with you before, sweetheart,” she suggested. “That got me hot ‘cause it made me think of the nuru massage. My boobies got so wet, it felt almost like the gel.”

Peter just grunted. Whatever Tamara felt like doing was just fine. He had also felt tingling in his own nipples when Tamara was tit-fucking him and wondered if he was receiving her sensations. Tamara began to rub her chest on Peter’s as her thighs straddled his hips, then she raised her body up a bit and trapped his penis against her mons, raised up a bit, and used the underside of his penis to rub on her clit.

They both gasped at the intensity; both of them now realized that they were truly sensing each other’s feelings. Tamara kept this up for several minutes, alternating with rubbing her nipples on Peter and rubbing her crotch on his cock.

Then she heaved a great sigh. “Lover, I need to get your awesome cock where it belongs—inside me. I wanted it in me all day. Watching you put down that jerk and then seeing you with those little vixens—I’ve been dripping wet all day. Ahh... I’m protected too.”

Peter looked at her with love. “You sure; it’s okay for you now?”

“Never been more sure. Let me do it from up here, okay? If it hurts, please be gentle.”

Peter gulped and husked, “Sure, darling.”

Tamara raised herself and moved down over Peter’s hips. Then, lifting up, she pulled Peter’s penis up and slotted its head between her lips and wiggled herself a little to get the head just right. Peter gasped and Tamara felt two jolts from her vulva—one was the stretchy and stinging feeling of what was left of her membrane being pushed on by the organ pressing against her; the other was that “outside” feeling of intense stimulation and a strong urge for it to push inward.

Biting her lower lip, Tamara sunk down about two inches, resulting in a sharp pinching sensation—it wasn’t really pain—it was completely damped out by an incredible combination of external and internal pressures as she felt both the impression of a large, hot rigid object pushing into her vagina, together with the incredible pressure surrounding a—something?—gliding into an incredibly hot, tight channel. The doubled sensation was so intense, she nearly blacked out.

She groaned and heard Peter sigh, “Oh, fuck, wow...”

Tamara lifted her hips and felt that doubled sensation in reverse, and then sank down fully. Tamara gasped as the widened part of the shaft just behind the head of Peter’s cock spread apart her labia. She gasped again and shuddered as she felt the strange but wonderful sensation of fullness as his organ stretched the tissues of her

vaginal canal as she sunk downward, driving it deeply inside her core.

“Yaaahgh,” Peter gasped.

“Eeehhh...” Tamara gasped. “Ohhh... so full...”

Tamara sat still for a few seconds, trying to recover from the intense sensations that swept through her as her clit was crushed against Peter’s pubic bone. She could also feel the strange and unfamiliar sensation of an organ she didn’t possess being squeezed inside a tight, hot, rippling channel, sending pulses of pleasure into her groin, spine, and belly. She looked down to where they were joined—they were *truly* joined, body and spirit; she thought that she could feel his pulse through his cock, and she could feel his emotions of love pouring out of him, enveloping her. The thought made her vagina clench and Peter groaned again at the sensation.

Then she began moving again, leaning forward so that her clit came into contact with the top of Peter’s cock, while she undulated herself up and down and back and forth on his cock. Peter reached his hands up to caress her breasts, running his hands over them, brushing over her nipples and pinching them, and again, both groaned in passion. Tamara leaned further forward and began to rapidly rock her hips up and down with a rolling, sensual motion, allowing his cock to ride over her clit when suddenly, the tightly wound spring of her building sensations snapped, rocking her whole being in an intense orgasm.

“Eeeeeyyyyyyhhh...” she half-screamed, half-moaned as her orgasm raced out from where they were joined, its heat radiating through her belly to her chest and up to her face, as her vagina rippled, spasmed, and squeezed on the organ embedded in it. She fell forward onto Peter’s chest, panting and gasping for breath, as her body shuddered in a few strong aftershocks.

Peter looked at her in awe and pulled her face close so he could kiss her. “Damn, sweetheart, I felt that too.”

He ran his hands down her flanks and squeezed her butt cheeks, pulling her hips hard into his groin.

“Ahhh... Oohh, you’re still hard...”

“Can we switch? Me on top?”

“Yeah,” she said languorously. “So nice... Don’t take it out...”

“Okay, let’s see...” Peter said as he put his arms around her body and sat up.

Crossing his legs under Tamara’s bottom and using her weight on his upper thighs as an anchor while keeping himself firmly embedded in her, he swung her around onto her back as he continued to hold her tightly against his chest. He was now on top.

“Huh,” she grunted in surprise. “That was unexpected... what...?”

Her question was cut off as Peter straightened his legs and thrust his hips forward, pushing even deeper into her. That forced Tamara’s legs further apart as Peter adjusted himself to lay above her, his weight supported by his elbows, as he sought her mouth to kiss again. He began rocking his hips back and forth now, sliding his cock in deeply and out almost all the way. Tamara could hear the sounds, *goosh, goosh*, and she shivered with the lustful feelings that had started up inside her again. She reached up and grabbed Peter’s butt to encourage him to go faster.

Peter took the suggestion and began to thrust as fast as he could move his hips as Tamara circled her strong legs around the back of his thighs and pulled him into herself as he stroked forward. They were both panting now and sweat was streaming off of them. Both were so lost in their sensations that they could no longer tell whose sensations were whose; they were both lost in worlds of pure sensation, each chasing their orgasms. As Tamara felt her own start to crash over her again, she felt Peter jamming his groin into hers harder than before and began

to feel a different sensation; a burning, hot feeling in her groin but not *in* it; then suddenly she felt both her own release and hers as Peter's semen jetted into her and her own pelvic muscles spasmed and pulsed, almost like they were trying to milk the ejaculate out of Peter's cock.

Their orgasms were so intense that they both blanked out for a few seconds. Peter was struggling to catch his breath and looked down at his lover. She was lying there, panting, but with a serene look. Then she opened her eyes.

"Peter...*puff* ... wow ... *pant* ... just wow..." she had just enough breath to say.

Peter half-rolled onto his side next to her.

"Fuck ... that ... *ahhh* ... was incredible..." he answered. Now catching his breath better, he asked, "Did you feel me ... like I could feel you? It was almost like ... I could feel myself in you?"

"I felt it too... It was feeling your emotions... I think... not sure." Then she giggled. "I don't think we were in each other's minds, but it sure felt like I had a cock and was pushing it into me."

"And I had the feeling of being stretched and full, too," Peter replied.

Tamara laughed. "Okay. This needs further study. Emma says that the gold standard for any experiment is that the results must be reproducible. We need to try it again... oh, jeez, Peter, you're still hard!"

He wasn't, really, just quite fat—"plumped up"—but Tamara set to work and had him ramrod hard in very short order. Now that their lustful urgency had been sated, their lovemaking was slow and romantic. Peter started by rolling over her near leg and, raising his hips, slotted the head of his cock at her entrance. As he slowly glided in, again feeling the incredible sensation of moving into a hot, slick, tight sleeve, he again felt the corresponding feeling of fullness and pressure he had felt before. The dual sensations made him even harder. He began moving in a steady rhythm that slowly built up momentum.

Peter leaned down onto Tamara's chest and sought her mouth while she pulled his head into hers and their lips met. Their tongues danced together as Peter continued to take long, slow strokes into her and they both marveled at the ability to sense each other's feelings. They kept the leisurely pace going for several minutes as both reveled in the passion that was now ramping up to a high intensity.

Now Peter reached down to Tamara's left leg and pulled it up high, placing his arm under her thigh and repeated it with her other leg. He had her lying spread-eagled with her pelvis tilted upward now and started to pound himself down into her. Tamara was thrashing her head from side to side now, and the harder Peter pounded into her, the more excited she got. Peter saw a bright flush begin to spread across Tamara's chest as she suddenly went completely wild, bucking her hips up into him and pounding his back with her fists.

Suddenly Tamara's hips spasmed and the muscles around her vagina clamped down on Peter's cock so tightly that he almost couldn't pull out as they both exploded. Peter felt the intensity of his semen beginning to burn through his cock but the pressure of Tamara's vagina almost prevented it from bursting out and into her channel. Tamara shuddered in a voiceless scream and then a high-pitched screech, as Peter let go with five powerful jets of semen into her core. He still felt hard, so to prolong his feelings, he leaned forward to her head and kissed her while still stroking into her—taking long and steady strokes—and was rewarded when her body went into yet another spasm and she screamed voicelessly around his mouth.

It took them longer this time to catch their breaths and Peter didn't roll off Tamara until she prompted him with a tiny push. When she could finally speak, it was weakly.

"Oh god, I love you... I guess the experiment was a success?" she breathed.

“Ohmygod, was it ever!” Peter husked. “That was even better than the first.”

“Did you hear them?” Tamara continued with a giggle. “Your sister and Terence?”

“Yeah, and felt it too,” Peter chuckled. “I guess I have a bond with her like she has with me. But it’s different from you, darling. I can *feel* what you do, but with Barbara, I just sensed that she was having pleasure.”

They rolled together to kiss again and the next time Tamara’s eyes opened, it was morning. And she was bursting. She slipped out of bed and rushed to the bathroom, did her business, and on the way out, ran into Barbara. They both blushed but then hugged.

“Wait a sec till I’m done, girlfriend,” Barbara said as she ducked into the bathroom.

When she came out, she took Tamara’s hand and led her out to the porch where they sat in the swing chair there.

“We heard you guys last night,” Barbara whispered, smiling. “Your first?”

“Oh yeah. Truthfully, I was dripping since the afternoon, watching how good Peter is—both in combat and with those little minxes of his—and yours.”

“Sexy little things, aren’t they? They really grew up since last year. And they just adore Peter.”

“I saw that,” Tamara agreed.

Then she told Barbara about how they were crawling all over Peter at the community fire.

“That really got me wound up and I was ready to attack Peter, even in the shower,” she laughed. “We heard you too, last night, and Peter says he could feel you.”

“Well, I definitely could feel *him*,” Barbara told her. “I could feel that he was having pleasure. It was kinda intense, actually, and that set me off with Terence. Say, Peter’s happier now than he’s ever been, you know. It’s almost like seeing a different person, since you two began dating.”

“Awww...” Tamara said and they hugged. “So was that your first time too?”

Barbara blushed. “Actually, yes. I’ve been working up the courage to take that monster in me. And you know? It actually was fantastic. Terence is a doll; he went really slow, but then, god, it was unreal. I thought his cock would come out my throat when he pushed in. I actually took him all the way, too—that’s unusual, I read.”

“You ‘read’? You actually did research on that?” Tamara asked, smiling.

“Yeah, I was concerned about how deep he could go in me. He’s only a little longer when it’s hard but it gets fatter. I read that the vagina depth range is between three to six inches but if you’re aroused, the cervix kinda retracts, letting something go a longer way in. Now there’s no way someone like David could get all the way in...”

Tamara winced at the thought.

“...but I was okay with Terence. Damn, though, I’m tender down there now; I think that the playground zone’ll be closed tonight.”

“Yep, me too,” Tamara agreed. “Shit, I can see how sex can be addictive, though.”

“Yeah, for sure... um, I hear noises inside. Shall we see if the boys are among the living yet?”

Tamara giggled and they went in. Barbara started a pot of coffee.

In a few minutes, Terence, squinting, wobbled out of the bathroom and Peter emerged from his bedroom.

“Welcome to the land of the living, guys,” Barbara smirked. “Have a good sleep?”

Peter growled something at her and Terence just shrugged, rubbing his eyes. As Peter ducked into the bathroom, Terence slumped into a chair, his eyes still mostly closed.

“Y’all kept me up almost all night,” he groaned. “Three times! Ah think Ah got friction burns!”

Then he heard Tamara giggle and opened his eyes and noticed her.

“Shit. Sorry, Tamara.”

“Hey, stud,” she grinned at him. “You guys went three times? Wow; we only got to two... we gotta play catchup now, I guess.”

Barbara had taken a sip of coffee but she blew it out her nose as she laughed.

“Damn, Tamara, don’t crack jokes when I’m drinking! Terence, honey bear, want some coffee? It’s done.”

He wordlessly put out his hand as Peter came out of the bathroom.

“I do, too, please,” he said.

“Okay,” Barbara poured two cups. “Ah, the water’s boiling for your tea, Tamara.”

“Thanks. Okay, so what’s on for today? Anything special?”

Peter yawned. “Can we skip the run today? Hey, Terence, let’s go to the exercise room and do some weights?”

They began preparing to leave.

“Nothing special planned,” Barbara said. “While they go do their weights, let’s see if the cousins want to do anything. We all used to like just walking on the trails, watching for birds.”

“Oh, that sounds nice, okay.”

“Oh, Peter—before you go. I totally forgot. Last night at the community fire, Ron told me that the drone problem is back again,” Barbara said.

“Jeez. What happened this time?” Peter asked.

“Some of the campers saw one in the late afternoon flying over the camping sites; then it headed for the pool area. They assumed it was something the resort was doing so they only mentioned it at the campfire.”

“Okay, I’ll keep watch today. We need to find out where they launch it from,” Peter grumbled.

“What’s this about?” Tamara asked.

“Yeah, what’s goin’ on?” Terence asked.

“I’ll tell you as we go. Barbara can tell Tamara,” Peter said as he left the cabin.

“Okay, Barbara,” Tamara said. “What’s up?”

“Here’s what happened last season. People began seeing a drone flying over our grounds. It’s not a toy; it’s kinda big, maybe a foot and a half across and has a camera on the bottom. We’re trying to find the owner to make him stop.”

“Hmm,” Tamara mused. “Can he legally fly one over private property?”

“Apparently he can, but he’s supposed to be within line-of-sight of the thing and it’s not supposed to be flown

over groups of people, either,” Barbara said. “We just don’t know where the owner is operating it from.”

“What if you shot it down?”

“Can’t do that, the police told us. The FAA regulates drones and that would be treated the same as shooting down an airplane or helicopter. Big fines are involved.”

“Don’t want that. What if it developed mechanical trouble and crashed?”

“Well, then it crashed. Why? Are you thinking of something?” Barbara asked.

“Maybe. If he’s not in view of the thing, then he’s operating it illegally, you said. If it went down and the owner can’t see where, then he wouldn’t know its exact location, so he’d come looking for it, I’d expect. There are lots of woods here surrounding us and I suppose that Ron doesn’t have to let him in. Or he could even make the owner strip off to come on the grounds. Anyway, if the drone came down, we could hide it in a remote part of the woods and make it tough for him to find it. Hey, I’m just playing with ideas, okay?”

“So if you get an idea that might work and avoid any problems, talk to Ron about it. I don’t want to see you get into trouble. Okay, let’s go see if the others want to do the trail walk.”

They did; Tamara was interested to learn why nature hikes were a perennial favorite for the cousins. It didn’t take her long to find out that they all enjoyed bird-watching, and there certainly were plenty of birds for them to spot, especially along the river. Several of the girls even had what they called a “life list” of all the birds they had personally seen—or even heard their songs, if they couldn’t see them.

“Hey,” Tamara asked, “How does the list work? Do you need to spot them first yourself, or can someone point out a bird to you?”

“Either works,” JoAnne told her. “We twitchers don’t care how we get to see the birds. It makes my day... hell, my month... if I see a species I never saw before.”

““Twitcher’?” Tamara asked.

JoAnne chuckled. “Nickname for a birder, a bird-watcher.”

That morning, Tamara gained a new appreciation for listening to the sounds of nature. She had never realized how many bird calls she could hear when she was outdoors, especially in a forest. But she was mainly thinking about how to stop that drone.

## Chapter 44 - Counter Surveillance

After their nature-birding walk, Tamara returned with the girls and they chatted for a while; then the older cousins said that they wanted to go to the pool. Barbara stopped by and told her that Terence and Peter had met a few other guys and were shooting hoops on the basketball court.

“Good; he’s keeping occupied,” Tamara told her. “I need to check my email to see if the patent lawyers have anything for me to answer.”

“Fine. See you at the pool later?”

“Yep. Be there as soon as I can. I need to track Ron down too, about the drone problem.”

“Good. Don’t do anything illegal, remember,” Barbara admonished her.

“Yes, mother,” Tamara chuckled.

Barbara snorted and walked away.

Tamara checked her messages and indeed found several about the two patent applications she had in the works. After working on her reply and sending it off, she looked at the FAA site to see what it said about drones, then went to several manufacturers’ sites. When she finished, she closed up and left for the pool area. On the way, she saw Ron riding toward the campground area in a golf cart, so she flagged him down.

“What’s up, Tamara?”

“Hi, Ron. This morning, Barbara told me that I should ask you about the drone problem. I have a few ideas about what to do about it.”

“I’m all ears, Tamara. I found out a little while ago that the bozo is posting stills and videos from our resort on a voyeur website. I’ve got Gary, um, Detective Lynch, coming by tomorrow at 11 a.m. to discuss the problem. So far, we’re stymied.”

“So I guess it doesn’t have any ID you can see.”

“That’s a major problem; it doesn’t. And Gary told me that it should have a radio ID beacon too. Last year when we were trying to find the owner, most drones didn’t have the beacon because it wasn’t part of the rules and for older drones, it was an add-on. I’m not sure about the rules this year, whether it has to have an ID beacon now.”

“I looked at the rules. It should now. What’s the thing look like?”

“Well, it’s a typical drone. Kinda big. Maybe eighteen inches across, has four rotors, and a fairly big camera underneath. And there are four legs that mount on two skids for feet. The guests who spotted it didn’t pay much attention to it ‘cause many thought that we were running it. But we have to stop it from coming; our guests’ privacy is at risk. You want to meet with us and explain your idea?”

“Sure. I’ll bring Peter too. And when we meet, if you have an old electronic gadget you no longer need, please bring it—or ask the sergeant if he has something that he wouldn’t mind getting damaged.”

“Really, Tamara? Your idea doesn’t involve wrecking the drone, I hope. We can’t shoot the thing down, you know.”

“Not doing that. No shots will be fired in anger,” she chuckled. “I’m working on a device that I think might be useful for the Defense Department that I could use. And this’ll be a good field trial.”

“Shit, girl, I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Okay, it’s just an idea and if the sergeant says no go, then I’ll drop it. But it looks like the drone is being operated illegally.”

“It is. Well, just come tomorrow. Thanks.”

He drove away, shaking his head and Tamara continued on to the pool. The entire extended Winsberg family was there now and so was a large number of others who Tamara didn’t know. She found out that these were long-time resort members who all had been coming to the resort for their August vacations for many years. After a round of introductions, people began getting their lunches out or buying their lunch from the lunch stand. After lunch they organized some spirited water volleyball games that went on for over an hour.

Afterward, Tamara spent some time socializing with the people she had met and chatting with the college-aged cousins. Then she decided that she had work to do and looked for Peter. She found him talking with a few of his parents’ friends, mostly the parents of the “rugrats” posse. They were telling Peter about how their daughters’ crushes on him was keeping them amused. Peter introduced Tamara to them and then excused himself.

“Tamara needs to talk to me... I see it in her expression,” he told them, grinning. “Let’s go, sweetie,” he said to her. “What’s up?”

“Lots of stuff. So early this morning, I spoke to Barbara while you and Terence were doing your manly things with the weights,” Tamara teased him. “She told me about the drone sightings last season. Then I saw Ron just before noon and he told me that the pictures from the drone are on some website now, too.”

“Yeah, I heard that too,” Peter said.

“When I saw him before, I told him that I have an idea how to stop it but both he and Barbara are dubious about whether it’s legal. Ron told me he called the detective; they’re meeting tomorrow and we’re going to be there too.”

“Um, ‘We’?”

“Yep. I want you there for moral support. Or immoral, whatever,” Tamara giggled. “I wanna ask the detective about my idea for stopping the drone and catching the guy.”

“Just how do you think you can do that?” Peter asked.

“You know that I was going on my computer earlier. I had some emails to take care of, but then I started researching drones. Let’s get back to the cabin and I’ll show you what I’m thinking.”

On the walk back, Tamara told him what she had learned when she was reading about the drones. When they got back to the cabin site, she took her backpack out of Barbara’s car.

“I need to make some adjustments to this gadget I’ve been playing with,” Tamara told him as they went into their cabin.

Tamara opened her backpack and pulled out what looked like a small infrared heater with a copper-colored reflector bowl on one side and a boxy shaped projection on the other. Then she produced a battery, meter, a toolbox, a box of parts, a little vacuum vise, and an IC soldering kit. Peter’s eyes bugged out.

“Honey, you don’t travel light, do you? What *is* all that stuff for?”

“Some time ago, I thought of a device that has possible military applications and I’ve been working on it at home. I don’t want it in Emma’s lab and I don’t want to leave it in the apartment when I’m not there; it’s too dangerous if someone finds it and messes around with it.”

“Damn, honey, what does it do?”



“So, it should be able to fry electronics at a distance of maybe a hundred feet, maybe more.”

“Jeez, that *is* dangerous. What does it do to electronics, exactly?”

“Makes a series of powerful EMF bursts, electromagnetic frequency radio and microwaves. I told you about how I zapped the RFID chips in Florida, remember?”

“Yeah...”

“So this is a kind of refinement of that. It’s somewhat frequency-tunable, has variable power, and uses the accumulator I invented as a power source so that there’s virtually no recovery time needed between pulses. I thought of using this against that drone. On those drone sites, I read that there are guns that shoot nets and ones that shoot RF to take down drones; but those gadgets are only for official, like government or military use, though. And I have this device right here; it probably can do the same, but in a much cruder way. Now I need to modify it a bit for the frequencies that the drone uses, so you can give me a hand with doing that, okay?”

Peter shrugged but sat down with her and assisted her, mainly by using the meter to tell her the power readings and frequencies her device was emitting as she adjusted its circuitry. After an hour and a half, she was satisfied with her adjustments so, thanking Peter, she packed her electronics shop back up into her backpack and stowed it in the bedroom.

People were beginning to return to the family site now to get dinner prepared, so Tamara and Peter joined them to help and soon everyone was enjoying a nice dinner.

*This experience is just so awesome, Tamara thought at one point. I’m gonna hate it when it all ends. And to think—I haven’t even had a single thought—not one—about being nude, for days!*

The rest of the evening was spent quietly. They had a fire ring set up in front of the main house and some of the guys started a campfire. The marshmallows, graham crackers, chocolates, and roasting sticks came out and everyone enjoyed roasting marshmallows and making s’mores.

When the fire died down, Tamara, Peter, and a few others visited the hot tub and spent the time discussing their plans for the coming school year and what they hoped to do after they graduated. Soon their yawns convinced them it was bedtime so they returned to their cabins to retire for the day.

~~~~~

Tuesday was an overcast day. Rain threatened all morning but it didn’t deter the runners from getting their exercise. In fact, the cloud cover helped with keeping the heat from being bothersome, and the generally uncomfortable mid-Atlantic summer humidity this morning was more like Florida’s, Tamara thought. When the time for her meeting drew near, Tamara grabbed her backpack and with Peter, they set off for the office.

When Tamara and Peter got to the office, the detective was already there, talking to Ron. Both greeted the couple.

“Ron tells me that you have some kind of secret weapon to use on the drone,” Lynch said with a smile.

Tamara shook her head. “Um, not a weapon, it’s an electronic countermeasure device. The Defense Department already has a number of things like those but I thought of this gadget that I’m building when I heard about the drone problem.”

“That’s okay, I suppose,” Lynch responded. “Not a weapon, good. Anyway, Ron told me that the perp is posting photos and videos now. He was already violating the FAA flight rules. He’s not operating within line of sight and he’s flying it over groups of people. And now he’s violating their privacy rule. But we can’t just shoot it down; that’s illegal and dangerous too. We need to locate the perp and get *him*, not the device.”

“Yeah, I read about the FAA rules on their drone site,” Tamara said. “They have some pretty stiff penalties and I don’t want to get involved with any federal prosecution. Anyway, Peter told me that last year, the drone was flying at about treetop level, that it was first seen coming from one direction, and leaving the area in another. So we can’t backtrack it or project its flight path. What I propose doing is to confuse the thing and blind its navigation. Is that guy committing a crime, other than violating the FAA flight rules?”

Lynch replied, “Actually, yes. Taking photos like he’s doing violates the state’s ‘peeping tom’ law, in Maryland it’s called ‘visual surveillance with prurient intent.’ That law doesn’t require that the surveilled subjects be in an enclosed private place; any place where they expect that they won’t be photographed is considered private. And our laws also forbid any type of photographic surveillance by outsiders on property where a private residence is located, and on this resort, I know that there are many private residences. It’s illegal to use a camera to record an unsuspecting person on private property.”

“Okay, but I also don’t want to be in the position of breaking one law to catch another person who’s breaking other laws,” Tamara told him. “Apart from that, the things that the drone guy’s doing will have an economic impact on the resort, if word should get out that there’s an aerial voyeur who’s posting their pictures on the web. The gadget I’ll show you now could be a possible solution. This device will interfere with the electronics of the drone enough that it should be confused. One option would be to just zap the electronics to bring it down; but that would cause damage.”

“Really don’t want that,” Lynch said.

“Yeah, of course. Another would be to mess up its directions until the power runs out or it flies into a tree. I read that the more expensive drones will do an emergency landing when the power’s low.”

“That’s better, but it still violates FAA regs over interference with an aircraft,” Lynch told her.

“True, but cops break speeding laws when chasing a fleeing suspect, right?” Tamara grinned. “Law enforcement people have much more leeway in bending laws to apprehend someone who’s wilfully breaking others, right?”

“Huh. Lectured in police procedure by a civilian. Tamara, you’re right. What do you have cooked up?”

She put her backpack on the table and opened it, then pulled out the device she had worked on the previous day while Peter watched.

“I have several inventions that DARPA over in Arlington has licensed and this is an extension of one of them. Now I’ll need to trust you not to talk about this so I won’t bother with getting non-disclosure agreements from you all—and I can’t tell you exactly how the technology works ‘cause then you *would* have to sign an NDA. Essentially what it does is to make bursts of electromagnetic waves and they can disrupt electronics. It’s called an electromagnetic pulse, or EMP. Kinda like what happens in a lightning strike, but not as dramatic. I’ve been playing with this device for a while and it works on the little circuits I’ve tested it on, but so far I’ve never tried it on a more complex device.”

“What does it do to electronics?” Ron asked.

“At high power it can fry electronics. Integrated circuits, things like microprocessors, are the most susceptible to damage. At lower power close by, or at higher power at extended distances, it can set up eddy currents—induced currents—that interfere with the device’s circuits’ operations. Ron, do you have something we can try it out on?”

“Yeah, I found an old cassette tape player. It still works, but of course it’s worthless; nobody uses them anymore. What will you do to it?”

“First, I’ll try scrambling it. The tape drive itself is mostly mechanical; a motor driving belts, I’m guessing, so

quick EMP bursts won't do much there, but I think I can affect the audio circuit. We need to do this outside 'cause I don't want to hurt any electronics in here. Sgt Gary, please leave your phone and radio in here. Any other electronics on you? I can see that Ron and Peter aren't burdened with electronics—or anything else."

They all laughed.

"How far is safe?" Lynch asked.

"Fifty feet from the building should be fine at the low power I'll use first."

She picked up her backpack and Ron took the cassette player and they walked over to a picnic table away from the building.

"Set it down there and turn it on," she asked and Ron started the tape.

It was playing a tape from a 1990s rock music group. Tamara backed away about thirty feet and took out her contraption, pointed it toward the cassette player, and raised her hand. After a few seconds, the music began to waver in pitch with screeches, rumbles, and skips. She dropped her hand and the sound returned to normal. Tamara raised her hand again and the music went squirrely again.

"I like it better sounding like that," Lynch joked. "Looks like your ray gun does mess with the electronics. And that was low power?"

"Pretty low. This thing fires rapid EMF bursts and I was slowly increasing the power until the player was affected. It's at about 20 percent now."

"You want to try the full power now?" Ron asked.

The player was again serenading them with the 1990s rock track.

"Not full," Tamara said. "This thing's power goes way high on a log scale and I don't want to damage stuff nearby. At full, I think it could fry electronics at maybe 500 feet. And heat the electronics too, even melt the plastics."

"Holy shit," Lynch breathed. "We could put something like that in a patrol car and stop a perp before a high-speed chase gets started."

Tamara laughed. "Needs more work. You'd fry the patrol car too. This looks like a reflector on the pulse generator, but it's only partly effective. Twenty percent of the energy goes backward through it. Let me go to 35 percent power."

The player stopped mid-wail in the soloist's singing and a few seconds later, a tendril of gray smoke drifted out of the tape compartment.

"Ugh. That device is scary," Lynch said. "If the perps got one, they could wipe out our radios and phones... I take back my comment about wanting one in patrol cars."

"That's why I asked you to keep this quiet," Tamara said. "This one is going to the Defense Department; I'm not even bothering with a patent. It's too dangerous."

Ron had picked up the player and was looking at it.

"'Fried' is the operative word. I smell burnt electronics," he said. "All right, Gary, is this something we can use to trap the drone guy? If this is like last year, he flies it on weekends in August and it goes over the campground, sports area, and pool."

"When during the day?" Tamara asked.

“Early to mid-afternoon, last year,” Peter answered. “How are you going to do it?”

Tamara turned to Lynch. “Let’s say I confuse it enough that it comes down on the resort grounds. I’m guessing that the guy will come knocking, wanting it back...”

“Enough said,” Lynch told her. “Okay, Ron, let’s do this. Swear out another complaint against John Doe, address unknown, drone operator, for criminal trespass, like you did last year—you still have the ‘no drone’ signs around the property?”

“Sure do. They can be easily seen from the air, too.”

“Good. We’ll add this complaint to the one you made last year, shows an ongoing problem. When the drone comes again, and your magic ray brings it down; I won’t say a word about the magic used—it’s a DoD secret ray, right, Tamara?” He grinned and she nodded. “Okay then. Tamara, I hereby deputize you as a county police forensic investigator to assist in the identification and apprehension of an illegal drone operator. I’ll do the official paperwork back at the station and have you sign a copy next time I’m out here. Ron, call me when you have the info on the perp and I’ll get the judge to issue an arrest warrant. Now, Tamara, you have a certain gleam in your eye and I’ve interviewed enough people to know that you have a devious plan in mind. Am I right?”

“Ha ha, very good,” she laughed. “You’re good at your job. Yeah, I was thinking of a fitting local punishment in addition to or instead of the one for trespass and the other stuff. When the drone comes down, I’d like to maybe hide it up in a tree in the woods, as if it crashed there. When the guy comes looking, we say that we heard that someone saw it but it was wobbling as it flew over the trees—and didn’t he see the ‘no drone’ signs? If he wants to search for it, he would have to pay the guest registration fee and follow the resort’s dress policy...”

She was interrupted by everyone’s chuckles.

“...and in case the thing’s controls can help find it, no electronic devices are allowed in public areas and he’d need to be nude while he was looking...”

They were laughing now.

“... and I assume it’s a guy and since he was taking unauthorized photos, you can invoke the no single-male rule and that he must be accompanied by a female... if married, his wife...”

Ron was laughing so hard now that his eyes were tearing and the others were very amused too.

“And if he wanted to bring in help to search, the same rules would apply to them.”

Ron wiped his eyes, took her hand, and shook it.

“That, my dear, was the best laugh I’ve had in a long time. ‘Make the punishment fit the crime...’ Now where have I heard that?”

Peter laughed. “*The Mikado*, Gilbert and Sullivan. A nineteenth-century musical play.”

“Oh right. Well, that’s perfect,” Ron said. “Oh, Gary, we also need to report the violation of the FAA rules.”

“Right. We did file an FAA report last August but since we had no identifying info on the perp, they said they couldn’t take action, but to let them know if we find anything. The perp’s got several violations; no drone visual ID or electronic ID signal, out of line-of-sight operation, and flight over gatherings of people. The FAA also has a photography privacy clause. Do you have the URL of where the pictures he took are posted?”

Ron looked through a notebook and wrote down the address, handing him the paper. Then Lynch left, reminding Ron to call when the action began.

“Tamara, you’re an unusual gal,” Ron said after Lynch left. “You’re full of surprises. Peter, did you know she was gonna spring this on us?”

“Some of it. She told me in general what she was planning. She had some long talks with Barbara about how far she could go, and then spent several hours on her computer looking up laws, regulations, and technical info. I’ve never, ever, seen Tamara unprepared. And then she spent a couple hours adjusting her contraption. You know, it’s crazy, she has a whole frikkin’ electronics shop in that backpack? I don’t think I’ve ever seen her without having that backpack somewhere close.”

“Yeah,” Tamara added, “I looked up the operating frequencies that the drones use, they’re in the WiFi range, and also how they access GPS to get their bearings. I tuned my ‘magic ray’ to mess primarily with those signals in the unit’s electronics.”

“Tamara, you’re just plain scary, you know?” Ron said with a grin.

“Hey, we need to plan for when ‘Santa comes to town,’” Tamara said. “We need to know when the sleigh with the tiny reindeer shows up.”

The others chuckled.

“Well, my guru,” Ron made a half bow to her, “what does your excellency suggest?”

Tamara grinned at him. “You know the general directions of the geographical features around here. Am I right that the area around here is somewhat built up, but to the north and northwest, and due south too, there’s a natural area?”

“Exactly. About a mile in each of those directions, it’s agricultural or a natural area,” Ron confirmed. “That’s why it’s so tough to find his launch site. And he could be using different ones, too—there are lots of potential places.”

“So here’s my idea. Have a contest; give a reward, something cool, to the first person who sights the drone and reports it. I’ll be ready to respond... um, I guess I need to camouflage the pulse generator so the drone operator can’t see what I’m doing. Maybe keep it under an umbrella.”

“Will it work through that?” Ron asked.

“Oh, sure. Through wood, or plastic too, and maybe even through steel if it isn’t like tank armor. Copper will shield it, though. Silver, too,” she giggled. “But silver shields are expensive. But they work against EMP. Also vampires.”

They all laughed.

Then Tamara and Peter left to get back to their cabin site for the family’s lunch.

~~~~~

The rest of the week was typically quiet; there were no scheduled activities, but the sports area was very busy, as was the pool, of course. Wednesday was the restaurant’s day off so the resort had an arrangement with several outside eateries, an Italian, a Mexican, and a steakhouse restaurant, to deliver take-out meals; resort guests made their selections from the take-out menus in the office by 3 p.m. and the meals were delivered to the office for guests’ pickup at around 6.

On Thursday evenings, the resort held a community barbeque for the dinner meal and served ribs, chicken, and pulled pork, together with the standard burgers, sausages, and franks. Creative veggie-only options were also available.

Tamara and Peter spent the days with their friends and the cousins using the sports facilities, pool, and spa. And doing a lot of sunbathing.

On Friday afternoon, the resort had scheduled a special game: orienteering. There were eighteen checkpoints set up all around the resort grounds and in the surrounding forest. Each checkpoint had a twelve-inch square flag, colored orange and white, and it marked the location of a plastic punching tool which was used to punch a unique pattern of holes in the orienteers's control card. Teams could be of two or three people. Each team received a compass, a map marked with the numbered checkpoints, and a control card, and to keep teams from getting in each other's way, each team's map had a different order of checkpoints to be visited. At each checkpoint, the punch was to be used to punch the corresponding spot on the control card. There were prizes for the teams with the fastest times through the course.

They all had a great time doing the course—and Tamara got to learn how to read a map. Peter joked that now that she could read a map, she needed to learn how to drive and she'd know where she was going.

“Silly—that's what GPS is for. Maps are sooo passé. Except for that game. That was fun.”

They all had dinner at the cabin site again and it turned into a huge party. The Winsbergs and Gibsons had invited a number of their friends and their families and all the guests came bearing their dinner contributions. After dinner, it was games time. Many of the adults played euchre, so that was one group. Another group chose poker. And several of the kids had the foresight to bring along some board games from the clubhouse, games like “Monopoly” and “Trivial Pursuit” and even “Cards Against Humanity,” so everyone joined a group playing their favorite game. A couple of the kids also brought “Twister,” but when they tried pitching that game, they got no takers. No one stayed long, though, because many of the group planned to go to the volleyball clinic the following day.

~~~~~

Saturday morning had the second volleyball clinic on the schedule and a lot of people turned out for it. The day started out cool and cloudy, but by mid-morning, the sun had come out and it was getting warmer. The extensive drills from the week before weren't repeated, but a quick skills refresher started off the session, and Tamara was given some excellent pointers which helped her to improve her serve. But her best position was playing up front; any of the three attack positions suited her abilities. Because she could hit equally well with either arm, she was a serious threat playing at any offensive position, as the team's outside hitter, opposite hitter, or middle blocker. After the clinic's refresher drills, the coaches organized a series of quick games as they had done the previous week.

In the first game, Tamara was playing middle blocker, and again used her anticipation and jumping ability to race in and kill the ball as the setter released it. She also played opposite hitter in another game, and the teams she played on did very well. Again, the resort's traveling team members urged her to consider going with them to the Superbowl. She told them that she'd have to think very hard about how to make that possible. They tried to recruit Barbara as well; when she played on Tamara's team, Tamara noticed how good a player she had become just from the previous week and the drills earlier today.

“I was a bit rusty,” she told Tamara. “I'm getting into the groove now.”

After lunch, Tamara and Peter got ready for the drone's possible appearance. Peter had told her that the operator was nothing if he wasn't predictable; last year the drone had showed up every afternoon on Saturdays and Sundays.

Peter got the resort's golf cart from Ron and brought it back to their site and Tamara got the pulse generator ready. She also had borrowed a golf umbrella from one of the resort's guests; it had a larger diameter than

regular ones. They had decided to patrol along the treeline around The Meadow, traveling from the west side around to the northern side of the resort, and then circle around to travel back. Those were the directions from which the drone most frequently appeared during last season, Peter had told her.

They patrolled along that route for about forty minutes, when Peter finally said, “Maybe he’s not flying it today. How ‘bout we just go back to our site and wait, okay? We’re just wasting electricity now, riding around like this. We’ll be able to get to any of the treelines quickly from there, anyway.”

They went back to their cabin and relaxed together on the porch swing chaise to wait for the call that the drone had been sighted.

## Chapter 45 - Crime and Punishment

The call Tamara and Peter were waiting for came about 2:30 p.m.; the little two-way radio Ron had given them beeped and she answered.

“Bogey at ten o’clock,” came Ron’s tinny voice, then he laughed. “A guest heard the drone’s buzz coming from the west-northwest. Around campsites 15 to 20.”

“On it,” Tamara replied and she hopped into the golf cart Ron had lent them.

Peter got behind the wheel.

“Let’s set up on The Meadow to the east of number 20,” she told him. “That’s far enough away from any campers. I didn’t see anybody around there earlier, though; that’s kinda strange.”

She pulled the device out of her backpack and got the umbrella ready.

“When I get out, pull back about 50 feet,” she told Peter. “No point in damaging the golf cart, Ron’s radio, or your phone. But stay close enough to video the thing; keeping back 50 feet should be safe.”

She hopped out and popped open the umbrella as the drone’s sound got louder; then it appeared flying low over the trees to the west. As it flew past the tree line and headed over The Meadow, it turned and lined up for flying over the pool. As it turned, Tamara pointed her device at it and triggered it. She increased the power a bit and the drone wobbled and stopped its forward movement and turned slightly to the north. She gave the drone another EMP jolt and with that, it lost a bit of altitude and turned back the other way. Then it recovered and resumed its travel toward the pool. She hit it with another burst of pulses and the drone staggered in the air, dropped a few feet and turned about 90 degrees to the south, but then it recovered again and turned back toward the pool area. Each time the drone seemed to recover, she shot another burst of pulses at it. She kept it flying over The Meadow, wandering around in circles as it wobbled and rocked in the air.

Now it began trying to stay pointed almost due west, seemingly in an attempt to head back to where it had come from, as if the operator knew it was in trouble and was trying to recall it. But Tamara, operating from her cover under the umbrella, kept giving the drone bursts of pulses every time it leveled out, but each time it lost altitude as she allowed it to get closer to the line of trees to the west. Now it was clearly flying below treetop level. Each time the drone began to increase its altitude, Tamara fired more bursts, repeatedly making the device stagger and turn off course. Like a drunken sailor, the drone rocked, twisted, jerked, and pitched, all the while trying to travel west while its altitude relentlessly kept dropping. Tamara followed behind it, hitting it with pulses whenever it seemed to recover.

*This thing has some pretty damned good electronics, she mused. Well, time for the coup de grace.*

She increased the power output of her EMP device to 30 percent and triggered it as the drone, now only about 20 feet off the ground, approached the trees and she heard its blades shriek as the drone made a valiant attempt to gain altitude. Another EMP shot and the drone pitched forward, increasing its forward speed instead of increasing its altitude, and it struck the lowest branches on a nearby tree. The drone dropped twelve feet to the ground.

Peter raced in with the cart as Tamara ran up to where the drone lay.

“Fantastic job, sweetie! I’m gonna look for an SD card or whatever the photos are stored on; hang on,” Peter told her as he pulled on a pair of nitrile gloves.

Tamara looked at the device. Its only apparent damage appeared to be the two forward rotors and the rotors looked like they could be easily replaced.



“The thing’s turned itself off. Must be a safety when it hit the tree,” Peter said. “Ah, it’s got a micro-SD card. Let me call Ron... oh, here he comes.”

Ron pulled up in a UTV utility vehicle.

“Great job, Tamara,” he called as he and Vicki got out of it.

“Ron, let’s see what the memory card’s got recorded,” Peter said. “It’s on a micro-SD.”

“Sure, let’s get back to the office; I can copy the card to the computer there. Vicki, can you stay and watch? Make sure no one disturbs the thing. I assume you want to see what’s on there too, Tamara?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Climb in and let’s go. I’ll also call Gary and tell him ‘the Eagle has landed,’” Ron smirked.

“Funny guy,” Tamara said.

“Not,” Peter said.

Back in the office, when they examined the contents of the memory card, Ron almost went ballistic.

“Shit,” he exclaimed. “He still has stuff on here from last week, looks like, and shots from over the pool, look, he got a number of kids in there. On The Meadow, kids playing, in the playground too. Damn. I’m gonna nail his ass...”

“We gotta make sure that the card is tied to the drone,” Peter mused. “Oh, I know. Let’s see if there’s any metadata stored with the images... okay, it is, good. See, this ‘EXIF’ tag? It shows the drone camera model was used to take the shots and the dates. GPS data too. So this card is tied to the drone and the resort’s location. Let’s copy this onto a memory stick and give it to Sarge Gary and I’ll put the card back. I have the video I took of the drone crashing and I kept Tamara out of view.”

“Good,” Ron said. “You want to go through with the plan of sticking it up in a nearby tree?”

“Sure. Make him work for it. And have Gary here when he finds it and have him confirm ownership. How about Gary hauling him away sans clothes too?”

“I love it,” Ron smiled.

“Hey Ron, how come there wasn’t anyone around the area when we did our thing?” Tamara asked. “I would have thought we’d have a crowd watching.”

Ron laughed. “Think you’re the only bright one around? I didn’t want any witnesses, so I had spread the word that we’d have free food at the lunch stand and free video games for the kids all afternoon, with prizes for the highest scores. You saw the big crowd when we got back to the office?”

“Sure. I was wondering what was up,” she said. “Very clever.”

Ron made his call to Lynch and then told the couple, “Take the UTV. I’ll get the truck with the ladder. We’ll head back and stage the drone crash into a tree.”

Once they put the memory card back into the drone and got the drone about twenty feet up in the tree, they scattered the pieces of the broken rotors on the ground below it together with a couple of broken-off small branches and a bunch of leaves. Then they all returned to the office.

They were surprised when instead of a visit from the drone’s owner, the office received a phone call. Vicki answered the phone when the call came in, forty minutes after they had stuck the captured drone in the tree.

“Arundel Nature Society, how can I help you?”

“...”

“A guest heard it buzzing around and told us about it. Listen, sir, this is private property and it’s posted with ‘no drone’ signs. We want you to stop overflying us.”

“...”

“I see. No, the guest heard it flying over the trees somewhere near the river.”

“...”

“If it came down, none of our guests have reported seeing it.”

“...”

“The only legal entrance to our property is through our gate. If you come onto our property any other way, it’s criminal trespass and we prosecute offenders, sir. If you want access to the grounds to search, you’ll need to come in the legal way, on our entrance road, and check in at the office.”

“...”

“No, it’s not our responsibility to hunt for your device. You flew it to our property and if it didn’t come back to you, then finding it is your problem, not ours.”

“...”

“Oh, you will? Be my guest. I doubt that they will help you.”

She hung up.

“Now that was interesting,” Vicki said. “He told me that it flew off course and he tried following it but lost radio contact. He wanted to come in through the woods to look for it; you heard what I told him then. Next, he claimed *we* had to look for it and return it; if we didn’t, it was theft, and he’d go to the police and they’d make us search for it.”

“Yeah, right,” Ron said. “Well, change of plan. If he doesn’t call the police, we still have a phone number they can trace.”

“Was there any damage that your ray gun did that can be found when he gets it?” Vicki asked Tamara.

“I strongly doubt it,” Tamara answered. “The memory card, that’s where the photos were stored, is semiconductor memory and that’s pretty sensitive to EMP damage. We could read the card with no problems.”

Just then a few guests came into the office to check their account balances. Vicki looked up their accounts and printed statements for them. They thanked her and left.

“I guess I’ll call Gary and give him the latest news,” Ron said. “I wonder...”

The phone rang again and Vicki looked at the caller ID.

“Same number,” she said, and this time she put the speaker on.

“Arundel Nature Society, how can I help you?”

“This is the drone’s owner. Listen, if you don’t find it and return it, I’ll take you to court.”

Vicki grinned. “Go right ahead. Is it weatherproof? You might get a court date in three to six months. What

happens to it if it gets wet? Also, can you prove to a judge that we are preventing you from searching for it? You said you were calling the police. Why don't you do that?"

"I called. They said that finding lost property is not their job," he replied.

"I see. Well, neither is it ours," Vicki retorted. "You have two choices then. Search for it yourself or do nothing and take the loss. Your choice."

"Are you kidding?" the guy screamed. "That drone cost 2500 bucks!"

"And how much do you think a lawyer will cost if you try to sue us? You're looking at 300 to 400 bucks an hour, buddy, plus court costs and filing fees. I wouldn't waste the money if it were me. Do you have anything more or are you done?"

"Um, well, can I come in to search for it?" he asked.

"Absolutely. If you plan to come yet today, you'll have to leave at sunset, though, unless you want to camp overnight. But we have a rule about single men here. For singles who are unknown to us, like yourself, you can only enter as a couple—if you're married, that needs to be your wife."

"You can't do that!" he screamed.

"This is a private resort and we certainly can make the rules about who is entitled to come onto our grounds. Again, your choice. Will you be coming today?" she asked sweetly.

"Um, no, I gotta... Listen, I'll call tomorrow."

He hung up.

"Okay, let's move this along," Ron said. "We stopped the drone; many thanks, Tamara."

She nodded.

"I'll call Gary and give him the guy's phone number and the drone registration number. That number was barely legible, but at least he had it registered."

Meanwhile Peter and Tamara were talking.

"One sec," Peter said. "Before you call, Tamara and I had a thought. He had photos of kids and there's no knowing yet if he did anything with them. So the kids here are his victims, even though we can't identify any of them; the drone was too far for that. We have a strong feeling that he's married and his wife doesn't know about his voyeurism hobby. What about doing this? Make these conditions the requirements for his searching. First: He's required to be present on the grounds during the hunt. Second: He has to have the kids here do the searching and it will cost him 20 bucks for each kid who joins in, per day. The one who finds it gets 40 bucks reward. Third: He cannot interact with the kids at all; his wife must be the intermediary. He can't be allowed to get close to them, either, Make him sit on a chair on The Meadow and have the kids stay away. Fourth: If he doesn't agree to this, then we tell him that we'll report him to the FAA and show him that he's risking incurring their civil penalties—that's as much as \$27,500. And their criminal penalties come with fines up to \$250,000 and jail time. And fifth: The resort dress code applies to both of them."

"Wow, that's nasty," Ron grinned. "I like that idea, especially letting the kids get some money from their hunting."

"There's more," Peter said, grinning. "About your criminal complaint. Tell him that you'll drop it if he does two things. Gets the photos removed from that website and if he sent the kids' pictures anywhere, get them removed. The second is to compensate you for lost business. You can claim that your season's unrented cabins and sites

were a result of potential guests not coming because of the voyeuristic photos. Come up with a reasonable loss amount. If he balks, then tell him that if he's found guilty of the charges in your complaint, he could be found guilty of a crime which could label him as a sex offender."

"Yeah, that sounds good. Let me check this out with Gary and see if he thinks it'll work from the police angle. It might look pretty close to something bad, like extortion."

"Good point," Peter said.

"Now I also got to get things ready for the Polynesian evening and the bands coming in later." Ron sighed. "Really didn't need this sideshow."

"And there's the 5-k race tomorrow too," Peter said.

"I haven't forgotten," Ron sighed, shaking his head.

~~~~~

That evening, the resort put on a luau, complete with a roasted pig—except it was roasted in a big barbeque trailer, not in a pit in the ground—and there were two bands present, with two separate dance floors, giving plenty of dancing space. Tamara discovered that nudists like to dress up in costumes, but lots of them seemed to believe that the costumes should be as revealing as possible. There were two body-painting artists present who decorated the kids before dinner, and after dinner, used glow paint to decorate the adults. Later, after dark, the UV lights over the dance areas made the scene and the dancers look surreal.

~~~~~

The nude 5-k run was scheduled for Sunday morning and the resort had arranged for a race timing company to do much of the organization. An existing and well marked race route had been used for this race in previous years. Resort personnel took care of the participants' registrations and fees and the timing company people did the rest. The race would be timed using special disposable RFID chips which were affixed to the runners' number bibs, while established runners could get their personal race chips registered in the timing system.

While the race entrants were going through the registration tables and Ron was overseeing the operation, a call from the drone operator came in and Ron took the call, which had been transferred to his cell phone.

After he answered, the guy said that he'd be arriving there at 10:30.

"I'm sorry, but this morning isn't possible. We're hosting a 5-k race this morning and everyone at the resort is tied up with that. There will be runners on the grounds, roads, and trails, so I'm afraid that we can't have non-race personnel anywhere on the race course. We can let you come in at 1:00 p.m."

The guy started to make a fuss about that, so Ron told him, "Listen, buddy. We're trying to work with you but you're not making it easy, okay? You can go a long way getting things done by following the rules. You haven't done such a good job about that, have you? I'll see you about 1 o'clock."

He hung up without waiting for a response.

Peter and Tamara had come to the registration table while Ron was talking.

"The drone guy is still being a jerk?" Tamara asked.

Ron nodded, "Yeah. I'm gonna put him through the wringer on this."

"Talk to Gary about him?" Peter asked.

"Yep. He said not to do anything that looks like we're suggesting an agreement or compromise. He told me that

if we're considering that, we should get a lawyer's opinion."

"Oh well, thought it was a good idea," Peter replied.

"It still could be; we'll see. He also suggested just letting the guy come in to search today—not involving the kids at first. Let him search where he thinks it crashed for today. After today, maybe use your idea. Anyway, you guys signing up to run?" Ron asked.

"Sure. Some of my cousins are running too. They should be along anytime now."

Tamara and Peter got registered for the run and got their number bibs. Peter told her about the race bib.

"Usually you pin them to your shirt, but we don't have shirts," Peter remarked. "Some runners tie a cord to the top corners and loop it behind the neck and loop another cord around their back, attached to the bottom corners. But when I tried that once, it was really uncomfortable. And there's always a joker around who complains that being naked, there's nowhere to pin the bib," Peter chuckled. "But a couple years ago, one dude clipped the bib to his nipple rings."

Tamara shuddered at that.

"I'm gonna wear that brief sports bra," Tamara said. "I could pin the bib to that, but it'll flop around in my face. So what do we do about the bib numbers?"

"We write the numbers with a marker on your skin. We need to find the person doing the marking... oh, over there," Peter pointed.

They got on the little line of waiting runners and when their turn came, the woman used a marker to write their bib numbers on their hips.

"Now carefully pull off that sensing tag from the bib and I'll show you how to thread it through your shoe laces so the readers can record you when you go by."

"Okay," Tamara said. "Cool, it's another RFID chip. Those things are useful. Except how they did it in Florida—now that was useless," she laughed.

They did the race but in running it, Peter and Tamara decided not to push their pace very hard—they weren't trying for a top finish, just a respectable time. Tamara finished with a 21:19 time, but with a kilometer to go, Peter decided to sprint for the remaining distance, so his time was about 30 seconds faster. They both finished in the top ten overall. But JoAnne came in first in the under-twenty group, and second overall, male and female, with an outstanding 17:44 time.

Tamara was very impressed and mentioned it to Peter.

"Oh, I guess you didn't know. JoAnne's a track star. She won her high school cross-country state title last season. She also holds her school and division records for the cross-country, indoor 3000 meter, and 5000 meter events."

"Wow, cool. No wonder she takes off like that when we run together. A sub-six mile, jeez. Okay, we need to freshen up in case drone guy decides to come."

He did. He called the office just before 1 o'clock, saying that he was on his way. He got to the office about 20 minutes later and a woman was with him. She looked very unhappy. Vicki greeted him as Peter and Tamara waited just outside the office door leading into the clubhouse.

"All right; you're the owner of that drone," Vicki began. "You can search for it on our property but need to follow all of our rules." She handed him a flyer. "Basically, we require that everyone, with very limited

exceptions, remains nude on our property and that no electronics capable of taking photographs be in anyone's possession while in community areas."

"What are those exceptions?" the guy grumbled.

"Law enforcement or other government people on official business. Service people hired to do repairs. Those are examples; trust me, you don't qualify. Now, do you want to stay to do the search?"

He agreed and she told him the grounds fee and then said, "Okay, now I'll need to get your picture ID—a driver's license—for both of you."

"Why do you need our IDs? We're not..."

Vicki put up her hand, sighing. "Listen. If you're going to fight us over every single resort rule, then you might as well just leave. You've violated the privacy of our guests with your drone..."

He began to object.

"... let me finish. A few people told us about seeing aerial pictures of our resort on a website and your drone is the only device that's flown over our property. We could legally ban you from entry, you know. You also may have violated Maryland's laws. So, can I get your ID?"

He grudgingly handed over his license and the woman did as well as she looked at the man and angrily said, "What's that website pictures business that she said all about?"

He responded, whispering, "I don't know, I'll find out later."

Vicki scanned the licenses and noted that they had the same last name. Rodney and Janice Sommers. He also handed her the cash to pay the grounds fee.

"Thank you," Vicki said as she handed the IDs back. "We have some restrictions for your visit while you look for your drone because of your antisocial, voyeuristic behavior. We're limiting where you can go on our grounds to where you think your device may have crashed."

She pulled out a map of the resort.

"Show me where your drone flew onto our property and where its last position was recorded."

He marked the drone's line of flight from the trees to over the resort's Meadow and his information agreed with Peter's sighting.

"But after it got about here," Sommers said, marking a spot, "the transmissions began to cut out and I started to lose the video feed. I sent the recall signal but the drone kept cutting out. The last video I saw was the trees around here."

He pointed to an area further to the north of where the drone had actually come down.

"All right then," Vicki said, "We'll limit you to that area at first. Now you'll need to disrobe; we have guest lockers if you wish."

With much grumbling, the two followed Vicki to the locker room where she left them.

"When you're ready, somebody will show you where to go."

Tamara and Peter were the designated chaperones and they had gotten "dressed" for the job; Peter wore shorts and Tamara wore a pareo.

When Sommers and his wife came out, Peter told them, "Follow me; I'll show you where to go."

“How come you’re dressed?” Sommers challenged.

“Law-enforcement duties,” Peter replied. “Chaperoning a law-breaker, as far as I’m concerned.”

The Sommers followed Peter out of the clubhouse, trying to hold their hands to shield their privates and looking all around them to see if anyone was watching. He brought them out to The Meadow and pointed.

“The area you think the drone came down is along the trees directly ahead, over there. You can go straight there and begin your search. I’ll be keeping an eye on you to be sure that you don’t bother any of our guests. And before you ask, none of our guests saw it go down; we’ve already checked.”

As the couple walked off toward the treeline, arguing, Tamara drove the golf cart up to meet Peter. He had shown her how easy it was to drive the thing. Between Tamara and Peter and several other volunteers, they kept the Sommers under observation until after dinner, when they gave up and returned to the clubhouse, tired and bodies scratched from pushing through the underbrush. They told Ron that they would return on Monday.

~~~~~

Monday morning, the Sommers returned and Ron, with Sergeant Lynch’s approval, had decided to let the kids help, with two modifications being made to Tamara’s and Peter’s plan. To avoid injury, the kids had to be dressed and Sommers would be allowed to interact with them. Ron had found seven kids who said that they would help.

Ron spoke to Sommers after he arrived, had paid his fee, and stripped.

“You didn’t get far yesterday and there’s a lot of territory back there to search. I can’t have this going on indefinitely; it’s disrupting to have you in here searching. We have a bunch of kids who said that they’ll help you but it’ll cost you twenty dollars per kid and we have seven signed up. They’ll spend the day looking and before you object, that’s way below minimum wage. And the other part is that the finder gets a fifty-buck reward. Those are the rules. You can go with the kids to direct them to likely spots but you have to stay on The Meadow. Is that understood?”

Sommers agreed but said he didn’t have the cash with him.

“There’s an ATM in the clubhouse. It’s linked to all the banks in the area. Use it. And I suggest having the kids spread out to cover all the areas where your drone may have entered our property.”

Vicki took the Sommers out to the Pavilion where the kids were assembling. Several minutes later, Tamara and Peter came to the office.

“So I see that operation ‘Find the Eagle’ is underway,” Tamara chuckled.

“Yeah. Gary called earlier; said to stop playing the fighting fish and to just reel it in. Their lab looked at the photo metadata on the flash drive and at the on-line photo metadata too and they match; the same camera was used. There’s a serial number in the metadata and it’s the same in each image. They called the manufacturer who confirmed that the serials are unique by camera. Gary also got an agent with the FAA’s Law Enforcement Assistance Program involved. Sent him the images and the agent agreed that Sommers broke some rules. But he said that the FAA prefers that local law enforcement handle this case since there was no injury or property damage.”

“So what happens when Sommers gets his drone?” Peter asked.

“Watch to see when the kids start looking in the right place,” Ron said. “Then I’ll call Gary. They’ll find it pretty quick. Sommers will have to come back here to get help; it needs a ladder to reach it. By the time I get the truck and tie the ladder onto it, Gary should be here. Then he’ll run the show.”

This time the planning went as expected. After a search of the northwest treeline was unsuccessful, Sommers pointed toward the trees to the west and the seven kids fanned out and began hunting there. After about twenty minutes, Ron's group, watching from the other end of The Meadow, heard joyful kids' shouts. Ron had already called Gary.

"Hey, Tamara," Ron spoke. "Gary suggests that we get Sommers to test the thing to be sure it wasn't permanently damaged. That way he can't claim that we caused the damage."

"Good idea. But the rotors were broken."

Peter spoke, "He can power it up and see if the electronics goes live. I looked up that model. The power goes off if a rotor hits something. Also, when there's no command for five minutes, there's an auto-power off. So the battery should have some charge left."

A few minutes later, Sommers came chugging up to them.

"The kids found it, so thanks for the suggestion. But it's about twenty feet up in a tree..."

"All right," Ron said. "Let me get a ladder. Go back to where they found it—it's where all the kids are standing?"

"Yeah."

"I'll bring a ladder over there."

In about a half hour, Sommers had the drone and was carefully carrying it back to the clubhouse. He had already paid out the reward. The Sommers began heading for the locker room when Ron stopped them.

"I want you to show me if the drone has any damage, apart from those rotors. That way you won't be able to claim that we at the resort damaged it somehow," Ron told him.

Sommers was too happy to object.

"I have the control console in my car. Also spare rotors; they break away to protect their motors."

He ran out to the parking area with the drone and rapidly took off the broken rotor hubs and fastened the new rotors on. Then he took out the control panel, reset the drone's power switch, and started the motors. The rotors spun to life and Sommers eased back the joystick to have the drone climb. With a loud buzzing sound, the device rocked for a second and then lifted off the ground and hovered at about ten feet off the ground.

"Video works too," Sommers told them.

While Sommers was working on the drone, Lynch's car had pulled into the area and he got out and walked over to the watching group. He watched as the drone was tested and nodded and winked at Tamara. Then Sommers moved the controls and the drone settled back to the earth.

"So you agree that the drone had no damage other than those rotors?" Ron confirmed.

"Sure. It looks like everything works normally," Sommers said as he went to pick it up.

Then Lynch stepped closer and spoke. "You identify this drone as your property, which you have just recovered from where it was found on the grounds of Arundel Nature Society?"

Sommers looked at him, confused. "Um, sure. Yes, it's mine."

"Then in the name of the people of Anne Arundel County, state of Maryland, Mr Rodney Sommers, I have a warrant for your arrest for visual surveillance with prurient intent, five counts. You have the right to remain



silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you if you so desire. If you choose to answer questions now without a lawyer present, you have the right to stop answering at any time,” Lynch recited.

Sommers stood there in shock, his mouth open, as Mrs Sommers gasped.

“What do you mean, ‘visual surveillance’?” she asked.

“It means taking photos of people without their consent,” Lynch told her. “It’s Maryland’s ‘peeping tom’ law. Mr Sommers used the drone to photograph people here at the resort and posted the pictures he captured with it on a sexually oriented website.”

She turned to her husband. “You didn’t tell me that! You said that thing flew off course!”

“It did! It did! I don’t know what he’s talking about!” Sommers objected.

Lynch took out handcuffs and cuffed Sommers.

“Mr Allerman?” Lynch asked Ron. “I deputize you to escort Mr Sommers to the office while I get my laptop. Mr Sommers, you will go with Mr Allerman now. And Peter?” Lynch said.

“Yes, sir?”

“Please pick up the drone and take it to the office. I’ll be right there.”

Lynch went back to his car and grabbed a computer bag; inside the office he took out a laptop and a small video camera. He gave Ron the video camera, turned it on, and stood in front of it.

“Mr Allerman, I further deputize you to make a video recording of my search of this drone device, identified by its owner as being the property of Mr Rodney Sommers, arrested by me on this date at Arundel Nature Society. Mr Allerman, please record my search as it progresses.

“I have a search warrant for your drone, also your vehicle, and your home. If you want to see them, then ask,” Lynch told Sommers.

While Ron operated the video camera, Lynch removed the drone’s SD card and inserted it into his laptop.

Two uniformed police came in then, a man and a woman. Lynch told the female officer to take Mrs Sommers to get dressed.

Then Lynch looked through the contents of the SD card; it matched what he recalled seeing on the memory stick.

“The photos and videos on this memory storage device confirm that it was used to violate the privacy of numerous people at this site. These photos were captured last week,” Lynch stated to the video recording. “They prove that this drone overflowed the resort and circled over groups of people, including children. These photos are also similar to photos we were alerted about that were found on a voyeur website. Mr Sommers, I will allow you to get dressed, even though I can take you in dressed as you are, so I suggest that you cooperate or I’ll change my mind. Billy, take him to the locker room to get his clothes; you know where that is. Um, I hesitate to uncuff him...”

Peter spoke up. “Sarge Gary, Billy and I can handle him. Ah, here’s Rosie. All three of us will go with him.”

“Good. If he resists, then don’t damage my arrestee too badly, you hear? All right, Mrs Sommers. You’re not mentioned in the arrest warrant but be prepared for what you’ll find at your home. When the officers have finished searching your vehicle, you may use it. And a search warrant is being executed right about now at your

home and they will be looking for any electronic and hard copy images your husband might have, related to this complaint, plus evidence of his use of websites where he might have submitted his photos. You may leave now. If you have an attorney, I suggest contacting him or her very soon. Do you want to see a copy of the search warrants?"

"No!" she said angrily and went stomping out of the office and then rushed to her car; two officers were just finishing their search of it. Several minutes later, the officers and Peter came back in, escorting a clothed, cuffed, frightened Sommers.

Lynch had to get another trash bag from Ron to put the drone into, commenting, "You guys are killing me, two weeks in a row. I'm gonna have to start carrying jumbo evidence bags to handle your cases."

They all left then, taking Sommers along.

Tamara turned to Peter with a smile.

"You did tell me that everyone at the resort has a good time, remember?" she asked him. "You didn't say it would be an exciting adventure too."

Peter just shrugged. "What can I say?" he sighed.

## Chapter 46 - Back to School and Off Again

Tamara's resort vacation was about to end; the coming weekend would be their group's last and the whole family would be closing up the cabins that Sunday. And no further "exciting" encounters occurred involving unauthorized photographers, drones, or any other unusual event. Peter had assured her that problems like those were rare and to have two in the space of a week was unprecedented.

During Tamara's final week, most of the resort's volleyball team members were present and they spent the mornings practicing. Tamara and Barbara joined them for many practice sessions. The team captains told them that if they joined the team, then the resort would be able to field a women's "B" team for the Superbowl, instead of a coed "C/novice" team, plus a men's "B" team. With Barbara and Tamara playing, there would be eight women; of the six women currently on their team, only one had superior offensive skills and adding the two friends would produce a competitive team.

The girls spent several days learning the team's offense and rotations and between the team members and resort guests, there were enough good volleyball players available to organize a few games. Tamara was extremely strong at the net as either a middle blocker or opposite hitter, and Barbara was a good all-around player, having good serving and defense skills, and was a strong outside hitter. Again, Tamara and Barbara told the team members that they couldn't commit until they could arrange their college schedule to allow them to go. They all exchanged their contact information.

On their last Friday, Ron gave Peter and Tamara an update about Sommers' arrest. One of the resort's members, Nancy Givins, was an attorney and had represented the resort in the past, usually pro bono. Givins normally worked as a corporate tax lawyer but Ron had asked her if she could represent the resort's interests in their complaint. They decided that they would see if they could persuade the prosecutor to offer Sommers a reduced charge if he gave up his drone and compensated the resort for lost business.

It was a sad farewell on Sunday for all the cousins; Tamara had gotten close to a number of them and they all promised to stay in touch with a weekly video chat. After the cabins were packed up and cleaned, they were closed up. Family members would still be coming out to the resort as long as the weather permitted, but it would only be for weekend stays, and they would mostly use the main house. Then it was back to the real world for Tamara and her friends.

### *Baltimore, Maryland: end of August*

Late Sunday afternoon, Tamara was back at her apartment; classes would begin in two days and she had just spent a busy time putting everything from her vacation away. She picked up her postal mail, looking for anything from the university about any schedule updates, to see if going to the Superbowl could be arranged. Even though much of the scheduling was now done on line, the courses that she was enrolled in were so specialized and had so few students, that most of them were arranged the old way, manually. For Tamara to be able to go to the event, first, Barbara would have to be available to drive because Tamara didn't intend to go without her. If Barbara wasn't able to drive, then the only other option would be for them to take a flight to Pittsburgh and get a car service from there. Tamara had nixed that idea in her thoughts.

Tamara checked her class schedule and reconfirmed that her class schedule had not changed. The issue was one of her classes: a two-hour special topics class in applied quantum electrical engineering principles which, in prior years, was held on Tuesday afternoons, but for this fall, it had been moved to Thursday afternoons. The Thursday after Labor Day would be its second meeting. Peter was also enrolled in that class. She couldn't miss that class. After reviewing the rest of her fall schedule, she called Peter.

"Hey, you available? And is Barbara there?"

"We're here. Barbara's emailing her advisor to get an appointment. She wants to add a research topic to her

schedule. You wanna come up here? Is it about the volleyball event?”

“Yep. That Thursday’s gonna be a problem. I’ll be up in a few minutes.”

She got to Peter’s apartment and he let her in.

“So what’s the deal, sweetie?” he asked.

“Did you look at the quantum engineering class schedule?” she asked.

“On Tuesday afternoons?” Peter said.

“No, this fall they switched it to Thursdays,” she said, giving him a sharp look. “Didn’t you check your schedule at all?”

Peter shrugged his shoulders sheepishly. “It’s always been on...”

“...except when it’s not. You’re so careful with your work, Peter, but this other stuff? Jeez. Anyway, the Thursday after Labor Day will be the second class meeting and there are only twelve sessions in that course.”

“Oh yeah. I know, it’s intensive. We can’t afford to miss a class. So we can’t leave Thursday.”

“Right, and we need to talk to Barbara about her driving there too. I’m almost ready to can the whole idea—just when we’re getting back into school, we’ll be off again. She wants to add a research topic?”

“Yeah. She has a bug about that Avery Program thing; it fits into what she wants to do in psych, and she already has some subjects—those who were in it and those who will be going into it—the cousins and our friends’ cousins. And that gives her an easier access to the teachers who are running it. That’s what she thinks. Anyway, I’m assuming you can miss classes on Friday?”

“I hate to do it, ‘cause Fridays I’m at the APL. It’s a research day. But right now, Emma’s got me working on the math that supports my circuit design, so I can do that anywhere, except when I need to run a simulation. No way can a laptop handle those calcs. Oh, I think I hear Barbara finishing up. You’re okay on Friday too, right?”

“Yeah. So’s Barbara. I think she’ll like going on Friday better, come to think about it.”

“What about going on Friday?” Barbara asked as she came out of her room.

Tamara told her about the Thursday class.

“Ah, okay then. Peter’s right, actually leaving Friday works lots better for me and it means that Terence can come too. He’s got something on Thursday that he says he can’t afford to miss. So the trip there is about 300 miles, about five hours’ drive. I looked it up; it’s interstate most of the way.”

Tamara pulled out her phone. “Let me see what we’ll miss at the Superbowl by not getting there on Thursday afternoon.”

She looked at the Superbowl schedule.

“Actually we don’t miss much, Barbara. A dance on Thursday night, and a v-ball clinic and practice sessions on Friday morning. There’s a pool party mid-day. The opening ceremony isn’t until after dinner.”

“I spoke to Robin when we got in just before,” Barbara said. “She confirmed that she and her husband have room for one more couple in their RV. They’re getting there on Tuesday. She wants to play in their Threes Tournament. And she told me that Anne’s camper is a bunkhouse type and she can take one more couple. They’re gonna get there Tuesday also. Everyone else is coming Wednesday.”

“What about meals? When they were pushing us to come, we didn’t think to ask about the details,” Tamara said.

“Does the place have a restaurant?”

“No, Robin said they have a snack bar and do breakfasts there and have a limited dinner menu. They also have a huge cookout for the lunches. When I told her we could come, after she stopped squealing, she said she’d let me know about how their group handled dinners. They like to do group dinners with everyone contributing dishes. They all stay together in one area—our resort team’s been going there for so many years, that they have a reserved area that they park all their rigs in.”

“Okay, so next thing. What do we bring? Besides food. Do we need to bring our own bedding?” Tamara asked.

“Hmm. Good point. Probably not, but I’ll ask. She did tell me that we needed warm clothes—even though we play nude, it can get chilly there. So sweat clothes and warmups are what people wear when it’s chilly, like in the nights. Some years it’s hot, though, she said. Next, bring drinks. They do sell bottled water but it’s not cheap. She also advised using the thicker types of elbow and knee guards. Lots of gals wear visors; the sun can be bright on the courts. Sunglasses, sweatbands. Oh yeah. Folding chairs for when we’re not playing and in the evenings at the campsite, and lots of towels.”

“Lot of stuff to remember,” Tamara remarked.

“There is. Oh, right, there are dances on Friday and Saturday nights too. I’ll find out more.”

“So when should we plan to leave?” Peter asked. “Lunch and dinner on the road?”

“Maybe,” Barbara answered. “Let’s think about it. Should we aim to arrive around 6 to 7 p.m.?”

“Sure,” Tamara said as Peter nodded. “Hey, dinner? You guys just treated me to three weeks of fun. Let’s go eat out, my treat.”

The others agreed, so they closed up and left.

“Peter, Barbara, do you feel weird like I do?” Tamara asked as they walked to the restaurant they had chosen. “It feels so strange wearing clothes and even stranger seeing everyone dressed.”

Barbara laughed. “Yeah, I used to feel that way but now, not as much.”

Peter agreed with her. “Maybe it’s because we’re so used to living in those two different worlds. We switch mental gears more easily now.”

After dinner they returned to their apartments. Peter stopped outside her apartment to say goodnight.

“I’m gonna miss sleeping with you, sweetheart,” Tamara told him after they kissed. “That was so nice. Especially the other stuff we did in bed.”

“Me too. But I agree with what we decided; to concentrate on school and keep the romance for the weekends.”

~~~~~

The next day, Monday, Tamara went to Emma’s office early. In the few emails they had exchanged, Emma had assured her that little was happening in the APL or in Cambridge; all the essential people were on holiday. But Tamara was eager to put together her fall research schedule.

She greeted Emma and they briefly described their vacations.

“I found that I love social nudism, Emma,” Tamara said. “Thanks so much for helping me get into it.”

“I’m delighted to hear that, my dear. Did you make many new friends? I certainly did when I began going to Andrew’s resort.”

“Many. Especially a lot in Peter’s family. What an incredible bunch of cousins he has; we all kinda bonded.”

Emma smiled. “That’s ace. It’s one thing about nudism, friendships seem to be more intense. Perhaps it’s because most social barriers are gone,” she mused.

“Oh, and I learned that I’m a really good volleyball player,” Tamara continued. “Barbara and I were recruited—actually arm-twisted—to go to that nude Superbowl thing in ten days. I’ll need to miss that Friday, but I’ve already started on finishing up the calcs that we scheduled to have completed by then.”

“Brilliant; I know about that Superbowl event. My resort sometimes puts together a team to go. Someone told me that its origin—that happened more than sixty years ago—was that it grew out of a volleyball league of three clubs and one of them was my own club. Their interclub competition gave the original organizers the idea to make it much bigger and open it to all who wanted to play, whether or not they were in a club.”

“Oh, that’s pretty cool,” Tamara said. “Anyway, it appears that our going is almost set. We’d leave before noon a week from Friday and be back Sunday evening.”

“I hope you’ll do well, then. And do try to visit my own club this autumn; perhaps you can get into some of the games they run on weekends.”

“Now that’s a thought. Maybe our two clubs could do our own league. We’re not far from each other,” Tamara said thoughtfully.

“Now then, let me tell you some news,” Emma said. “Not big, big news, but even so, it’s a nice step, innit. I heard on Friday that the long-term experiment on the scaled-up energy-storage system that uses your accumulator design was successful; over the 30-day quiescent period, the self-discharge rate was less than 0.01 percent; a comparable lithium-ion battery’s rate is 1.5 to 2 percent per month. But when they included the external self-charging circuit that you developed, the self-discharge rate went negative; there was a greater amount of energy at the end than at the beginning. You’ve got a lot of happy people over there, Tamara.”

“Wow, that’s so good to hear. What about the month’s cycle degradation test—the repeated charging cycles?” she asked.

“More good news; the best life cycle numbers from lithium batteries used for power storage is about 2,000 to 3,000 charging cycles before the storage capacity is reduced to 80 percent. The accumulator-based battery has now gone over 10,230 cycles and its storage capacity seems unaffected. There also appears to be negligible energy loss between charge and discharge. We want to improve battery efficiency; that’s the ratio of the useful energy available that can be supplied by the battery to the total amount of energy put into the system. The best ratio achieved is, once again, the lithium-ion battery and it’s 88 percent. The accumulator storage system has almost a perfect ratio—99.6 percent. Tamara, this accumulator you invented is revolutionizing energy storage.”

“I need to tell you something about that,” Tamara said. “When I was at the resort, there was a drone flying around and the resort owners couldn’t locate the owner. I knew I could bring it down with a device I made in a private side project I’ve been working on.”

“Uh oh. Do I want to hear this?”

“Ha. Maybe not. But the police detective they called in gave me the okay. I used all my own money for building the device and did the work on my own too. Except for one of the accumulators I had built for the battery project; it had a major flaw and we rejected it. I didn’t ditch it; I had an idea.”

“Oi. Oh shit,” Emma moaned. “Now I *know* I don’t want to hear this.”

“You really do want to, Emma,” Tamara smirked. “The flaw turned out to be in the layout of the circuit that

prevents too fast of a discharge. It had a spot where the tracings came too close and the interference between the tracings in that particular accumulator didn't let it discharge properly. I fixed that problem in all the other accumulators, but I kept the flawed one because a section of that circuit was damaged. So I replaced that circuit with one where I could vary the output and to test it, I thought of my very first project, an EMP device I made to zap RFID chips. Long story, but the short version is that I have a new toy for Dr Tarmson. My point in telling you this is that this accumulator—and all the others—appear to be able to deliver a huge amount of power very quickly. And the little modification I made allows the device it powers to be able to generate a rapid burst of strong EMPs. The thing can fry electronics within about 100 to 200 feet, even more, using what basically looks like a 'C'-cell battery as a power source."

"You never cease to astound me, don't you," Emma sighed. "I'm sure you know how dangerous a device like that can be."

"Oh, sure." Tamara laughed. "You'd laugh if you could see my apartment. I bought a roll of copper screen—400 bucks' worth—and built me a Faraday cage in my living room. It's only a three-foot cube, but it's not the most decorative item in the room."

Emma laughed. "I'm totally speechless for any response to that. So you're turning that EMP thing over to DARPA?"

"Absolutely. I'm sure if I tried to patent the idea—it's patentable, since the pulse generator itself is a new development—I'm certain that the military wouldn't let the idea go public."

Emma just shook her head.

"Well then. Let's get back to matters at hand," Emma said. "I have your master's committee meeting set for three weeks from today at 1:30 p.m. Your schedule was open then. The articles that we returned after answering the reviewers' comments were accepted and they'll be published in the October issue. And you've been given clearance to use the MRI at the APL to test your new external coil designs..."

She had to stop because Tamara was fairly bouncing in her chair.

"Ha, ha. My goodness, Tamara. Such enthusiasm, I'm sure. Remember that I need your calcs for the RF field strengths your pulsing system will be using. You've already done the overall fields, haven't you. I recall that you confirmed the calculated fields with your experimental results; that's when you discovered that magnetic field strength anomaly, innit?"

Tamara chuckled wryly. "Yep, and I hope that pursuing that won't affect my other MRI work."

"No, it shouldn't, unless you discover something more important, like a unified field theory, the next time you get a bright idea."

They both laughed.

"So by the Monday, in two weeks, have the work on those calcs for coil positioning for field strength uniformity done. Then we'll be ready for the lab work. After you build the external coil assembly, have you given any thought to research subjects? We'll need to apply for university human subjects approval from the committee."

"Yeah, I volunteer," Tamara laughed. "I did mention this to Barbara, she's in psych, and they know in that department how to get volunteer subjects. The department gives credit for study participation. She gave me the department's instructions on setting up a research study to use psych students."

"Yes, your research proposal did cover that, I recall. You also mentioned that you'd need to recruit a radiologist to look at the scans. How's that going?"

“Yeah, I asked my Miami med school mentor, Dr Beauford, for suggestions. He said he knows some people at the Hopkins med school and will let me know. Also, the chief radiology resident at Miami is a Hopkins med school graduate. In my timetable, that won’t come until December, maybe later, depending on how well I can tune the coil and get a decent signal-to-noise ratio. The quantum effects I’ve been seeing from my calcs are gonna make me have to design better filter circuits.”

Soon Tamara and Emma were finished with their planning and Tamara left. When she checked her email, she found a message from the EE journal editor informing her that pending her response to the reviewers—they had minor points of clarification, her articles would be accepted. She sent a message to Dr McIntyre giving him the good news and thanking him for his help.

~~~~~

The Gibsons, Peter’s and Barbara’s uncle and aunt, had invited them, and their parents and partners, for a barbeque at their Frederick home on the Sunday of Labor Day weekend. After a busy week at school, Tamara found that she was looking forward to the break.

*I must be getting soft, she thought. I’ve gone months with no breaks; maybe my body’s giving me a message.*

She had a good time during the visit. Janice was home from college—Maryland—and had brought her boyfriend. And she got to meet Werner and Greta Winsberg, Peter’s paternal grandparents; they were back from a European trip. Greta was a tall, Nordic-featured woman with a ready smile and a wicked sense of humor, but Tamara sensed a spirituality—a deep peace and sense of modesty in her—just like Peter. And there was something else about her, something she couldn’t place. Tamara decided that she needed a private talk with Greta. And Werner was a true template for Barbara; he was an active, outspoken, take-charge person with a deep sensitivity for the people around him.

Tamara was most amused, though, by Mike. The Martins were also there—Theresa’s family; her dad worked in the lab on the Army post where Mike’s dad worked. Mike was virtually glued to Theresa’s side whenever Tamara looked at them. After being introduced to everyone, Tamara sought out Mike.

“Hey, buddy,” she greeted him with a hug; then she hugged Theresa. “Theresa, how’re things at the new school? Mike get you all set?”

“Oh, sure, Tamara,” Theresa grinned. “He’s really helped me figuring out the social crap. I always hated starting a new school when Dad was reassigned. This was the best new school experience yet.”

Mike was beaming.

“He also took Toby under his wing,” Theresa went on. “With an upperclassman as a friend, Toby got instant acceptance and already has a ton of friends.”

“And what about you?” Tamara asked. “Any girlfriends?” she chuckled. “Female social support is important too.”

“Oh yeah, it sure is—hang on.” She turned to Mike. “Hey, honey, give me a minute with Tamara, okay? Girl stuff.”

They moved aside a little ways and Theresa whispered, “It’s really funny; yeah, I found several girls I like. They told me that last year Mike was a social outcast, and I can’t see that at all. He’s got a bunch of guy friends and I’ve seen girls stopping him to talk a lot, too. He says something and they look at me, say something, and walk off. Mike told me that they were asking whether he was taken.”

“So you guys are considered steadies now,” Tamara said.



“Oh, we are. He’s fun to be with and we like the same things too. I really hope it lasts, but I have the feeling it will. I’m so happy I met you last month!”

They hugged again and she went back to Mike. Tamara actually got Mike alone a little while later.

“Theresa told me you’re going steady,” Tamara said. “So I guess that things are good.”

“Really are. Thanks so much for getting us together—you boosted my confidence so, so much, Tamara. Last year, I’d ask a girl for a date and get nowhere. I’ve been back in school a week and already I’ve had girls asking *me* why I haven’t asked them out. I tell them that I have a girlfriend.”

“Feels good, being popular.”

“Does it ever. And Theresa is so cool and she’s got a number of friends already.”

Tamara smiled at him. “It’s always nice to hear good things like that. Take good care of her now, I have the sense that she’s gonna be someone special, okay?”

They hugged and then Barbara came over to get Tamara; Werner wanted to speak to her.

“Hi again, Tamara,” he said. “So I’ve been hearing about the impact you’ve been having on my grandkids—hell, my whole family—and the resort too.”

“Good things, I hope,” Tamara said, smiling.

“Absolutely. I’ve never seen Peter so happy. And when he’s happy, so is Barbara. I heard about what you’ve done for Mike. And I also heard from Ron at the resort how you handled the drone incident. That guy agreed to compensate the resort and give up the drone if they dropped the complaint. Otherwise he’d face a fine and jail time.”

“That’s excellent. I’m glad it worked out. Peter helped with that too,” Tamara said.

“It seems you two make a good team in many ways,” Werner told her. “I, too, can feel your soothing presence; felt it when we first met.”

*Spirits!* Tamara thought. *Yes, I can feel in him the same empathetic sense that I get from Peter. The sense must have skipped his father.*

“Well, sir, Peter’s told me about his experiences growing up and the problems he had in high school. His ability to recover from that shows how strong he is, but it also told me that the support he got from his whole family was a key to helping him too. I spoke to the cousins and can see how much they all care for one another.”

Werner looked at her searchingly and she looked back at him, faintly amused.

“Are you trying to ‘read’ me?” Tamara asked with a chuckle, making a finger-quote gesture. “Like you, I can read people’s emotions, but I can also blank my own if I want. I’ve started to teach Peter how to ramp down his own ability so he can have better control over it. He’s gotten a good start at doing that and I have an idea how he managed that.”

Werner shook his head. “You’re right; I tried to sense your feelings. People give off unconscious signals—lots of times it’s body language but other times, it’s something I can sense differently. My mother could do that. I know that Barbara can do it too. But just now, it was like you weren’t there; I could see you but couldn’t sense you. How...”

“I don’t know how it works; I just know I can do it. And other stuff too. A part of my research work at Hopkins is to learn how it works in myself and in other people too. I’ve met a few people who can do some of what I can,

so your own abilities aren't unique."

"What other stuff..." Werner began but then Greta came over and interrupted.

"You're needed to help with the grilling, dear. And I want a chance to talk to this darling girl myself."

Tamara laughed. "Less chance for him to get into trouble out there, right?"

They both laughed.

"You got me there, Tamara. Nice talk; we need to talk some more too," Werner said as he left.

"I saw him giving you his 'stare,' Tamara," Greta told her, emphasizing "stare." "You never flinched; that's rare..."

Tamara started to say something.

"... no, wait. He's a really gentle person but fiercely protective of the family and has the unfortunate ability to be overbearing, so I must apologize for his behavior..."

"Now I must interrupt, Greta. He was nothing of the sort—certainly not rude or overbearing. He's like a teddybear, isn't he? I found him to be warm and caring—very empathetic—and when he tried, um, pushing at me, I thought it was cute how he battled his conscience not to do it with me."

Now Greta looked at Tamara as her expression went from perplexed to understanding.

"I heard about you from Peter and Barbara and thought they were embellishing your abilities. From what you said about Werner, you must have looked into his soul. You described him very well."

"I sense something about you too, Greta. Your emotional presence seems to consist of several entities. Your surface presence is light-hearted and open, but you have a depth in your emotions of an iron will and a fierce fighter. You are more to be reckoned with than Werner, actually."

Greta gasped. "It's true then... what I initially felt from you when we shook hands. I sensed presences in you or around you... many presences. Guardians, if you will. Very similar to the ones that I sense accompany me. Oh my lord, this is incredible; there are so few of us..."

"Let's sit down," Tamara suggested. "We have a lot to share. I do indeed seem to be blessed with guardians; they guide me, advise me, and warn me about things I need to know. Much of that happens unconsciously and I'm only aware of it later. I'm Haitian and what I think you sensed is our spirits; we call them *lwa*. These spirits can be either benevolent or maleficent and appear to be attracted to humans who bear some of their attributes or characteristics. They may appear to be guardians for some of us Haitians, who regard them in the same way as Christians think of a guardian saint. The *lwa* only seem to appear to worshipers during religious ceremonies but it appears that somehow I am a focus for their... presence? That's not a good term; they're not 'present' in the sense of anything in the physical world. But whatever their manifestation is, if I need a response, it's there."

"This is so amazing," Greta said. "Your entities are called *lwa*. In my culture, Nordic, we speak of the *disir*, those are the spirits that act in conjunction with Fate, and they also can be either benevolent or antagonistic toward humans. They are known to act as protective spirits for our extended families—which used to be the clans. I sense in myself the influence of such a spirit, or maybe two, a *dis*, or possibly a *fylgjur*, another term for a spirit which supposedly acts as a guardian for people. Our culture has a rich mythology and it's populated by a large variety of *vættir*, the supernatural beings, but for me, my own experience is that the *disir* are real."

"We have much in common, then," Tamara said. "Many different cultures have common experiences and what we view as different entities may truly be different manifestations of the same thing. Something I noticed when

we met: Peter seems to be a male version of you—the same depths of feeling, a deeply caring personality, and a mean sense of humor. Do you think he might have a... um... hitchhiker... in his head?”

They both laughed.

“I really don’t know,” Greta said. “His emotional development was so damaged by his high school experience that he shuttered himself emotionally for so long, and those are the years when that kind of sensitivity normally develops.”

Tamara nodded. “I know; it was that way for me too, and even though my mom was great at guiding me, that was a scary time in some ways. I asked you about Peter because he had an interesting experience back at the resort in August. One of the *lwa* came to him and he was aware of it and also of her message. I saw it happen too. That was unique in my mom’s experience; she’s a priestess and her mom was before her. To her knowledge, that’s never happened—at least, in the last fifty years that she and her mom knew about, anyway.”

“Goodness, I don’t know what to say. To answer your question, though: yes, I do believe that Peter is like me in a lot of ways. Just like Barbara is much like Werner. Particularly her protective streak. Don’t ever hurt her Peter! And those were very insightful comments about our emotional characteristics, my dear. Now, what I really wanted to talk to you about was what a change you’ve made in Peter. Since meeting you, he’s been a different person. And about the others in the family you’ve helped, too.”

Greta went on to tell Tamara mostly the same things that Werner had told her earlier, and Tamara told her a number of amusing stories about all of her grandkids from her time with them in the resort. After their talk, the two were fast friends and they planned to get some quiet time together to discuss their different cultures’ ideas of the spirit world.

Then it was mealtime and soon the time to leave for home came. Peter and Barbara grilled her about her conversations with their grandparents, but she didn’t give them much detail.

And on the trip home, one thought kept coming up: *I sure missed an awful lot about not having grandparents. The Winsbergs are fantastic; I wonder what the Richardsons are like.*

## Chapter 47 - Psychic Vigilante

Back at school after the holiday, Tamara felt that her rhythm was off—she had just three days back at school and then she'd be gallivanting off again on yet another trip. She spent a lot of hours working on the RF generator field calculations to work out the most efficient coil circuit layout geometry. She also consulted her work on the coil design which had produced the powerful repulsive/magnetic field she had observed; she didn't want to inadvertently use a coil geometry which would produce a similar effect. Her calculations were completed by early afternoon on Thursday and she closed up her computer to go to her quantum engineering class. This was an essential class for her; she had been working with mesoscopic systems for two years now and this class would help her in learning how the mathematics which described quantum electrodynamics applied to the physical world where engineers would be designing working equipment.

When the class was over, she and Peter rushed home to finish packing. Barbara had put together a list of things that they needed to bring and her apartment, being larger, was the staging area. Besides, as Tamara pointed out with a smirk, much of her living room was presently occupied by this Faraday cage thingie...

Terence had also brought his things over too. Fortunately, they were going to a nudist event and wouldn't need a lot of clothes—for a weekend, anyway. Barbara's car was a small SUV so it had a good cargo capacity; they planned to stop for the food and consumable supplies when they got close to the destination. Peter and Terence were also drivers so they planned to split that chore, and to save time, they packed meals to eat while on the road. On Thursday evening, they packed the car, went to dinner together, and went back to Barbara's apartment. Terence would be staying over at Barbara's but Tamara had some more work she needed to finish before the trip, so she went back to her apartment. An email had arrived from her patent attorney group while she was in class and she needed to answer it; the records she needed to refer to were in her apartment.

She also was still trying to decide whether to take her EMP device, her masers, or both. She rarely went anywhere without those masers and now that the power supply was so small, they were much easier to carry. Deciding that being prepared was the better choice, everything went into her backpack, along with what Peter had called her "whole frikkin' electronics shop."

The next morning the group got together for breakfast and while Tamara and Barbara made their lunches, the guys stowed the remaining articles in the car. After everyone did a quick check of their emails, it was time to go. Barbara had been texting Stacy and found out that their team had been duly registered that morning; everyone on both teams, except themselves, was there and waiting for their arrival.

The trip was long but uneventful. After a fast food stop for dinner and a grocery trip, they arrived at the resort and registered. Then someone from the club helped them find the rest of the team. They got the car parked and the team members welcomed them with happy greetings. They had wanted to enter a competitive women's team for years and Tamara and Barbara had made doing that possible.

There were eight women on the team now. Of the original six, Stacy was the captain, a solid "B" player and an excellent setter, while Robin played defense. She was also ranked as a "B" player. Her usual role was libero or defensive specialist but her 5 foot-3 inch height limited her offensive effectiveness. Anne was another "B" player and was good all around, particularly at the net. Judy and Rosa were good at defense but were poor blockers and couldn't reliably place spikes, while Carla was barely a "C" level player but had a powerful serve. Tamara and Barbara would bring a strong offensive capability to the team, and because half of the team members were "B" players, they had registered as a "B" team.

The opening ceremonies, which Tamara found to be really interesting, featured a spirited welcome for everyone and a quick review of the tournament's ground rules; then the prior year's championship teams were recognized. Then the dance began. Since play was to begin at 8 a.m., no one from the team stayed late but they could hear

revelers partying into the wee hours.

The following morning, everyone was up early because their first games were scheduled to be at 8 a.m. The team had decided to move Barbara and Tamara around in their offensive roles because they were so versatile. This would keep the other team guessing about how their opponents would attack the ball. The new team members didn't disappoint the veterans either; they made some particularly memorable plays. For the first set's beginning serve, Tamara's team was in service-serve and Tamara was playing middle blocker. Stacy, in Zone 1 at the right back court, had called for a quick set play. When the ball was served, Stacy ran up to the right-side net, Zone 2, to prepare for taking the pass. Barbara was playing outside hitter and she began to run in to the net's center as Stacy began to set the pass from Zone 2, drawing the defensive blockers to the center, but Tamara came in behind Stacy as she set the ball, and as soon as it cleared the net, Tamara leaped and put away the kill, spiking it behind the opposing blockers.

Two rallies later, Stacy called for a "4-set" fake and took the pass from Robin, the libero. She lofted a high arc set toward Zone 4, the left side of the net, and Barbara charged toward the ball and jumped, swinging at the ball and drawing three blockers on defense, who all leaped, arms raised, right in front of her. Suddenly, Barbara ducked out of the way and Tamara was there, racing in from the right, and lefty, slammed the ball to the opposite side of the defenders.

After several more points, Stacy called for an "X play" and Barbara and Tamara both charged the net from two different directions as Stacy did a low set to Tamara in the middle. She faked a spike with her right as the blockers were drawn in that direction but hit the ball with her left, away from them.

When the score was 11-3 in favor of Tamara's team, the rotation now put her in Zone 2 and she'd play opposite hitter for the rotation. On receiving the service, the pass from Rosa, who took the serve, was off and it drew Stacy well out of position. Stacy managed to get to the ball and put it up in a very high set but it went toward the right antenna, back about five feet from the net. Tamara was facing Stacy and instantly saw where the ball would fall; it would be too far for Barbara, playing middle, to reach it, and Tamara was facing in the wrong direction for a spike. She leaped for the ball as it dropped and executed what in basketball would be a perfect hook shot. It was a backward slam over the net, a reverse spike, and caught the defense completely by surprise—the only possible recovery shot from that kind of bad set, after all, would be a high arc over the net to keep the rally going. Instead, Tamara had a kill. The spectators who were watching erupted in shouts of surprise and delight and suddenly Tamara had become the player to watch.

Her teammates gathered around her in congratulation while members of the opposing team complained to the referee.

"She's sandbagging," several of the defenders complained. "Look at her plays; she's way better than a 'B.'"

The referee called Tamara over and Stacy, the captain, came with her.

"Miss, what's your playing level?" the referee asked.

"Huh?" Tamara said, confused.

"He means your skill level," Stacy clarified. "We're a 'B' level team. You told us you never competed before, right?"

"That's right," Tamara answered. Then to the referee, "This is my first competition anywhere. I learned to play in high school gym class and then had some lessons at my resort last month."

"Really?" he asked. "You've never played organized volleyball before? Your play does seem better than 'B' level."

“Never played. In high school, the teacher said that I was very good and should be on their team, but I didn’t have the time to do sports then.”

The referee turned to the players who had complained.

“I’m taking her word for her playing experience. She’s got a natural talent and we can’t assign her to a level until she’s played in a tournament.”

There was some annoyed muttering from the complainers but the referee got the game going again. Tamara’s team won the first set 25-6 and meanwhile, word of her play, and Barbara’s too, had spread, so by the end of the match, there was a fairly large crowd of watchers. Barbara was also showing herself to be a good player; she was a powerhouse at the net and had a wicked serve. Her serves were very deceptive; they didn’t have lots of power; she hit overhand floaters with no spin at all, so when the ball began to drop on the other side of the net, it seemed to weave, flutter, and swerve and dip unpredictably. She served five aces until the receivers figured out how to get a good pass to their setter. They won the next set with a closer score, 25-18.

Since this was a round-robin tournament and there were twelve “B” teams competing, the amount of time available allowed teams to advance by winning just two sets out of three instead of the typical three out of five. Tamara’s team did extremely well and even the team’s lesser-skilled members made strong contributions.

In the finals on the following day, they came in second in the “B”s, losing by the scores of 25-23, 22-25, and 29-27, to a very experienced Canadian team, every one a strong “B” player. Tamara’s group stayed for several hours after their own finals to watch the featured finals, the men’s and women’s “A” and “AA” finals, And when the awards were presented, Tamara and Barbara were told by the officials’ group that their play level was judged to be upper intermediate, or “BB,” and they could continue to compete at the “B” level until their skills were re-evaluated.

When the two resort teams met after their playoffs, Barbara and Tamara were the center of attention. Stacy was very vocal in her praise.

“Guys,” she announced, “For an inexperienced player, Tamara has more ball sense than most players I’ve ever seen. That reverse spike she pulled off in our very first game—that was the prettiest play that I’ve ever seen.”

“And Barbara’s serve was crazy,” Robin told the others. “Indoors, it wouldn’t be a hard one to handle. But outdoors, that ball was all over the place. A tiny breeze would push it and the receiver would miss it, misplay it, or shank it. Five aces in a row, wow!”

“We’re sorry we couldn’t get to see your games,” Rick told them. “But we did hear a lot of chatter from the watchers about some really good players on a gals’ ‘B’ team. Do tell, what were they talking about? And what magic did Tamara pull off? We heard about a gal who pulled off an impossible play; that must have been the reverse spike you mentioned.”

Rick’s team had been third in their own “B” matches.

To Tamara’s and Barbara’s embarrassment, their teammates recited almost a blow-by-blow description of their more interesting plays.

“Yeah, but you guys are ignoring your own great plays,” Tamara retorted. “That one where you threw yourself almost flat on the ground, Robin, and got the ball to bounce off your hand... I saw how you scratched your chest, ouch!”

“That’s called a ‘pancake,’ Tamara,” Robin grinned. “And we liberos are used to bruises and scratches.”

Then the guys related their own game exploits and all of the regular team members agreed that this outing had

been their resort's best Superbowl performance ever. Even though it was getting late and they were still pumped up and excited from the tournament, Tamara's group reluctantly began to pack up to head home.

On the ride home, Tamara decided to see if she had gotten any email on Friday, so she kept her backpack with her to get to her laptop as they traveled. They had gotten a late start; they wouldn't arrive home until around 11:30 p.m. Peter was driving and Barbara decided that she wanted him to stop for gas as they reached the Baltimore outskirts. They pulled off the highway and Peter drove into a station. There was a single car there, parked next to the convenience store door.

Something touched Tamara's premonition sense—it was a strong warning of danger. She looked at the car in the station and then into the store as Peter slowly approached the pumps.

"Peter!" she called. "Quick! Get out of here! Go slow; don't speed; just drive out."

"Huh," Peter grunted and began to drive away as a guy jumped out of the idling car, and Tamara saw him pointing a pistol in their direction.

"Call 911," Tamara told Barbara. "There's a holdup back there. Peter, make a u-turn here and stop."

"Whatta you doing?" he began as he stopped but Tamara was out of the car as soon as it stopped.

Making herself "small," Tamara dashed the hundred yards back to the station, staying in the shadows, and hid behind a gas pump as a guy ran out of the convenience shop and jumped into the waiting car. Tamara had taken both her EMP device and one of her masers with her and aimed them as the car began to move away from the building. She had both on full power and kept the maser pointed at the car. She triggered the EMP unit over and over, a half dozen times, as the driver tried to accelerate but the car didn't respond. With a clatter, the car's engine stopped and the car rolled into some bollards in front of a row of parking spaces. The hood popped and steam rose from under the engine. Then she gave the car a ten-second-long final EMP burst at full power and saw smoke rising from the underside of the car. She saw the guys in the car moving around inside as if they were trying to get out as she slipped away, moving back into the shadows, and then ran back to Barbara's car. Just as she got into it, a police car zipped past them, lights flashing, and drove into the station.

"What the hell was that about?" Peter demanded as she got into the car.

"Drive away. I'll tell you," Tamara said as she picked up her pack, put her devices away, and got her cell phone out. "I've got a police scanner app on my cell. Let's see what we pick up."

She opened the app, found Baltimore, and selected the county's sheriff's department.

"...10-4. Just one vehicle, appears disabled. Backup requested."

"Unit 32, 10-4, two units responding; advise three minutes."

"10-4. Uh oh, suspects in vehicle appear to be breaking a window? What?"

"32, not understood. Say again."

"Roger, dispatch. Suspects in the vehicle must be trapped inside. Ah, firearm discharged. Advise responding units to proceed with caution. Active shooter."

"10-4, 32. Active shooter. Advising."

There was about a 30-second silence, then, "Dispatch, backup arrived. Going open mike."

Tamara and her friends heard the deputy use his loudspeaker to demand that the occupants exit the vehicle; then there was a hurried conversation between the deputy and someone else; it appeared that the perps couldn't get

the door open and had tried shooting at the lock. They had also tried breaking the windows but couldn't get enough of the glass out of the way to squeeze through. They heard someone call an order to drop their weapons out of the window and put their hands on the top of the dashboard. Then it became difficult to understand; they couldn't hear much more since the sound was too confused and noisy, so Tamara shut the app down..

"Okay now, Wonder Woman," Peter said, somewhat annoyed. "We have an idea what you did. Oh, and thanks for the warning—I don't wanna think of what coulda happened if we stopped there. But why did you get involved?"

Tamara sighed. "I'm not sure. Something like that happened to me once before and I felt compelled... oh, right, those guys then were rapists..."

"What do you mean, 'those guys'?" Barbara asked. "At the gas station?"

"No, not there. Before, when this happened. At the beach in Miami, some guys were bothering the girls I was with. Something pushed me to interfere then. Then the cops got there and handled it and I found out later that they had raped someone."

Terence had been quiet until now, but he spoke up. "Y'all, it's goin' on eleven now; y'think that'll be on the news?"

Barbara grunted, "Oh sure—with that much of a police response, yeah. Let's get the local news on."

She got the radio tuned into a news/talk programming station. In about ten minutes, the event was mentioned.

The reporter was introduced, and then she said, "It appears that the recent string of gas station robberies might be broken, according to a spokesman from the state police. Less than a half-hour ago, sheriff's deputies and state police units had responded to a report that the Jiffy Gas Station here in West Friendship in Howard County had a hold-up in progress. A 911 call had come in and when the first deputy responded, he found an extremely strange situation. I spoke to Lieutenant Marby of the state police several minutes ago and here's what he had to say."

Reporter: "You said this was an unusual situation."

Marby: "Exactly. When the first deputy arrived at the scene, there was a single vehicle here and it had crashed into a parking barrier near the building. Its occupants seemed to be trapped inside, they even discharged a firearm inside to try to get out, after attempts to break out enough of a window failed for them."

Reporter: "Why couldn't they get out?"

Marby: "This is what we can't understand. The vehicle is completely dead. All of its electronic systems are damaged, including the electric locks and windows. Somehow, even the mechanical parts were affected—their plastic parts appear to be melted and fused in the locked position. We had to use hydraulic shears to cut a door open."

Reporter: "I also understand that you suspect that these persons may have been involved in similar crimes."

Marby: "Yes indeed, we do. I can't say any more on this topic except that it's likely that this string of robberies may be ended."

Reporter: "An attendant in one of the past incidents died of a gunshot wound inflicted during a similar robbery about two months ago. We heard that police have security tapes from that incident. Does the vehicle used in that robbery, as seen in the tapes from that site, match this vehicle?"

Marby: "I can't comment on that, miss."



Reporter: "Thank you, Lt. Marby."

"There you have it, Jane. A robbery and a capture of two hold-up suspects, thanks to a tip from an alert citizen."

"Goddamn," Terence sighed. "Probable killers too. Tamara, are y'all psychic or something?"

She laughed. "Or something. Maybe a psychic vigilante. That explains why I was pushed into intervening; once to catch rapists, now to catch killers. Who knows; I sure don't. I didn't even plan on taking those gadgets, but at the last second I changed my mind and packed them. Hey, come to think about it... Barbara, why did you tell Peter we had to stop to get gas? We're just about home and we still have more than a half-tank?"

"Well... um... shit, I don't know... The thought just popped into my mind. Damn."

"And Peter?" Tamara asked. "Why that station? We passed two others before you turned in there."

"Well, it... um... I... I don't know? Are you saying that we *all* were influenced somehow?"

"Hey, not me," Terence objected. "Ah don't do spirits too well."

The others chuckled and then Barbara commented, "So it looks like as long as we hang out with Tamara, we've gotta expect weird stuff happening. Only, Tamara, please, *please*, keep your vigilantism to less dangerous subjects, okay?"

"I'll try, I really will," she answered humbly. "And don't ask me why that happened. I honestly don't know."

They had arrived at the apartment building and Peter pulled into the garage under it. They decided to just leave their camping stuff in it, and after hugs all around, left to go to their apartments.

~~~~~

The following day, Tamara got a voice mail while she was in class, so she returned the call when she was free.

"Hi, Sarge Lynch; what's up?" she asked when he answered.

"You," he laughed. "Over in Howard County last night. That has 'Tamara' fingerprints all over it, figuratively, am I correct? The only thing I know that can do that to a vehicle is your ray gun."

"It was your own idea, remember?" Tamara reminded him. "I just saw a way to do it without causing collateral damage. I saw one guy had a gun but I didn't know those creeps had killed before."

"Yeah, there's strong physical evidence linking them to those other robberies. Say, there's a big reward for evidence leading to their capture and..."

"Um, no, I don't need it. Oh, the family of the person killed—they could really use it, right? It can't bring back the person, but... Could you figure out how to arrange that? I could prove that I saw their car; the exact time... oh, the cell phone call to 911 was on Peter's phone."

"That's really generous, Tamara. Sure, I'll get that going for you. Now you *are* giving that ray gun to the feds, right?"

"Sure; I called my contact at DARPA last week and she's coming by tomorrow to meet with me to collect it, together with my development notes for it. This is a case where you *really* want to read the manual before you operate the thing, right?"

He laughed. "Very good, Tamara. Just keep doing good stuff, okay? You're quite an interesting young woman and I expect to be hearing more good things about you from Ron, Peter, and the resort folks."

They both wished each other a good week and disconnected.

~~~~~

When Tamara met with Tarmson on Tuesday, she didn't expect that she would bring a general officer along with her. Or two scientists from her department. She called to tell Tamara that she'd meet her in a meeting room that she'd reserved in the JH Club.

Everyone was understandably impressed with the device when they heard Tamara's story of how she had disabled the robbers' car. She had gotten them to sign NDAs before she told them that story, however. She had the unit's performance fully documented, thanks to a testing session she had drafted Peter for, out in the natural area of the resort. She presented graphs of distances versus field strength at 50 and 100 percent power at various pulse lengths and intervals.

"So you don't plan on patenting any of this, Tamara? Some of those ideas are new," Tarmson asked.

"No, nothing there is useful commercially, that I can visualize. It has much more utility as a weapon or countermeasure. I got the idea when I was working on my MRI coil designs and did the work using my own time, money, and apartment, so the university has no involvement." She laughed. "You should see the Faraday cage in my living room."

The others laughed.

"So I will get in touch with our attorneys to work out how to compensate you for this development—you believe this is useful, General Baker?" Tarmson asked.

"Absolutely. Miss Alexandre, this is an impressive device, quite unlike anything we've been able to build. And its utility in helping us devise a protective shield against EMP attacks is invaluable, so the Defense Department is indebted to you for your work. Dr Tarmson told me how she's repeatedly made job offers to you..."

Tarmson interrupted, "... but she says that she needs to get a real education before getting a real job."

They laughed again.

"Now if I could just convince you to give the U.S. government exclusive rights to your accumulator," the general began.

"Nope. Not possible, sorry," Tamara grinned. "Now *that*, perhaps that has some commercial value."

Another laugh, and Tarmson said, "Very true, my dear. You're changing the world. I'm excited to see what you come up with next."

The group left with the EMP device after the transfer forms were signed by the parties involved. Tamara was relieved when they left but also had a feeling of loss—one of her babies was leaving home. But now she could concentrate on the two big projects facing her: the MRI external coil design and the origin of the anomalous magnetic force.

Emma's APL engineering techs were all back at work now and soon would have several sets of the scaled-up chips ready for intensive testing. The strong magnetic field which Tamara had produced in her 4-millimeter coil could be replicated with coils up to about 2 centimeters where the effect suddenly disappeared in a true threshold effect. She had some insight about why that had happened, but again, it was an intuitive feeling, so she was cautious enough to explore her reasoning using mathematics rather than her gut feeling.

Her other project seemed to her to be more accessible; she had plenty of experience in designing external coils and tiny RF generating circuits. She had shown both mathematically and experimentally that the SET-based RF emitters she had designed produced fields which could energize protons sufficiently to change their spin axes in a constant magnetic field; the challenge was to quickly damp the RF pulse so that the return signal could be

clearly detected—a signal-to-noise ratio situation. With the degree of miniaturization she had accomplished in the coil circuits, not only quantum circuit effects needed to be considered, but also the electrical noise contributed by normal molecular motion.

The design she had chosen to build was analogous to increasing the number of pixels in a television screen: the higher the pixel count, the greater the image resolution. Her difficulty was that her RF coils needed to work bidirectionally, with the activating signal going out and the returned signal coming back. All of this happens in an MRI scan during a period of a few tenths of a second to a few seconds. The activating pulse lasts for several hundred milliseconds, exciting the protons, and as the excited protons' energy decays, the energy released is emitted for a period of up to a few seconds. The strength of the activating pulse is chosen based upon the densities of the tissue to be imaged, and is cycled through a series of strengths to image the varying densities; the computer separates out the results for display. Tamara's problem was to account for these variables in how her emitters were fired to "strobe" the tissue study region and then go quiescent to receive the return signal. Theoretically, her design should produce images with extremely high spatial resolutions.

### ***Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore: mid October***

Tamara was midway through her work on the filtering circuits, busy at Emma's lab on campus, during the second week in October, when Emma burst into the lab, clearly excited.

"This is blindin' brilliant!" she called out as she came in. "Got a ring from the National Academy of Engineering; just got off with them. They've chosen us—you and me—to receive the Charles Stark Draper Prize. Be awarded during National Engineers Week in February. They said they called you..."

"Oh my god... wow, no... I heard a call come in on my cell but I was too busy." She looked at her phone. "Went to voice mail. What's that prize?"

"A major engineering award, like the Nobel Prize, but for engineering achievement," Emma said. "For your work in developing the accumulator and mine in the theory underlying the concept. Let's check the Academy's site and see about it, then."

They read about the award on the U.S. NAE site. Emma read the description aloud.

The Charles Stark Draper Prize is awarded biennially for specific engineering achievements that have significantly affected modern society by improving the quality of life, providing the ability to live freely and comfortably, and/or permitting access to information. ...

"They didn't tell me this, but look: The award is a gold medal and \$500,000," Emma said in awe. "There's to be a presentation in February."

"Jeez, I don't know what to say. Um, does that mean that the press will be hounding us?"

Emma laughed. "It's nothing like the publicity that the Nobel Prize gets, I assure you. But this award is supposed to be one of the top engineering prizes, innit."

Tamara couldn't do any more work after that news, so Emma took her and a few other faculty members to the JH Club to celebrate.

### ***Early November***

During the two months she was back at work, Tamara had spent some of her time in refining the filtering circuits until she achieved a good balance between rejecting extraneous noise and retaining the true signals. She had actually been working on possible circuit designs for two years, mostly by mentally visualizing the circuits needed and contemplating their likely performance. Her final coil circuit design was based on the use of an array of SETs in the RF generator circuits, and with her noise filtering circuits operating, the superconducting

coil/transmitter/antenna of the external coil assembly was able to reliably detect proton relaxation signals for regions emitting about  $6 \times 10^{13}$  photons for each discrete coil circuit per activating RF pulse. This number represented roughly the number of free hydrogen nuclei in a cell. In terms of the MRI's spatial resolution, this equated to the system's ability to visualize anatomical regions consisting of about ten to fifty cells, depending on cell type, which was about a million-fold increase in the MRI's current spatial-resolution capabilities.

At least those were the resolution numbers she had achieved when using an artificial hydrogel brain phantom model. This was an anatomical model which employs a brain shape filled with a gel whose density matched that of the brain's neuronal tissues. The gel was doped with contrast agent to try to mimic the blood vessels and the brain's gyri and sulci were simulated by using a combination of casted and molded flexible silicone molds. Tamara had gotten the brain phantom from NIST, the National Institute of Standards and Technology, which was a pioneer agency in developing tissue models for use in imaging studies.

The university's human subjects committee had cleared her experimental protocol and Tamara also now had a volunteer radiologist on call; he was intrigued with the idea of an ultra-high-resolution MRI and was delighted with the results he had seen with images using the phantom. For her needed subjects, the Psychology Department and the medical school had helped her to recruit a few volunteers. The project she had designed would use neurofeedback techniques with the fMRI to allow the subject to train him/herself to distinguish between the tastes and odors of grape, strawberry, and cherry when they were presented together with certain sense-confusing stimuli. This project would allow Tamara to directly visualize the capillary blood flow in the subjects' midbrains and olfactory tracts. The student volunteers would get research participation credit; they were to learn what the MRI study was to accomplish and, using a copy of the primary data collected, were to write a short paper discussing the results.

## ***December***

By early December, Tamara had finished designing the filtering circuit and built a chip prototype to test. After a few adjustments, she was ready to have the necessary number of chips printed to install into her latest MRI coil; Emma's techs would be doing that job. Any more work on the MRI would need to wait, since the end of the fall term had arrived. Tamara had decided that she wouldn't go to visit her parents in Miami this year, since they would be coming to Baltimore during the holidays in two weeks. Besides, she still had pressing work on the magnetic force effect she had discovered back in the early summer.

For this other research problem of hers, the magnetic force anomaly, Tamara had visualized a potential solution to overcome the limiting size of the coil in the RF emitter circuit which had produced what appeared to be a monopole, albeit a massive one, or possibly a conglomeration of similar monopoles—but how was it possible for so many particles of a similar polarity exist so closely without them mutually repelling? She wondered about that problem and then thought that the answer might be analogous to how protons are packed into nuclei without having their similar charges mutually repel.

That, she recalled, was a function of the proton's structure. She reviewed the physics of the atom in her mind. Protons are made up of quarks, and gluons, the carriers of the strong force exchanging between quarks, she recalled, was what keeps the three quarks which comprise the protons and neutrons—the hadrons—together. And this inter-quark interaction of gluons inside hadrons also exerts a residual strong force on the adjacent hadrons, and that is what holds the nuclei together. This residual strong force, which operates at a very close range—the size of an atomic nucleus—is considerably stronger than the electrostatic Coulomb repulsive force—about a hundred times stronger. So the nuclei stay intact.

Perhaps the monopole had an associated set of fundamental particles analogous to quarks and a corresponding new family of force-carrying particles? She decided that these questions needed further study; she'd have to decide how to do some calculations to work out a possible monopole theory. Paul Dirac's statement concerning

how the quantization of electric charge could be explained by the existence of magnetic monopoles was intriguing and it gave her a possible starting point.

However, she still was considering her new idea about a way to scale up her magnetic field coil without running into its size threshold, and she didn't need to do calculations to see that it should work; it was her intuition guiding her again. Increasing the coil diameter caused the scale-up problem, but that was for a single coil. What about making a coil of coils? A super-coil, as it were. This idea, in order to be mathematically expressed, needed a modification or extension of the Biot-Savart law, so Tamara spent several days working on the math and used computer simulations to test the new super-coil geometry she envisioned. The math showed that the new geometry should indeed enhance the magnetic field strength when normal currents were put through the sub-coils. But unusual things always seemed to happen when she used superconducting circuit components.

And that's when she got another of her intuitive inspirations.

## Chapter 48 - Viking Spirits Too

The inspiration came when she was working in Emma's APL lab the following day. She had a vision of how her calculations might fit the physical reality that the magnetic force experiments revealed. She began sketching her idea in her lab notebook, working on it for most of the morning. Being the winter break, many of the engineers and techs were off. But Marty Fox, the engineer who she had worked with on the magnetic coil scale-up attempt, came into the lab during the afternoon and she told him what she had come up with.

"Well, that's an unusual concept," he told her. "Reminds me of the radial engines used in some prop aircraft. The cylinders are in a circle instead of a linear geometry. You said you did some calcs?"

Tamara showed him the computer's output from the simulation that she had calculated based on the scaled-up coils without the superconducting effects.

"Okay, that looks good. Only thing, those 2-centimeter coils produced a field of about a thousand-fold greater than those calcs show."

"Right, so I used that data and plugged it into my model for this new geometry, taking into account the superconducting elements and ran the simulation again this morning," she told him. "See the results? The three orders of magnitude difference you saw gets corrected. So it seems the math theory is valid; the difference is because of the superconducting effect, and the modification I made to the Biot-Savart law needs that empirical correction to account for the superconducting circuit behavior. Oh, hi, Emma."

Emma had come in while Tamara was talking to Fox.

"What's this about modifying the Biot-Savart law, then?" she asked.

Tamara explained how she had thought of using the coils in a different way. Then she went on.

"I also did some thinking about monopoles. Occam's Razor says that the simplest explanation for something is most likely the right one. So the magnetic effect being the result of a fundamental particle is likely the correct one. That means searching for an unknown additional fundamental force would be wasting time. I decided that if monopoles do exist, then the universe's symmetry would suggest that magnetic monopoles should have an internal structure, just like quarks make up hadrons. When I tried to use math to check the validity of that idea, I came up with some mind-boggling numbers for the monopole's mass. And that suggests the reason why particle accelerators haven't detected monopoles—we're nowhere close in achieving the energy needed.

"Using current theories based on the standard model of particle physics, I tried estimating the possible mass for the magnetic monopole. Even making the most liberal assumptions, it seems that its mass could range from  $10^{10}$  to  $10^{14}$  TeV/c<sup>2</sup>. That's *huge*, the *smallest* mass I calculated it to be is ten *billion* TeV/c<sup>2</sup>. The Geneva accelerator, the Large Hadron Collider, the LHC, can only get to 13 TeV, and its ring is enormous, it's 27 kilometers around. So far, the largest particle mass produced in a collider is the top quark, whose mass is approximately 0.17321 TeV/c<sup>2</sup>."

"Refresh my memory, Tamara," Fox said. "I'm an electrical engineer, not a physicist. What do those numbers mean in real life?"

Tamara chuckled. "Yeah, engineers prefer to think in SI energy units. Particle physicists are a snooty breed, they prefer electron-volts. That's a single electron moving through a potential difference of one volt—it's a very tiny number, but very useful at the atomic scale. You do know that the 'T' in TeV is for 'tera' and means one trillion. Oh, another thing—you'll hear particle physicists using electron-volts for mass too, but what they're really referring to is the mass-equivalent unit eV/c<sup>2</sup>, where the speed of light, c, is understood. For an engineer, in joules, if the LHC can develop 13 TeV... then to joules... let me get a calculator... that's a 1.6 factor... okay.

It's  $2.08 \times 10^{-6}$  joules. To compare to real life, let's see, gravity force is 9.8 newtons per kilogram, so a mass of 1 kilogram falling a distance of 1 meter gives a force of 9.8 joules. An electron-volt is tiny, as I said. One joule is equivalent to  $6.242 \times 10^6$  TeV. So the minimum force needed to produce a monopole, as my calculations showed, would be 1600 joules. Jeez, that much energy at the atomic scale would only have been available just after the Big Bang, I think."

Emma had been listening with a faint smile.

"I see you've taken my advice to heart and you're using maths for guiding your engineering planning, rather than your gut feeling," she said, approvingly. "So you still believe that you've captured the elusive monopole?"

"If I did, with its apparent mass, that could go a long way to account for the amount of dark matter in the universe. Couldn't it?" Tamara asked.

"Perhaps, but your idea's still missing a few technical details," Emma sniggered, and then broke out laughing.

"This isn't the place for art appreciation, Emma," Tamara smirked back, and at Fox's confused look, told him, "Private joke."

"Okay. Now then, let's go over what you're planning, shall we?" Emma said.

*Good, Tamara thought. Maybe she can find something I did wrong.*

Tamara pulled her notebook over and handed it to Emma, who began working through Tamara's calculations. She didn't find any mathematical errors but she was interested in how Tamara used Dirac's comment about the quantization of electrical charge as the inspiration for her starting point.

Tamara explained, "So I was thinking of the idea that the quarks and leptons that make up the universe's visible matter, together with their associated force particles, could have a counterpart involving the magnetic monopole, which would have a similar internal structure. That's kind of an extension of the supersymmetry idea, in a way. The standard model predicts that antimatter should exist, but only fleeting traces, short-lived, have been detected, so the standard model still has its shortcomings. I wanted to see what kind of mass a theoretical monopole should have, so I began by playing with Maxwell's equations and extended them to quantum field theory and that's where my monopole mass calc came from.

"We previously observed that huge repulsive force in my coil, and I had assumed that the only possibility was magnetism. But then I recalled that the dark force itself is repulsive. All forces have a particle counterpart; that's the duality of matter and energy. What if monopoles make up dark matter and dark energy is carried by a structural particle of monopoles? Or dark energy is anti-gravity, and its mediating particle is an anti-graviton?

"One result from my calcs made no sense; in the real-world magnetic dipole, the lines of force connect the poles. Cut a dipole in half, separating its poles, and you get two dipoles. My field calcs for the monopole show that the field extends out radially from the source but the field strength dropoff doesn't obey the inverse-square law like electric monopoles, which have a spherical symmetry. Magnetic forces have a dipole symmetry and field decay follows an inverse-cube law. But even though this possible magnetic monopole appears to exhibit a spherical symmetry, it appears to follow the same field characteristic that the dipole does. So that implies that the magnetic lines of force connect to *something*, somewhere.

"We need to build an apparatus with the coil assembly to test the field shape because much of the math results imply strange behavior. In fact, I got so bogged down in the math that the only reasonable numbers I could come up with was for the potential field strength of the 2-centimeter coils that we built; the calcs for the super-coils make no sense. And even those calcs need an empirical adjustment to compensate for the superconductivity of the components."

“So I’m looking at your numbers but nothing I see looks like a glaring error,” Emma said thoughtfully. “Why don’t you and Marty assemble one or two of your... erm... super-coils? Interesting name choice, innit. Oh, another thing. I’ve been meaning to ask you if you’ve thought about my suggestion that you hire an engineer and tech of your own—not that I mind having Marty and my group work with you. Having your own people will keep development issues properly separate in both of our work.”

“Yeah, I did discuss that with the lawyer who handles the trust I had set up to manage the royalties and licensing income I’m getting,” Tamara said. “He told me that I could go ahead and have him do that and there would be some tax advantages, especially if he set it up as a grant to Hopkins for use at the APL for technical support of a research program. I told him what I needed and he’s worked out the grant amount.”

“That’s ace. And running it through the APL, the way I’ve done with my own people, means that they’ll be vetted for a security clearance. You should go to Admin and talk to the HR—the human relations—blokes there and they can do the recruiting. If you want, I can help interviewing candidates.”

~~~~~

During the next few days, that was how Tamara occupied her time. She got a recruiting process underway and also worked with Fox and by week’s end, two coil arrays were finished. She had taken care that the sub-coil orientation was arranged to avoid the mutual repulsion that she had seen when she had tested the original 4-millimeter coil assembly chip. In their testing of the 2-centimeter coils, the engineers had observed that the field the coils produced repelled ferro-magnetic materials, such as iron and nickel, but had no effect on nonmagnetic materials. Interestingly, though, the field weakly attracted diamagnetic materials but the effect was small.

Emma came to the lab to see the resulting apparatus when it was ready to test. Tamara fed the assembly with a tiny amount of current and slowly began to increase it, while they watched a two-gram iron pellet suspended by a nylon monofilament string in the center of the super-coil. There was no effect for a trickle of current, but when she advanced the rheostat a slight amount more, the pellet suddenly shot straight out, away from the coil assembly; its string stretched and snapped, and the pellet flew a foot or two more, falling to the floor.

The group watched in awe.

“We need to calculate the force exerted on that pellet,” Emma ordered. “Let’s get the tensile strength of the string. We can calculate the length of time the force was applied from the high-speed video recording, so Marty, please get that from the camera. We know the current delivered to the system and can get the power to the system from that, while the pellet was accelerating. Oh, and check the pellet for remanence—residual magnetism.”

“That was impressive,” Fox commented. “In our tests of the small coil, we noticed a threshold effect where the magnetic field dropped off significantly a few feet away. We did clear this area of any magnetic materials but anyway, I was trying to watch the other metallic items nearby. Nothing appears to be affected. I’ll get the techs to put this coil geometry through the whole set of tests but that won’t be finished until after the holidays.”

“That will be fine,” Emma said. “Tamara needs to get back to the MRI study anyway; she’ll be starting with her subject testing when the spring term begins. Is that correct, Tamara?”

“Yep. All the phantom tests are complete. Davy will be our MRI tech for the study and he’s working on the conversions of the imaging programming for the old coil parameters to the new one.”

“Tamara, I’m going to go over your numbers really carefully,” Emma said. “There’s a whole lot here that I need to understand theoretically. Marty, please get me the timings from the video and the power settings. When you get them, get me the field strengths too. And have the techs run the coils with samples of differing magnetic permeability and some diamagnetic materials as well. We need to fully characterize the physical properties of



this phenomenon.”

“Will do, Emma.”

“Blimey, with the holiday starting, nothing more will be happening till after, will it,” Emma sighed. “Now then, the afternoon is almost over, so let’s close up and leave.”

As Tamara walked away with Emma, she asked Emma, “I’m getting all these contacts from a bunch of university physics and engineering departments asking if I could visit to give a talk about my work, Emma. I don’t know how to answer them.”

Emma smiled. “That’s good news, innit. It shows that they’re reading your papers. I’m getting requests too. How do you feel you should reply?”

“Um, I’d rather hold off—I’m way too busy to prepare a presentation and with this spring’s research and class schedule...”

“There’s your answer, then, dear,” Emma told her. “Thank them for their interest in your work but politely decline for those reasons.”

“Sure. Thanks, Emma.”

### ***Late December***

During the Christmas and New Year’s holiday break, Tamara finally got to meet the Richardsons, Mason and Angela, Claire’s parents. Tamara was at Peter’s home for their Christmas eve dinner and the Richardsons and the Winsbergs, senior, were there too. Of course Mason and Angela had been looking forward to meeting her and Mason was not shy about grilling her. Peter had told Tamara to expect it.

“I’m delighted to finally get to meet you, Tamara,” Mason told her after Peter introduced her to him and Angela. Angela smiled and greeted her. “It’s so nice to meet you at last.”

Mason went on, “It’s such a cliché but I’ll use it: Angie and I have heard lots of good things about you, right, Angie?”

“Yes, indeed, what you’ve done for Peter and others in our family.”

“Oh, Peter, could you give us a few minutes with Tamara?” Mason asked.

“Oh, come on, Pops,” Peter complained. “You don’t need to go into your third degree now.”

He chuckled. “No, son, it’s not about her being good for you, it’s more like are *we* worthy of a woman like her in the family. We just want to talk privately for a few minutes.”

Tamara found out that Mason simply wanted to be certain that she knew about Peter’s problems in high school.

“Claire did tell us that Peter mentioned to her that he told you about that bad time he had,” Mason said after Peter walked away. “But did he tell you any details?”

Tamara nodded. “He was very open about what happened—even told a group of us about it, and then told me lots more in private. Why is this important for us to talk about it privately? Peter’s open about it, really.”

Angela smiled. “That’s wonderful. It’s because he’s had a lot of difficulty talking about it to others, including in the family, and we didn’t want that problem time to become something that came between you two in the future.”

Tamara had been trying to “read” them emotionally, but all he could get from Mason was that he had an intense,

direct, and focused personality with a very strong moral sense.

*Why is he in politics, then?* Tamara wondered. *Wouldn't what he sees greatly trouble him?*

Angela, by comparison, had an open and loving personality that was almost totally focused on Mason but her will seemed as strong as iron. Her family was also there, but Mason was the focus.

The thought occurred to Tamara, *Behind every strong man stands a strong woman? That so-called proverb is so wrong. These two are a **team**, really, so it should be **'Beside every strong man...***

Her thoughts drew back because Mason was speaking.

"Yes, I had spoken to Werner about the Winsbergs meeting you and how you had impressed them, especially Greta. They're here today too, somewhere around. I just wanted to tell you that everyone's noticed the difference in Peter; he says it's because of you, so we're so grateful that he met you."

He reached for her hand but Tamara drew him into a hug; then she hugged Angela.

"I can't take all of the credit, obviously," Tamara told them. "You guys in his family did the best part of helping him. The love I feel from all of his family members tells me a lot about you folks."

"Yes, my dear," Angela said. "That's what Greta said about you—that you were sensitive to how people feel. Peter's like that too, also Barbara."

*And you really don't have the full sense of that,* Tamara thought.

She was able to tell that they both had a small ability at empathic sensing, slightly greater than average, but nothing even close to Peter's or Barbara's ability. But she could tell that Mason was a shrewd observer of body language.

"All right, let's let this lovely young lady go now so she can go back to her guy," Mason said, grinning. "It's been a pleasure talking to you, Tamara."

"Likewise," she said and then she went looking for Peter.

Tamara spent the afternoon and evening talking with Peter's family members and even got to spend some time with Greta. She told Greta that her mom would be coming to Baltimore for a visit starting on Thursday and she'd try to find a way to get them together then.

~~~~~

Tamara spent a lot of social time during the day following Christmas, visiting with Peter's family. Terence had gone back to Austin for the Christmas week, so it was just the three friends. Tamara had mentioned to Emma that her parents would be in town after Christmas, and Emma had invited her and her parents to her home on that Saturday. On Thursday afternoon, Peter and Tamara drove to the airport to pick up her parents. When they met Peter, Nadine had to stifle a gasp.

"Tamara," she whispered to her as Wilson was talking to Peter, "do you sense anything from Peter?"

"What do you mean, Mom?"

"There's a *presence* about him, just like your dad has that *presence* of *Ogorin* always nearby."

"I don't feel that, except when *Erzulie* went to him with her message. I felt the *presence* then."

"This is different, sweetie, it's a feeling similar to yours. Oh dear. That's it; he's probably a focus as well. A *pwen*, like you, I think. He seems to be a focus of spirituality—and he isn't from our culture and ancestry. I've

never heard of something like that before...”

“*Manman*, there are other cultures and...”

“Oh dear, yes. With my education, I should have realized that,” Nadine said.

“What I was going to say—Peter’s *granmanman*, Greta, on his father’s side, has spirits the way we do but her ancestors are Danish. Or Norse, actually. Their cultures have *lwa* too but of course their words for them are different. I felt a *presence* in her... oh, wait; I suddenly got a memory of *Manman* Tamara that just appeared. Oh, I see now how you are seeing Peter. I...”

Their whispered discussion was interrupted by Wilson.

“Honey, Peter and I got our bags. The kids are parked in the short-term lot, so we need to get a move on. Let’s get to the hotel and check in.”

They set off for the parking lot and Peter said, “You do remember that my folks are making dinner for all of us. Do you want me to drop you off and pick you up later?”

“Yeah, let’s do that,” Tamara said. “I want to talk to my mom for a bit; also fill them in on what we’re doing while they’re here.”

After Tamara and her parents had checked in and were alone, Nadine told her how proud they were about her Draper Prize.

“So you mentioned that it’s held in a D.C. hotel?” Wilson asked.

“Yep; they have it in a hotel conference ballroom and the presentation is during Engineers Week. I sent you the date; it’s the third week in February.”

“We’ll definitely be there,” Nadine said as Wilson nodded.

Then he said to her, “Your guy’s pretty impressive, honey. He’s got a solid, internal strength... the kind of focus and personality that makes for a great Marine too.”

“Ha, coming from you, Dad, that’s great praise. Thanks. That’s what I see in him, too. Not the Marine part, though. But Mom noticed something that I missed, and then her comments to me freed up a bit more of *Granmanman*’s memories in me. Mom saw a kinda *presence* in Peter. Something from *Manman* Tamara’s brief time in my consciousness popped out and I could see what she saw. I see it in you too now—like a shadow. It’s kinda like the memory of a shadow in your emotions and it has the taste of *Ogorin* for you.”

“Yes, that describes what I sense too,” Nadine said. “I see something like that with Peter, but now, my darling daughter, you seem to be surrounded by presences. More than ever before, too.”

“Wow, and that’s what Greta said about me, too. When she said that to me, I realized that I could sense it in her. She called it or them her ‘guardians.’ She wasn’t sure if it was one or more and I couldn’t tell but I thought I sensed two.”

“So we’ll get to meet her tomorrow?” Nadine asked.

“Yep. The Winsberg clan. The Richardsons too. Both sets of Peter’s grandparents. Greta told me some interesting stuff about their culture’s spirits. They have benevolent and malefic aspects, just as ours do. I have trouble understanding how a good spirit can also be evil, but I saw that happen with Mr Evil. In my time of need, *Marinette-Bwa-Chèch*, supposedly the most evil of the *lwa*, responded to me to do something good.”

Nadine nodded and smiled. “Your physics has the answer, my child. Every particle has an antiparticle, as I

understand it. Two manifestations of the same thing. And your quantum physics says that you can't determine something's state until you look at it. Before you look, it can be in any possible state. Some say perhaps in *all* possible ones. Is this not true?"

"Mom? You've been reading physics stuff?" Tamara asked, astonished.

"Gotta keep up with my genius daughter," Nadine smirked. "So the *lwa* can be like that. They are neutral, as far as humans go. They reflect the personalities of their worshipers. If an evil person chooses to ask their advice, what the person gets is a reflection of his internal desires. The *lwa* simply reinforces the person's personality and inclinations. Were you to try to do something evil yourself, since it violates your own morals, then the *lwa* would appear to be rebuking you; your own personality would rebel. *Marinette* is simply the dual aspect of a violent spirit, dangerous, but one that can act for good as well as for evil. Her influence is said to be able to either free persons from servitude or committing them to it—as you explained to me when you eliminated the threat of Leger. Thinking about that time still makes me shudder, how you looked when you were possessed then."

"Okay, that makes sense. You make a good analogy by using quantum superposition; things which exist in opposite states at the same time until they are observed. Ha, it's funny; a Vodou *manbo* using quantum mechanics to describe what the *lwa* do."

They laughed.

"You told us about Peter's terrible time in high school," Wilson said. "And how he's recovered so well from that time. He seems to be a quiet guy, didn't say much, but I looked into his eyes when we met. That kid is deep. And he's got a strong will. Is he stubborn? It seems that he could be."

"Oh, not at all," Tamara said. "He can be almost deferential at times, but he's not like a doormat either. But if you want to see a strong will, wait till you meet his sister, Barbara. Now, she's a willpower champion—but again, she doesn't push it unless you're acting stupid with her. And she's really attuned to Peter; she was his protector in high school and can sense his emotions, while Peter is a sponge for all emotions around him. That's why he had such a bad time in high school—he picked up all the negative emotions of kids freaking out about the Naked in School Program. He got all kinds of positive support from his family to help him recover and then he really dove into his studies. Obviously did well, 'cause he won a Clarke scholarship."

"I need to talk with him some more," Nadine said. "There's something really important about him..."

"Oh! Remember when I did my own worship ritual in my apartment?" Tamara asked. "You said you felt the spiritual effects."

"Yes, I do."

"So when it was over, I felt *Ayizan* tell me that Peter had abilities which I could unlock."

"*Mezanmi*! I really do need to speak with him. Hmmm. Well then. Changing the subject, though, what else have you arranged for us this week?"

"I know that Dad's arranged for you guys to see some people in the State Department and in the Pentagon next week, so there's just this weekend. Tomorrow, Friday, Claire—Peter's mom—has a bunch of the family coming. Saturday, we're going to Emma's. Her father-in-law Stuart will be there; he's the Royal Marine guy, Dad."

"Oh, good," Wilson said. "We can exchange stories about Uncle Dan and who we might know in common."

Wilson and Nadine went on to tell Tamara about the things that were going on back in Miami. Tamara got the

sense from them that their Miami life was becoming less fulfilling; Nadine's congregation seemed to be more transient now and Wilson's job was no longer challenging. He was considering looking at other mechanical job opportunities.

Soon Peter came by to pick them up to go to the Winsberg home. When they arrived, Scott, Claire, and Barbara greeted them. Terence wasn't there; he hadn't returned to Maryland yet. The Alexandres and Winsbergs spent the next half hour chatting, getting to know each other, and then Werner and Greta arrived. When Nadine met Greta, the energy in the room suddenly became intense; Peter staggered as the emotional waves washed over him and Tamara grabbed his arm to steady him.

"Shit," Peter whispered. "Where did that come from? Grams and your mom?"

"Apparently," Tamara answered.

When the two women shook hands, they both stopped and stared at each other intensely, smiling. Then Greta broke the silence.

"A soul sister!" she said as she hugged Nadine.

Greta turned and looked around the room and her eyes lighted on Tamara.

"Tamara, please come join us," she called to her. To Nadine, "Let's go somewhere quiet to talk."

Nadine just nodded; Tamara could see that her mother was in her "spirit-communing" mode.

Greta led them to a room that was fixed up like a study and gestured for the others to sit on a couch there. She pulled up a chair in front of them and began to speak.

"There may be just three of us gathered here now, but I sense the presence of multitudes of others and this is unprecedented in my experience."

Nadine nodded. "Indeed. There is a turmoil in the spirit world; I know that I am quite sensitive to certain stimuli that my *manman*—mother—taught me about. I, too, feel presences and some feel strange to my senses. It appears that you have your own protectors, as you called them? Tamara mentioned that to me. I sense presences about you; with Tamara as well."

"Yes," Greta smiled. "And I, too, sense that Tamara has a host around her; many more than when I first met her."

"I can sense them much better, now," Tamara said. "It happened like I told you back at the hotel, Mom. Also, *Papa Legba* seems very curious 'cause he hears a language he hasn't heard for a thousand years."

Greta looked at her intently. "You actually can communicate?"

Tamara shrugged. "In a way. It's not like a conversation. I get impressions of thoughts or emotions which seem to come from outside. Sometimes they're in response to something that I'm thinking about and sometimes the thought just pops up. It's mostly emotional feelings that I've learned to interpret."

"Oh, goddess," Greta breathed. "You're able to do something that we *völur* can do but only after years of training." At their questioning expressions, she continued, "Yes, I'll need to explain. I'll tell you a bit about my own background and ancestry; this may be long, so I hope I won't bore you."

"Oh, no, please do tell us," Nadine said. "In my studies of cultural anthropology, I researched many societies and cultures, but all were ones which currently exist. The presences which seem to be within you, but aren't—they are like a shadow of a presence—seem to be ancient and very foreign to my senses."

“Ooh, this is so exciting,” Greta gushed. “Two people who understand! I know of just three others like me from the old religion. There are belief systems which have what anthropologists call ‘shamans’; I’m not completely familiar with most of those, other than those of the East, like the Hmong and Shinto shamans. There are shaman belief systems in many Asian countries like Korea, Philippines, and central Asia. I have much less knowledge about other cultures and how strongly their shaman component operates. I know that some authorities ascribe shamanistic rituals to certain native American groups. Europe, Africa, and South America also have... oh, goodness, please excuse me. I get into lecture mode so easily...”

Tamara grinned. “I looked you up, Greta, and found out that you’re an anthropologist at Westphalia and you’ve been appointed as the chair of anthropology in that new institute at Westphalia, Columbia Institute of Economics. You should know that Mom has a degree in social anthropology.”

“You don’t say? I’ll need to explore that with you, Nadine. But please let me tell you what I learned after meeting Tamara and a bit about my ancestral history. Before I met Tamara, I only knew a little about Vodou, enough to know that the movie stuff and references to voodoo dolls and things like that are nonsense. After we spoke, I did a little self-educating, and my goodness, how much more there was to learn! I found out that Vodou emphasizes the importance of honoring ancestors and spirits—the *lwa*, as you call them—and that the *lwa* are thought to act as intermediaries between the human world and the divine world. I read how each *lwa* has a distinct personality, and some actually have more than one. They occupy their own areas of human influence, such as love, healing, and wisdom, the natural world too, and even life and death. The *lwa* are seen to be powerful forces for good or evil, blessings or curses, all dependent on the worshiper’s attitude and how they are served.

“I saw how Vodou is an integral part of Haitian culture and has a rich history, going back to Africa, and how it got combined with Catholicism because of how the slaves were forced to abandon their religion. That forced Vodou to evolve and adapt, incorporating elements from Christianity.

“Well, I do know from my own years of education that different religions and the mythologies of different cultures have many similarities, regardless of where in the world they come from. Look at the similarities of the different creation stories. There are similar world-wide flood stories too. So there was no surprise when I learned how there were similarities between the mythology of my own culture, Norse mythology, and the Haitian culture which practices Vodou. Both have a strong emphasis on the natural world and the spirits that inhabit it.”

“That’s exactly true,” Nadine told her. “There is one major difference between those belief systems, though. With Vodou, although we venerate the *lwa*, we don’t *worship* them. Ours is a monotheistic faith and we worship the One God. The Norse religion was polytheistic, correct? Odin, Thor, Loki, Freya, they were worshiped, as I understand the mythology. But... oh, that’s right, this was not always the case. Vodou evolved from the religion of the Fon people of the Kingdom of Dahomey and was polytheistic until the influence of Christianity forced its adherents to change.

“Yes, we were originally polytheistic. In our mythology, the supreme god of the Fon, Ewe, Yoruba, and Igbo people, *Nana Buluku*, is the original creator and gave birth to *Lisa*, the sun spirit, and *Mawu*, the moon spirit, and the material which forms the rest of the universe. *Mawu* and *Lisa* are considered to be a single entity, *Mawu-Lisa*, a female-male androgynous spirit, and are the world-creating spirits; in a four-day period, she-he-they created the world, organized its land and oceans, and then made plants, animals, and humans. So you are correct in how the mythologies are similar.”

Greta smiled. “Thank you; that was fascinating. Now to my own background. The old Nordic religion and the worship of the ancient gods was banned by the Christians for more than a thousand years, so it has only a very small group of adherents nowadays. My mother was one of them and she traced her lineage all the way back to

the Norse Vikings from before 800 C.E. The women of her line were known as *völur* or seeresses. The singular term is *völva*. After Christianity began to spread throughout Scandinavia, the *völur* became known as witches and were banned. So like many banned religious practitioners, they went underground. The art was taught by mother to daughter; it's a type of shamanism, in this case, old Nordic. The Vikings also had a tradition of male seers, but that line disappeared; anyway, none were known to my mother.

“The primary ritual activity that's practiced by a *völva* is called *seid*. This is an ecstasy technique that's so similar to many other religions that it's eerie. Religious ecstasy is known in Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity, Sufism, Hinduism, as well as other religions... and in Vodou, as I learned. *Seid* allows the *völva*'s consciousness to leave the body to seek knowledge and to commune with helpful spirits to try to answer questions about the future and get advice for her supplicants. Her soul is believed to travel to other universes or to the spirit world during these trances; in the ritual, the seeress experiences an altered state of consciousness.

“In the ritual, the seeress is seated on a special seat and holds a ceremonial staff, and in the traditional ceremony, she would be surrounded by her acolytes, a group of young girls, who chant songs to evoke the spirits; the chanting helps the seeress attain her state of trance.

“In the society of ancient times, these seeresses occupied an elevated personal status. They were highly respected and were sought after to help settlements or households which were facing difficulties. One such case is chronicled in the ‘Saga of Erik the Red,’ where a *völva* is called to conduct a *seid* on behalf of the whole community. She arrives together with her acolytes—the saga calls them the ‘spirit helpers.’ When the ritual begins, the girls chant their songs, calling forth the spirits, and the *völva* is given the needed advice.

“Now, like those of Vodou, the practitioners of the old Norse religion, *Forn Sidr*, which means ‘the old way,’ have been persecuted for a long time—but that Norse persecution goes way back to 800 or thereabouts, when Christianity became dominant in Norse lands. This is why we have so little knowledge about the ancient practices—the practice of the rituals got stamped out. This means that the current practice of what is now known as ‘Asatro,’ the belief in and worship of the Norse gods, doesn't descend from the beliefs of the Vikings. It's closer to a modern reinterpretation of the old religion, a revival of sorts, since no sources written by actual practitioners exist. What exists are only short accounts in the sagas and these most likely have been tampered with by later Christian interpreters.

“Much of the practices used in the modern revival of the religion are based on accounts in the *Poetic Edda*, also known as the *Elder Edda*, and the *Prose Edda*, or *Younger Edda*. These are works from Iceland that were compiled in the thirteenth century from earlier works and together they constitute the primary sources of skaldic poetry and Norse mythology that exist. It's from these two works that we know about the cosmogony, religion, and history of the Nordic tribes, but they're told through the filter of Christian storytellers.

“And at long last, one old religion group, called the *Forn Sidr* after its ancient name, got official sanction from the Danish government in about 2003. It's now the largest of the Nordic religion societies and was officially formed in 1997, but there are less than a thousand members, I think. The adherents make up small congregations located all around Denmark.

“My family descends from these old Viking traditions, and my maternal line has had seeresses in it going back to those ancient times. I've been trained in the ancient ways, but there are so very few of us now, with the modern world luring young girls away from the old ways. So I was overjoyed to find that Tamara had a spiritual presence so very much like my own and the other *völur* whom I know. And I see that you, Nadine, also share in that unique characteristic.”

Nadine smiled. “A few others of the *manbos* whom I know are very much like me, Greta. My people all tend to be very spiritual, even if they aren't strictly observant. We are all in tune with nature; that's our African

heritage, and our spirituality comes from the many generations of adversity my people have faced—natural, in the form of hurricanes and earthquakes, and human-made: tyrannical governments and terrible economics. We turn to the only ways we can find joy, within ourselves or through community cooperation.”

“Yes, I know that faith and religious worship are very strong in the face of adversity,” Greta said. “But I did want to mention something else about spirituality that I have noticed that Tamara has brought to us, my family, that is.”

Nadine nodded. “I know what you want to discuss. It’s about Peter and what you sense about him, isn’t it? Because I sensed it when we met and it’s not possible that you could have missed it.”

Greta laughed. “That’s it exactly. It seems that my grandson has acquired something in addition to his astonishing empathetic abilities.”

“Yep, I’ve noticed that,” Tamara said.

The other two looked at her expectantly.



## Chapter 49 - An Unexpected Offer

Tamara looked back at the two women who were waiting expectantly for her to speak. She laughed and shook her head.

“This isn’t gonna be the great reveal, you know,” she chuckled. “I always knew that Peter was special; I could feel it but didn’t know exactly what it was that I was feeling. *Manman* had given me a hint of it when she told me about how she sensed Dad’s personality when they met. Greta, Mom sensed the characteristics of one of our most important *lwa* in Dad, *Ogorin*. That’s another of those spirits who has two sides; in this case, he’s both the warrior and the diplomat. And originally, the Dahomeyan *Ogorin* was the spirit of blacksmithing—the mechanical technologist. All those characteristics describe Dad perfectly. And Greta, *Ogorin* is like Thor in many ways—the hammer is a big one of those ways—and he’s a bit like Odin too.

“I was drawn to Peter when I met him. He’s quiet—actually pretty intense. He’s analytical and insightful. His empathy allows him to identify with other people which makes him amenable to seeing their points of view. Of course that empathy got him into serious emotional trouble, as we all know. And then I got to see another side of him—how he interacted with his cousins, many of whom are younger—and with a posse of little vixens at the resort.”

Greta laughed heartily at that and Nadine looked mystified.

“Tell you later about that, Mom,” Tamara told her. “Anyway, I saw something new in him then—a teacher and father figure, someone who could give instruction and correction lovingly and sensitively. I already knew that the *lwa* had approved of him, Greta, I had done something like your *seid* ritual and was told by my guardian *lwa* that Peter had abilities that I could help him to develop. And then he was ‘visited’ by another *lwa* and was left with a message.”

Now it was Greta who had a mystified look, while Nadine nodded.

Tamara grinned at Greta. “I guess I need to keep a score-card about who knows what,” she giggled. “So the message wasn’t for him; it was for me, but the way it came and involved his getting it too, I could tell that *Erzulie* considered Peter and me as one single entity, as if we were already married.”

Now both women gasped.

“Yes, in thinking about *Erzulie*’s visit, that impression is the only one which makes sense. But back to Peter. When I was talking to *Manman* and Dad back at the motel, I thought about how *Manman* had sensed that Peter was a spiritual focus; we call it a *pwen*, and that released a memory or ability that I must have had buried in my mind. That’s when I realized that I could sense, more directly than before, the influence of a spirit on someone’s personality. I know *Ogorin*’s very well since he’s visited my own self many times and has gifted me a sense of premonition. Dad has that from *Ogorin* too. But the influence I sense in Peter isn’t as familiar to me since *Manman* doesn’t call to him in our rituals very often. But I’m sure this *lwa* has become Peter’s guardian.”

“*Mezanmi!*” Nadine gasped. “You’re right! I can see that. You see, Greta, in my faith, our observant believers usually have an affinity to the *lwa* whose aspects best match their own personality; they view that *lwa* as their guardian spirit. In my case, it’s an extremely important spirit called *Papa Legba*. He’s the spirit who controls the ‘crosswalks,’ the gateway to the spirit realm, and it’s his power that allows me to commune with the other *lwa* and to enable my people to approach them. Tamara just alluded to another *lwa*, one whom I’ve rarely called to, it’s *Damballah Wedo*; he’s incredibly powerful—the force of creation is in his power—so I always hesitate to ask him to bless us with his presence. Of course I display his *vevé* in my temple because of his importance. But from what I sensed from Peter, you must be right, Tamara.”

Greta cleared her throat, politely seeking attention. “*Damballah*? I’m afraid that when I read about Vodou, I

didn't pay much attention to the individual spirit powers. And *Papa Legba*? That's very interesting, since in the Norse mythos, it's Odin who's the god of the crossroads. Very similar function, actually."

"Ah, yes," Nadine said. "There are so many similarities. In the Norse mythos, the world, Midgard, is encircled by *Jörmungandr*, a serpent who encircles the world in the deep oceans, cast there by Odin to keep him from threatening the gods..."

"You know that?" Greta exclaimed, astonished. "And you recalled it?"

"Of course. Knowledge of the mythologies and religions of the world are vitally important in understanding people's motivations, desires, and impulses. I do personal and spiritual counseling and find the knowledge very useful."

"Hmm. When we finish discussing Peter, let's explore that thought."

"As you wish. I was exploring why *Damballah* may well be Peter's guardian. Um, I brought up the Midgard Serpent. Yes. The snake is a powerful totem in many cultures and that's also true in the Dahomeyan pantheon. I mentioned *Mawu-Lisa* before, well, *Damballah-Wedo*—also called *Dan* or *Danbada-Wedo*—is her-his-their son who's said to have a serpent form. He assisted in the world's creation and the coils of his body support it. For that reason, the Fon believe that *Damballah* is the giver of life and sustainer of the world. He's also the patriarch of the *lwa*, he's believed to be the oldest, and a warm, benevolent presence who embodies peace and gentleness.

"The Fon believe him to be a healer; that's a function of the life-giver, and he's said to be the embodiment of wisdom and the guardian of all of the facets of wisdom: customs, principles, morals, and all African traditions. So in the Vodou religion, *Damballah-Wedo* is the serpent spirit. He's very popular; he's the father figure. He's also the embodiment of excellence, and is benevolent, innocent, and a loving father.

"In the limited time I've been with Peter, I see many of those characteristics in him. Tamara?"

"Jeez, Mom, you got everything I saw too. Um, you do know that one of *Damballah*'s wives is *Erzulie Fréda*? And that *Erzulie Fréda* is also a wife of *Ogorin*?"

"Certainly, dear. *Lwa* family relationships are somewhat complicated."

Greta laughed. "That's true of the Norse gods as well. So you believe that Peter's been accepted by your spirits? Because that would create an interesting linkage between two spirit universes."

"Um, I believe they are linked already," Tamara said, smiling. "I mentioned *Papa Legba* before. He's *Manman*'s guardian but likes to keep an eye on me too. I think that I must amuse him or something. He 'visited' me a short time ago and found your guardians. He knows all languages, so I'd bet that he's getting all caught up with the Vikings, just like we are with our earthly affairs."

Both women laughed.

"What does it mean now that Peter's been 'adopted' by a *lwa*?" Greta asked, making finger quotes.

"Um, not much, I think," Tamara said. "He might get some unbidden random thoughts. Dad had a *lwa* guardian for maybe twenty years before he learned about it. Right, Mom?"

Nadine nodded.

"What do we tell him?" Greta asked.

"I'll guide him to that knowledge, just like Mom did with Dad," Tamara told her and she nodded.

"That's excellent. Now to change the subject totally, Nadine, you mentioned your education as an

anthropologist.”

“Well, I had advisors in both sociology and anthropology and my research was on a social topic.”

“What was it, exactly?” Greta asked.

“I was in a doctoral program and my research project was on the transmission of cultural traditions in agrarian societies, from mother to daughter. It covered the moral, social, and spiritual traditions and looked at cultures in Africa, Central America, South America, and some Pacific islands. That research was the subject of my dissertation.”

“You have a doctorate then?” Greta asked.

“Actually, no. My mother’s disappearance interrupted my studies. I had to leave school and return home; most of my savings were spent in trying to locate her. I couldn’t return to complete the degree so they gave me the master’s.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. How close were you?”

“The dissertation wasn’t quite complete; I was finalizing it for its submission. So my dissertation defense never happened. I finished it remotely and submitted it to my professor but Universidad de San Juan wanted me to return and register for another term to do the defense but I couldn’t—it was in Puerto Rico and I was in Haiti; going back and forth back then was too expensive. I didn’t have the funds, and I had to earn a living too. I was already a ... well, think of it as an ‘ordained,’ *manbo*. My little congregation supported me. I didn’t really think about pursuing the university for it; getting the knowledge was more important to me than the diploma.”

“Still, they deprived you of something you earned. The work you did would be invaluable to anthropologists and sociologists—was it ever published?”

“No... it was in French and I submitted it in French and Spanish and I had used some of my meager funds to have it typed out and the required number of copies mailed to the university.”

“Um, *Manman*, I got a copy...” Tamara began and the two women looked at her, Nadine in shock.

“What? How?” she began.

“When you said what you wrote it on, back in Haiti when we visited there, I got curious. So in the spring of my first year at college, I got the Hopkins library, the research section, that is, to try to get a copy. It took three months to get Universidad de San Juan to even acknowledge the request. Sheesh! They were such pikers. I paid the copying fee and postage that the Universidad charged. They even wanted to charge a searching fee to find it but the Hopkins staff threatened them by telling them that this was a violation of inter-library cooperation and they’d be blackballed. Still, it took another three months to get the paper copy. You know, the signature page is complete—the committee people all signed off on it, I noticed.”

“So you have a copy of it? Mine was lost, somehow, during my moves,” Nadine said.

“Yep. Plus, during the past year, I translated it to English and made a pdf of the translation, and got it put in the Sociology Library archives at Hopkins. It’s really quite good. A digital copy of it is on line on the Hopkins website too.”

“You did all that?” Nadine asked incredulously.

“Yes, *Manman*. When I read the paper, I thought it was valuable work and well done. So when I finished the translating, last spring, I took a copy to a professor in sociology that Barbara had a course with and asked him if the research was useful. He liked it, a whole lot. He wanted to know why it was never published—he said it

would be very useful in several of his classes. He's the one who got it put in the Sociology Library. I was gonna tell you but then all that battery research fuss started up and I got tied up in that and forgot."

"Do you have the web address for it?" Greta asked.

"Oh sure," Tamara said and pulled out her cell phone.

She went to her browser and flipped through some screens.

"Okay, I have the bookmark here, let me copy it. Greta, what's your cell? I'll text you the link."

When that was done, Greta continued the conversation.

"It sounds like you were cheated out of that degree, Nadine," she said. "Let me tell you something now and I hope that you won't think that this is being forward or preferential. My last trip to Europe with Werner was basically a recruiting trip. President Gerston was asked to serve as the first president of the Columbia Institute of Economics when his term ends. He wants to assemble an international faculty in research areas that will study ways of improving economic conditions in third-world countries. I have two or three anthropology faculty positions to fill and I'm having a very difficult time in finding people with the right credentials. I'm looking for people whose knowledge lies outside the traditional academic anthropology circles which seem to be inbred in the classical viewpoints about cultures.

"Nadine, you've impressed me tremendously as far as being very social and a wonderful communicator. Your Haitian background, including your knowledge of their truly stressed economy, gives you even more strength..."

"Wait, Greta... Are you suggesting you might be interested in me as a possible faculty member? I have no qualifications for that," Nadine objected.

Greta shook her head. "Actually, if I got this right, you have a terminal degree in anthropology; just the piece of paper stating the degree is missing. Second, you have a terminal degree as a clergy person; you've been in practice how many years? About twenty? Much of it dealing with and counseling impoverished people?"

Nadine nodded, speechless.

"And if I understand what Tamara said about your dissertation, the fact that it's being used in university teaching is yet another qualification. I'll read it and see, but I'm certain that it will be just fine. Tell me, would you be available to join the faculty at Westphalia if we were to make an offer?"

Tamara had never seen her mother struck speechless. She was now.

"Mom? This is real. I told you so many times how smart you are. Where do you think I got my own smarts from? Surely not Dad?" Tamara laughed and that broke the logjam.

"Tamara! Your dad has awesome smarts!" Nadine said, laughing. "It's just that I think I'm just an ordinary woman..."

"Mom, you impress everyone you meet, you know. I've heard about what they think about you at the VA. And your patients love you too. True, that's not entirely applicable to a university job, but 75 percent of doing a good faculty job is effective communication."

"She's right. That's so true, Nadine. Well, I guess you need time..." Greta started.

Nadine interrupted, "I certainly would need to talk to Wilson, but, well, truthfully, my work as a *manbo* somehow has become less fulfilling in the past few years. The neighborhood is changing; it's becoming more gentrified. My congregation members have been moving away and more transient people have been showing up at worship and they're not truly committed, so the worship is unsatisfying for most. One of my drummers passed

away last year too. Wilson and I have been discussing what to do; his job has lost most of its challenge and he's gotten antsy about the overcrowding in Miami. That's what drove him to move to Haiti after he left the Marines. He told me that he could get a job just about anywhere. So, yes, perhaps I would be interested."

"Excellent," Greta said. "I'll read your work and talk to some people. Now we've been talking in here too long; let's go join the rest of the family."

On the way out, Nadine whispered to Tamara, "What were the 'vixens'?" and Tamara told her, giggling.

"Oh. That's funny."

While the three had been talking in the study, the Richardsons had come in and Wilson was talking to them. Nadine went to them and Wilson introduced her and then resumed his discussion topic with Mason. Wilson had mentioned to Mason and Angela that the family was from Haiti, so Mason had been quizzing him about the country's political opposition, whose efforts to oust the government had been thwarted.

Tamara watched her dad introducing her mom and then looked for Peter and Barbara; she found them in a deep discussion.

"Hey, Tamara," Peter said when she came up to them. "That was a pretty intense discussion with Grams and your mom."

"Yeah, even I could feel it when they greeted each other," Barbara said. "What was that about?"

Tamara smiled at them. "Our families have a strong link, they learned. Through the spirit world. You know that Greta is an... um, I guess you could call her an 'adept,' okay? She can commune with the spirits. I hope that I'm not breaking her confidence by telling you that."

Peter sighed and said, "No, she's open about that but, you know, what we think about magic..."

Barbara interrupted. "Yeah, my folks think her clinging to her Norse heritage is a bit odd, but she's highly regarded academically. The U.S. president even interviewed her for the anthropology job in the new institute he'll be running when he leaves office in a year or so."

"So you guys were talking about spirits, like the *lwa* and her Norse spirits—the *álfar* and *disir*?" Peter asked.

"Not as much as the similarities of our ancestral cultures," Tamara chuckled. "Get two anthropologists together and they talk shop. I hope your folks don't think my mom is odd 'cause she's a priestess of an ancient African religion."

"Oh, no," Barbara said. "It's just that Gram's in a modern science but still practices a really ancient ritual. When Aunt Shelly, her daughter, was a kid, Grams taught her about being a *völva*, but Shelly didn't stick with it. Grams was disappointed, but her big sister—she passed away two years ago now—lived in Denmark and had a large family, and the women in that family are continuing their Nordic line."

"Oh, that's good—while Greta was talking, I did wonder whether Shelly was also a seeress," Tamara said.

Peter laughed. "Nope. But she has this awesome intuition and her kids are convinced that she's a mind-reader. Like with Mike. When he felt bad that he couldn't get dates, Aunt Shelly knew about it almost immediately. No way could Mike keep it secret."

"Hmm. No wonder she was so grateful to me," Tamara mused. "So—what were you guys talking about so intently?"

"How to tell Emma that maybe your folks might be uncomfortable with any nudity when we go there," Barbara said.

“Oh yeah, I did think of that. Of course they know that I’ve gone to the resort with you guys and they know about Emma’s Home Resort. Remember, when we first went there, Emma hadn’t even mentioned the nudity, so with newcomers like my folks, she probably won’t have a nude party. Besides, it’s kinda cold now.”

“Yep, but remember that her pool can have a dome over it?” Peter reminded her.

“You’re right. I’ll text her.”

Emma replied that the gathering would be textile and she did notify the others who’d be coming.

After dinner at the Winsbergs, Barbara left for the airport to pick up Terence while Peter and Tamara brought her parents back to their hotel.

“Peter, your folks and grandparents are impressive,” Wilson said. “Werner stayed in his dad’s development business, he told me, and Greta is a university prof.”

“Yeah, Gramps kept up the commercial real estate development business that his father began but his kids weren’t interested in that career. He’s in the process of going public with it and selling to some investors. He’s set up a board of directors and is working out how to hand over control to a management team. He’ll be keeping a bunch of stock in it though.”

“I’m not really sure what Mason does, though,” Wilson said.

Peter laughed. “Neither does the rest of the family. He’s the principal in a political consulting firm that flies way under the radar in the D.C. area. If you want to get into an elected office in this region, Mason is the one to see. He backed the last two Maryland governors, for example. And Grandma is in a fundraising organization for charitable donations.”

“Say, about tomorrow. At Emma’s,” Wilson continued, “what’s, ah, the dress code?”

Tamara turned around in her seat to smile at them.

“Emma says it’s textile all the way. Including the pool, if you want to swim—it’s got a heated dome over it, actually.”

“Well, that’s kind of her,” Nadine said. “I wouldn’t want to impose my own preferences on her; if the others who’ll be there wanted to be without clothes, I could deal with it, but I’m happy that she’s being sensitive to us newcomers.”

“Yeah, I told you what happened with her sister-in-law Abi,” Tamara laughed. “She kinda surprised us. Um, you and Dad talk about what Greta said?”

“We did a little, honey,” Wilson told her. “A lot to think about.”

“Here’s something else,” Tamara said. “Not to push you into anything, but I plan to stay in this area after I graduate. I have a premonition that I’ll be here for a pretty long time. And there is a Haitian community in the D.C. area; I checked. Consider that too. And also what you could do with Greta with both of your spirit connections.”

~~~~~

On Saturday, mid-morning, Tamara, with Peter and her parents, arrived at Emma’s. Barbara and Terence had arrived earlier. Emma and Andrew, plus Andrew’s parents and sisters and their men, were all there, so the Alexandres went through another round of introductions.

Emma came to the door when the group arrived and greeted them as Stuart passed by and he stopped to greet the

newcomers. When Wilson took Stuart's hand for a shake, the men stood there for a long few seconds, shaking hands and sizing each other up. They obviously approved of each other, because when they released each other's hand, they did a brief man-hug.

"Blimey, Wilson, you have an imposing presence," Stuart told him. "We're about the same size, yet you seem to tower over me in some way."

Emma was watching and grinned. "Dad, he is simply overflowing with self-confidence, don't you see. Nadine does too, but in a softer way. Nadine, you just radiate comforting thoughts—that's your priestess persona, I gather. You use it in social situations as a way to relax the people you meet, isn't that correct?"

Nadine laughed. "Yes, I suppose I do; never really thought about it. That's quite perceptive, actually, Emma... can I call you that? Tamara talks so much about you, I feel like I've known you for years."

"Goodness, yes," she said, clapping her hands. "That's brill. I've been gagging to meet you folks for ever now; Tamara's just amazing, isn't she."

"We certainly think so," Wilson said.

"So enough of us embarrassing her then; let's go meet the other lot," Emma replied as she led the way into the house.

They had a lively time; it was a much more animated group than at the Winsbergs. Sam and Abi had everyone in stitches with their constant stream of jokes, and Wilson and Nadine found that jokes told with British accents made them somehow funnier. Then Wilson, with a gleam in his eye, told a few jokes too, but he used French, and for the dialogs in the jokes, he used a different regional accent for each speaker.

All of Andrew's family spoke French fluently; so did Emma. Barbara, Peter, and Terence knew a little, but Ryan and Jay were lost. Still, Wilson's linguistic trick was quite funny. And when Sam challenged Jay to do the same thing in English—but to skip doing the Noo Yawk accent—that got some laughs too.

Then Wilson told Jay, "I'll show you how to do a Noo Yawk accent," and proceeded to nail it. And then he amazed the others in the group when he did a reasonable imitation of Jay's and Ryan's voice and speech, but when he started on Andrew's voice, he switched from Andrew's clipped west London style to a broad south London accent, wowing everyone.

After everyone finished exclaiming how good he was, Wilson explained, "I've got a good ear, that's all. My Uncle Dan, he taught me to be a Marine, he could imitate people like that too and I copied him. He had the various Brit accents down pat, and all the French ones too. It's just a parlor trick. Not useful unless you want to be a dialect coach for actors, I guess."

Soon the group split into younger and older again, with the younger ones electing to hit the pool so they went to get their suits.

That's when Nadine told Emma, "Wilson and I are fine with your home's dress code. If they want to skinny-dip, please don't stop them on our behalf."

"Really then; it's okay? They'll be chuffed to hear. Hey, you lot," she called into the house, "Nadine says going starkers is hunky-dory!"

"Brilliant!" Abi's voice floated out the door.

A minute later, Abi and Sam came thundering out the door and without a pause, cannonballed into the pool.

Wilson turned to Andrew. "Were they naked? I saw a blur go by and I think I heard a sonic boom."

Andrew chuckled, "I think so. Oh, here's the rest. They are."

The other younger group members strolled sedately out of the house and slipped into the pool from its side or walked down its steps.

Andrew continued, "Just so you're aware. The word 'naked' isn't used when referring to a nudist. We prefer the word 'nude,' which means simply 'unclothed.' 'Naked' means 'vulnerable,' 'exposed,' or similar things."

"Ah. Tamara did mention that to us, I recall," Wilson said. "Oh, Emma, I wanted to congratulate you on that Draper Prize and thank you for giving Tamara the opportunity to do the research to get that award."

"That was all Tamara," Emma told him. "Her ability to make intuitive jumps is astounding. I just was included because some of my maths suggested to Tamara how to pack electrons at a high density into a molecular matrix. So she ignored a few physics principles and showed that achieving impossibly high electron densities was possible. How it works is still puzzling all my colleagues and most other physicists everywhere."

Then Stuart and Gerry came out of the house carrying trays with drinks and snacks and set them down on the table.

"Dig in," Stuart told everyone. "Wilson, I must say, if they needed another model for a Marine recruiting poster, I know who they should contact. You absolutely have the look of a warrior. I see how you keep aware of everything around you and ready to move at an instant's notice."

Nadine chuckled ruefully. "I've seen him move. Once, when Tamara was threatened, he moved about ten feet in an eyeblink."

"Uncle Dan taught me well," Wilson said. "Good posture and balance is essential and how to move is part of that."

"Yes, well, that brings up your decorations," Stuart said. "A blindin' achievement, the Medal of Honor."

"Yes, but I would give that up in an instant if I could have protected all of the Marines in the two units I served in. Especially that final battle I was in. We lost eight good men then."

"I know the feeling well; I was a lieutenant and commanded a close-combat team in Kandahar Province in Afghanistan. We were attached to a U.S. Marine battalion, as I recall, the second battalion, in the Eighth Regiment. I had fifteen commandos and a sergeant in my command. By the end of my tour there, nine months, with replacements for wounded and killed commandos, I had lost eleven. And those Marines were from among the best-trained troops in the world. True, we were deployed in the most difficult operations, but even so, the losses weighed heavily on my conscience. What could I have done differently so that they were not exposed?"

"That's it exactly!" Wilson exclaimed. "After I was wounded, I fought those demons for a long time. What helped me the most was learning that the decisions I made were the absolute best ones I could have made at the time. It was a matter of accepting that those decisions were based on my training and that I had the best possible training—not just as a Marine, but from Uncle Dan too."

"And he did give you the best training possible," Stuart remarked. "Witness the Medal."

"That was my dream job," Wilson sighed. "For my whole childhood, I dreamed about being a Marine. And a random rifle shot shattered my shin and I lost my dream... But that misfortune brought me to a better life, I firmly believe. I found my soul-mate, Nadine, and have an awesome, incredible daughter too. And a job that was my second love, mechanics. At least the vehicles don't shoot back. Usually, anyway."

The others laughed.



“Can you tell us about that battle?” Stuart asked. “Some people have difficulty re-telling their experiences, don’t they.”

Nadine interrupted. “Wilson’s better now, so long ago, but this might work for him. I have a copy of the citation in my web storage so let me pull that up.”

She got the document on her phone and gave the phone to Stuart. He read it and passed it around to the others as Wilson said that they could ask questions about details if they wanted. One question was whether Wilson’s unit may have crossed paths with Stuart’s.

“Not likely,” Wilson replied. “We never got as far south as Kandahar. I did have one or two small Royal Marine detachments at battalion from time to time, but they were there only for special operations. You know, the secret-secret stuff.”

“True,” Stuart told them, “we had a few units go up to Kunar and the other north-west provinces. I wasn’t with them. Those were special-ops teams. Wilson, you mentioned mechanics and vehicles—that’s what you do now?”

“Yep. I work on anything mechanical, actually. Mobile or stationary. Engines, generators, refrigeration, transmissions of any kind, hydraulic systems. I rebuilt a car from a junker when I was in high school and went on from there.”

“I can see how that skill would have been useful in Haiti,” Stuart remarked. “And Tamara told us that you’re a priestess of Vodou, Nadine. She also lectured us about Vodou, the religion and that it’s not voodoo, the movies.”

Nadine chuckled. “That’s Tamara. True, it’s a religion that has quite ancient roots in western Africa. I serve my community as a simple clergy person and do counseling and some faith-healing.”

“My wife is also modest,” Wilson told him. “She has an advanced degree in anthropology too.”

“Oh, Wilson...” Nadine began, but Stuart interrupted.

“Blimey. One moment; this morning I got a ring from a colleague; wanted to know if I could come in on Monday for a quick meeting. I’m off next week, but she said it was important. The coincidence is bloody stunning... Nadine, by any chance, did you speak to Greta Winsberg yesterday?”

Nadine gasped and Wilson leaned back in his chair in surprise.

“Actually, I did,” Nadine answered. “And Greta is a colleague of yours? That means Westphalia, correct?”

“Correct. I’m on the Academic Council of the new Columbia Institute being set up at Westphalia and the chair of Political Science at the university. Greta is the chair in Anthropology. The other council members are in sociology, economics, applied mathematics, psychology, business, information systems, law, and international relations. Greta told me that she just read a dissertation on a topic which spans sociology and anthropology and that she was extremely impressed by the work. I shouldn’t tell you this, but what the hell. She told me that there’s a possibility that the author might be receptive to an offer for a position in her department and in the institute. Is that person you, by any chance, Nadine?”

“I don’t know what to say,” Nadine replied. “It is me, but this is all so sudden... such changes are happening...”

Emma, who had been listening quietly all this time, spoke up now.

“Nadine, your daughter always speaks so highly of you and how well you guided her through the use of the special abilities she has. Yes, I know about them and I know that she told you that I know of them. Great

changes will be coming for Tamara too; she's about to become famous in the entire world for the scientific and technical innovations she's developed, isn't she. You and Wilson have taught her well how to use her abilities; she always credits you two for her accomplishments. I know of Greta's academic reputation and if she says that your dissertation is impressive, then I'm certain that you have the ability and qualifications to take a faculty position there. It all comes down to your desires. Are you willing to make a life change of that magnitude? Are you able to get out of your current comfort zone for this opportunity? Those are the questions you need to answer. That's something to think about, innit?"

"We discussed this opportunity last night, Emma," Wilson told her. "Nadine is concerned about being able to meet the expectations of people who've been faculty members for their entire careers. I told her that the change for her will be similar to when she had to learn an entirely new job, nursing, when we came to the U.S. Except that she's already had the necessary educational background."

"That's it, exactly, Wilson," Stuart said. "I don't want, as they say, to put the cart before the horse, Nadine, but it sounds like Greta's getting ready to make an offer to you. Otherwise she wouldn't be asking for an unusual Academic Council meeting during holiday. And the position is not only at Westphalia, it's also part of creating a new institute, so you'll have a chance to shape your work in the way you want, won't you."

"All right, you've all ganged up on me and persuaded me," Nadine sighed. "If I get an offer, I guess I'll accept. This will be another huge change in our lives, Wilson."

## Chapter 50 - Planning Changes and Changes in Plans

### *End of December*

On Monday, Wilson and Nadine rented a car and went off to their first meeting; today it was to the State Department to see Evan Masters, who was now an under secretary. When Wilson had told him that he'd be in the D.C. area during the holiday period, Masters asked if he and Nadine could meet with a number of cultural specialists at the agency to answer a number of questions about life in Haiti. And the Haitian ambassador to the U.S. would be there too; he wanted to meet Wilson and Nadine.

In late afternoon on Monday, Tamara, who was staying with Peter's family during the holiday break, called Nadine to find out about her day but the call went to voice mail. Fifteen minutes later, Nadine called her back and they spoke for a while.

Peter came in after doing an errand for his mother as Tamara was finishing up her phone conversation. She disconnected and turned to Peter with a big smile.

"That was Mom. She's at Westphalia just now—they offered her that anthropology position!"

Peter hugged her. "Wow, and she accepted, right?" Tamara nodded, smiling. "However did she wind up at Westphalia?"

"So Mom and Dad were at the State Department for a two-hour meet-and-greet and lunch that Mr Masters had set up. He and Dad had hit it off when they first met and Dad kept in touch with him—actually, Masters did a lot for my family. Anyway, before they left D.C. after lunch with Masters, Dad decided to do a little exploring and they were driving around south of the Capitol when Mom got a call from Greta. She was at their council meeting and wanted to ask Mom some questions. While they were talking, Greta found out that they were driving around in D.C. and told them that they could get to the campus in about a half hour.

"So they drove over there and Mom met with a few of the council people who had stayed to meet her. Greta told her that this definitely wasn't the normal recruitment procedure, but she hadn't found any suitable candidates after six months of searching, even in Europe. She had read Mom's dissertation and thought it was excellent work and that Mom was a perfect fit. The other council members also gave Mom their approval. Greta brought Mom to her department and took her around, introducing her to a number of faculty members who were there. Greta told Mom that the last step would be approval from the Anthropology faculty but, she said, that step would be a formality; the department members were letting the choice for the position be Greta's and the council's, since the position was chiefly for the Institute."

"Cool. So they're coming back now?" Peter asked.

"Uh huh. They're stopping at the hotel first. They know to come here for dinner," Tamara said. "Oh, and tomorrow, I heard that Dad's lunch with the Defense guys got another person added. The Navy corpsman who served with Dad in the Marines works at Walter Reed now and Dad's kept in touch with him by email ever since they reconnected on the hospital ship."

When dinnertime arrived, so did the Alexanders and both sets of grandparents. Greta wanted to talk to Nadine about the Westphalia offer, and the Richardsons wanted to congratulate Nadine. After dinner, Greta told Nadine that she had spoken to both the university provost and president about Nadine's withheld degree.

"I told them that their doing that to you was mean-spirited and academically dishonest. If you were unable to register and the only step left for you to complete the degree was your defense, which is a token formality anyway—the copy of the dissertation had the approval signatures of your committee members—then they should have found a way to accommodate you. So Westphalia University will contact Universidad de San Juan and make certain that they award your degree. I know that you are aware that President Gerston is to be

Columbia Institute's president when he leaves office. If the university has any problems with them, Gerston can get their attention," Greta chuckled. "So I'll be in close touch with you when you return home. We can give you two months to get your personal stuff in order and then we'd want you here. Can you do that?"

"I'll make it work," Nadine answered.

"Nadine's biggest issue is letting her congregation know she's leaving and closing her temple," Wilson said. "All the rest I can handle if it takes longer than two months. We'll need to look for a place here, too, but I'm not too concerned about that. And I can look for a job here when we have a place to stay."

"I don't want you to think I'm ignoring you when I offered the job to Nadine, Wilson," Greta said. "I've also been looking around to see about tradesman's jobs and asked in the Facilities department if they know of any positions for mechanical tradesmen and..."

Scott had popped his head into the room. "I'm letting everyone know that dessert and coffee's ready, but what's that about mechanical trades jobs?"

"Greta was talking about looking for possible mechanic's jobs," Wilson told him. "I take care of the heavy equipment, stationary or mobile, for Miami-Dade. Any other mechanicals too, in fact."

Scott came into the room. "That's right, we were so focused on Nadine that we didn't think of your job, Wilson. You're an auto mechanic, then, right?"

"Actually more of a general mechanic. I repair anything with any kind of motor or engine, pretty much anything mechanical. I've even worked on the county's watercraft and birds—ah, rotary-wing craft, but for those, the FAA-licensed mechanics need to supervise my work. But an engine is an engine and a tranny is a tranny. I also work on generators, refrigeration systems, and vacuum pumps—anything that has moving parts, actually. Ah, sorry for all the detail. I'm not trying to brag."

"So I have a thought," Scott mused. "A good mechanic can get a job easily around here, but you've got really diversified experience. You'd probably be bored with working in an auto shop. Out at the APL, we have a bunch of mechanics but they're all really specialized. I wonder if the facilities chief would consider looking at you to bring on board. The APL has a huge amount of facility-associated mechanical systems plus all of the mechanical systems we build for the research projects. Have you done any electrical or electronic work?"

"Oh sure. In vehicles, all the time. Much of the repair work needed on modern vehicles is on the vehicle electronics, and in modern tractor rigs, there's miles of wiring. Police vehicles, fire equipment, ambulances, they have all kinds of electronics. The county has three heavy-rescue rigs and I've worked on them. Reefer trailers, the refrigeration controls are complicated. I can read schematics and use electronic test equipment—well, not the stuff like Tamara used in the medical school, but I've been known to use a frequency analyzer a time or two to troubleshoot a system."

"Sounds good, Wilson," Scott said. "How about you put a resume together and get it to me? I can't promise anything, but with Greta and me, we'll look at opportunities. Oh, and Claire can see if there's anything at the Naval Academy. As a vet, you'd have a preferred shot at any opening there."

They gathered at the dining room table again for dessert and told the others what had been discussed. Then Werner looked at Wilson and Nadine with a smile.

"It looks like the whole family here has jumped on the 'help the Alexandres' bandwagon, so let me put an oar into the stew, to mix some metaphors pretty badly," he remarked and the others laughed. "I may be in commercial real estate, but I 'know people,'" he made finger-quotes. "Nadine, just let me know what you're looking for in a new home. You can let Wilson give suggestions, but we all know that the final choice is yours."

Everyone laughed and Wilson said, “How true.”

“I’ll get my account executives on it—give ‘em a challenge, in fact, to find good residential properties with a good deal. And I know people from some national chains who can help you with your Miami property, too. That way you both can concentrate on the stuff that only you two can do. Sound good?”

Wilson got up and went over to shake Werner’s hand.

“Many thanks,” Wilson told him. “Your family’s been wonderful to us.”

Nadine hugged him and went to Greta to hug her.

She whispered in Greta’s ear, “...and thanks for making it so I’ll get to see Tamara more. We’ve been so close while she grew up and I miss her closeness.”

Greta nodded. “I’m glad it worked out.”

~~~~~

The following day, the Alexandres and Peter drove to Arlington. They were meeting a group put together by Secretary O’Rourke for lunch at a steakhouse a short distance away from the Pentagon. The group was supposed to be made up of some people who wanted to meet the Alexandres.

It turned out to be several families, and the group had been put in a private dining room. O’Rourke was there with his wife, but the big surprise was that Master Chief Gilbert Bronson was there too, with his family. There also were several of Wilson’s old unit members; a few had retired to the D.C. area and several were still on active duty, well advanced in rank, and now assigned to staff jobs in the Pentagon.

But it was Bronson who Wilson was most interested in. They had kept in touch by occasional email exchanges and Wilson knew that Bronson was now assigned to Walter Reed. He didn’t know what the assignment was, however, and was amazed to learn that his old comrade was now the command senior enlisted leader of Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda. He was at the head of the medical center’s administration, together with the center’s director and the chief of staff.

Bronson introduced Wilson to his family; Doris was a college freshman at the University of Virginia, the twins Iris and Ivy were high school juniors, and Jonas was in eighth grade.

Jonas greeted Wilson with big eyes. “Dad and Mom named me after you ‘cause you saved him,” he said. “So how come your name’s Wilson?”

“Ah, there’s a story there, Jonas. Your dad only knew me by my middle name—Jonas. I did a kinda bad thing; I falsified my age to get into the Corps. See, my mom passed away while I was still a minor and I had no dad, so the state was talking about putting me with foster parents. I didn’t want that. But I always wanted to be a Marine, so I got some fake ID and was able to get signed up. That’s something you should never do, but I did it all for good reasons, see?”

“Yeah, okay. And Dad said you got the Medal of Honor for when you saved him.”

Bronson came over and put his hand on Jonas’ shoulder.

“Son, he saved more than just me back then. He personally saved two Marines from sure death, saved about 35 more Marines in his platoon by leading the defense of our position, and saved hundreds of Afghan civilians and U.N. personnel in the town we were guarding. Wilson’s a true hero.”

Wilson was blushing as Nadine took his arm. “He also helped Haiti by getting rid of a political threat,” she told Bronson.

“Yes, I know about that, too,” Bronson answered. “Good man.”

Wilson, with Nadine in tow, went on to talk to his other unit members and their wives, making this an emotional reunion, while Tamara and Peter were regaling Bronson’s kids with tales about their high school and college life. Doris wanted to study medicine; the twins were completely undecided, and Jonas wanted to follow his father in a career in the Navy. But after meeting Wilson, he admitted that possibly the Marines would be okay too.

They spent a few hours at the restaurant, socializing after their lunch, and then people began to leave. Wilson now had a number of additional contacts from the area.

The Alexandres spent a quiet New Year’s Eve with the Winsbergs and the kids and then left for the airport the next day. They would have a busy month or two packing and closing out their Miami affairs. Nadine was still considering whether to continue her part-time *manbo* ministry after they moved.

### ***Applied Physics Laboratory, North Laurel, Maryland: early January***

During the week after the new year began, Tamara’s new employees, an electrical engineer named Betty Miskin and an engineering tech named Saul Freeberg, had joined the research group in Emma’s lab and were assisting the techs in Emma’s lab in working on collecting the magnet coil data that Emma had requested. Fox was showing the new people the other projects which Tamara had in progress. Tamara herself was completing the final checks on her high-resolution MRI coil. Her experiments on the volunteer subjects would begin in three weeks. It was the intersession period, so she was spending all her time at Emma’s APL lab, which the APL administration had enlarged somewhat by shuffling room assignments, giving her additional space. Tamara was talking to Fox when Davy Foster, the lab’s MRI tech, stopped by the lab at the beginning of the second intersession week.

“The system’s all calibrated for using your new coil,” he told her. “But the T1-weighted and T2-weighted scans that were set with the phantom are kinda approximate—I can see that the resolution is way, way up but there’s no blood flow or cellular structure in the phantom.”

“Yeah, okay, but can you still use the standard TR and TE times for the T1 and T2 scans? And did you try the Flair sequence?”

“Oh sure. That gives the highest contrast—but I think you’ll need to limit Flair with your coil. The very high contrast might drop out fine detail.”

“Hmm, good point. I’m thinking we need to do a few runs with an actual brain, not a phantom brain,” Tamara said.

“Hey, I’m not volunteering,” Fox laughed. “What’s all the jargon, anyway? Those letters.”

“They’re just shorthand for the MRI pulse sequences,” Tamara said. “You know tissues have different densities and amounts of free water and that means different free hydrogen nuclei concentrations, the MRI-visible ones, that is—it’s called the proton density. The T1 and T2 sequences give us the ability to look at structures within each tissue slice where greater and lesser dense tissues are shown in the image with different contrast. So we get the T1-weighted images by using short TE and TR times. TE is the ‘time to echo,’ the time between when the RF pulse is produced and when the coil receives the echoed signal, and TR is ‘repetition time’; it’s the amount of time between each pulse sequence delivered to the same tissue slice.

“Now, the T1 and T2 relaxation rates are related to the amount of water in particular tissues. The T1-weighted images highlight the returned proton signals from fatty tissues of the body while the T2 images show the proton signals from both fatty and water-based body tissues. And finally, think of the ‘Flair’ sequence as a super-long T2 one that increases the T2-image contrast. The bright areas on the images that the computer generates

represent strong signals. Enough?”

Fox nodded, grinning. “I think I got it. X-ray images are bright for dense tissue like bone and MRI images are bright for high levels of returned RF signals.”

“Exactly. So the operator sets the signal timing and capture details based on the kind of study. That’s all stored in the machine program which runs it automatically. The system needs to be tuned for the pulse generator and signal receiver properties and that’s what Davy was doing. Then the chosen settings can be stored. This is a research unit, not like one you’d see in a hospital, so all the functions are individually adjustable. So Davy, we need to get a human guinea pig?”

“Yeah. For maybe two hours. That’s enough time for the fine tuning.”

“Okay, I’ve spent a ton of time as an MRI subject,” Tamara told him. “We don’t need contrast, I’m assuming.”

“Correct. We don’t do that here at the APL, typically, even though they have those new non-toxic fMRI agents based on calcium, manganese, and iron.”

“Fine, I’ll need to call the Research and Exploratory Development office and clear my being a phantom stand-in with them. Emma stressed my following the lab’s rules, after all.”

She contacted the office and wound up speaking to the department head, who gave her permission to do the final calibration.

The following day, Tamara went to the building where the MRI unit was located and Emma went along. She was interested in seeing how the external coil was used in an actual fMRI study.

Tamara explained to her, “You know that the basis of fMRI, when it was first developed, was that MRI could detect the diffusion of the hydrogen nuclei from the water in the brain from blood vessels to cells and also the movement of blood in vessels in the brain.”

Emma nodded.

“So early on, an effect was noticed with deoxygenated hemoglobin in the blood, there was a drop in the T2 signal, both natural and effective—you know what that is?”

“Yep. The T2 and T2\* signals. Got those basics when I designed the magnet. Go ahead.”

“Good. So that drop is known as the ‘BOLD effect,’ for blood oxygenation level-dependent. The BOLD effect is weird and completely counterintuitive. When neural activity increases in a part of the brain, not only does the blood flow to that region increase, but also the blood flowing to that area becomes more highly oxygenated than blood moving to other areas. Now, deoxygenated hemoglobin is paramagnetic; it’s weakly attracted to magnetic fields. And oxygenated hemoglobin is the opposite, a magnetic field has a slight repulsive effect—that’s diamagnetism—and in this case, it makes the MRI signal slightly stronger. That diamagnetism is what makes fMRI work. We see the actual structures which are using the oxygen, which means their activity’s increased. And knowing what the subject is doing, allows us to link physical or mental actions with specific parts of the brain.”

Emma chuckled. “Lecture mode off?”

Tamara blushed. “You do that too, Emma!”

“So true. And you’re set for the first volunteers in two weeks, then?”

“Uh huh. But the test today should show the coil’s best spatial resolution. The current fMRI best, with a 3 tesla magnet, is approximately one to two millimeters. I think we can get down to maybe ten to twenty micrometers

and that's about the size of a nerve cell body. Theoretically, we might even be able to see activity at the synaptic clefts between neurons in the brain and that's a thousandfold smaller, 20 to 30 nanometers. In reality, though, with the molecular noise at those dimensions, I'd expect just to see clusters of synapses being activated."

Foster ran through the full sequence of scans that Tamara's protocol had planned, with her using the scent tests to examine the MRI's sensitivity in the olfactory tract. Close to the end of the study, and during the final sequence with the grape scent, Tamara's mind went off-task as she suddenly got one of her inspirations.

*Hey, I can try firing up my limbic system and see what it does! Cool!*

There was a loud *clang* as the MRI shut down and a red light began flashing over the control room window. The room's intercom crackled to life.

"What the fuck was that, Tamara?" Foster shouted and Tamara could hear in the background, "What the bloody hell..." from Emma.

Tamara laughed, "Shit. Sorry. Brain fart..."

Foster retorted, "If that had been a fart, it would have blown the side of the building out. It looked like your brain just exploded then!"

"Okay. I'll tell you after. It's recorded?"

"Damn straight it is," he answered.

"Save it. I'm going off-script now, so please don't hit the fire alarm," she giggled. "Set up that last scan sequence again."

"Roger, I think. Let me check the circuits to be sure nothing got blown... Damn, the signal amp setting was only at 15 percent and it still overloaded... good thing we've got the high-speed amp overload protection... okay, all good. Starting in ten seconds, so watch the countdown clock."

This time, instead of using the scent stimulus at the appropriate time in the scan, she collected a big cloud of light green taste shot with silver streaks—calming and healing thoughts—and "pushed" it toward the control room. Fifteen seconds later, the red light over the control room window came on again, indicating another unprogrammed shutdown. Once again, Foster came on the intercom.

"Okay, what did you do to overload the computer? It couldn't handle the amount of data coming in and shut the sequence down."

"Well, that tells me that we could use a faster data system. We've got what, sixteen channels and a data acquisition rate of 100 megabytes a second?" Tamara asked.

"Yeah. That was fine till you blew it up."

"Okay, let me get out of this thing and I'll come look."

Tamara went into the control room where Foster and Emma were looking at the scans. Emma looked up from the screen.

"Davy put up a scan using the old coil and one from the new one before you did the overload," she said. "Even to my entirely untrained eye, the resolution improvement is huge."

"Yeah, look at this," Foster said as he zoomed in on the second image. And zoomed further, and still further.

"The computer is compensating as we zoom in and filling in the skipped data, which the Fourier transform ... um, averages out, you could say, when we display the overall image. This looks amazing. The radiologists will



love this. We couldn't see this detail in the phantom 'cause that had nothing but gross structures for density calibrations. So what the hell happened here, Tamara?" he asked as he switched to the last set of scans.

Tamara looked at the image; it was the overall image from her brain, and the entire scan was lit up.

"Um, I see some detail in the white," she said. "Did you zoom it at all?"

"No—isn't that, like, overexposed?" Foster asked.

"I think it's a mathematical artefact of how the transform works, trying to display average intensities over wider areas," Tamara said. "I saw that happen with regular MRI images when contrast was used and the program setting was a bit off. The individual voxels should still have their original values."

"I'm showing my ignorance here," Emma said. "So what's a voxel?"

"A voxel in MRI is analogous to the pixel in a two-dimensional picture," Foster told her. "The size of the voxel is the spatial resolution of a single element of the image. It's a three-dimensional chunk from the image which is given a single value based on the intensity of the signal for that chunk. Tamara's right, overexposure is caused by light spilling over to adjacent pixels or washing out the photosensitive granules in film. Tamara, how sensitive to cross-talk are your receiver coils?"

"Very little, especially how they're activated," she answered.

Foster had changed the view to the last scan, the one where Tamara had "pushed" the calming taste, and was zooming in the view. Very quickly they could see definite structures begin to appear, and as Foster advanced the zoom level, he began to point out the areas that showed the intense activity.

"I'm no radiologist," he said, "but this looks like... um, nothing like I've ever seen before. Look at those white lines in the olfactory tract. They go from these tiny patches along both sides of the olfactory bulb, and other lines radiate from there going toward the hypothalamus-thalamus area."

He zoomed out a bit and panned over to the midbrain and zoomed in.

"More of those threads are leading out to the parietal lobe of the neocortex..." he panned again, "and there are more of those bright patches along the sides of a whole lot of sulci there—all lined up in rows. I've never heard of structures like I'm seeing here. Are you sure you're human?" he laughed.

Tamara laughed too, and said, "Guaranteed 100 percent. I'll bet this hasn't been seen before 'cause the resolution is so high. Can the computer display a scale of the resolved area?"

"Oh. Sure it can. Let me center on one of those patches. They're... um ... about 100 micrometers wide and maybe 200 long."

"Can you get a depth?"

"The bright area extends deep into the cortex. Several millimeters."

"Ah... let's see. That would be maybe 75 to 100 nerve cells of some kind per patch. How close can you zoom into a patch?" Tamara asked.

Foster worked on the keys a bit.

"I'm in quite a bit but the image is washed out. I see some faint structure but the signal is too strong here. But if I move just 500 micrometers away, the signal is gone. This resolution is unbelievable. What were you doing that ramped up the signal so much, anyway?"

"Okay, so, you know that this is covered by your NDA too—medical info from the study."

“Sure. And the lab’s NDA too.”

Emma was watching the exchange with interest; she wondered how Tamara would handle this question. She had already linked the signal overload to Tamara’s ability to influence emotions.

“All right,” Tamara was saying. “When I was a kid and had to have surgery, my parents were told that I have a strong cerebral blood flow ‘cause the anesthetic they used was cleared almost immediately after it was stopped. And I learned a trick in meditation—it’s to isolate a body part by concentrating on it. So if I concentrate on thinking, that ups the blood flow more. Did you look closely at the first scan you had up when I came in? I saw how my whole brain looked lighter than the scan you were comparing it to.”

“Yeah, I did see that. I figured it was just a contrast setting. Let me look.”

Foster reset the view and loaded the other images. Then he played with the contrast settings.

“Damn, you’re right, Tamara. That’s really a higher blood flow.” He laughed. “No wonder you’re so smart!”

The others laughed, and Tamara said, “Let’s let our radiologist, Dr Marcos, look at these scans. See what he makes of them. Is the data on the secure server?”

“Yeah. But I’m gonna need to reduce the file sizes—downloading the images over the internet will be a chore otherwise. The routines they use for the medical MRIs are okay, especially the ones based on compressed sensing, but I’m gonna try a couple others I found. They work like the data compression methods used for digital imaging, like one called the portable network graphics routine. It’s a lossless compression method. If you use digital images, that’s called a PNG file.”

“Will doing that interfere with Marcos accessing the images?”

“Nope. The cyber group’s got someone assigned to work on that already. It’s part of the lab’s communications mission area—data compression,” Foster said.

Tamara helped put the equipment they used away and she left with Emma to return to Emma’s lab.

“Now that was fascinating,” Emma said. “And your coils worked just about the way you planned, didn’t they.”

“I’m pleased too,” Tamara answered. “They did.”

Emma laughed. “So tell me... You lit up the real-time scans twice. They looked entirely different to the first several, even to this untrained eye. The first time, your forebrain went all white and like a bolt of lightning, the white area streaked over the top... is that the cortex?... and then slowly faded. You called it a ‘brain fart,’ but I reckon that it was your intuition machine in action, innit?”

“Yep. Got a good idea then.”

“So I’m chuffed to have the distinct honor of being one of the first people to witness a true ‘brainstorm.’ In high resolution and full contrast, even, to be sure.”

“Hey, that’s awesome. I gotta remember that,” Tamara laughed. “But I did see a bunch of artefacts at the high-resolution views and those were obviously caused by noise. I’ll need to see if that can be filtered by programming or if it needs some circuit tweaking.”

Emma nodded. “How much time will that need, and will it delay the rest of the project?”

“It won’t delay anything, but to answer the first part, I’ll need to look at the data files first. But, Emma, did you see those patches that lit up? That shows a new brain functionality. The sites are too small and widely distributed so they’ve never showed up in medical MRIs. And I can’t be the only person who has those

structures. Why are they at the brain's surface, too? And lined up like that... oh jeez..."

Emma chuckled. "What thought did your incredible intuition prompt now?"

"Lined up like an antenna... the antennas in RFID chips have a similar pattern. I wonder if those nerve cell patches have an electromagnetic output? EEGs detect the brain's electrical activity. Beauford said my EEGs showed a very high activity... Emma, I need to get an EEG to work with."

"Oh dear, I'll need to..."

"No, wait. Maybe my old med school hospital still has the one that they surplussed. Tim's a pack rat; he never throws old stuff away. I'll ask him. If he has it, we could get it for nothing. I know it was, um, the hospital called it 'deaccessioned' so it's not in the inventory anymore. I'll call him."

When they got back to Emma's lab, Tamara called Tim and got his voice mail. She left a message for him to call back when he was free. Then, turning to Emma, she asked to meet with her in the office. Emma looked at her quizzically, but led her in and they sat.

"So what's up now?" Emma asked.

Tamara dug into her ever-present backpack and brought out a sheaf of papers and Emma recognized that some of them were the microphotographs that Tamara had taken of the first coil chip she had tested, the one with the coil alignment distortion.

"A few days ago, I was doing some additional calcs on the coils and had taken these papers out of my file for reference," Tamara began. "Then I noticed something that I had missed before. This photo shows the view zoomed in on coil one, and the 'scope light is illuminating the chip there." She pointed out the feature to Emma. "But look here, at coil two. See the light there? It's in shadow from the 'scope light, yet it's lit up from the inside somehow."

Emma looked at the photo and then up at Tamara. "Could it be reflections from the room somehow?"

"No, I had the area dark to get better photo contrast. That made this 'ghost light' show up better, actually. So here's the latest. Just before we did that MRI experiment earlier, my engineer Betty gave me these photos." She laid them out. "We got the original coil chips out and ran tests shining light into just one and got nothing. But then I told Betty to try applying a bit of power to the circuit, and look."

The photo showed a bright spot in the center of the unlit coil.

"Here it is with a red filter on the source."

Now the photo had a red spot where the white one was.

Tamara continued, "I told her to get some other original coil chips out and try them to see if the effect is characteristic of the coils and it turned out it wasn't. So something else was happening. Then I got..."

Emma interrupted, laughing, "One of your famous insights, I'm sure."

Tamara shot a pouting look at her and went on, "I theorized that those two original coils had gotten somehow linked, kinda like a form of quantum entanglement, but at a macro scale."

Emma nodded and said, "You can see the implications of that insight here, can't you." Tamara grinned at her and nodded to go ahead. "Einstein, you know I love to quote him, said something like 'Measurement of one subatomic particle can instantaneously affect the measurement of some other particle, no matter how much distance separates them.' In writing about this counterintuitive idea in physics, he made the famous statement, complaining, 'God does not play dice with the universe.' He also used the phrase 'Spooky action at a distance,'

but that was a general comment about observations of quantum states, not specifically about quantum entanglement, but people eventually began to link those comments to his thoughts about entanglement. So what did you do to test your theory?”

“That’s what Betty gave me earlier, the results of those experiments. I figured that when the two original coils interacted and pushed each other away when they were energized, it somehow linked or entangled them. So I asked her to take two separated coil circuits and energize them while they were in very close proximity—of course while allowing for their violent repulsion. Here are photos of the light testing on those coils.”

She showed Emma the photos; the center of the unilluminated coil was glowing the same color as the source coil.

“The coils need some power, but use only a tiny amount to do this. Betty took the second coil to the next room and then to the next building and the light intensity in the second coil was unchanged. These pages show the results of applying RF or other electromagnetic energy to the first coil and it can be detected at the second one. But there was a bit of a change in the received signal—instead of any attenuation, the energy out exceeded the energy in by a certain percentage.”

Emma sighed. “Once again, you’ve staggered me, Tamara. This discovery is as revolutionary—no, even more—than your others. This discovery implies that travel of information at speeds faster than light is possible.”

“Um, not really. It doesn’t violate the principle that light-speed can’t be exceeded. Remember, the coils appear to open a portal into another... um ... space or universe or dimension or whatever. I’m guessing that the coils, when entangled, somehow warp that interdimensional space so that they are physically close. I plan to try to explain what happens mathematically. But meanwhile, I’ve got Betty looking into trying to scale this up and I’m thinking that this could be a way of achieving wireless power transmission at distances, especially since there appears to be a power gain. It would be nice to be able to exploit that.”

Emma was grinning broadly. “Don’t neglect highly secure communications. A pair of linked coils would be an impossible communication method to break into.”

“Yep. That’s in my development notes too, Emma. I thought of a bunch of applications and wrote them down. They’ll become my patent claims.”

“I taught you all too well,” Emma sighed and grinned. “Are you going to look into removing those signal artifacts we saw in the MRI scans now?”

“Right. I’m getting on that right now.”

Tamara went back to her corner of the lab where she had her desk and logged into the secure server used for storing the MRI data. She opened the image file containing the artifacts she had seen. After examining the data and looking at the output of the surrounding coils, she realized that the noise was caused by incomplete hysteresis damping in the coils’ signal receiving section. That kind of noise could be removed by the signal processing software, so she sent a message off to the MRI programming support person with the details. While she was doing that, Tim called her back.

“Hi there, Tim,” she answered.

“Hi yourself, Tamara. What’s up? Last you told me, you were about to start on your big project. Still on schedule?”

“Oh, sure. The tests with the phantom worked and the signal levels are all set but we had no idea if the spatial resolution was what the numbers had suggested, so I had them do a series on me.”

“And? You sound happy so I’m guessing it’s good news.”

“The best news. The resolution is a three-order-of-magnitude improvement over the best 3-tesla equipment. I can’t wait to see what it would be with a 7-tesla machine. They’re thinking of making an 11 or 12-tesla MRI here, like the 11.7 one at the NIH in Bethesda, but that would be two years. There’s a lot of concern with the health effects of the 7-tesla system, so until its safety profile is better known, there won’t be any work on a stronger magnet. So anyway, the images we got are excellent.”

“That’s great, girl, but it’s not why you called, right?”

“You know me too well. We saw detail of fine structures in my images and those structures showed activity in the fMRI. But we don’t know what kind of activity, so I thought that trying an EEG would show something. Do you still have that decommissioned one I used to play with?”

“Still have that one.”

“Nice. Would it be possible to send it to the Johns Hopkins Physics Department? Like do an official transfer or donation?”

“That should be easy; that equipment isn’t on our inventory anymore. The thing’s got several dead channels so it can’t be used clinically and, although you fixed those channels by cobbling up bypass circuits, the machine isn’t FDA compliant anymore. I’ll check it out and let you know. To add to that deal, the med school Neurology Department has an excessed EEG electrode head-cap assembly. They replaced it with a wireless self-contained unit. It’s a bit shopworn but it has many more electrode positions than the clinical ones use, the 10-20 layout.”

“Thanks, Tim.” She disconnected.

*Now I need to find a neurologist to look at the EEG tracings. This is getting complicated,* she thought.

## Chapter 51 - MRI Experiments

### *Early February*

When February began, Tamara's MRI project was in full operation. She had recruited fourteen subjects and had designed a protocol that was broken into several different related tasks, with a possible follow-up of smaller scope, depending on the results of the first series. Tamara had read several articles in the literature which claimed that the anterior cingulate cortex was highly active in empathic response, followed closely by the hypothalamus and amygdala, but specific details differed somewhat for gender and the amount of activity seemed to be related to age. So her studies would be concentrating on those structures.

The first session for each subject was to quantify their midbrain activities detected by the fMRI to try to rank them by degree of empathy. In the protocol, the subjects viewed images of great emotional content, listened to sound tracks of babies crying, and were exposed to similar items of emotional content, while the fMRI scan recorded how the subjects' brains responded.

Then, on a different day, the subjects were given the task she had designed to activate their olfactory tracts. This task had them trying to distinguish between the three fruit flavors she had chosen while their nostrils were blocked. To confuse their visual-association sense, the flavored items were presented to them in a capsule of the color of a different flavor. She used a cognitive feedback technique in this task to have the subjects "train" themselves to pay very close attention in identifying each flavor.

The third task in the sequence combined the first two, in an attempt to see if the activation of the subjects' limbic systems could be enhanced by exposing them to mixtures of the fruit flavors, in different proportions of two of the three flavors, and having them attempt to identify the predominant flavor. This test required the recall of a sensory memory and mobilized most of the midbrain structures responsible for memory processing and recall, including the limbic system and the hippocampal formation, while keeping their olfactory tracts active.

After three weeks, the first series of subject tasks were complete and Dr Marcos had the scans. A few days later, he called Tamara, quite excited.

"Tamara, those scans are incredible; the resolution and detail are amazing. I'd like to call in some colleagues to analyze these scans with me, I'm seeing things on the scans that have never been described before."

"Of course. You can get others to work with the scans. Just one thing—they all need to sign an NDA 'cause I'm working on the patents for the device. And there's subject confidentiality to maintain also."

"Sure. Can you send the NDA form to me?"

"Yeah, I'll email you a pdf. They can sign one and you can return the signed copy to me by campus mail. But scan and email the scan or a photo of the signed copy back to me also in case the campus mail gets lost or something."

~~~~~

Tamara was in Emma's Physics office going over some of the magnet monopole project measurements about a week later, when Dr Montern appeared at the door.

"She's done it again," he announced, solemnly.

"Sorry?" Emma said, looking up. "What? Who?"

"Upset the whole world of science. Tamara," Montern said, unhappily.

"Chet, come in, sit down, keep calm and carry on," Emma joked. "What's Tamara done now?"

“Ha. What *hasn't* she done. I got off the phone with Dr Karasitos, the head of the Neuroscience Department, a few minutes ago. He called me from the med school with Dr Ellenden on the line; she's a vice dean there. My sense from their call is that the med school department heads are getting concerned that Physics is taking over their faculty. There's about a dozen of their faculty who are involved with Tamara's project now...”

Tamara giggled. “It's twenty-three as of an hour ago...”

Montern looked at her while trying to keep a stern look on his face, but then cracked up.

“Yeah, Karasitos told me that six of his faculty, they're in cognitive neuroscience, are poring over some MRI scans from Tamara's project. The dean said that half of the med school's and hospital's radiologists, three pathologists, a number of neurologists, and several psychiatrists—if I'm keeping it straight—are glued to their computers, looking at those scans.

“Um, I think there are one or two psychologists and someone in histology too,” Tamara offered.

Emma leaned back and let out a hearty laugh. “She'll take over the university next, won't she,” she sighed.

“So tell me how a physics project got into, well, medicine, I guess,” Montern asked.

Emma looked at Tamara and motioned for her to answer.

“So I'm really doing physics where it interfaces with biology. That's biophysics, and like one thing biophysicists do is to study how nerve cells communicate—and my work has been tending in that direction. I'm putting that topic together with electrical engineering, since nerve calls act like biological electrical circuits. I'm also using physics when I design MRI improvements. Every system in an MRI uses something based on modern physics. Superconductivity, electromagnetism, radio wave propagation, quantum electronics. And engineering physics too, that's integrated circuits and semiconductors. Josephson junctions and even Andreev electron scattering are playing important parts in my work. My MRI project was to use the special properties of the SET, the single electron transistor, and designing superconducting RF generating and receiving circuits, to improve the spatial resolution of the scans. That's helping my collaborators—all twenty-three of them now,” she giggled, “...learn how nerve cells communicate.”

“Hmm, a real cross-discipline project,” Montern mused. “The old model of physics with solo researchers is disappearing...”

“That disappeared generations ago, Chet, starting with particle physics,” Emma grinned. “Big physics started, most science historians would say, in 1929, when Ernest Lawrence got his idea for the cyclotron. Then, a little more than a decade later, came the Manhattan Project. Then the *really* huge projects started. Since the equipment in a typical high-energy physics lab costs a million bucks or more, that lab would want to keep a bunch of them occupied, wouldn't it. My own solid-state lab has thirteen engineers and techs and three postdoc physicists—not to mention two remarkable students, and Tamara's employing two additional engineer types. When I got my first appointment to the APL, I had decided to work solo and couldn't understand why they gave me a lab. Blimey, I was so naive then. Even Tamara couldn't have done what she's done without a team backing her, right, Tamara?”

“Totally. It's true that I get ideas but it takes a number of people to build what I imagine.”

“So I gather the resolution of your MRI coils is the featured news?” Montern asked.

“Yep. The ability to see structures at a finer scale lets you see new neurologic activity centers and new pathways linking them. So this is allowing the researchers to better understand what the brain regions do.”

Emma laughed. “Tamara's got a bunch of patent apps in the pipeline now and it means that diagnostic and

research medicine will get a new tool without having to invest in an MRI with a stronger magnet. I reckon that her new coil will be a hot item for most diagnostic centers. And I've got my Cambridge company's solicitors talking to Tamara's about licensing deals."

### *Mid-February*

"Emma, Dr Marcos sent me the preliminary results of the first set of experiments," Tamara said.

It was mid-February and Tamara was getting ready for the second phase of her MRI tests; she had gone to Emma's office to discuss her project and the latest idea she had gotten.

"You'll recall that I was screening for empathy as a possible way to activate the parts of the brain that I suspect work to give me my abilities. To classify our volunteers' empathy levels, Marcos divided them into three groups based on the written screening questionnaire and their brain activity. The least empathic was a '1' and the most, a '3.' What he found was that the people with the highest empathies also had the best results in the olfactory tests."

"So I reckon that result helps support your chemical messaging theory, then?" Emma asked.

"Yeah, and also how the brain causes empathy in a person; so that raises a question about charisma. One of the most charismatic people I ever met was your sister-in-law Sam. Do you think that I could get her to do a session with the fMRI? It would be a one-shot scan session and she'd just need to watch a video clip and say something about what she thought about it."

"I'll ask, but if you're flexible on the time, I think she'd do it."

"Good, thanks," Tamara said.

~~~~~

The other part of Tamara's latest idea was twofold. One was to scan Peter, her super-empath subject, and the other was to look for her own chemical signals. Doing the EEG part would have to wait. She had worked out a way to try to capture organic molecules from the air, even the tiny levels of her theorized personal pheromones. She had already lined up time on the new device that the Mass Spectrometry Lab in the Department of Chemistry had recently gotten—it was capable of detection of small biological chemicals in the low femtogram concentration region. The device was a chemist's answer to the physicist's particle beam accelerator.

Tamara recalled that very tiny amounts of illegal drugs could be detected in an athlete's blood by using a device called a mass spectrometer. Sometimes a gas chromatograph device would be coupled to a mass spectrometer for certain complex analyses; in her case, that additional instrument wasn't needed. Her analysis would employ the new time-of-flight mass spectrometer the lab had gotten. In the device, a volatilized specimen is placed in the source chamber and the molecules in the specimen are ionized with a laser pulse. Then the charged ions are electrostatically accelerated into a drift chamber. The ions of a small mass, as they travel through the chamber, move faster than the heavier ions, so the beam of ions which impacts the detector is separated according to ion mass. Each compound has its own ion mass signature; this is referred to as its "spectra."

She also had figured out how to collect any airborne pheromones. Peter's Uncle Dave worked in Ft. Detrick at USAMRIID, the United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, the Defense Department's facility for research into defenses against biological warfare agents. Dave had told her about some of the work he did as a virologist and had mentioned the small portable isolation units they used for field work. Tamara had contacted him and arranged to borrow one and had it set up in the MRI room with an air sampler on the unit's exhaust; this would trap any organic molecules from the exhaust air on its filter.

Tamara planned to run several tests during the next few months. One was to try to collect any unusual organic



chemicals in the air when she “pushed” an emotional color taste, but she had learned that her “push” needed a target—and the target couldn’t be herself; that only worked for limited things, like biofeedback methods did. She decided to use the thirst emotion as the challenge, since most of the others in her repertoire were more unpleasant. This part of her followup experiment had two components: the first was with her in the open but out of sight of the subject and the second was with her in the isolation tent with the chemical-capturing filter in place.

She planned slightly more elaborate tests with Peter and a simple one with Sam—Sam’s was to scan her brain when given the task of reacting to a brief video and presenting her point of view on the video’s topic in a convincing way. Tamara had no doubt whatsoever that Sam would perform that task admirably. Tamara, like many other people, saw how charismatic people always had their personalities turned on—like many other people, she had noticed that when certain people entered a busy room, most everyone in the room turned to look at who had entered, despite their being engaged with other activities, like conversations, at the time.

Tamara had arranged with a faculty member in the Hopkins Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology to collaborate on identifying and characterizing the molecules that the isolation unit’s air filters had trapped. They had analyzed those molecules using the Chemistry Department’s mass spectrometer unit and now had copies of their spectra; this allowed them to use their characteristic fragmentation patterns to match up the fragment ions formed with known molecules. Tamara met with one of his postdoctoral fellows, Joyce Darner, who agreed to help to do the identification.

What Darner found from analyzing the spectra of Tamara’s compounds was that they were all based on a compound very similar in structure to the supposed human pheromones called androstadienone and estratetraenol, exocrine hormones produced by human males—the “andro” compound, and females—the “estra” form. Even though those molecules had been assumed to be sexual pheromones, Tamara knew that every well controlled study published to date failed to show a significant sexual response to exposure to the molecule. But Tamara’s molecules were slightly different from the base molecule; the MS analyses showed that in Tamara’s case, the major difference was that the methyl group moiety in the molecule was replaced by different radical groups of varying composition.

By early February, Darner had enough information to attempt to synthesize one of the molecules, one with the simplest radical group. Tamara had visited her to learn what she had found.

“Tamara, this is a hard one to make synthetically. The attached radical groups make the molecule fairly unstable during syntheses, but that’s not the real problem.”

“What’s the problem, then?” Tamara asked.

“I get optical isomers when I synthesize the compound,” she said, “and isolating one enantiomer from the other hasn’t worked; the molecules degrade easily. The molecules you secrete are the D-enantiomer, I suspect that, biologically, the stereoisomer mixture would not work at best or be harmful at worst. That’s what’s been found in pharmacology when dealing with stereoisomers.”

Tamara knew from her organic chemistry courses that biologically active molecules are enantiomeric, or stereoisomeric. They have identical chemical structures except that their bonding angles differ at certain atoms in such a way that the physical shape of one version cannot be converted to the other. Such molecules also possess optical activity; that is, under certain conditions, light passed through concentrations of the molecules is polarized in either a right- or left-handed direction; thus they are labeled “D” for “dextro,” or right-handed, or “L” for “levo,” the left-handed version. She also recalled that stereoisomers of the same molecule have different biological properties in pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics. These properties describe how long they stay active in the body and how the body absorbs, metabolizes, and excretes them.

“Uh huh, I understand,” Tamara told her. “Can you keep trying? This might be a breakthrough chemical. Or is there a way to concentrate the molecule from the filters?”

“Possibly. This work is a real challenge, and it’s an interesting molecule too. Something brand new that nobody’s seen before; that’s rare.”

Tamara left, wondering how to deal with this part of her emotion-communicating project. She vowed to look into the quantum-mechanical properties of steroid hormones to see if that could suggest an answer.

~~~~~

But National Engineers Week was here and on Saturday, Tamara and Emma would be presented with the Draper Prize. Engineers Week gets little publicity, not because the seventy-odd engineering and education societies that observe it don’t try to make the public aware of it. So do all the fifty-plus corporations and government agencies which get involved in it. But most scientific events rarely get significant coverage in the news. News which isn’t scandalous, sensational, dramatic, or lurid, mostly doesn’t get published.

The National Engineers Week was created in 1951 to recognize the contributions to society that engineers make and it’s observed on the week in which George Washington’s birthday, February 22, occurs. Washington is regarded as the nation’s first engineer because of his initial career as a land surveyor, which he began at age 17.

The Draper Prize is awarded at an event hosted by the U.S. National Academy of Engineering and this year, the awards ceremony and banquet were to take place in a D.C. hotel ballroom. Honorees could invite family and friends to attend, so Tamara included her family and Peter and his family, while Emma invited her family. There was a dinner followed by speeches and then Tamara and Emma each gave a brief acceptance speech.

As the event was winding up, Sam looked at her siblings.

“Kinda low-key compared to the Nobel Prize ceremony, innit?” she chuckled.

Emma nodded, grinning. “I much prefer this kind.”

“You guys went to Emma’s Nobel Prize affair? Wow,” Tamara exclaimed.

“It was brill,” Abi gushed. “Especially how all the people there, the nobility too, thought Sam and I were the granddaughters of one of the laureates. And when they saw who this Dr Emma Clarke really was, a 14-year-old kid, most of the blokes there were gobsmacked.”

Those in Peter’s family were amused by this revelation and wanted all of the details and Sam was happy to comply [as told in *Emma Comes in from the Cold*].

~~~~~

Back at work after the weekend, Tamara dealt with a number of invites for her to present a seminar, sent by email and even a few by postal mail, by politely sending her regrets. Then she dove back into her calculations. She had some new ideas which had occurred to her from speaking to a few of the engineers and scientists at the NAE event. Several had asked questions about applying her discoveries about electron storage and flow to their own design situations and her answers had led her to another inspiration about how mathematics could account for her discovery.

She had realized that the explanation for how her circuit permitted electrons to flow against a charge gradient was almost certainly related to the repulsive magnetic monopole phenomenon she had discovered; her accumulator circuit design and its physical layout were similar in both cases. She began her calculations with the assumption that the circuit that she had invented, which allows electrons to move against a charge gradient, must be analogous to the electrostatic phenomenon known as quantum tunneling, where electrons are able to

penetrate a potential energy barrier whose energy exceeds the electron's kinetic energy. Under the influence of her circuit, which employed her unique use of superconducting components and single-electron transistors, the SETs, to amplify current flow, she theorized that the attractive force exerted on the electrons by the coil circuit's monopole force effect was stronger than the repulsion of the electrostatic field, allowing the electrons to travel through the electrostatic barrier of the field.

Because of the extremely small size of the SETs' superconducting junctions, whatever force that the monopole effect created was operating on the negatively charged electrons, and was therefore attractive. An electrical charge in motion creates a magnetic field; electrons are charged particles, and since they are always in motion, their magnetic moment allowed the monopole force to pull them into the storage matrix. In the larger coil arrays Tamara had designed, the force no longer operated at a quantum scale; the scale had become macroscopic, so the force was repulsive, not only to ferromagnetic and paramagnetic materials; it affected most matter.

The dense electron packing her circuit achieved was therefore a result of the monopole force—the “coil force,” she had decided to call it—which appeared to fold space inside the lattice and allowed very high electron densities to be achieved. The reason that the Pauli exclusion principle seemed to be violated locally was because when the potential energies of the system were calculated, the calculations appeared to show that electrons with identical quantum numbers were occupying the same atomic orbitals within the same atom. That was the Pauli principle violation; no two electrons in an atom can have the same four quantum numbers. But the electrons in the storage matrix were not actually occupying orbitals in the same physical atom; they were distributed throughout the folded space created by the coil force.

When Tamara completed her calculations—and after multiple rechecks—that she finished several days later, she was very excited; she couldn't see anything wrong with her calculations or her initial assumptions. It did look to her that the known theories of quantum electrodynamics could account for both the electron flow and electron storage. She needed Emma's advice.

“Blimey, Tamara, where's the fire?” Emma exclaimed as Tamara burst into her office, quivering with excitement.

“These calcs. Emma, please tell me if I'm right and didn't make some kind of dumb error.”

Emma studied the pages for several minutes; then she leaned back into her chair.

“Bloody awesome... Tamara, I'm about to embarrass you the way my own advisor did when I showed him my maths for the superconductor formula design. I want you to present this work to the whole faculty; you've done something that physicists all over haven't been able to figure out, and as well, you did it using current quantum physics methods.”

“So the math is okay then?” Tamara asked. She was still processing Emma's comment.

“Quite. All the maths work out. It's your initial assumption, the electron charge tunneling, that may be controversial, but the maths can't be denied. Your idea of the ‘coil force’ though—that will set off many old-school physicists. The numbers work, however. And the maths backing the theory as shown here matches how the physical device works. Publishing this work, though, could be a challenge because it's so revolutionary.

“But I'm not going to be like Niels Bohr, who was Werner Heisenberg's supervisor. Bohr had prevented Heisenberg from publishing one of his ideas, the one which involved postulating a thought experiment involving a ‘gamma-ray microscope’ to directly observe an electron's position—Heisenberg had formulated that idea to help validate his uncertainty principle. I had read that Bohr was opposed to that idea, so he blocked him from publishing it. But when Bohr went on vacation, Heisenberg submitted the paper anyway. Bohr was annoyed about his doing it but they did reconcile, though, and their later contributions to physics was enormous.

Today, their work, together with that of Max Born and others, is known as the ‘Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics.’

“So even though I don’t understand how the maths can be explained in terms of our physical reality, I won’t keep you from publishing the work—and the first step is for you to organize a talk—get other physicists involved in discussing the maths. The more it’s discussed, the quicker your ideas will get accepted. But on the other hand, you know, Max Planck once said that a new scientific truth doesn’t triumph because it convinces its opponents and makes them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die and a new generation grows up that’s familiar with it. What that really means is that science advances by one funeral at a time.”

They both laughed.

“Okay then; let’s organize a seminar for you. At least you’ll get a chance to prepare. My advisor just grabbed me and a bunch of department members, dragged us off to a classroom, and told me to start talking. I’ll let you know what I arrange. Go prepare a forty-minute presentation; there’ll be plenty of questions, I’m sure.”

Tamara left the office, still feeling a bit unbalanced. *My work was good. My math was correct. I guess I’m learning how to be a good scientist.*

About an hour later, Terence dropped by. He and Tamara checked in with each other at least once a day and discussed their work; they had a lot of overlaps in their electronic systems designs.

“Hey, Tamara, Emma was talkin’ about y’all just before,” he told her when he stopped at her office. Tamara’s little office was located in a corner of Emma’s lab in the Physics-Astronomy building. “She was on a call as Ah was comin’ in to talk t’her and Ah heard a bit.”

“You weren’t eavesdropping, I hope?”

“Nah. It was good stuff. She was finishin’ the call and said something like, ‘she’s the modern version of Leonardo Da Vinci, actually,’” he chuckled. “Ah’m guessin’ she was talkin’ ‘bout y’all.”

“She said that? Really? Wow...”

“Hey, Ah think she’s right. He wasn’t just a great artist... he was also into engineering, anatomy, zoology, botany... um... geology, optics, aerodynamics, and hydrodynamics, from what Ah remember of his work. Y’all’re doin’ most of the same things... much more modern versions, though,” he laughed. “Let’s see, quantum and classical physics, electrical engineering, neuroscience and neuroanatomy, biochemistry, and probably psychology too. Right?”

“I suppose so. But in my case, they’re all related. Leonardo’s work was all over the place. Just think of the range of inventions he thought of. How he found the time to do all of that work is mind-boggling. I’m nowhere in the same class as he was.”

Terence laughed. “Lots’a folks would disagree, right there. Say, Ah wanted to show you what Ah came up with for the latest version of my infrared detector for the ‘scope...”

They spent about an hour going over Terence’s circuit design and he left, happy with the results.

### ***Early May***

During the rest of the spring semester, Tamara worked with Peter and had him in the MRI for a few sessions; she also had Sam in once, and worked with a few selected subjects from her student volunteer group for a small follow-up study. Both she and Emma had decided to use some of their Draper Prize money to fund the parts of her research which were beyond the scope of Emma’s federal grants.

Tim’s shipment of the used EEG unit and electrode headset arrived in early April and Tamara paid a visit to the

Neurology Department at the Hopkins School of Medicine to get some lessons in the proper electrode use. She was met by several very enthusiastic neurologists who were delighted to help her; they even offered to have one of the department's technicians work with her to do some EEG scans. They told her about how their review of the MRI scans she had done in her study had triggered many new ideas about brain function and several of the physicians were actually writing research grant proposals to investigate the new brain interactions that they had seen.

In late April, Emma told Tamara that they were going to England in June.

"We are?" Tamara asked a grinning Emma. "Why?"

"Nothing very big, but I just heard that I'm getting a bloody knighthood," Emma chuckled.

"Emma! That's so awesome!" Tamara exclaimed. "That's a really big honor. Is it about your research?"

"Possibly, but not bloomin' likely," Emma smiled. "They usually don't look at science for those honors. They give them for performing some kind of extraordinary service to the country—usually in the arts, business, or humanitarian areas. Something that enhances the reputation of the British people. Science honors have been uncommon but that may be changing. In my case, I reckon that it was the startup of my battery-research and manufacturing enterprise in Cambridge three years ago. It's made England the world center for battery technology and energy storage, innit. And that brings money into the country; it's estimated to be hundreds of millions of quid. Now here's why you're coming too... as well, they have an honor for you..."

She had to stop as Tamara gasped as she clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Indeed, as the inventor of the technology, you also have a share in the economic benefit to the U.K. I think you absolutely deserve it. If someone like Bill Gates got an honor for his charitable work—not that I think he didn't deserve it; his foundation is well known—then you certainly should for what you've done. As well, the blokes at EEC Energy Solutions, my Cambridge company, want to show you the prototype for the commercial energy-storage accumulator unit based on your invention. Until now, the current largest unit on the market can store up to 3.9 megawatt-hours of electricity in a unit that is forty feet long, eight feet high and eight feet deep and weighs about 50,000 pounds.

"Our prototype modular unit stores about 14.7 megawatt-hours and it fits in an eight-foot cube and weighs perhaps 6,500 pounds, or a bit less. Your use of that porous polyvinylidene compound substrate as a base makes the accumulator so much lighter—not to mention its not needing much metals. All the boffins in my Cambridge group are celebrating at these numbers and we've got a lot of very happy staff now too, don't we."

"Emma, I have to say that I'm speechless..."

"My dear, I told you that you would become world-famous for your work, and the accumulator is just the beginning. I've set my marketing people a goal for developing batteries for electric vehicles now. And we haven't even scratched the surface on the application possibilities for that 'coil force' invention of yours. Now I understand that your own personal investigation about the brain function research is complete and you just need to review the data."

"Yep. There's still just so much for everyone to do, though. Was this what it was like when you were developing your superconducting formula—so many people all doing different things? My head spins trying to keep track."

"That's it precisely, my dear. They were all collaborators in my project, as they are in yours. Your role's like being the conductor of a symphony orchestra; every player could be a soloist in his or her own right, but they chose to form a group and each makes a vital contribution. The kind of science you're doing is a true

collaboration.”

### ***End of May***

University graduation was on the third Monday of May. It turned out that Tamara’s majoring in both physics and electrical engineering was the cause of a bit of bureaucratic wrangling. According to university policy, dual majors received the degree awarded by their “primary” major. But Tamara had completed all of the requirements for a bachelor’s degree in both physics and in engineering; indeed, she had earned some twenty-plus additional graduate credits in both majors. Because of her accomplishments, both departments insisted that she be counted as a graduate of their department and receive a degree that reflected her work in their discipline. This was a matter of real importance for both departments because, essentially, a renowned scholar brought recognition to the department which granted their degree.

In the end, the top university officials refused to change the university’s dual major graduation policy, despite their acknowledgment that Tamara was certainly worthy of such an honor. The officials’ reasoning? That setting such a precedent would encourage less worthy students to request waivers. A conference between the two departments took place with the result that Tamara was awarded three degrees at graduation: A bachelor’s and master’s of science degree in physics, and a master’s of electrical engineering degree. The departments took advantage of a loophole in the university’s graduate school degree requirements which placed no limits on the awarding of multiple graduate degrees, provided that the candidate met the degree program’s requirements. Tamara also received various other honors, both departmental and university.

Peter was awarded his own degree at the ceremony, a bachelor of science in electrical engineering with a mathematics minor, while Barbara received her bachelor of science in psychology with a sociology minor. Terence had not skipped a year, so he was continuing on as a senior. Barbara had accepted an offer from University of Maryland to enter their doctoral psychology program; she didn’t want to leave Terence, even for graduate school and besides, Maryland was highly ranked in their psychology program. Both Peter and Tamara were continuing on in graduate school at Hopkins.

~~~~~

At the end of one of Peter’s final MRI sessions on the last Friday of May, he asked Tamara if she had drawn any conclusions about how empathy and charisma were processed in the brain.

“Actually I have strong evidence now that people appear to send signals to each other,” Tamara replied. “In my tests, I found that by having the subjects use the positive feedback techniques I showed them, I was able to get them to improve their empathy scores and we could see the corresponding changes in the MRI scans. So that tells me that the ability is native.”

“So it’s a learned ability?” Peter asked.

“Yep. That might be a good topic for a psych study, in fact, but I’m not gonna get sidetracked. So the MRI scans of those subjects showed the development of patches of receptors—or possibly the activation of inactive receptors—in their olfactory bulbs. And when I ‘pushed’ thirst to the subjects, it seems that they had two separate responses. If I was in the isolation tent and they responded to the thirst, then those neocortical patches I saw in my own scans lit up, but only a little—those were the ones I told you about, the ones whose layout looked like little antennas. When I was outside the tent, then both the neocortical patches and the ones in the olfactory bulb lit up.”

“That means the brain can receive both chemical and electrical signals, then, right?” Peter asked.

“That’s what the results of those experiments suggest, anyway,” Tamara agreed. “And I did get positive results from the mass spec lab about identifying a new biochemical compound in the air, captured on the air filter while

I was ‘pushing’ the emotion. The scans done on me when I was ‘pushing’ showed much activity increase in my neocortical patches. It appears that the sebaceous glands in my scalp and forehead were stimulated and that appears to be where that chemical came from. A few swabs confirmed that. Joyce Darner, my postdoc collaborator in the Biochemistry Department, is still working on the molecule and she says she’s making progress. The endocrinologists over at the med school are jumping all over those results ‘cause it seems to show a completely new human physiological process: a voluntary biochemical secretion and the corresponding response to a chemical stimulus.”

“So your volunteers still got thirsty when you were in the tent and your chemical signal didn’t reach them.” Peter clarified.

“They got thirsty, yes, but it was nowhere as strong as when I was outside it. I said that their neocortical patches lit up a little but I couldn’t properly test what happens there electrically ‘cause I can’t do an EEG in the MRI room at the same time as a scan is run. But my own EEG tracings when I ‘push,’ show intense electrical activity in my parietal neocortex. I’m guessing that I generated some kind of external electrical signal that the subjects picked up and got the thirst sensation, but that was a weak result compared to when their olfactory tracts became involved.

“And then when Sam was scanned, that area of her neocortex totally lit up, so my working theory is that charismatic individuals broadcast some kind of electrical signal that announces their presence. And in your case, your empathy, I already told you that you appear to have the same number of those parietal neocortical patches that I do, but yours are always... um, energized, I guess I could say, at a much lower level than Sam’s but much greater than any of my first test subjects. Your brain is always in ‘receiving’ mode and that’s why your empathy gave you so much trouble in high school.”

“Jeez, that’s so cool, learning all that about the brain,” Peter said. “But how much of that stuff can you publish?”

Tamara chuckled. “I didn’t mention this, I guess. So much is going on. I’m a co-author on, um, fourteen papers now, those are just the ones for the medical literature. There are two more in chemistry and three in psych journals. My contributions to those papers came from my being actively involved in the experimental design that those papers describe. Only four of them’ve been published so far, but the rest are due out in the next two or three months.”

While Tamara and Peter were talking, they were helping Davy Foster to close up the lab and then they headed out to Peter’s car. He had recently gotten it as a graduation gift from his grandfather Mason, a four-year-old hand-me-down, and he was trying to get Tamara to learn to drive.

As they approached the car, he asked her, “So when d’you wanna start some lessons, then?”

She giggled. “Not yet, honey. I like having a cute chauffeur. Maybe when we’re back from England.”

“I can’t believe how many irons you have in the fire, babe; it’s crazy,” Peter smiled at her. “Let’s see if I can get them all. First, analyzing the MRI studies you just told me about, to see which brain areas your ‘pushing’ affects. Second, the work on your chemical secretion. You still don’t know how it’s different for each emotion you ‘push,’ right?”

“Yep, but we’ve made some progress there and we might be close. Go on...”

“Third, you wanted to see if the chemicals you secrete have any effect on a subject if the subject is exposed to them without your ‘pushing’ them. Fourth, the EEG studies. You’re trying to find out if you generate some kind of electrical signal when you ‘push’ an emotion color. You also told me you were trying to figure out a way to do the EEGs in the magnet room. Fifth, your work on the monopole force discovery. You’re working on the link

between that force and the electron charge tunneling idea that you've hypothesized. Sixth, writing each of those things up for the stuff you plan to publish. Did I miss anything?"

"Um, us helping my folks move into their new house?" Tamara suggested.

Tamara's parents had just closed on their new home and she and Peter were going to help.



## Chapter 52 - A Startling Proposal

### *Little Haiti, Miami, Florida: four months earlier*

The Alexandres had returned to Miami in January to close out their affairs there and pack up to move; Nadine would give the VA a month's notice and Wilson would give the county his two-week notice. They quickly found out that Werner did indeed "know" people. During their second week back, a commercial developer from a national firm with a Miami office called Wilson with a proposal. The developer, a friend of one of Werner's business associates, had done some preliminary work on reviewing the Alexandres' property and the neighborhood area. Three of the four properties which had "land-locked" the Alexandres' lot were potentially available to be purchased. One was in tax arrears; a second was unoccupied and owned by a real estate investment trust, a REIT—the property was being held on speculation; and the owner of the third property was habitually late in paying the mortgage. The fourth site was the smallest and was located at the back of the Alexandres' property. The developer had already secured options to purchase two of the properties and was working on the other owners.

The developer had a proposal for Wilson. He thought that if his company could acquire the other two parcels, with the area's zoning, he could build a multi-unit dwelling on the combined sites. Since many properties in the surrounding six-block area were being flipped—many older homes were being demolished and larger homes built in their place—he felt that the market would support building luxury units. So he told Wilson that he would be making generous offers on the second two properties and Wilson's lot, located in the center of the five parcels, would have a significant increase in value. As Nadine had told Tamara, the neighborhood was becoming gentrified and the developer affirmed that fact.

Before they left Miami, the Alexandres packed the essential items from their home and shipped them to their Maryland apartment. They packed up the temple contents as well; for the last step, they arranged to have movers pack up the rest, transport it to Maryland, and put it in storage until they found a permanent home.

Nadine and Wilson returned to Maryland at the end of January and set up housekeeping in a furnished apartment which Werner's people had found for them. They had previously shipped their cars so they would have their use as soon as they arrived in Maryland. During January, Nadine had flown to D.C. and presented a seminar based on her doctoral dissertation to the Westphalia anthropology faculty and they had voted to confirm Nadine's appointment to the department. She now had a joint appointment in the university and in the Columbia Institute of Economics. Then, at the beginning of February, Nadine began her new job.

She had been very concerned about how well she could handle this new job of hers and she wondered how she'd fit into the academic life after being away from it for such a long time. She did enjoy her time as a graduate student at the Universidad de San Juan; she had done very well in her classes and her teaching assignments and her work on her research project had given her immense pleasure. Still, that time was more than twenty years ago.

### *Westphalia University, Westphalia, Maryland: mid-February*

One week after starting her job, Nadine was only just beginning to feel settled in her sparsely decorated office. She was reading one of the anthropology texts the department used in its classes and had several scholarly journals stacked on her desk with Post-It notes sticking out from the pages of several of them. That's how Greta found Nadine when she visited her office and tapped on the door; Nadine invited her in.

"Nadine, I see you're busy reading our materials, but I had a thought about helping you in a more active way; I've sensed that you're still uncertain about your abilities," she told her.

"I hope it's a good thought; I'm trying to get caught up... it's been years," Nadine said, waving her hand at the stack of journals.

“You have all the basics, my friend. I thought of a way to get your confidence way up—that’s to get you in front of some students right away. Normally we don’t ask a new person to jump in and start teaching immediately, but you’ve got a solid knowledge of the principles and from my conversations with you, I doubt you’ve forgotten very much. My idea is for you to take on a section of our junior anthro seminar class. We’ve got a sudden opening; the scheduled instructor was one of our grad students but last week she had to take off the rest of the term for a family emergency. I have a sub in the class this week and was going to shuffle some people around to get it covered, but then I thought of offering you this class.

“This seminar class involves the students reading a selection of current research papers and reviewing the research topic covered and the important works that those papers cite. During each meeting, students present the work in their assigned paper to the rest of the section and then everyone discusses their presentation. You would moderate the presentation and discussion and point out the basic teaching principles that get mentioned. Of course, you’d read the papers too and be able to guide the group, asking leading questions as needed.

“You’d get right into the current research, starting out this way, and leading the class will use your knowledge and communication skills too. The syllabus is already set and the kids all have their assignments, so all you’d need to do is to keep a week ahead of the class. And you’d quickly pick up the modern research in the field. Sound like a plan?”

Nadine smiled and nodded. “I think it’s a perfect plan. This will be a great way to get my feet wet; now tell me the details.”

Greta went over the class with her and showed her the syllabus on the department’s web site. After they finished and as Greta was leaving Nadine’s office, she stopped to ask her a question.

“I meant to ask: any news on your Miami house sale?”

“Actually, yes,” Nadine replied, smiling. “We’ve gotten a really good offer from the developer now. Our lawyer in Miami is checking it out and we’ll get his advice in a few days.”

“Excellent. That’s good news, Nadine.”

Nadine began leading the junior seminar class and was very pleased to find out that she seemed to fit right in; all of her prior experience came flooding back and leading the class was interesting as well. Then, in early April, she was delighted when she received a formal letter from the Universidad de San Juan notifying her that her master’s degree was being corrected to a doctorate since she had indeed met all of the academic requirements; they apologized for the error.

### ***Applied Physics Laboratory, North Laurel, Maryland: mid-February***

Wilson began looking into his own employment options soon after they got settled in their Maryland apartment. There were possible openings at the Naval Academy and also at Westphalia. But those jobs were basic auto mechanic jobs and Wilson wasn’t very excited by that work; there would be no challenge. He was much more interested when he heard from Scott that the APL facilities manager wanted to speak to him about his skills and experience.

Scott, who was the head and chief engineer of the mechanical engineering department, had earlier pitched the idea that the Facilities Department would benefit by having an all-around mechanic on its staff, someone who would be able to work on all of the lab’s mechanical systems, those operated by the facility and those used by the research projects, including the devices specially built for those projects. Scott pointed out to Gary Chambers, the Facilities Department manager, that none of the techs in the mechanical engineering department had the broad range of skills that Wilson possessed and the engineers’ skills didn’t even come close.

While Scott was with him, Chambers contacted Wilson’s reference, Miami-Dade County’s director of

maintenance, who told him, “That guy has magic hands. There was nothing that he couldn’t fix. Saved us bundles by keeping our fleet going. He even worked on our aircraft, a chopper—you know, the aviation techs need an FAA license, but one time our chopper had a problem in its transmission that no one could diagnose. Wilson heard of the problem and had it located in an hour. Of course, without the licence, he couldn’t actually work on the chopper, but he guided a tech to the problem and told him how to fix it. When they asked him about how he knew about helicopter transmissions, he was modest; he told them that when he was in the Marines, he paid really close attention to the ‘birds,’ he called them, and how they were maintained at his base. His men’s lives depended on them working, he told me. So he knew his way around a chopper. We’re sad to lose him but he’s way too good for a county fleet repair shop.”

After Chambers disconnected, he looked at Scott.

“Sounds like this guy walks on water. Is he really that good?” Chambers asked.

“I have no detailed info other than my conversations with him; I told you before what I found out about him. Say, you know that university student of Emma’s? Tamara, the one who invented that energy-storage device and now has the medical section in an uproar about her new MRI improvement?”

“Sure. Who hasn’t heard about that?”

“Well, this guy’s her dad,” Scott told him. “Smarts must run in the family. She’s an electronics genius and looks like he’s a mechanical one. So you interested? Should I have him come in to talk to you?”

“Damn. I’d be stupid not to get someone like that on the staff, I guess. Yeah, set it up with my gal.”

Later that evening, Scott called Wilson and told him about coming in for an interview and then mentioned the call to Wilson’s former manager. He told Wilson about what his manager said about him.

“So that’s what we heard from your county facilities director,” Scott said. “They really like you back there,” he laughed. “So when can you come in to talk to Chambers?”

“Anytime he wants,” Wilson answered. “What kind of job am I interviewing for, anyway?”

“That’s what we want to work out. Since you know about so many systems, I’d expect that you’d have a very broad responsibility for anything mechanical. No birds or watercraft, though; we don’t own any.”

They both laughed at that.

At his interview, when Chambers learned that Wilson had dealt extensively with Helene Tarmson of DARPA over the development rights to Tamara’s inventions, he was amazed. When he learned that Wilson was also a Medal of Honor recipient, he was floored. But most of all, Chambers was impressed with Wilson and the skills he possessed. Within a few days, the lab made him their formal job offer.

### ***One Month Later***

In the middle of March, Wilson was notified by the Medal of Honor Society that the next ceremony had just been scheduled; it would be in the White House in mid-April. He was invited to attend and that wearing the dress uniform of his service was customary. And then he received a phone call from Robert O’Rourke of the Defense Department. O’Rourke told Wilson about the ceremony and urged him to come.

“Now that you’re living in the area, it would be good to have you come,” O’Rourke told him.

“Okay, sir, I’ll respond yes to the invite.”

Wilson returned the response form, saying that he’d be there. Fortunately, his dress uniform, the one he had worn at his own Medal ceremony, wasn’t with the items packed in storage; he had it hanging in his closet—but

he needed to be sure it still fit.

Wilson had been instructed to drive to either the Washington Navy Yard or Joint Base Andrews and park there; from there he would be picked up by a Defense Department limo to be brought to the White House. Andrews was closer, so he chose that site. There were five other Medal recipients there when he arrived, so a round of introductions ensued. Two more men arrived and then the limo pulled in. It was a stretched limo so they had plenty of room, which was good because Wilson felt a bit stifled in his dress uniform. He learned that he wasn't the only uncomfortable one. He did enjoy talking with the others; they shared a strong bond of similar combat experiences, which felt much different from Wilson's interactions with other veterans.

### *The White House, Washington, D.C.: mid-April*

When they entered the White House after being dropped off at the North Portico, a White House aide met the group and led them to the East Room but on the way, Wilson was intercepted by a staff member.

"You must be Sergeant Alexandre; am I correct?" she asked.

"That's affirmative..." Wilson shrugged mentally; old memories were returning and he had fallen into a military mindset.

"Thank you. The president would like a word with you before the award ceremony. Please follow me," she responded.

"Ma'am, you do know that I'm not today's recipient?" Wilson asked, confused.

"I do know and I'm sorry for the misunderstanding. Mr Gerston learned that your own award presentation was not exactly public and wants to correct that situation."

They had reached the Oval Office now and the Marine at the door saluted Wilson and opened the door. Wilson returned the salute and whispered, "Oorah," as he passed and the Marine smiled and nodded slightly.

The president was seated in an armchair and in a chair across from him was Robert O'Rourke. Both men rose as Wilson approached and the aide went to a chair by the wall and took a recorder out of a table drawer nearby. Gerston saluted Wilson and he returned the salute.

"Sergeant Alexandre, such a pleasure to get to meet you," Gerston said. "You do remember Bob O'Rourke, I'm sure?"

Wilson shook the president's hand and then O'Rourke's.

"I certainly do, sir. We first met, by phone, eight years ago, and he tried to recruit me for the CIA then," Wilson joked and they laughed. "Sir, you wanted to speak to me about my 'private' award ceremony, but you really don't have to make any special note of me today. After all, today's event should be all about the new recipient."

Gerston smiled at O'Rourke. "You did say he was modest." Then he looked at Wilson. "I won't be minimizing today's Medal of Honor award to Lieutenant Jennings, Sergeant Alexandre... may I call you 'Wilson'? I assure you that's not from disrespect; I've studied your biography and feel that I know you very well."

"Sir, I would be honored to have you use my given name, Doctor Gerston."

"Ha, ha, ha..." Gerston roared. "Touché. I'd venture to say that few people know that I have a doctorate; I don't conceal my education though. I'm fine with just being a 'mister.'"

"Certainly, sir," Wilson grinned.

"Excellent; let's be seated. Wilson, I hear you're a direct sort of person. Very up-front but with a good sense of humor. Now Bob here has filled me in on some things you've done after receiving your Medal of Honor and

truthfully, I must say you've continued to serve your country admirably even after you left active duty."

"Everything I did was a response to the danger my family was in, sir. We were looking for a quiet life."

"To be sure. But it was *how* you reacted that was noteworthy. For example, you were able to get an alert to the FBI about foreign infiltrators in our government and your alert came just days after we got a similar warning from a high-school student, an incredible person in his own right. His information, followed by yours, exposed the infiltrators. I awarded him the Medal of Freedom and would have recognized you then as well, except your role in the exposure of the plot got buried in the incredible morass we faced in digging the Executive Branch out of the mess the plot caused. I only heard of your role in it when I started to look into your background."

"My background, sir? Whatever for?"

"Coming to that; just hold the questions. Then there was a personal attack on your wife by a foreign national who was in the country illegally, using a stolen passport. Not only did you, and she, stop him, but the information you extracted from him—using Marine techniques, I'm sure—led to the exposure of a whole political and criminal conspiracy, moles in our government, and illegal foreign operations. Plus enabling the FBI to solve dozens of murders.

"And then, to top it off, you effectively removed the political problem at its source. I'm certain that, whatever that autopsy showed, somehow you eliminated that Haitian witch who was the source of much of the instability of the Haitian government. My FBI and CIA sources are convinced that she didn't have a 'natural' death.

"Finally, I learned that you're not the only extraordinary person in the Alexandre family. Your daughter has provided the Defense Department with some inventions of hers which are allowing us to make some major breakthroughs in defense research. And your spouse isn't just a priestess; she's an anthropologist who has done some significant sociological research, which was unfortunately buried by her university, but now has been discovered, and I recently learned that she's now part of the institute that I'll be leading when my presidential term is completed.

"Now I can come to my point; I can see I'm making you uncomfortable..."

"Absolutely, sir. Many of the things you mentioned happened by pure chance..."

"Ah, you have said it just right. As Louis Pasteur is quoted, 'Chance favors the prepared mind.' How you react to chance occurrences is an indication of your true instincts. And I need people with your instincts working for our nation. Your friend in the State Department, Evan Masters, tells me that he thinks you would be a perfect choice to serve as our special envoy to go to Europe and unsnag the talks between us, the U.K., and the European Union. I need someone there who can cut through the BS and all of my reports about you say that you're the person who can do it.

"And concerning your wife Nadine, the Columbia Institute needs someone with her credentials and background to do a kind of pilot study for us. A project based on her doctoral research. We would appoint her as a special envoy to Haiti. Her chairperson, Dr Greta Winsberg, knows about this matter and is probably telling her about this appointment as we speak. I see that I've succeeded in rendering you speechless. Can you accept this assignment for your nation, the one which you've served so admirably all your life?"

Wilson gulped and nodded. "I'm sure that I'm unworthy, President Gerston, but I'll do my best."

O'Rourke was silent up to now, but he spoke. "Mr Gerston agrees with me that your position might have some more authority if we reactivated your Marine service. You'd be on detached duty from the Marine Corps commandant's office, assigned to the office of the Secretary of State as an ambassador without portfolio and you'd effectively function as a special assistant to the president. General Connelley's office will contact you

before you leave for the U.K.”

Wilson could only nod, gulp, and say, “Yes, sir.”

Gerston stood up and the others rose. “Thank you, Wilson; I’m sure that your instincts will guide you well. Your Marine training told you to leave the technical details to the experts; your expertise as a leader was to guide the experts to do their thing in the best way possible. Just remember your roots and your instincts will serve you. I need to meet with Lieutenant Jennings now; I’ll see you later in the East Room.”

They shook hands and then O’Rourke led Wilson back toward the East Room. As they passed an aide escorting an elderly man in Army dress blues walking with a slight limp toward the Oval Office, Wilson stopped and snapped off a sharp salute to the startled man.

“Lt Jennings?” Wilson asked and the man nodded vacantly. “Congratulations, sir, on your honor. The president is waiting and you’ll enjoy talking to him. You’ll do great.”

Jennings smiled faintly and they exchanged salutes.

The award ceremony proceeded just as Wilson had remembered his had gone, except that there were many more people here now, including eleven prior Medal of Honor recipients. He was seated with them, all the way over on the right side of the room and, with the crowd present, he wasn’t able to clearly see the other two seating sections. After the president completed the award presentation ceremony with Jennings and everyone was seated again, Gerston returned to the podium.

“I just wanted to say a few words now about another of our nation’s heros, one who didn’t get the full recognition he deserved because of an extremely delicate and critical political situation which existed at the time. Our government needed to limit access to his award ceremony and although I can’t change the past, I’d like to take this opportunity to try to rectify what was a necessary situation back then. So I’ll take this opportunity now to officially recognize another of this nation’s heroes. I ask Marine Staff Sergeant Wilson J. Alexandre to join me on the platform.”

*Damn, Wilson thought, he’s gonna do it anyway.*

When Wilson reached the podium, Gerston stepped toward him as Wilson saluted; Gerston returned the salute and reached out his hand for a warm handshake.

“Sgt Alexandre and I had a long talk back in the Oval Office just before and I got to know him personally. Eight years ago, he was a recipient of the Medal of Honor for a number of extraordinary acts of courage in battle, repeatedly exposing himself to enemy fire to personally assist his wounded Marines to a safe position to receive medical aid. His gallantry and leadership also allowed his unit to fulfill their mission, succeeding against overwhelming enemy forces. For that bravery, Sgt Alexandre received the Medal of Honor and I’d like to offer our nation’s thanks for his gallantry and service.”

Gerston turned to Wilson and saluted him and Wilson returned the salute while the audience rose and applauded. Wilson looked out over the people who were standing there applauding and suddenly he saw Nadine! And Tamara. And all of the Winsberg clan too. They had kept it all a secret. But the applause had died down and Gerston was speaking again.

“Sgt Alexandre’s service to this nation didn’t end when he left active duty, however. Part of the reason for his private honor ceremony had to do with national and international law enforcement activities and political problems involving an ally of our nation. As a result of Sgt Alexandre’s skills and acute intuition, our law enforcement agencies were able to detect infiltrators in official positions, both those of our own government and an allied government. The information he was able to provide also allowed the FBI to solve many open crimes.

I'd like the other members of the Alexandre family, Dr Nadine Alexandre and Miss Tamara Alexandre, to join me up here now for my own acknowledgment, as president, for this extraordinary civil service to our nation."

He waited as Nadine and Tamara came up to the platform. Nadine looked confused while Tamara wore a tiny smile. Wilson wondered yet again if his daughter could read minds.

When the three were on the platform, Gerston continued, "I would like to officially recognize these extraordinary civil contributions to our country, the ones which I just mentioned, now. Staff Sergeant Wilson J. Alexandre, for especially meritorious contributions to the security and national interests of the United States of America over a sustained period of years, as president of this great nation, it gives me extreme pleasure to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom to you. Please join me in congratulating Sgt Alexandre for his service to our nation, both military and civilian."

Everyone rose and applauded loudly while an aide brought the medal on its ribbon to Gerston, who fastened it around Wilson's neck.

"I'm not done..." Gerston said with a smile. "I'm enjoying this; it's a great part of my job."

Everyone laughed.

"Sgt Alexandre wasn't alone in his efforts to help our government and our law-enforcement officials. Wherever he was involved in his activities that gave officials invaluable intelligence about those criminals, his spouse and daughter were always close by and paid a vital role in Sgt Alexandre's ability to notify the authorities. Dr Nadine Alexandre's role in capturing the perpetrators was just as important as her spouse's. Her actions also deserve the nation's thanks; therefore, for especially meritorious contributions to the security and national interests of the United States of America over a sustained period of years, as president of this great nation, it gives me extreme pleasure to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Dr Nadine Alexandre. Please join me in congratulating Dr Alexandre for her service to the people of the United States of America."

Again the assembled group rose and applauded while Gerston placed the medal around her neck.

Gerston smiled at Tamara. "There's yet more," he winked at her. To the audience, "You might expect that I'm going to repeat what I just said, but you'd be wrong."

Laughter.

"It's true that Miss Tamara N. Alexandre was likely involved with solving those crimes or bringing those people to justice along with her parents; she might even have had a greater role than our officials can determine. But Miss Alexandre has made her own impact on our nation, in fact, on the world. Her inventions are revolutionizing energy storage. Her work in the medical field is revolutionizing medicine's diagnostic abilities. And she has done remarkable work in areas which are even now assisting in our country's defense research. She has already received one of the world's leading engineering awards, the Charles Stark Draper Prize, the engineering profession's equivalent of the Nobel Prize. Therefore, for her extraordinary service for the security and national interests of the United States of America, and for making a significant contribution to engineering and science, as president of this great nation, it gives me extreme pleasure to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Miss Tamara Nadine Alexandre. Please join me in congratulating Miss Alexandre for her service in national security, science, and engineering to the people of the United States of America."

Once again everyone rose and applauded while Gerston placed the medal around her neck.

After a few concluding remarks, Gerston invited the family members and guests of the awardees, plus the prior Medal recipients, to a reception in the Blue Room.

On the way there, Wilson and his family were walking with Gerston.

“You certainly put one over on me, sir,” Wilson smiled.

“I was told you liked a good joke,” Gerston laughed. “And I appreciate your thoughtfulness with Lt Jennings. Your comments to him really helped settle his nerves. He’s had a very rough time with his own demons.”

Tamara was listening and she whispered to Nadine, “I could tell that poor man is lost in his own emotions. It’s kinda like what I did to Mr Evil. I’m sure I can help him.”

“But be careful, sweetie.”

When they got to the Blue Room, Tamara noticed where Jennings was standing with a woman about his age. *Must be his wife*, she mused. *Good, that helps*. She hunted around for another Medal recipient in an Army uniform and found a sergeant. She approached him and introduced herself and thanked him for his heroism.

“Oh, miss, no need,” he said. “It sounds like you’re pretty awesome, yourself. I’m Randall Carter, Desert Storm.”

“Sergeant Carter, can you help me talk to Lt Jennings? You can see that his memories of Vietnam are still plaguing him.”

“Yeah, I see it in his eyes. But how can I help? I’m not trained...”

“I just need your strength,” she said to him. “I see strength and confidence inside you and I can help you share it.”

“Well, okay. For a fellow Medal person, sure.”

Tamara led him over to where Jennings was standing. “Lieutenant?” she asked. “I want to congratulate you on your honor and tell you how happy I am that your heroism was finally rewarded.”

The woman with him looked over at Tamara with an expression of profound sadness but gratitude for her comment. Meanwhile, Tamara was gently “pushing” a silvery-green taste to Jennings as she drew Carter closer.

“Lieutenant, this is Sgt Randall Carter; why don’t you shake hands.”

As they did, Tamara added her own hand and looked deeply into Jennings’ eyes as she “pushed” more silver and used her physical connection to amplify her power from Carter. Meanwhile, she was softly speaking to Jennings about some of the actions the Army colonel had mentioned as he read Jennings’ citation, whispering to him that those things were in the past and those threats were gone. Then she told him what her father had said: *The decisions you made were the best possible ones you could have made; they allowed you to save the rest of your troops; isn’t that so?*

She drew a bit more power from Carter and “pushed” some additional green and silver.

Then in a normal voice, she asked Carter, “Sergeant, can you tell us a bit about your own bravery? Please drop any modesty and tell the lieutenant how you can cope with your memories of that action.”

Tamara noticed that the remote look in Jennings’ eyes was almost gone and he was looking at Carter now.

As Carter began to speak, Tamara took her hand away from those of the two men and tried to ‘push’ an activating green-silver taste to the woman, a taste that Tamara had found that would jog a person’s limbic system to increase an ability to project empathy to others and become more sensitive to others’ emotional signals, but was startled to get absolutely no response.

*What? It’s like a solid wall*, she thought. Then she had an insight. *Maybe it’s a sex-based thing and I need a male’s mind for support. Let’s try that.*



Tamara whispered to the woman, “Take his hand with mine and I’ll show you something my mom showed me. She’s a priestess of an ancient religion and knows about healing souls.”

The woman looked at her, startled, but took Jennings’ hand and Tamara joined hers. Tamara had figured out with Peter how to activate his limbic system; it took a tiny bit of a color that wasn’t a color and it appeared to jump-start the activation of the neural patches in the cortex. She “pushed” a bit of that not-color to the woman and then using her physical connection to the two of them, she drew a tiny amount of the silvery-green taste from the woman.

She turned to Tamara, startled. “What just happened? All that odd light that seemed to flash?”

“You felt that? Good. You did that yourself. Remember the thought that came along with the light. Can you make yourself do it again?”

The woman knitted her brows and Tamara tasted the result. “Great, you did it,” she said. “Mom’s soothing sense works in you. And look, Mr Jennings’ talking to the sergeant almost normally now, isn’t he?”

“Ohmygod, I can’t believe it, what did you do? Oh, I’m Shelley Jennings, and you’re... um...”

“Tamara. Right. I did nothing; I just showed you something that’s been in Mom’s family forever, a healing emotion. You had it inside you but didn’t know how to use it; I just showed you. You can use it to help your man when he gets those spells of depression and detachment. That’s what it is, right?”

“Oh my god, the president was so right about you... about your family,” she gushed.

“No, please don’t think of us that way,” Tamara said. “Listen, any really good, sensitive clergy person could have arrived at the same idea. Minds help each other heal; they just need to know how to connect. That’s all I showed you.”

“Showed her what?” Jennings asked as Carter looked on, bemused.

“She showed me how to help when you ‘go away,’” Shelley told him.

“I think that hearing the sergeant’s story helped too,” Tamara said. “Isn’t that right?”

Jennings nodded vigorously. “It sure did. Say, Randy, want to grab some grub?”

Carter looked at Tamara with an expression of confusion and she winked at him as he went off with Jennings. Shelley pulled her into a hug.

“Tamara, whatever you did there, I can’t thank you enough. You gave me my man back.”

“I’m glad you could do it. It was all you. All it takes is love, a faith in yourself, and an additional faith in whatever deity you believe in, Shelley. I just showed you how to think those healing thoughts.”

Before she left Shelley Jennings, Tamara “pushed” a tiny bit of light-green taste with streaks of ochre at her; this was the emotion that Tamara had learned that would confuse a person’s memory of the most recent events. Tamara theorized that this particular taste/scent interfered with the amygdala’s processing of episodic memory—events, while preserving semantic memory—factual knowledge and performance ability. Thus Shelley wouldn’t recall exactly what Tamara had done but she’d still recall how to use her new healing sense.

*And that's when it hit her—the president awarded me the Medal of Freedom! To my parents as well. I could tell that he had planned something special for Dad, but he put one over on me, too. Oooh... a chameleon, that's it. Gerston has some abilities too, besides his very strong charisma. I gotta find a way to spend time with him to see how that works.*

She went off to look for her folks. And Peter.

## Chapter 53 - Recalled to Service

### *Back to the Present: late May*

Now it was late May; university classes were over, and the Alexandres were moving into a house that they had purchased. It was midway between their jobs, his in Laurel and hers in Westphalia. Their new home was in a semi-rural area about a mile from Peter's parents' home. It was a 2400 square-foot ranch house on three acres of fenced property with a detached garage and a pole barn that had been used by the prior owner, a collectibles dealer, to store his merchandise. That was where Nadine planned to put the contents of her *ounfò*; she intended to eventually set up a small *ounfò* after she made contact with the area's Haitian expat residents. Tamara and Peter were going to help them unpack the items which had been in storage.

Tamara and Peter showed up early at the Alexandres' new home just as the moving van pulled up with their stored household goods.

"Oh, Dad," Tamara said when she greeted him when they arrived as he was carrying a carton from his truck to the house, "yesterday the Brits published the birthday honors lists in their official government journal—it's called *The London Gazette*. Did you find out if you guys can come to the ceremony? It's about three weeks from now."

"Yes I did, sweetie. That's right around the time I need to go to those economic talks. And I spoke to Evan Masters at the State Department. All the details that I discussed with Gerston have been finalized and he told me that my appointment as a global good-will envoy—a g-dash-d ambassador, of all things—to Europe is all set. Incidentally, so is your mom's appointment, as the special envoy to Haiti. Your mom's appointment is tied to her position at the Columbia Institute of Economics. She can tell you more about it. But mine? Gerston told me that I have an unusual ability to see through bullshit and go right to the core of a problem. Your mom told me that Gerston's right; that's the piece of *Ogorin* in me. The *lwa* of both the warrior and the diplomat."

"What's your job then?" Tamara asked. "You were unclear after that awards ceremony."

"Ha. What happened there just blew my mind—never expected anything like that. The job? Like a mediator. My going's been cleared with the APL too; they don't mind if I'm away from the lab at times. I think that, with all of their federal defense work, someone up very high in the Defense Department must have 'suggested' that they let me take the envoy job. Somehow the president thinks I should have that ambassadorial status and got the Senate to confirm me. This particular problem—I'm scheduled to get into it right after your ceremony—has to do with the talks the U.S. is involved in with reps from the Brits, the European Union, and some Common Market economic nerds. I'm supposed to listen to where they are now—it's some kind of stalemate—and figure out how to get the stalemate fixed. And you know? Somehow I don't mind doing it; I like challenges. So we'll see."

"That's so cool, my dad's a diplomat," Tamara grinned. "Hey, use your diplomat passports."

"Sure. You can do that too, Masters said you could. It's an honor for the U.S. as well as for you, being on the queen's honors list."

Tamara nodded. "So since you'll be able to go to the ceremony too, Emma said that you can stay with us at her place in London if you want, even stay longer for your meetings. Her flat's got four bedrooms and a live-in housekeeper, she told me."

"Emma has a London apartment?" Wilson asked.

"Yep. It's where she lived till she came to the U.S. Her family owned it and the building it's in, and her estate trustees didn't want to sell it, she told me. One of her London companies is in real estate and the building is in a good location. They rent her apartment out for housing official visitors to their other companies, so they pay for

its upkeep and for the staff that run it. And the bedrooms are actually all self-contained suites.

“So here’s what I wanted to show you. I copied the section of the honors list from *The Gazette*’s web site. Here,” Tamara said, handing him a sheet.

“What’s this?” Nadine asked as she walked past them and stopped.

“The Brits’ honors list,” Wilson told her.

Nadine looked at it and they read it together.

***Order of the British Empire***

*To be Ordinary Dames Grand Cross of the Civil Division of the said Most Excellent Order:*

...

Dr Emma Elizabeth CLARKE FRS. Professor of Physics, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, USA and Research Professor of Physics, Cambridge University, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, East Anglia.

For services to Entrepreneurship, Commerce, and Science.

(Cambridge, Cambridgeshire)

Nadine looked up at Tamara and asked, “This is like a knighthood, right? I see there’s a heading ‘Knights Grand Cross’ with other names just above this section. What’s ‘FRS’?”

“Yep. She’s a female knight,” Tamara said and chuckled. “Also, last year she was elected as a fellow of the Royal Society, that’s the FRS. It’s an honor that’s awarded only to eminent scientists.”

“What’re those towns in parentheses? I thought you said that Emma had a London home,” Wilson wondered.

“Emma told me that she owns a home in Cambridge near her company. It’s her U.K. legal address, so I guess they use that in the honors list. See, the others have towns shown like that.”

“So her official address is in Cambridge,” Nadine remarked.

“Yep, she told me that’s an estate that her grandpa owned,” Tamara said. “While she was growing up, her trustees leased it out, but she took it over to live in when she went to Cambridge on her sabbatical. Okay, I’m further down the list, in the honorary section, ‘cause I’m not a citizen.”

They looked at that part.

*Dames Commander of the Order of the British Empire*

*Honorary DBE*

Tamara Nadine ALEXANDRE, Scientist and Engineer, Applied Physics Laboratory of the Johns Hopkins University, Laurel, Maryland, USA.

For services to Commerce and Engineering.

“And look,” Tamara pointed to a name. “I see that President Gerston is getting an honorary knighthood too. I wonder if he’ll be able to come to the ceremony.”

Wilson pointed to the “Dame” title above her name and asked, laughing, “So we need to call you ‘Dame’ now?”

Tamara chuckled, shaking her head. “Emma told me that only citizens of countries that recognize the queen as their monarch can use that title. She’s a Brit so she can, but not me. I can use the ‘DBE’ after my name,

though.”

“And you said you’re going to Cambridge after the ceremony,” Wilson commented.

“Right. There are engineering and physics meetings during the week before the roll-out and her company, EEC Energy Solutions, is having me do some presentations too. Emma built that company from scratch, you know, and it’s become one of the largest of its type in the U.K. Emma’s actually extremely wealthy. She owns a controlling interest in the industrial empire her grandfather built, but she lets its boards and her CEOs run the operations. This company is her baby and she keeps close track of it. She’s its board chair and chief scientist.”

They had actually been working while carrying on that conversation, and soon the back of Wilson’s truck was unloaded. Nadine got called away by the movers to answer a question about where some items were to go. Soon the movers were finished and the four of them began to unpack the boxes. A knocking at the door announced the arrival of Peter’s parents, Barbara and Terence, and the Winsbergs senior.

“Hey, Alexandres, we’re here to help,” Greta called.

Nadine quickly got them all organized into teams to unpack each room—three teams, with Wilson, Nadine, and Tamara leading one each. Each knew where and how things were to be stored, based on their Miami home, so the unpacking went quickly. In the late afternoon, Mason and Angela Richardson arrived with plenty of pizza and beverages to feed everyone. One of the items of furniture that Nadine and Wilson didn’t have yet was a large table for the dining room, but Peter told Wilson not to worry; he’d fix that. He grabbed Terence and they ran to the pole barn. Peter had seen the movers bringing several large folding tables and lots of folding chairs to that building. They brought two of the tables and a bunch of chairs back to the house. Then they all sat down to eat.

Werner looked around the room. “I got to see this place after my staff found it,” he said. “It looks really good now; the work crew that the realtor got did a great redecorating job, didn’t they?”

Nadine smiled at him. “You just want a pat on the back, you big teddy-bear, right? Actually they did do some great work, and so fast too, so thanks for all you did.”

“My grapevine tells me that you’ve been appointed as the U.S. special envoy to Haiti,” Mason said to her. “And Wilson was appointed as an ambassador with no portfolio—that’s gov speak for troubleshooter—a good-will envoy to Europe. I know all about troubleshooters, but what exactly is your role, Nadine?”

“One of the missions of the Columbia Institute is to find ways to improve economic conditions in third-world countries. My research specialty was in social anthropology and was based on family dynamics and structure from the female point of view. My thesis was that the transmission of cultural values in non-industrial societies is based on the mothers teaching their daughters. Women traditionally have been pushed aside in economic development in third-world countries, actually in many other societies too, but in the late 1970s, the idea arose to form organizations to provide microfinancing—that’s making very small loans to people in impoverished communities—to provide capital to support local entrepreneurship. Soon after that, women began receiving micro-loans and many used those funds in entrepreneurial ways to become self-supporting. Microfinance is completely different from charity; it’s actually a very useful tool for socio-economic development, and many millions of women world-wide have benefitted from those programs.

“As you know, Haiti’s economy is simply terrible and my Institute project is to develop ways to try to improve the economic conditions there from the bottom up. I know the country intimately and how the culture works. Many people there knew me and my mother, or know about us. The envoy role gives me official standing, but it will be humanitarian in nature, not political. There’s discussion now at the Institute to apply for some backing for this work from the U.N. and the Organization of American States. So that’s what my envoy role is about.”

Eventually everyone left and Tamara and Peter remained to talk to her parents.

“I never got to completely explain what happened with that Lt Jennings,” Tamara told them.

“You said that his mind was turned inward,” Nadine remarked. “Like you did to Leger.”

“After thinking about it, it was more like what happened to Peter in high school. Like Peter’s dissociation. Jennings had fallen into a kind of dissociation, caused by his own self-incrimination about how he reacted in battle. A lot like you told me happened to you, Dad.”

Wilson grinned, “So my genius daughter is now a psychologist?”

“Um, no, but Barbara gave me her senior thesis to look over and it was on dissociation. It was really good and I learned a lot. But I could see how Jennings looked and could ‘taste’ his emotions. They were buried so deeply that he had almost no personality overlay.”

“Yeah, that’s what I saw when I passed him in the hall,” Wilson told her. “He looked vacant. I tried to give him a little boost and apparently it did something because Gerston noticed it and remarked to me about it.”

“Yeah—but did you see what happened when the presentation was over? He deflated like a balloon.”

“From where I was sitting, I couldn’t see him too well.” Wilson said.

Peter broke in. “I did notice that, actually, and Barbara told me afterwards that his eyes looked like mine when I was a zombie back in high school. Like I was, he was probably detached from his surroundings. Then Tamara went to talk to him and soon it looked like he was normal—well, not quite; but then his wife would whisper something to him and he was back again. What happened there, honey? What did you do?”

“I did to his wife Shelley what I showed you, sweetie. Then she could use what I showed her to help him. Mom, I need to show you how my ‘pushing’ works; I figured out a little bit about how the mind works when it does that. It’s a latent ability in people and the brain has structures that are dormant unless they are turned on somehow. With empaths, some parts of those structures are active and with charismatic people, other parts seem to be active, but they’re all part of the same neural network and they’re activated by the limbic system.

“Let me show you what I learned, but I found out that we need Dad’s help too. It’s something that appears to have a direct sex component to make it work or maybe it’s an emotional link. I’ll need to check out both possibilities. Anyway, take Dad’s hand and pay attention to your thoughts, okay? You’ll get some strange random ones.”

Peter laughed. “For sure. If it’s like what happened to me, it felt like I was immersed in this strange green light everywhere but it was gone in an instant. And then I started feeling like I had grown a new body part ‘cause I started to feel more aware of things around me. That was crazy.”

Tamara placed her hand on her parents’ joined hands and Tamara “pushed” the “not-color” taste to her mother, who gasped and looked at her daughter. Wilson had also received the “transmission” which had been amplified by their physical contact and he stood there blinking.

“Spirits! It’s like I grew another whole sense!” Nadine exclaimed. “Now I’m suddenly aware of everyone’s emotions—is this what you see all the time, Tamara?”

Tamara was delighted and hugged her mom.

“If you mean sensing people in several different ways, then yes, *Manman*. You’ll need to practice using it now; Peter has it too now and he’s still learning how his sense works. I think it’s a little different from person to person. Dad, did you feel anything? I couldn’t tell with Jennings ‘cause his emotions were still turned inward.”

Wilson was trying to clear his thoughts. “Something happened but I’m not sure.” He looked at Tamara. “Oh, jeez, Tamara. You’re kind of glowing... Nadine too... and Peter. What...?”

Nadine looked at him. “Darling, maybe the sense she gave you works so that you can see people’s auras...”

“Nope, not ‘gave,’ *Manman*; I simply unlocked it,” Tamara corrected her. “Dad, that’s wonderful—hey, maybe you’ll be a human lie detector now, I’ll bet. I can do that too but in my case, I sense it as tastes. You must see aura colors like *Granmanman*.”

“You know, I’m seeing aura colors too,” Nadine said. “But they’re muted and faint and I sense emotions along with them.”

“Wow, three of us have had our abilities unlocked and we all sense them differently,” Peter mused. “We’ve got a lot to learn about how this stuff works.”

~~~~~

Two days later, Wilson got a message at work from the Marine Corps commandant’s office asking him to report to the commandant as soon as possible and to contact the office to tell them when he could arrive. He responded that he could be there at 8 a.m. the following day if that was acceptable. It was.

Wilson entered the commandant’s office suite in the Pentagon and was directed to an office, where he was met by a female Marine master gunnery sergeant.

“Wilson Alexandre reporting as ordered, Master Gunnery Sergeant,” he intoned, being sure to use her full rank. He knew that calling her just “sergeant” would be insulting. If you did such a thing in the Corps, you’d get your butt chewed out so badly, even a firehose wouldn’t be able to douse the flames.

She smiled at him. “Thank you for your service and thank you for your courtesy too,” she said. “General Connelley is ready to see you, sir.”

Wilson was still getting used to his new sensing ability, and even though he was aware of how it worked when he met people, it was still disorienting. He could somehow sense their emotional frame of mind, but it was up to him to interpret what those emotions meant. The MGySgt’s current emotions implied respect and admiration.

She led him to an office door, knocked, and opened the door.

The general rose from his chair and saluted Wilson, then came over to him after Wilson returned the salute. They shook hands.

“Pleasure meeting you, and allow me to express my thanks for the honor your bravery brought to the Corps and yourself. President Gerston gave me a few orders concerning your status and he said you agreed to the appointment that he proposed,” the general said. “We’re to recall you from your medical retirement and place you in the Corps reserve, put you on detached duty, and assign you to the commandant’s office—my office. Tell me—do you think that you still could pass the fitness test?”

“I’ve kept in shape, sir, and my upper-body strength is as good as when I was 20 years old. But completely rebuilding my tibia with an implanted surgical rod prevents me from running distances, although I can still move very quickly for short distances; sprints too. But my inability to do the three-mile run was what retired me; the docs said that the pounding that my leg would be getting could cause additional damage. I’m fully mobile now, and except for leg pain occasionally, my fitness and health has been good.”

Wilson’s new sense told him that the general was being totally honest and forthright; he wasn’t hiding any nasty surprises.

“That’s good to hear; I’m glad your recovery went so well. We’d never assign you to troop duty anyway, but being in good shape is essential for all Marines. You’re to be a special assistant to the president, actually, and you’ll be assigned to the State Department in a manner similar to our military attachés. After this mission, we will want you to attend the Reserve Support Course of the Joint Military Attaché School; they’ll teach you things you should know about protocol and general attaché duties.”

“Yes sir.”

He turned to his desk, picked up the phone, and spoke into it, “We’re ready now.”

The door opened and a Marine colonel and the master gunnery sergeant came in.

“This is my chief of staff, Col. Garrity, and you’ve met my staff NCO, MGySgt Harris. Now the president didn’t tell you everything that he intended for you, so the following orders will come as a surprise. Go ahead,” he said to the colonel.

The colonel pulled a sheet out of a packet he was carrying and began to read.

“Attention to orders: By the direction of the commander-in-chief, the president of the United States, you are hereby appointed as a commissioned officer of the U.S. Marines Corps Reserve at the rank of major...”

Connelley put up his hand to stop the reading and grinned at Wilson, who had gasped and looked shell-shocked.

“That *was* a surprise, right? Even though the Corps doesn’t have a direct commissioning program *per se*, the president still has the prerogative to commission officers and in your case, he’s decided that your being a major instead of a staff sergeant would support your mission better. Not that our NCOs are held in any regard other than the highest; you non-commissioned officers are the backbone of the Corps. But back to the legal stuff. Continue, Col Garrity.”

“If you accept this appointment, your commission is effective as of 1 June of this year and continues at the pleasure of the president. You are assigned to the office of the Commandant of the Marine Corps and will be on detached duty to the State Department to serve at the direction of the president.

“Execution of the oath of office document constitutes your acceptance of this appointment as an officer in the Corps of Marines of the United States and that you took the oath prescribed by 5 USC 3331 and as attested by an authorized official.’ Do you accept this commission?”

Wilson gulped and said, “I accept, sir.”

“Then raise your right hand and repeat after me: ‘I, Wilson Jonas Alexandre, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God.’”

When Wilson finished, the master gunnery sergeant handed him a form on a clipboard.

“This is the document attesting to your oath of office, Major. Please sign it here,” she pointed. “Let me offer my congratulations, sir.”

“As I do mine,” Col Garrity said; then he handed the packet he was holding to Connelley, he and Harris saluted the general and Wilson, and left the office.

Connelley held out the packet to Wilson. “Here’s a copy of your commission and the associated orders. Congratulations, Major Alexandre; you must have made a real impression on the president because direct



commissions like this are truly rare occurrences. Now we'll go over some housekeeping items. You'll need officer's uniforms and insignia; you know that there are differences compared to the NCO gear. My office has arranged with the uniform shop on the second level to get what you'll need. Go there and they'll take your measurements and have a full set of field officer's uniforms ordered in your size. They'll also do the tailoring as required. All of the costs will be charged to your uniform allowance—which will unfortunately stop immediately after you get squared away, since that supplemental allowance is only available to enlisted personnel. Your orders packet contains the information you'll need about when to wear the uniform and which one, when you're on mission. The State Department will give you your mission details and will coordinate your travel.

“Do you have any questions, Major?”

“No, sir, and I must say this was quite a surprise. I will ensure that I will do my absolute best to represent the Corps and our nation with honor.”

“Well said. It's been a pleasure meeting you, Major, and I wish you success in your duties. Semper Fi!”

He saluted Wilson and they shook hands; then Connelley ushered him out. Wilson's mind was whirling; everything was going so fast!

*This is like when I was in-country and we got our mission orders, he thought. I need to get that mind-set back and think rationally, plan each step. Okay, uniform. This sheet says I need Service As, blue dress A, and evening dress A. Barracks cover... shit, one with scrambled eggs on the brim too. Appointed as a damned field grade officer, no less. Good thing I'm sentimental and kept all of my medals in my 'bugout bag.' I've got a set of ribbons on my NCO dress blues but I'll need more sets of ribbons and ribbon bars... let's see... to hold fourteen, I think. Yeah. For the other uniforms. Miniature medals for the evening dress As. And my badges...*

He looked at his orders again and noticed the authorization for an additional badge. *What the hell? The Presidential Service Badge?* He read the authorization: “Pursuant to Executive Order 12793 of 1992 and in recognition of several years of continuing service to the President...”

Wilson was organizing his thoughts as he made his way to the mini-mall on the Pentagon's second level. Connelley's office had indeed made the necessary arrangements and soon Wilson's order was completed. He left the shop with the items that they had in stock; the uniforms would be tailored to his measurements and would be ready within a week. He traveled home, lost in thought.

### ***London, U.K.: mid-June***

Emma and Andrew left for London a week prior to the ceremony since Emma wanted to be sure that her company, EEC Energy Solutions, had the prototype ready for its publicity roll-out; she also wanted to be sure that her London flat would be ready for the Alexandres. Since the attendance of honorees' guests was limited to three at the ceremony at Buckingham Palace, Emma had asked that her grandfather-in-law, Sir George Marshall and his wife, be the other guests with Andrew. She had adopted Sir George as her honorary uncle when they first met, after all.

Tamara's guests were Peter and her parents, of course, and they arrived in London two days before the investiture ceremony. Using their diplomatic passports allowed them to speed through passport control at Heathrow and a car from the U.S. embassy was there to pick them up and deliver them to Emma's flat, which they learned was only a few blocks away from the embassy.

“How come your family picked a building so close to the embassy?” Wilson asked when Emma greeted them.

“Ha. They picked me,” she told him. “They moved it here from Grosvenor Square in Mayfair around 2017 when the new building here was finished. The old embassy was next to Hyde Park, not far from Buckingham Palace. I

think that building's become a hotel now, actually. This flat is in Borough of Lambeth and the embassy is in Borough of Wandsworth which is just across the railway." She pointed out of the nearby window to the commuter rail line across the street from her building. "You can see the embassy to the northwest, out that window. One of my real estate companies owns this building and I own this flat; it occupies the top three floors. Grandpa and Grams loved entertaining so that's why these rooms are so big. There are..."

There was a chime and Emma said, "Just a bit, that's the staff."

She went to an intercom. "Yes, Grace?"

"..."

"Yes, tell them we're in the great room; then you can have refreshments brought; thank you." She turned to the Alexandres. "Good, you'll meet my mentor and honorary uncle, Sir George. Andrew's grandpa."

She went into the outer lobby with Andrew and a few seconds later, the elevator *dinged* and then happy voices could be heard coming from there. And then she reappeared, leading a stately gentleman in his late sixties and a distinguished-looking woman about that age. Andrew followed, grinning broadly, as he spoke to them.

Emma came up to Wilson and Nadine, holding the man's hand.

"Nadine and Wilson, let me present Sir George Marshall KCMG GBE and Dame Isabella Marshall GBE, my grand-in-laws. Uncle George and Isabella, it's my honor to introduce you to Major Wilson Alexandre, Dr Nadine Alexandre, and..." Emma reached out her hand to Tamara and Peter, "... and Miss Tamara Alexandre and Mr Peter Winsberg. I've told you all about these people in our video chats, haven't I."

Everyone shook hands.

"Let's all sit," she said as a woman rolled a cart into the room and began putting out little dishes of finger food and carafes of drinks. She pointed to the items and named them as Emma thanked her and she left with the cart.

Sir George remarked as he looked around, "I do recall this room; it hasn't changed much, Emma. So you kept this flat even after all those years?"

"Yep. Actually my trustees did. They didn't want to sell the building, which was a prescient decision, since the embassy's construction nearby formed an anchor for more businesses to come here, creating more jobs in the Nine Elms area's transformation. My sources tell me that the building value increased by 300 percent when the embassy chancery's site was announced. It's revitalized the entire area economically as well."

"Isn't it further away from the Brit government buildings, though?" Wilson asked. "We're on the other side of the river."

"Actually I don't think so," Sir George answered. "Number 10, Whitehall, and the Houses of Parliament are almost as close now than the chancery's old Mayfair location."

"Uncle George, why don't you tell us what happens during the investiture ceremony," Emma asked. "I know it's been years for you but it couldn't have changed much."

"Ha ha," Sir George laughed. "I've attended many more since then, my dear. Well then. Both of your honors are in the civil chivalry division. So you'll have an idea of what you'll be seeing, let me go over the honors that the queen will be awarding. The most senior honor is the Order of the Garter, founded by Edward III in the fourteenth century. Only the Victoria Cross and the George Cross, which are awards for gallantry, outrank it. We'll skip the Scottish Order; it's next, but none are to be awarded now. Now comes the Order of the Bath, which is for military and senior government officials. That Order was created in the eighteenth century. After that comes the Order of Saint Michael and Saint George, the KCMG, from the nineteenth century. This is

usually given for appointment to high military or civil ranks and I received the KCMG when I first became an ambassador. I'll skip the Royal Victorian Order; it's for personal service to the monarch.

"Finally comes the Order of the British Empire, created by George V in 1917. The two highest classes of this Order are the Knight Grand Cross or Dame Grand Cross—your honor, Emma, and the Knight Commander or Dame Commander, which is to be yours, Tamara. This Order is one of the more common honors that the monarch awards. Most are given for outstanding contributions to economic development; the arts and sciences; services to benefit the public welfare; and charitable and humanitarian work. Over the years, far fewer honors have been given for science, as you know. My own honor as a Knight Grand Cross was for contributions for public service in economic development and your grandpa had a major role in setting me up on that course. I could use my diplomatic position as an economic attaché to induce industrialists to come to the U.K. to set up here.

"And you have followed in those footsteps. You've created a multimillion pound industry in battery and energy storage technology; as well, this will make the U.K. the world center of that technology for years to come. I'm convinced that was the primary reason for the honor you'll receive. And Miss Tamara? I understand that she's the genius behind all that new tech and that tech is the driving force to bring money, jobs, and reputation to our country."

"So, the ceremony?" Emma prodded.

"Ah, yes. Talking about economic development gets the old juices flowing. Well then. First, you don't need an acceptance speech. You both would approach the queen and do a small curtsy. She'll hold her hand out and you gently hold it for just a second—a touch—and let go. No grasping and holding on.

"The queen may ask you a question or two; simply answer her—just like you would answer any person. Remember to address her the first time as 'Your Majesty' and then simply 'Ma'am' after that.

"Emma, since you're a British citizen, your honor has the full privileges of the Order of the British Empire. You use the style of 'Dame' before your name and the postnomial of GBE, which stands for 'Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire.' But for women, the sword-tap isn't done; that's for knights, since the 'acclaim,' as it's called, is a carryover from the ancient military ceremony of appointing a member of a fighting force for the protection of the sovereign.

"Tamara, as you aren't a subject of Her Majesty, your award is of necessity honorary. That means that you don't use the style of 'Dame' in your name, but your honor gives you the right to use the postnomial of DBE; the 'D' is for 'dame commander' in the award's name.

"You won't be called first. The first honors go to the military division, then comes the civil division, so watch those who come before you; that's the best way to see what to do. The final part is up to you, a simple acknowledgment of thanks is fine, but you can be elegant about it too—but keep it short. I still recall what I told the queen: 'I deeply appreciate this exceptional honor you have given me on behalf of our great country, Ma'am. I will treasure this moment always.'

"Now don't you both use that," he laughed. "Actually you can't, Tamara, not without rewording it. Just say something sincere. Did I cover what you needed, Emma?"

"Absolutely. Thank you."

"Now then, Wilson, I understand that President Gerston has sent you here about that annoying trade and tariff dispute involving Europe and the U.S.," Sir George said.

"True. You heard that from Emma or from the negotiating group?"

“Both, actually. I have some expertise in that area; it’s true that I built my career doing similar negotiations, innit. Okay, you lot,” Sir George turned to the women and Peter. “Can I have a few minutes with Wilson to sort him about what he’ll face in those meetings?”

Emma and the others were talking among themselves and Emma just waved her hand at him, so he motioned to Wilson and they went to an adjoining room.

“I have my uniform with me and the State Department said I should use my judgment whether to wear it,” Wilson said as they were getting seated.

“Oh, do wear it. Dress uniform?” Wilson nodded. “Excellent. These Europeans are suckers for displays of status. Now, the first step, as I understand your schedule, is to meet with the trade attaché at the U.S. chancery tomorrow. Let’s go over some talking points now, shall we?”

Sir George had a very good understanding about where the negotiation difficulties probably were at and gave Wilson some constructive suggestions. Then they rejoined the others and they had dinner served.

The next few days would be quite busy.

## Chapter 54 - Investiture

The following day, notes from his discussions with Sir George in hand, Wilson walked the few blocks over to the U.S. embassy building. He had a meeting scheduled with the deputy assistant secretary of State for Trade Policy and Negotiations, who was leading the U.S. team, and the commercial attaché from the U.S. Commercial Service of the Department of Commerce's International Trade Administration, the trade promotion arm of the U.S. government. During the meeting, he learned about the current status of the trade talks. Before he had left for London, he had gotten an extensive briefing with State and Commerce Department officials in D.C. Now, thanks to Sir George, he had a very good idea of where the stumbling blocks in the talks were likely to be. These were primarily cultural and nationalistic issues, not substantive economic ones, he sensed.

And personal issues too, he learned, a short time into the meeting. Wilson's new sense, the one Tamara called his human-lie-detector ability, told him that Commerce's commercial attaché was out to make a name for himself. Wilson had already dealt with misguided and know-it-all junior officers when he was a Marine NCO, so he knew many ways to respectfully but firmly modify or redirect that kind of attitude.

While Wilson was thus occupied, Emma was keeping busy with videochat sessions with the roll-out team at EEC Energy Solutions, making sure that all was on schedule. Isabella had taken Tamara and Nadine for a quick sight-seeing drive around London and Andrew was spending the day with his grandfather. Peter, on the other hand, was visiting the Electrical Engineering Department at Imperial College London. Peter's graduate school advisor was a collaborator with a faculty member at the ICL on nanotechnology- and microsystems-based detector and actuator devices, and Peter had planned to visit him. His preliminary doctoral research project idea was control systems for the incorporation of micro-power sources using Tamara's accumulator design into tiny self-powered actuators for use in robotics and prosthetics technologies.

They were all together again in the late afternoon as they got ready for dinner.

"You look disturbed, Emma," Isabella remarked. "Is there something wrong?"

Emma looked at her. "Possibly. It's not absolutely certain, but very likely, that we've been a target of some industrial espionage."

Sir George stood up and angrily said, "Tell me what happened and I'll have the entire MPS and Cambridgeshire police crew on it."

Emma giggled at him. "Brilliant. You can do that, I'm sure."

Sir George snorted. "My best mate, Simon Armstrong, was my roommate in uni at Oxford; he's the father of Home Secretary Patty Bolling—Patricia, that is. My daughter's family and Isabella and I are close friends with the Armstrongs and Bollings. Her department oversees policing in the U.K. To be sure, I can do that. What happened, do you know?"

"My engineering division head told me that some components of an energy-storage unit cell are gone missing. One component is the micro-porous polyvinylidene difluoride sheet which contains the embedded SET-based circuits and generates the increased electron flow. Another component is the electrically conductive polymer semiconductor doped with the superconducting formula. Those components are part of the core of the energy-storage unit and a set of them is missing. The third part is the control circuit, which activates the cell and that part is only added when the units are assembled; they're fabricated as units are assembled and immediately added, so there weren't any to nick.

"The component sheets are kept in vacuum-sealed sleeves and have to be kept absolutely clean, and the assembly needs to be done in an ultra-clean environment, because any impurity introduced into the storage matrix will cause it to break down and the stored energy will escape all at once. That happened in my lab back at

Hopkins when Tamara built the first accumulator; that first version had an impurity in one component, the device got overcharged during a thunderstorm, and it blew up part of my lab.

“One of the tech assistants hasn’t showed up for work for a week and he had access to the polymer sheet storage room. They suspect that he took the sheets. But he didn’t have access to the clean facilities and doesn’t know about the cell-assembly protocol. The local police were notified and they’re looking for him but he apparently had a fabricated identity. That’s all we know now.”

“The charging control circuit is the critical part,” Tamara said. “Without it, there’s no regulation of the energy going in or out. You can’t reverse-engineer the polymer sheets to figure out how to build a proper charging circuit either. You know, if that dude plays around with the sheets, gets them into the right configuration, and tries to pump power into that setup, he’ll get it overcharged and it’s gonna go *bang*. Those sheets are lots bigger than my original version too, so any damage will be extensive. Like a lightning strike.”

“Yep, they’ve already told that to the bobbies,” Emma said. “The officials know that the danger only comes if the perps try to make a device from the sheets. So they are taking the theft seriously and involving something called a ‘special branch.’”

“That’s good,” Sir George said. “They’re already on it then. So I don’t need to have Patty mobilize the troops. Everything else is ready for the roll-out?”

“It is. I’m excited about it, too.”

~~~~~

The investiture ceremony was on the following day. Sir George arranged for two limos which took the whole group, dressed in their formal clothes, to Buckingham Palace. Checking their credentials and identification went quickly since Sir George was known to many of the staff. Soon it was time for the ceremony to begin and officials opened the doors to the Throne Room and people began filing in. The queen was waiting there with a group of officials and she nodded to her head protocol officer that she was ready to begin. As people were showed where to stand, a palace official brought the first honoree to the queen and the ceremony began.

After a few people had received their honors, it was Emma’s turn and an official came to her and led her forward. She smiled her radiant smile at the queen as she curtsied and the queen offered her hand, which Emma briefly held with her thumb and forefinger, then released it, all the while smiling at the queen.

“Ah, greetings, Dr Emma Elizabeth Clarke. You are as engaging as your late charming and elegant grandfather. We recall him and your brilliant grandmother with fondness. We are quite honored that your parents chose our name for your middle one and we are so very sad that both of your parents perished in their service to our nation. But you, my dear, have brought honor and economic prosperity to the British homelands through both your science and your entrepreneurship. Our advisors tell us that you are introducing your new energy device. Very soon, is it not?”

“Yes, Your Majesty, the device will be unveiled and demonstrated in Cambridge late next week. Representatives of the Crown were invited.”

“And you plan to install your energy storage units in sites around the country thereafter?”

“That is true, Ma’am. The result will be a dramatic decrease in the cost of energy to consumers.”

“Most admirable, my dear. So young, yet so accomplished. You are a credit to the United Kingdom and we are delighted that you chose to remain closely tied to our nation, even though you grew up overseas. Dr Emma Elizabeth Clarke, we appoint you Dame Grand Cross of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. Let all present acknowledge this honor and let us accord Dame Emma our thanks for her service to the Crown.”

After receiving the award, Emma curtsied and said, “Ma’am, I am more honored by this recognition from my sovereign than by the recognition from my peers at the Nobel Foundation because this honor represents my help to my country.”

The queen nodded and said quietly, “Well said, my dear, and our great thanks.”

There were a number of other honors intervening and then it was Tamara’s turn. A chamberlain had previously moved her to a position close to the queen, and when the previous recipient was led away, Tamara found herself approaching England’s monarch. Tamara saw that the woman was quiet but radiated an exceptional amount of personal power. What was unusual was that Tamara could not sense any emotional overtones other than a strong feeling of duty and pride in her office. *This person has a will of steel*, Tamara sensed.

She curtsied and lightly touched the queen’s hand and the queen smiled at her.

“Welcome, Miss Tamara Nadine Alexandre. It’s so refreshing to have so many young people selected for honors on this occasion. And you are the student of another extraordinary person, Dame Emma Clarke, who we just had the pleasure of honoring. We understand that it is your remarkable inventions, together with Dame Emma’s theoretical work, that led to the creation of the new energy industry in our country.”

“That’s correct, Your Majesty; Dame Emma was the inspiration for my work.”

“How modest and polite, my dear. We also understand that you have developed devices to improve medical diagnostic equipment. Do you plan to continue such work in your future?”

“My early childhood was in Haiti, Ma’am. I vowed that when I grew up, that I’d find a way to help poor and disadvantaged people everywhere.”

“What an admirable goal, my dear. You are well deserving of our honor. Therefore, we appoint you Dame Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. Let all present acknowledge this honor and let us accord Miss Tamara Alexandre our thanks for her service to the Crown.”

Tamara received her award and as she touched the queen’s hand again, she said, “I so appreciate this honor, Ma’am; it shows me that my work will contribute to the wellbeing of people in many countries.”

“Thank you, my dear. How well spoken you are.”

Tamara rejoined her little party then and received quiet congratulations from the others and a very brief kiss on the cheek from Peter. They continued to watch the others receive their awards and then President Gerston was presented to the queen. After a very friendly exchange with the queen, he retired and a young woman was led forward and Tamara gasped quietly.

Peter whispered, “What?”

“She has such power... talk later.”

When the next person was brought forward, it was Sir George’s turn to gasp quietly and Emma looked at him with a questioning expression.

“He very strongly reminds me of someone I knew fairly well,” he whispered to her.

Soon after a number of others were honored for their achievements—including two who couldn’t be older than high-school age—the ceremony was over and the honorees and their guests were invited to the reception. Both Emma and Tamara were congratulated by the others in their party and Sir George got busy greeting and introducing people whom he knew to those in Emma’s group. Between he and Isabella, they knew a lot of people.

On the way to the ballroom, Sir George saw an official whom he knew and motioned to him. The man came over to him, greeting him.

“Hallo, you old workaholic. Can’t stay away from the action, can you,” he said as they shook hands.

“Indeed not,” Sir George answered. “But I’d like to introduce you to someone special. Dame Emma Clarke, it gives me great pleasure to present to you the Right Honorable Bruce Harning MP, our new secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero. Mr Secretary, I present Dame Emma Clarke; she was just honored by the queen.”

Harning nodded his head to her and took her hand. “Honored, Dame Emma.”

“Likewise, Mr Secretary,” Emma said.

“I wanted you both to meet; I know your department is sending representatives to Cambridge for the unveiling of EEC Energy’s power unit. I’m certain you didn’t connect Dame Emma with that company.”

Harning looked at her in surprise. “Oh, pardon me for my ignorance, Dame Emma... of course I knew of a Dr Clarke but I didn’t make the connection.”

She chuckled, “You certainly aren’t alone. I’m not offended.”

“Yes, my department has been in detailed negotiations with your company about the number and siting of your energy-storage farms. We want to know your manufacturing capacity and plans for providing the U.K. with units.”

“Yes. We will address those issues with your department right after the demo of the first unit,” Emma told him.

“Let’s move to the reception hall, dear,” Isabella interrupted. “Business later.”

“Certainly. Shall we?”

He offered her and Emma his arms and they walked toward the ballroom. They were able to circulate a little but Sir George wanted to introduce Wilson to some trade officials he had seen among the group in the room, but Tamara was keeping an eye out for that young woman she had seen getting her own knighthood honor; she wanted to meet her.

“She simply radiated power, darling,” she told Peter. “Such amazing charisma. She was a lot like Emma and Sam too. And the guy who followed her was also powerful but in a different way. Internal power, very much like Dad has. I hope they’re still here; I’d like to meet them.”

Some of the crowd in the ballroom had thinned out by now and Sir George noticed a small group of people diagonally across the room, partly hidden by a column. He saw that Prime Minister Grayson was with them and so was that young man whom he thought looked so familiar but couldn’t place.

“Wait just a moment, Emma my dear, and friends. There’s someone over there who brings back memories,” he said and started to walk over to the other group.

Emma and the others followed a bit behind, curious about what Sir George was up to. That’s when Tamara saw that the two young people, whom she wanted to meet, were in that group too. Sir George approached the group but stood respectfully at a distance away, waiting for a moment to politely interrupt. He had noticed that President Gerston was also among them; of course he knew the president from his time as the British ambassador to the U.S. As he approached, he heard some of their last few words.

Gerston was speaking to the prime minister. “... Perhaps something simple like world peace?”

Grayson laughed at the comment. “We’ll need to get together to discuss that, Mr President. And find another



country for them to which they can export their rebellion.”

Then Grayson noticed Sir George approaching as the people in her group laughed at her words.

“Welcome, Sir George,” she called to him. “Come join us if you will. I’m certain that President Gerston remembers you well.”

Gerston smiled and said, “Absolutely. Greetings, Ambassador Marshall, good to see you,” and reached out his hand as Sir George touched the PM’s hand and then shook Gerston’s.

Meanwhile the young man in the PM’s group, the one who Tamara thought had a presence like her dad, was looking at Sir George with an expression of recognition.

“Pardon me?” the young man interrupted. “Sir George Marshall? I remember you, sir. You knew my parents, Audrey Boniger and Paul Coris. In Hong Kong and then from Mom’s Thailand posting too. I’m Kevin Coris.”

Sir George smiled widely. “Ah, yes. It’s Kevin. Paul Coris indeed. I thought that you looked familiar; you’re the spitting image of your dad. Dreadful, what happened to them. Sorry for your loss.”

Kevin nodded, “Thank you.”

Grayson had recovered somewhat, and said, “Well, obviously it’s a small world for diplomats, Sir George and Mr Coris. But, Sir George, I see you have your own entourage hanging back there, including some of our other honorees. Please ask them to join us and we’ll do the introductions.”

“Madam Prime Minister,” Gerston commented, “I doubt many introductions will be needed. To me, at least, I recognize most of our newcomers; I’ve had the personal pleasure of honoring some of them myself.”

“Is that so?” Grayson said, smiling. “So let’s get this sorted then; Mr President, I know Sir George and Dame Isabella Marshall; would you please introduce your compatriots then?”

Gerston grinned at her. “Certainly, Ma’am. My Stateside friends, I present to you the Right Honorable Eleanor Grayson GCMG, prime minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; Mrs Prime Minister, it’s my distinct pleasure to introduce to you Dr Emma Clarke and her spouse...” he paused as Sir George whispered in his ear, “Dr Andrew Marshall. I have not had the pleasure of meeting them previously but I certainly know of their distinguished achievements. And with them is a most extraordinary family, the Alexandres, whom I honored just two months ago with Presidential Medals of Freedom. Prime Minister Grayson, I’m honored to present Major Wilson Alexandre, Dr Nadine Alexandre, and their daughter Miss Tamara Alexandre. I’m sorry, but although I’ve met the young man, I...”

“Peter Winsberg, Mr President,” Tamara interrupted. “My close friend, as you’ll recall.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you, Tamara. Mr Peter Winsberg. Madam Prime Minister, I wasn’t aware that the queen would be honoring Dr Clarke—Dame Emma, and Miss Alexandre, but I cannot think of any others so deserving. I would have loved to have had Dame Emma’s energy startup company founded in the United States. Now shall I introduce my other citizens in our own little group here or would you like that honor?”

Grayson chuckled. “You’re doing fine, Mr President. Why don’t you continue?”

“Certainly, my lady. Sir George and Dame Isabella Marshall, Dame Emma Clarke and Dr Marshall, Major and Dr Alexandre, Miss Alexandre, and Mr Winsberg. First, I’m pleased to introduce my dear First Lady Rita Gerston; his Excellency, the U.S. ambassador to the United Kingdom Charles Wixom and Mrs Marjory Wixom; and our deputy chief of mission, Minister-Counselor Warren Porter and Mrs Barbara Porter.”

Hands were shaken among those introduced, then Gerston motioned to Denise and Kevin to join him.

“Next, it gives me great pleasure to present Miss Denise Roberts GBE and Mr Kevin Coris GBE to you. They are here in the U.K. to attend classes at three of the world’s top universities. I know, two people and three universities. We all know the word ‘overachiever.’ Their picture is in the dictionary illustrating that word.”

Everyone laughed and there was another round of quick handshakes.

“Okay, Madam Prime Minister. Your turn,” Gerston said, turning to her and grinning.

“Indeed. I might get the last two to be introduced but they are certainly not the least, by any measure,” Grayson said with a smile and motioned to Amelia and Jeremy.

“Distinguished guests all,” she intoned, “I am honored to be the first to officially and formally introduce our nation’s newest honorees. I present, for the first time, Dame Amelia Hadad CBE and Sir Jeremy Porter CBE. Despite their being secondary-school pupils, their work in advancing educational policy and practice in the U.K. has greatly distinguished them and their service to the Crown was acknowledged today by the queen.”

Grayson was very interested in talking with Emma and Tamara; she was delighted about the new energy industry that Emma had brought to the U.K. and was amazed by Tamara’s youth.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be amazed, however,” she admitted. “Look at our honorees here today. Dame Emma, I believe you’re the senior here and you are just in your mid-twenties! At that age, I was still getting oriented in my first real job. And Miss Alexandre, just how many patents do you hold now? My officials never could find out.”

“Um, let’s see, Ma’am. And it’s just ‘Tamara,’ if you please. Including active applications, between seven and eleven. It depends on whether the claims for some inventions should be split to protect against challenge or infringement. And two that are defense-related and just direct-licensed to the U.S. Defense Department. But I have five more apps in preparation. Those are for my most recent MRI work. I put that work off to help Emma with her energy-storage theories.”

“Extraordinary...” Grayson mused.

Emma laughed. “Tamara is a true throwback to the idea of the ‘Renaissance man’; in her case, it’s woman. She’s not only minting patents like they’re a dime a dozen, she’s also been making significant scientific discoveries in neuroscience, psychology, endocrinology, and neurology, not to mention solid-state physics, quantum electrodynamics, and quantum electrical engineering. Any single one of those areas is a field of research and study all by itself and yet she’s involved with major projects in all of them.”

Tamara was blushing as Gerston was listening in on the conversation.

Then he spoke, “Would it be too much to ask, Tamara, that the next major industry you create be in the old U.S. of A.?”

Tamara twinkled a grin at him. “Tell you what, Mr President. Let’s make a deal. I told the queen earlier that my early childhood was in Haiti and that I had vowed that when I grew up, that I’d find a way to help poor and disadvantaged people everywhere. I have some ideas for several potential inventions that will help energy transmission, generation, and also the transportation industries. Clean energy too. Some of the fabrication work could be done in third-world countries to help support their economies, but the major impediment to doing that is that many of those governments are despotic, corrupt, or both. That’s a political problem. If you can find a way to help change that situation so any benefits go to the poor and disadvantaged people in those countries, I can base my industries in the old U.S. of A. How’s that sound?”

Gerston looked flabbergasted but Grayson recovered quickly.

“Goodness, Tamara, that was a bloody stunning riposte! A true diplomat’s response to an off-hand comment, that was. If you ever decide to change your citizenship, my own nation can use people of your skills and intellect,” Grayson chuckled. “As well, cheekiness.”

Everyone laughed.

“I know when I’m outclassed, Madam Prime Minister, when two quick-witted people gang up on me like that,” Gerston said, laughing. “But I’ll be serious now. Tamara, you certainly know about the Columbia Institute of Economics—your mom here was recently appointed to its faculty.”

Tamara nodded; she could sense where Gerston was going with his comment now.

“One of the goals of the institute is precisely what you so masterfully described; that’s to try to overcome the causes of poverty in many non-industrialized and third-world countries. That is the institute’s prime research and action area. So I will accept your challenge. If you can create such inventions, I will work to include those countries in achieving as much economic benefit as possible for its common citizens, not its rulers. Is that a satisfactory deal?”

Tamara nodded. “Yes, sir. I accept. Mrs Grayson is our witness, Ma’am, okay?”

Grayson nodded, smiling broadly.

“Let’s shake on the deal, sir,” Tamara said and Gerston gripped her hand, smiling.

Holding his hand and looking into his eyes, Tamara sensed Gerston’s total commitment to his words. *A truly honest politician*, she thought. *How did he ever get elected?* Then she recalled his charisma. She “sensed” a bit deeper and then realized that he had the ability to control and channel it. *Jeez, he can ‘push’ sorta like I do*, she realized.

She released his hand but Gerston was looking at her strangely.

“I feel like I’ve been judged and barely passed the test, Tamara,” he said to her quietly.

“Just a little trick I learned in my neuroscience research, sir. It’s said that the eyes are the windows to the soul and that old maxim is actually the literal truth.”

“I’m very sorry to say that duty calls now, my friends,” Grayson told them. “I must get back to the affairs of running my government. Although I must say, it sounds like the affairs in your own government just got a bit more complicated,” she laughed. “It’s been a true pleasure getting to know you, Tamara. My very best wishes for your success in *all* your fields,” she chuckled. “And to you as well, Dame Emma. Delighted to meet all of you.”

She went off to say farewell to several of the other remaining people, including the rest of Emma’s group and Ambassador Wixom’s too.

Then Wixom came over to Gerston.

“Mr President, I didn’t want to interrupt you while you were having such an entertaining time. The PM was laughing so much that I was getting concerned that the U.S. was in trouble.”

“Ha, ha, no, Charlie. Just the opposite. I think that Tamara here has truly cemented the good will between our countries. She’s gone and befriended another world leader.”

“Good. Our schedule is open and Warren had a suggestion. The younger set would like to talk among themselves a bit. We had planned to return to the Winfield House residence after the ceremony. But Wilson’s been busy, he’s nabbed several Brit trade officials and chatted them up and then got word to me that they’d love

to meet briefly with you if they could. We could do a quick pow-wow at the residence if you agree.”

“Sure. You can steer the conversation to safe areas, right?” Wixom nodded. “There’s a lot of good feelings floating around, so let’s work with that. Wilson will be able to contact them?”

“Yes sir.” He signaled a thumb’s up to Wilson who waved back and walked over to a palace official, said a few words, and handed him a note. The official nodded his head and rushed off.

Wixom turned back to Gerston. “Done. We’ll meet them at 4 p.m. Ready to leave, sir?”

“Lead on, Charlie.”

~~~~~

Tamara and Peter rode with Nadine, Wilson, and Isabella to Winfield House; Nadine and Isabella had gotten on famously and were chatting together furiously. Wilson was on his cell phone, talking to Sir George, who was in another limo with Emma and Andrew.

Porter, Wixom, and their spouses were in another, the president and his wife and the Secret Service contingent were in the next limo, a massive armored one, and the last car in the procession was occupied by Kevin, Denise, Jeremy, and Amelia.

When they arrived, Jeremy went to the Alexandre’s limo and invited Tamara and Peter to join his group, so the limo groups split up. Wixom took Gerston and Wilson to a small reception room to await the trade officials. Tamara and Peter went with Jeremy to a sitting room where Kevin, Denise, and Amelia were waiting. And the others were being entertained by Marjory Wixom, who was organizing the staff to put some refreshments together.

*Finally I get to talk to this Denise Roberts!* Tamara thought as she entered the sitting room where the others waited.

But when she walked into the room, she felt a barrage of senses almost overwhelming her. *There’s such power here!* she thought. Everyone stood up to greet her as she came over to them.

“I’m sure you all remember us from that incredible experience at the palace,” Tamara joked, “but if not, this is Peter Winsberg and I’m Tamara Alexandre.”

“Yeah, we didn’t get to talk to you at all, Tamara,” Kevin said. “We did get to talk to Peter. You really had Gerston and the PM going there, didn’t you?”

Tamara chuckled. “Got him to agree to a deal, actually.”

Then she went on to explain the arrangement she had made.

“Damn,” Kevin shook his head. “Gerston thinks that Denise and I are dangerous. But we’ve only managed to influence two countries. You’re workin’ on the whole effin’ *world!*” He laughed.

Peter took Tamara’s hand and said, “This gal doesn’t think small. Ever.”

“Still, that was a cheeky thing to do, and with the PM there too...” Jeremy grinned. “That must have been why she was laughing so hard.”

They shook hands all around. When Tamara shook Kevin’s, he looked at her in surprise, but as soon as Tamara touched Denise’s hand, Denise reacted with a gasp.

“Holy shit,” Denise said, looking at Tamara. “I never felt anything like that! I felt something when we were introduced after the ceremony, but this was different.”

Kevin looked at her. “I felt something when I touched Tamara, too. Also Peter before.”

“So did I.” ... “Me too.” Amelia and Jeremy said at the same time.

Denise shook her head. “With Tamara, it was more than just ‘feeling something’ just now. It was like... she has... Tamara, I don’t know how to say this... but are you a multiple personality or something?”

Tamara laughed. “Denise, you’re one of very few people who’ve been able to sense my, ah, ‘presences’ isn’t exactly the correct term... ‘companions,’ maybe. I’m their *cheval*.”

“But I felt it too, Denise,” Amelia said. “Tamara, I think it’s that there seem to be presences around you or linked to you somehow—very powerful in some ways but all that power—a positive energy—is directed at you. And your whole demeanor, your body language, reflects supreme confidence and assurance, so you’re using that power you’re getting and projecting it.”

“Jeez, Amelia, you’re another person in that exclusive club who has that ‘sight,’ I’ll call it. Up to now, only my mom and Peter’s grandma could do it. Peter and my dad can sense it a little. Yes, I do have these entities who’ve kinda adopted me ‘cause I can sense them. In my religion we call them *lwa*; ‘spirits’ is the translation of that word. What they really are, I believe, is that they are somehow the actualization of human intentions—that the human mind brings them into being and that’s the only way that the *lwa* can interact with reality. But it’s the belief in them that allows the human mind to do unusual things. Other belief systems produce people who do unusual things like fire-walkers or people who choose to lie on beds of nails without harm. Some people know how to communicate with animals.”

“Yeah, but I feel a number of distinct personalities kinda flitting in and out around you,” Denise said. “I get a little with Peter too, but it’s very strong with you.”

“You’re obviously sensitive to spirit presences then,” Tamara told her. “That’s really rare and unusual; I thought people had to be brought up in those traditions to be so sensitive but it looks like it must be a natural ability, possibly linked to empathy, since Amelia has it and Kevin and Jeremy too, a little. The guys have a very strong aura of presence, too. But let me tell you a little of my religion.”

Tamara went on to describe Vodou and her experiences in it. When she explained how she had thwarted her school officials in their attempt to start the Naked in School Program, she was stopped.

“Wait!” Denise exclaimed. “Are you saying you did that all by yourself? Really?”

Tamara laughed. “Absolutely not by myself; I had the help of the *lwa*. I told you about my ability to ‘push’ emotions. That only got me so far. The other help I got came from the spirit world. You may scoff, but I know that it’s real. As a scientist, I don’t have any mathematics that can prove their existence, but as a trained observer, I can see that there can be no doubt. Let me show you something. Kevin, I heard that you went to school in a few countries.”

“Ah, yes. Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Hong Kong, Indonesia.”

“So you know their languages?”

“I speak them all—wait, let me qualify that. Indonesia has more than 300; I only learned Bahasa Indonesia. And Siamese in Thailand, which also has many local languages. I know some of the main languages better than the others, though,” Kevin told her.

“What if I told you that one of our most important *lwa* knows all human languages and helped me understand one that I urgently needed to know? I only know Haitian *Kreyòl*, French, and Spanish, besides English, of course.”

“Ah, someone who knows *all* languages? How can that be possible? I’ve never heard of anyone who can do that,” Kevin admitted.

“Well, let’s try it out,” Tamara told him, grinning. “*Papa Legba*, I hope you’re paying attention,” she muttered and was overjoyed to feel a whispered chuckle in her mind.

Peter jerked. “Jeez, someone just laughed in my ear!”

Tamara stared at him. “Really?” she exclaimed. “You heard him too?”

He nodded and Tamara looked at the blank faces of the others.

“It appears that the *lwa* favor Peter too. He heard the same response as me from *Legba*. Okay, Kevin, pick a language and say something not obvious in it.”

“Sure. Okay, 彼女がどうやって私の言っていることが分かるのか分かりません。 [*Kanojo ga dō yatte watashi no itte iru koto ga wakaru no ka wakarimasen.*]”

Tamara giggled. “Told you not to say something obvious. *Papa Legba* says that’s Japanese and means something really close to, ‘I don’t see how she can know what I’m saying.’ It could be translated in other ways with minor differences ‘cause of the way the *Nihongo* grammar works.”

“Amazing,” Kevin mused. “Okay, um, 내일 날씨가 좋을 것으로 예상됩니다. [*Naeil nalssiga joh-eul geos-eulo yesangdoebnida.*]”

“Better. *Papa Legba* compliments you on your accent in Korean. He says your Japanese accent sounds like you’re British. You said, ‘The weather is supposed to be beautiful tomorrow.’”

“That’s amazing, Tamara. My accent? Damn, that’s exactly what Japanese native speakers tell me I sound like...” Kevin complained. “I learned *Nihongo* from a Brit teacher.”

“I know one!” Amelia interrupted. “*Nagpunta ako sa palengke kasama ang aking tiyahin noong nakaraang lingho.*”

Tamara cocked her head and listened for a few seconds, then nodded.

“Okay, but you slightly mispronounced that last word, ‘week.’ It’s actually *linggo*. That’s Tagalog and means ‘I went to the market with my aunt last week.’”

Jeremy stared at Amelia in awe. “How do you know Filipino?”

She giggled, “One of our housekeepers was from there and she taught me a little.”

“This is fun; can you do another?” Tamara asked, grinning broadly.

“Okay, this is a hard one ‘cause I don’t know it as well. 万物皆有美，但不是每个人都能看到它。 [*Wànwù jiē yǒu měi, dàn bùshì měi gèrén dōu néng kàn dào.*]” Kevin said haltingly.

Tamara cocked her head, listened, and then chuckled. “*Papa Legba* says that was barely understandable, but Kong Qiu, or Confucius, as he’s called today, would have said it as... one sec...” She listened again, then continued, 萬物皆有美，非人人皆能見之。 [*Maan mat gaai yǒu měi, fēi yān yān gaai néng jīn xī.*] “‘There is beauty in everything, but not everyone sees it.’”

“Goddamn, Tamara, your accent was just about perfect!” Kevin exclaimed. “Who were you listening to? And why is Peter grinning like that?”

“‘Cause I could hear it too, Kevin! Honey, that was *Papa Legba*? His voice in my head gave me chills, but it

was so warm and loving too.”

“Yep. *Legba* is *Manman*’s patron but he keeps tabs on me ‘cause I amuse him,” Tamara said. “Kevin, I know we can’t be definitive about proving that the *lwa* exist, but did that demo make you think that it’s at least possible?”

Kevin stammered, “Wow... this... is unreal, Tamara. All I can say is, when you have eliminated the impossible...” he began and Tamara joined him in completing the quotation, “...whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

Then they both laughed.

The six of them began discussing their own charisma and empathy traits and their experiences with dealing with others who had those capabilities, but soon dinner was announced and they went to join the others.

## Chapter 55 - Making Friends and Influencing People

“The others” included President Gerston. The whole group from the investiture had gathered in the ambassador’s family dining room for the meal. Gerston was scheduled to go on to Geneva the following day where he was to address the European Parliament, but he elected to stay over to spend more time with this group of people who had so captured his admiration. During dinner, the discussion covered a wide range of topics including the meet-and-greet that Gerston had with the U.K. officials and the unveiling of the new energy-storage units that Emma’s company was producing. She mentioned about the missing device components.

“But this afternoon, I heard about some more irregularities there. There was some apparent pilfering of other components that go into making the core of the energy-storage units. EEC Energy people were alerted by the police who were following up on a mysterious explosion in an isolated, abandoned farm building in the Cambridge vicinity. The police thought it was from gas—LPG—but that was ruled out. An analysis of the debris turned up traces of the polymers that we use in the energy device. One or more people were killed or injured; some traces of human tissues were recovered, but any bodies, if someone had been killed, had been removed. So it seems that someone was stealing materials and trying to build a working device and it blew up on them. But taking a doped polymer sheet set and trying to push energy into it is exactly like taking a bottle of nitroglycerin and shaking it. It’s a very unstable material if handled the wrong way.”

“How do you make it safe, then?” Wixom asked.

“That’s part of Tamara’s engineering design, actually,” Emma said. “The protections against overcharging or even tampering are built right into the core design. She’s the best one to explain how she designed the cells so that they can’t be converted into explosive devices. Tamara?”

“Sure. When the first accumulator exploded and I saw how much power was packed into that tiny device, I realized that I didn’t want my design to have a similar problem to the one that plagued the early lithium-ion batteries. They could explode or catch fire if they weren’t handled or used properly. Actually, they still need care in handling. So I designed the accumulator devices to have a safety circuit. Here’s how that works.

“The integrated circuit which controls the charging and discharging of the device—think of it like a traffic controller—is manufactured in the same clean room where the cores of the cells are being assembled. Then each individual cell is encapsulated in a polymer layer which includes a microprinted conductive screen. Then the whole thing is sealed in an epoxy layer.

“If any part of the screen layer is pierced or damaged in any way, then the energy stored in the cell will be dumped as heat into the charging control circuit and will melt the whole cell into a fused blob. Forced overcharging will do the same thing—it will fuse the cell. Shorting the cell’s terminals triggers a discharge-limiting circuit and locks the output briefly so any connected wires won’t get hot. If someone tries to x-ray the thing to get a picture of the electronics inside, the high-energy photons of the x-ray beam will trigger an overcharge event and cause it to fuse as well. That makes the cells inherently safe, by design, from being used as explosives and they’re safe from being reverse-engineered too. So some bad actor won’t be able to engineer a cell into an explosive; the design even prevents their copying it and passing it off as an official unit.”

“What about heat dissipation?” Denise asked. “Doesn’t the unit generate heat inside when the energy flows?”

“Good question,” Tamara answered. “The heat’s negligible. There’s no chemical reaction involved in producing energy and the components are all superconducting so the energy movement encounters no electrical resistance.”

“I thought of something,” Jeremy said then. “Couldn’t someone just completely discharge the cell and then take it apart? Then there’d be no energy left to melt it.”



“Hey, a budding engineer,” Tamara chuckled. “Another good one. Because of the way the matrix stores energy and replenishes it from the environment, it can’t be drawn down to less than somewhere around 12 to 17 percent of full charge by using its external connections. The residual energy is plenty to fuse the whole cell. But that was a great point.”

“Thanks, Tamara,” Emma said. “Charlie, does that answer your question?”

“It sure does. Thanks, Tamara, that was a pretty impressive explanation and your work is even more impressive,” Wixom remarked.

“Thanks, sir,” she nodded.

Then Sir George spoke. “So it looks like the police are finding out that EEC Energy Solutions has been targeted by spies?”

“Looks that way,” Emma said. “I heard that they’ve got a number of leads they’re working on.”

“Good,” Sir George said.

The discussion turned to other topics and the end of the meal approached. Then, while dessert was being served, Gerston looked around the table, smiling.

“This is an impressive gathering, folks. I’ve attended state dinners with a lot of important people, but this group is far more impressive than any that I’ve been with before. True, I personally have honored five of you for your amazing contributions to the U.S. But the U.K. has conferred ... ah, let’s see, it’s nine knighthoods, right? Sir George has been knighted twice. Dame Isabella. Dame Emma is a Nobel laureate who also received the Field medal and the Charles Stark Draper Prize. Those last two are like Nobels in mathematics and engineering, correct, Dame Emma?”

She nodded, smiling.

“I heard you were recently elected to the National Academy of Sciences, too. Goes along with being elected as a fellow of the Royal Society.”

Emma nodded. “But don’t forget Tamara, sir.”

“How could I ever? She was awarded a Draper Prize too. And together with her friend, Mr Winsberg, both are Clarke Scholars. That’s being chosen as two of the top high school graduates in the country, The entire Alexandre family are national heroes; Major Alexandre is a Medal of Honor recipient and all three were awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.”

Nadine put up her hand. “Mr President? I think you’re embarrassing everyone here now. Me too. Look at Denise, Kevin, and Dame Amelia and Sir Jeremy—their faces are glowing red.”

“Oh my, you’re absolutely right. But there’s so much incredible talent in this one room that I want to remember this time together. I made a deal with Miss Tamara, too. That deal will involve the Columbia Institute of Economics and its mission and it’ll be a real challenge for me to satisfy Miss Tamara, right?”

He looked at her, smiling.

“You bet,” she shot right back at him.

He went on, “So I’d like to find a way to use all of your talents and abilities, everyone, to help the Institute when we kick off the projects that the academic council of the Institute is planning. Some of you are on board with us already. But watch out; I know where all of you live, and I might just call on you in the future!”

Everyone laughed and soon began to leave the table. Kevin went over to Tamara as they were leaving the room.

“It’s still early—can we talk?” he asked. “Let’s go back to the sitting room. I want to talk about our schools.”

When they got settled, Kevin opened the discussion. “Gerston said you and Peter were Clarke Scholars, so that means you guys are in Maryland, right? Hopkins?”

Tamara answered, “Yep. Peter and I just graduated from Hopkins but we’re staying for grad school there. I know that Amelia and Jeremy are ... it’s not high school ... you’re going into year 12?” They both nodded. “What about you and Denise?” she asked.

Denise answered, “I’m getting a master’s degree from the London School of Liberal Arts and Education and this summer I need to take one more ed course and finish writing my thesis. Then it’s back to the States and Kevin and I need to finish up at Avery University. We’re ‘super-seniors’ because we took an extra year earning masters’ degrees—but we haven’t even gotten our bachelors’ degrees yet,” she laughed. “So we’ll graduate next spring and I want to go to med school. Kevin has similar plans.”

“But not in medicine,” Kevin clarified. “I want a doctoral program in political science and international relations.”

“So you guys were here to go to school and wound up getting knighted,” Peter said, thoughtfully. “And it was because you showed them that Avery Program? With Amelia and Jeremy too?”

Jeremy laughed. “I guess you didn’t hear her say this, but the PM accused Kevin and Denise of exporting the colonists’ rebellion back to the U.K. Actually Denise single-handedly unraveled two years of the government’s curriculum planning in ed schools and then both of them got a government agency disbanded when they stopped the U.K.’s Naked in School Program in its tracks. They were knighted because Denise and Kevin showed how much money the Brits were losing by keeping the Program going and how much the Avery Program would save the government.”

“And Amelia and Jeremy were important co-conspirators,” Denise chuckled. “The government ministers never knew what hit them when those two nailed them to the wall with how they were violating the law and kids’ civil and human rights too. Then we showed them a video about how the Avery Program worked and they grabbed onto that like a lifeline.”

“You go to Avery University and know about the Avery Program, so...” Peter started.

“They helped invent it!” Amelia interjected. “With their friends at Avery. And then they taught it at my school to a bunch of uni students and also to Jeremy and me. Our school has the country’s pilot program for teaching it.”

“Wow,” Peter nodded. “My cousins—they live in Delaware—told me that their school was looking into the Avery Program this past year and will be starting it up there this fall.”

“Really?” Denise said. “Then they would be one of the few outside of the Atlanta area to do that. Do you know their school’s name? I’ll make sure that they get the most recent curriculum stuff from how we developed it here.”

Peter gave her the information and she entered it into her mobile phone.

“So you guys were the ones who got the Program—the naked one—stopped in the U.S. too,” Peter commented.

“It was a team effort,” Kevin told him. “A number of people played major roles. A lot of very talented people.”

“Emma told me that when she was in high school, they tried to run the Program there,” Tamara told them. “That

was when it was first beginning, maybe twelve years ago.”

“Really? Was she in it?” Denise asked.

Tamara laughed, “Nope, she and her friends shut it down before the school could even get it started. But get this—they were in Fairbanks in Alaska! How about that for idiocy?”

Everyone reacted to that news with surprise.

“That’s just about the stupidest thing I ever heard,” Jeremy summed it up for all of them. “Naked, in the winter, in Alaska. What were they thinking?”

Tamara laughed. “You do know that you shouldn’t use the word ‘thinking’ when you’re talking about officials running the Program, do you?”

Jeremy grinned. “Absolutely.”

“Hey, let’s talk about what’s happening next week,” Kevin said. “Next Friday is when Emma’s invited us to the roll-out of Tamara’s energy device. I’m helping my Aunt Janet—she’s the CEO of the Coris Foundation—get settled; they’re moving into a house in Beckenham and the Foundation is finishing its headquarters move from Jakarta. I’ll be helping with that. Denise is taking her ed course but she has Fridays open.”

“And I’m helping my daddy and new mum too,” Amelia said. “Their house is gorgeous; it’s in a park, and Kevin and Denise bought it for them as a wedding gift... thanks again, my bro and sis; love ya. Jeremy said he’d help us too.”

“But we’ll drive up to Cambridge Thursday afternoon and stay at Emma’s. She invited us to stay overnight at her estate there,” Kevin finished.

“Glad that you can come,” Tamara said. “My folks need to return home when Dad’s meetings are done, probably on Tuesday. Peter’s spending a few days working with his collaborator at Imperial College while I meet with Emma’s engineers to look over the prototype specs and performance. The prototype unit has a provision for one kind of wireless energy transmission, RF beams, and I’ve been working on systems to minimize power losses during energy beam transmission. My goal is to do away with high-voltage electrical transmission lines. The prototype will be used to test transmission methods.”

“I guess we’re a bunch of high achievers,” Denise chuckled. “But Tamara’s outclassed us all...”

“No way!” Tamara objected. “I haven’t destroyed parts of the governments of two world powers, you know.”

“Yeah, *yet*,” Peter snarked. “You guys, don’t give her any ideas, ‘cause when she gets going on one, the destruction in her wake is like where a tornado passed. She’s already shaken up the departmental structure at Hopkins—her ideas have sparked so many cross-disciplinary programs there that the administration has all but given up trying to write program descriptions. Most of the medical, science, and engineering faculty are trying to get joint appointments in other departments just to get a piece of the action. How many collaborators do you have on your neuroscience project now, Tamara? Thirty-four?”

She giggled. “Nuh uh, it’s at fifty-seven now. From sixteen departments, schools, and programs. Just before we left, I got calls from professors in economics, sociology, and philosophy. They have ideas to use the neuroscience findings which my collaborator’s group has been publishing in their respective fields, so that number may increase.”

Peter turned to the others. “See what she’s done? Case closed.”

“Sorry, honey,” Tamara rebutted, “Look at Denise; she did a number on the curricula of all the ed schools in the

country. And sounds like the four of them did what my dad told me to do about ending threats when they stopped the Program here. He's a Marine and they make sure that the threat is gone when they've finished their mission. They say, 'Walk softly, leave no sign that you passed. But if someone interferes with your passage, then end the threat. And never look back.'"

"Ohmygod, Tamara," Denise cried as she ran over to hug her. "You're another Marine brat—where's my head at; I didn't make the connection. Sure, your dad's a Marine, duh, saw the uniform. When we're all back in the States, I gotta hook you up with Cindy Denison. She and her brother Roger, their dad's a Marine too, had us use Marine strategy to destroy the Naked in School Program back in the States. She'll absolutely *love* your 'no-holds-barred' philosophy."

"Well, Denise, Cindy must have taught you well, 'cause that's exactly what you did with your little education rebellion here," Tamara replied. "In my case, that motto describes how I live my life—I had to because of the threats my family faced in leaving Haiti. I just apply it to my work as well—an unanswered question, an unsolved equation, missing data, these are all threats. I leave *none* behind when I work. And, of course, the threats of evil people too; those I neutralize," she finished in a tone of voice and an icy glare that gave everyone in the room a sudden chill.

"Shit, Tamara, that was scary," Kevin remarked. "I felt the emotion behind that last comment."

Denise shuddered. "Oooh, that was awful—suddenly your spirit became inky black, Tamara—what the hell did you do?"

"Jeez, sorry," Tamara apologized. "I forgot I'm with a bunch of sensitives here. Part of my psyche is tied up in an attachment to the *lwa* called *Ayizan Velekete*. She's my patron and the protector of the young, poor, weak, and disadvantaged people in the world. I committed to her when I was young that I would never do evil nor abide evil people. This is the source of my abilities, I believe, and how I was able to stop the Program back in my high school. The Program was a serious evil inflicted on the children and had to be stopped."

"Oh, that's perfect!" Amelia exclaimed. "That was exactly what Jeremy and I were saying in his blogs and how we got the public's support behind us, the press too, and that pressured the government to listen to us."

"You know, Tamara, I'm getting a hint of an idea here," Kevin mused. "Modesty aside, we've got a bunch of wizards here. You're the tech wizard; Jeremy's a legal wizard; Amelia's a humanitarian one; I don't know Peter well yet but I sense that he's both a tech wizard and an empathic dynamo; Denise is a psych wizard; and I'm an organizer. We've all bonded over the last week, I believe. Perhaps when we've all finished our education, we could get together and see what we could accomplish. Can we all think about that?"

Tamara was slowly nodding.

"Yes, that just may fit in with my own personal long-term plans. So I certainly will give that some thought."

Jeremy began to say, "It's kinda soon for me..." when Emma came in with Sir George.

"Okay, you lot, it's time to break this up. Jeremy, your folks want you to get Amelia home and the Alexandres want to get back to the flat to kip out. It's been a long day," Emma told them.

They all promised to talk again on Thursday in Cambridge and then everyone left after saying good-bye to the Gerstons, Wixoms, and Porters.

### ***Cambridge, U.K.: that Monday***

During the following week, everyone kept very busy. Tamara and Emma went to Cambridge and Tamara spent the first part of the week getting familiar with the manufacturing process used in building the energy-storage devices. She gave a number of presentations about her quantum electrodynamic theory modifications which

showed how electrons could be stored in what essentially was a virtual, multi-dimensional matrix where the quantum numbers associated with the electrons could assume random values—something not permitted by normal electrodynamic theory.

Then she brought out her plans for transmitting energy wirelessly. The preliminary idea was an adaptation of her maser to beam microwaves from tower to tower, a method which was currently in use, but the long wavelengths of the microwaves, together with atmospheric scattering and absorption, made it difficult to keep the microwave beam tightly collimated and keep the energy losses low when sending a beam through the atmosphere. She had mostly solved the atmospheric scattering problems by making them no longer relevant. Her discovery of the space-folding properties of her coil circuit would allow energy transmission through the coils' folded space, but scaling that invention up to a usable size was proving to be difficult. Also difficult to solve was learning how to produce a collimated energy beam to insert into the transmitting coil and to extract it without losses from the receiving one. She now wanted to turn the research on the energy collimation issue over to the company's engineers, while she continued work on scaling up the transmission coil to a usable production size.

~~~~~  
Wilson called Tamara on Wednesday, late afternoon. His part in the talks was complete now and he and Nadine would be returning home on Thursday.

"So how did it work out?" Tamara asked.

"To mix metaphors badly, it was like herding a bunch of horny male long-tailed cats through a big room filled with rocking chairs and female cats in heat," he chuckled. "Everyone was a prima donna, it seemed, and also afraid that another rep would upstage them and get an advantage. Sir George's idea—Gerston's too—of my wearing my uniform was a good idea."

"How's that?" Tamara asked.

"Well, the German rep asked me how a military man could help them getting through the technical issues, and I pointed out how, when Alexander the Great was challenged to untie a complex knot in Gordium in Phrygia, which is now in central Turkey—it's known as the 'Gordian Knot' story, we all know how he solved that problem. He drew his sword and sliced it open. I told the reps that was my role and as a Marine, I was highly qualified at both sword-play and problem solving. That broke the ice and we went on from there."

"Brilliant, Dad! How'd you know that stuff?"

"Your dad's a history buff, remember? Your mom isn't the only smart person in the family. After you, of course."

"Then did you make any progress?" Tamara asked.

"They were just nibbling at the edges of the major issues. I let that go on for a few hours and then got everyone's attention—in a Marine way. Saying *listen up!* in a command voice works wonders. I told them that if they weren't part of the solution, then they were part of the problem. I told them that this was going to change right now and here's how we're going to tackle the issues. In a complex military campaign, you don't attack the final objective right at the beginning. You identify attainable waypoints, soften them up, and then reduce them. Then move to the next. And use multiple lines of attack, without dividing your forces. I explained how that worked, and showed them how to translate the military approach to a problem-solving one.

"I had each rep list the issues and goals each wanted to attain, and we flow-charted them into a time line. I showed them that by working on the agreement that way, using waypoints and benchmarks, it allowed for intermediate evaluation of how the objectives could be attained and allowed for mid-course correction. Doing

the agreement that way would also allow for a lot of flexibility and give-and-take; they all loved that. I guess they must thrive on that bargaining crap and I gave them lots of bargaining opportunities. And you know that ... ah, injection of that lie-detection ability you did for me? Well, that was very useful in separating the BS-ing from the real issues, too. So the talks are on track now and the ol' U.S. of A. reps were happy as a passel of hogs in a mud pit."

"Funny, Dad. I think you cleaned up that last expression but I get your drift," Tamara said. "So your mission was a success."

"To the extent that the log-jam is gone, yep. I did what they sent me to do. Showed 'em how to drop the egos and work together."

"Cool. How's Mom doing with her project?"

"I'll let you speak to her in a sec. Is the unveiling on track for Friday?"

"Sure. Sorry you can't stay for that. Emma and I have mostly been catching up with the manufacturing end here and giving the tech staff here some new research project direction. It's on power transmission; that's the next step in making energy cheap and readily available."

"I'm sorry too but I really have to get back. There's a new equipment installation at the APL and the boss wants me in on the setup. Oh, right. Something else. My premonition sense has been bugging me lately—nothing specific, but it's a sense that I've learned to pay attention to. So you watch out too. We'll see you when you get back. Next week, right? Love ya. Here's Mom."

"Sure. Love you too. Bye, Dad, and congrats."

"Hello, Tamara," Nadine said as she took Wilson's phone. "Missing you already after being together so much last week."

"Yeah, I feel the same way. So how did your own project work out?"

"You know that Kevin's brilliant, don't you?"

"Oh, yeah. He is."

"So I told you what he said after he learned about my work at the Institute, about getting with some of his foundation's caseworkers. And he gave me the contact info for Amelia's grandparents; they're working in west Africa. So I now have a network of contacts in east Asia and in Africa who are actually working with the target populations that I'm studying."

"Kevin also put me in touch with one of his professors at the London Economics Institute. She's Nigerian and an expert on the effects of microeconomics in rural communities and actually has some field work experience. I visited her and we spoke for about four hours and we're going to collaborate on a project we sketched out."

"And after I spoke to those case-worker people of the Coris Foundation and the Hadads in Africa, I can see how to develop the basis for putting a real project together. Kevin is a genius in figuring out people's strengths and abilities and getting them together on projects."

Tamara chuckled. "Mom, I actually saw him doing that myself. He's getting an idea to involve our three couples—him and Denise, Amelia and Jeremy, and me and Peter—in something when everyone's finished with their degrees. I got a sense of his idea from his emotional signals and it looks exciting. So you have a good research direction now?"

"Absolutely. It was the lack of collaborators and contacts—the things one builds early in an academic

career—that was missing for me. Now that’s changed and I can move forward.”

“That’s great, Mom. Dad can tell you what Emma and I’ve been up to. Peter tells me that he’s really made progress in developing a plan for his dissertation research project, so this trip has been productive for everyone, looks like. He’ll be joining me this evening and the others, you know, Kevin et al will be coming tomorrow. And Dad told me about his premonition sense. I’ve gotten it too. It’s nothing specific, just a general warning to stay alert. So I am, and don’t worry.”

“Dad told me and said the same things. But keep safe anyway, honey. We’ll see you when you get back and trade stories. Love you and be well.”

“Bye,” Tamara said and disconnected. *So Dad’s got a premonition too, she thought. The last time we both got that sense, it involved family as opposed to one person. But they’re leaving the country tomorrow... I don’t understand. Keep alert; that’s always important.*

~~~~~

Peter arrived in Cambridge early that evening, coming from London’s King’s Cross Station on a Great Northern express, and Tamara met him with a driver from Emma’s estate.

She greeted Peter as he strolled out of the platform area of the Cambridge North Station.

“Missed you, sweetie,” she told him as they kissed. “So you got lots done.”

“Jeez, yeah,” he said. “It was intense, but this will be such a great project. Hey, you need to see this.”

Peter pulled an envelope out of his backpack, opened it, and pulled out a photo. He handed it to Tamara.

She looked at it and then broke out laughing. “Oh, god, so funny. A Platform 9¾ sign and half a baggage cart sticking into the wall. What are you wearing? A black robe with red... oh! Gryffindor! And is that a wand too?”

Peter laughed, “Yeah, got the whole nine yards. Got a scarf too. There’s a Harry Potter shop near the Platform 9¾ sign. I bought the stuff and got my photo taken. The station management actually played along with the Hogwarts Express idea; it’s a real tourist attraction too.”

“So is there really a Platform 9¾?” Tamara asked.

“Actually there are just some tracks between Platforms 9 and 10, but with a wave of the magic wand, I could see a shadow of a platform there,” Peter joked.

“Funny,” Tamara giggled. “Say, the robe and stuff might be fun to use when we do the energy device roll-out.”

“Yeah, I thought of that, but maybe the Brits are too staid for that sort of humor.”

“I’ll ask Emma; see what she thinks,” Tamara said. “Anyway, keep that photo safe. It’s great.”

They had reached the car now and climbed in.

“Tomorrow Emma wants to take us to see Cambridge University. We’re having lunch with the Clarke Scholars there too. There are eight, she told me, but only five are on campus now. Kevin’s group is arriving in late afternoon.”

~~~~~

On Thursday morning, Emma and Andrew brought Tamara and Peter to the Cambridge campus and showed them the sights. Tamara and Peter didn’t realize just how extensive the university is, its thirty-one colleges occupy most of the central area of the city. They visited Trinity College, King’s College, and Queens’ College,

and briefly stopped at some of the other picturesque buildings; then they walked on to the Cavendish Laboratory where the Physics Department is located.

There, Emma introduced them to a number of faculty members and they looked at the facilities. When noon approached, they went to the nearby West Café where an area had been reserved for the group. Peter and Tamara met the Clarke Scholars who could come and they exchanged their stories. Having heard Amelia's and Jeremy's experiences with the U.K. version of the Naked in School Program, Peter's morbid curiosity got the better of him and he asked his new friends about their own experiences.

"Cor, mate," Henry Simms, a physics student going into his third year, responded, "I reckon tha' you'm not talkin' 'bout what 'appened in the ed school 'ere."

Peter shook his head. "No, in ... um ... high school? I forget what it's called here."

Simms grinned at him. "Ah, I see, yis, you've got a different system over there. Secondary schools be called years nine to eleven. Then sixth-form colleges be twelves and thirteens. Uni be three years, four if 'ee take a master's. Now then, that bloomin' rot they call a Program only got started up in most state schools maybe two years ago—September before last. Before that, only a few schools in smaller tawns 'ad it for testing. I was already 'ere when it started up in a lot of schools. Sarah, you just finished your fresher year—was the naked Program in your school?"

"Awl-gal sckewl, zorry," she giggled. "They cun't fathom how to do it there. My Clarke classmate Simon, ee couldn't be 'ere, maybe... wait, no, ee came from an independent school. They didn't 'ave to run the Program in they."

Simms turned back to Peter. "Unless them new freshers 'ad it in their schools, then looks like none of us 'ad to deal with that rot."

"Oi, I took the new freshers around for their tour," Charlotte Davies, a mathematics major going into her fourth year, interjected. "Both were in independent schools."

"So no one here, good. I hear that it's being dropped now." Peter told them. "It was a bad idea."

Davies nodded. "I heard that too; something else is replacing it. Stupid berks; can't let the teachers concentrate on teaching."

"Peter and I heard about the program that's replacing it," Tamara told them. "Nothing like the naked program and the kids who were in it love it. Sounds like relationship and ice-breaker games with P.E. games in the mix too."

"Say, you mentioned the ed school, Henry," Peter said. "I heard something about what happened in the London School of Arts and Education."

Simms chuckled. "Bloomin' planks, them government gits. Us heard they was makin' them ed schools do this bleddy daft uni-level naked program, forcin' the ed students to be starkers. Us started 'ere a week later than the London unis and the word got out by social media that all the ed students in the country would 'ave to take part. So the ed student lot 'ere all got together and agreed that if Cambridge was included in that, everyone would switch majors and they'd 'ave empty classrooms. Besides that rot, it's reet parky 'ere durin' the school year—can get close to zero in the winter and our buildings are old and are reet drafty, ain't they. So the ed faculty got the administration to agree to drop the nudity rot. My girlfriend's in the ed school and she told me about 'ow they got that sorted."

"Yeah, our friend in London said the same thing happened at a school there," Peter told him. "So do you guys get a chance to work on a research project like the Clarke Scholars in the U.S. can?"



“Oh, arr; ‘tis a proper big part of the program ‘ere and there be plenty o’ chances to design your own research, too. ‘Tis encouraged, in fact,” Sarah told him. “My job will bide in nanotechnology—microrobotics in aimed medicine to hand over payloads to certain innards.”

“Cool; my doctoral project is in nanotech too, but in double-E. Control systems,” Peter said.

“Nice. Maybe my project ‘pplication will meet yourn somewheres down the line,” Sarah said.

Then the talk turned to social matters and Tamara and Peter were intrigued to hear about all of the formal and semi-formal events that the colleges of the university sponsored—even super-formal white-tie events that several of the colleges held in May.

During the hour after lunch, the students and faculty circulated among the group just talking about topics of interest. The Cambridge physics faculty all knew about Tamara and wanted a chance to talk to her; many offered to sponsor her for a trip to Cambridge during the school year for a series of seminars in quantum electrodynamic theory, a field in which she was becoming a noted figure. Tamara told them that she’d consider the offer when she knew what her fall schedule was going to look like.

Then they had to leave; Tamara and Peter wanted to be at the estate when Kevin’s group arrived; Emma had work to do at EEC Energy Solutions, and Andrew had several meetings scheduled with a few economics faculty members at the university.

## Chapter 56 - Energy Device Rollout

Kevin and his group arrived at Emma's estate at 5:45 p.m.; they had taken the M11 and beaten the evening rush hour out of London. Kevin was driving one of the embassy vehicles, courtesy of Warren Porter, and since he had some experience with driving in England, Japan, and Indonesia, he was familiar with left-hand traffic.

Emma had returned from her office a few minutes earlier and met them as they pulled up.

"This is quite a spread," Kevin remarked to her as they walked to the front door. "The grounds are like a park."

"It is. I'm so happy the trustees decided not to sell it when Grandma died. They folded it into the real estate operation and set it up to hold events and small conferences. The university uses it a fair amount for housing for visiting faculty too. That's why there's a staff, and I decided to keep them and continue the leasing when I'm not in residence—I keep one wing for my exclusive use and it's self-contained too; it's private from the rest of the main building. Now go freshen up and put on your dressy togs like I told you to bring; we're going to a great restaurant for dinner and they require jacket and tie, semi-formal for the gals."

At the restaurant, they were shown to a private room; several people were already there. Emma introduced them.

"Tamara and Andrew, you've already met our dinner guests. You other ladies and gents, gather 'round. Dr Sir Henry Stafford, Dr Nils Thomassan, Dr Beverly Norris, and Mrs Wilma Carter. It's my pleasure to introduce you to Mr Kevin Coris GBE and Miss Denise Roberts GBE, to Dame Amelia Hadad and Sir Jeremy Porter, and to Mr Peter Winsberg, my guests for tomorrow's event. My friends, Dr Stafford is our president and CEO; Dr Thomassan is our chief technology officer; Dr Norris is our director of research, and Mrs Carter is our chief financial officer. Sir Gregory Hodges, who's the vice chair of EEC Energy, is in Scotland and couldn't be here this evening, and our manufacturing operations director also couldn't be here—he's making the last-minute preparations for tomorrow.

"My company executives, I wanted you to meet these very special people whom I only met last week but have already become quite dear to me, and as well, apparently to Tamara. She's told me that she feels that somehow our futures are linked, very likely through our energy business and my friends' ties to projects to improve conditions in third-world countries. So I wanted you all to get to know each other."

They had a pleasant meal and had a far-ranging discussion about the company's plans, Kevin's foundation, and all of their education plans. Emma told them that she would be giving them a tour in the morning and that Andrew would be joining them after a morning meeting he had at the university's Economics Department.

They parted after promising to chat after Friday's event.

~~~~~

Tamara and Peter woke up early the next morning and got ready to meet the others for breakfast.

While they were getting ready, Peter remarked to Tamara, "Damn, sweetie, I don't know what's the matter with me... I feel jumpy and unsettled. Felt it all night and didn't sleep very well."

"Yeah, me too," she replied. "So that's another ability you've gained, you know. Dad has it too; it's not quite precognition where you know what's gonna happen. It's a premonition ability. Something's gonna happen today; I feel it too. It could be either good or bad, you know, but my feeling leans to bad right now. I don't have any idea what will happen, though. When I get this feeling, I just stay alert. You should do that too, and if some thought pops into your head suddenly, pay attention. It could be a message from a *lwa*."

"Damn, really? That's crazy. Okay, I'll keep alert. This is such weird shit."

They met the others for breakfast. Emma had gone to the facility earlier, the housekeeper told them, and that she

would be meeting them to give them a brief tour before the unveiling event. Andrew would be joining them from his meeting at some time this morning.

They left Emma's estate at 8:45 a.m. in the estate's limousine. It was just a short ride to the EEC Energy Solutions facility which was located on the River Cam in Grantchester Meadows, just inside the Cambridge city limits.

As the limousine carrying Tamara's group drove down the lane leading into the facility, they could see a number of buildings of varying height on the site, dominated by a modern six-story office building, and between the buildings were several large parking areas, nicely landscaped and arranged to fit into the terrain. One of the parking areas had a large tent set up at one side of it.

The limousine stopped in front of the office building and as they climbed out of it, Peter remarked to Tamara, "You're not taking that backpack of yours with you, are you, sweetie?"

Tamara grinned at him. "Peter, you know that I go just about everywhere with it, so why do you bother asking? This time there's no electronics lab in there—instead I've got your Harry Potter cloak and stuff there."

He just shrugged, "Oh, right."

They walked into the lobby of the building and stopped at the security desk.

The guard was watching them enter and as they approached, asked, "Hello, Tamara; this is your Coris, Roberts, Porter, et al, group?"

She answered, "Yes, sir; that's us."

"Excellent," the guard responded. "Tamara's already all set. You others, sign in here, please. I'll need to see your IDs and then I'll call Dr Clarke."

After the guard gave them their facility ID cards on lanyards, he made a call, and a minute later, a woman came out of the office area entrance.

"I'm Helene Steward, Dr Clarke's admin assistant. Hello, Tamara. She sent me to fetch you lot. She's been on the bell all morning getting important news. We need to take the lift here."

Steward led them to a conference room on the top floor and a minute later, Emma came in.

"Morning," she greeted them. "I've been busy—Sir George rang me last night and told me that earlier in the day, there was a huge explosion in a building in Bedford, about 25 miles west of here. The building used to be a warehouse and distribution center but was unoccupied until about a year ago but no one knew how it was being used then—no cargo lorries were arriving. The blast leveled the building and the debris closed the road out in front. The surrounding structures only had minor damage, fortunately; it was a big open building and the explosion just popped the walls open like a balloon. There were eleven people inside, all Russians, and they all died. There was a lot of electronics equipment in there too. One of the deceased was our missing former engineering aide, so we now know where those stolen polymer sheets went.

"Sir George told me that MI5 was involved with our industrial espionage case now and told me that I should ring the inspector in charge this morning; they'll be visiting here later today."

"What's MI5?" Kevin asked. "I heard of MI6, that's like the CIA, right?"

"Right. MI5 is internal U.K. domestic security and MI6 is the foreign intelligence service," Emma told him.

"I've spent much of the past hour talking to the MI5 inspector and a detective. They've been aware that there are Russian agents in the country who were sent here to try to learn about our energy device. They have info that the

Russian government is worried about how the device will impact their export of oil and natural gas to Europe. About a quarter of the EU's natural gas comes from Russia now, down from 40 percent, and it seems that the Russians are worried that our energy-storage device will cut into that number even more.

"The MI5 agency people are fairly certain now that the Russian government is behind the spying here. They think that their objective is to learn about the device, how it works, and perhaps if it's vulnerable to sabotage or other kinds of tampering. I asked him if there's anything we should change about our security here and he told me that he's been told that we have excellent physical security in place. They will be giving us some further advice about operational security. He said we need to be alert for any overt attempts to break in here or other direct action against the company. I told him that we had increased our security staff following the theft of the parts and he said that was good, but to stay alert. As well, they are working on some other leads they have on our spying case. Well, that's all he would tell me.

"So let's go look at our facilities now. Tamara's seen everything earlier, obviously. You can view the labs but we can't enter the manufacturing area itself, although I have photos I can show you. Then I'll show you a video of the manufacturing process. We have about ninety minutes before we'll go to that big tent outside where you'll get a close look at the unit. The show starts in a little more than two hours from now."

Emma took them through the labs and they noticed that there seemed to be many uniformed security people present.

Kevin asked Emma, "You really do have lots of security here. Is that all because of the espionage or for the event today?"

"After discovering that those device components went missing, we did add a few more personnel to cover the area, especially the lab buildings, yes," she answered. "And a few more when we found out about the explosion last week."

"But they're not armed..." Kevin went on.

"Can't be," she told him. "In the U.K., even the routine police patrols aren't armed. Carrying any kind of weapon, except by special police units, is illegal here, even batons, knives, and defensive agents like pepper spray aren't allowed."

She brought them into a room set up like a classroom lecture hall.

"We do our presentations here. Our facility has a sizable scientific and engineering staff and we do a lot of basic research too," she told the group proudly. "I'll show you the photos and videos of the manufacturing area now. Please remember that this information is proprietary; you signed those NDAs that bind you from spilling our secrets, didn't you."

They all acknowledged that they understood and Emma began the show. Then it was time to go to the tent where the device would be unveiled. Emma led the group out of a side door of the building. To the right, they saw a series of single and two-story buildings surrounded by a four-foot concrete wall topped by a chain-link fence, which in turn was topped by a concertina wire coil.

"Looks like a high-security area, almost like a prison, over there," Kevin remarked.

"Exactly," Emma told him. "The manufacturing area there is very high security. That area is just like a military-grade security installation. The concrete walls deter a vehicle crash-through. That's where the clean rooms are located and where the energy-storage units are manufactured."

To the left was a large parking area and a tent had been set up at one side of it.

“The unveiling of the unit will be out there,” Emma told them. “We’ll get our private peek now.”

Several people were already walking over to the tent from a far parking lot. A uniformed security guard approached them, holding a cell phone, and calling Emma’s name. Both Tamara and Peter had noticed him and were watching him using a cell phone; that looked unusual since they had noticed that the guards carried radios. When the guard looked at Emma and called her name, they both stiffened.

“Emma!” Tamara called urgently as Peter stepped between her and the guard as the guard started to run toward the group. “He’s an imposter! Get back to the building!”

Suddenly a van roared up the nearby drive, about a hundred feet away, jumped the curb, and stopped about twenty feet away. Five men started to get out, two were carrying what appeared to be pistols. The approaching guard, now within arm’s reach of the group, reached to grab Amelia, who was closest to him. She twisted in his grip, grabbed his arm, and holding onto it, twisted her body and pulled him around into a shoulder throw and they all could hear the muted *crack* of a breaking bone just before the sharp *thud* of the guy landing on the concrete walk sounded as he screamed in pain. Then Amelia took off, running after Tamara and Emma, who had reached the building door, while Peter turned and ran to intercept the men from the van.

Amelia looked around, expecting to see Jeremy and the others following, but they had turned toward the van and were closing on it, trying to get there before the men could get themselves oriented. They had all seen that the men from the van had been distracted by the screaming of the ersatz guard, who was lying on the ground, and one of the men from the van had moved toward him but another called him back. Kevin and the others had stopped, however, when several men quickly recovered, pulled two AK47s out of the van, and began pointing the weapons at them, shouting that they were to walk ahead of them toward the building door where Emma had re-entered the building.

Emma, now inside the building, pulled out her mobile phone and began dialing, but Tamara turned away from her and Amelia and opened her backpack. Shielding her actions from the others, she reached into a compartment and pulled out three two-inch-diameter silvery rods and quickly fitted them together to form a ten-inch-long tube.

“What can we do?” cried Amelia, watching through the door. “Denise—Jeremy—they’re in trouble!”

“I’m on it,” Tamara grunted. “Wait here,” she said as she hid what she was doing.

She quickly pulled on a tab on the side of the middle cylinder and a silvery mesh web unfolded like a little parasol umbrella from its side. Then she slipped out through the building door, pointing the concave side of the umbrella-shaped tube toward the armed men, who were standing ten feet away from Kevin’s group, one of whom was shouting at them to move toward the building while Kevin was shouting back in Japanese, pretending that he didn’t understand, and the armed men were looking at each other in confusion.

*Damn, that’s clever thinking, Kevin,* Tamara thought as she activated the device she had assembled, her Mod 5 maser, now powered by an internal high-output accumulator. The maser’s excitation chamber wasn’t air this time; it was a mixture of nitrogen, argon, and helium that she had developed, and the maser energy that it produced would heat metals and other dense solids very rapidly. This device was an offshoot of her latest attempt to build a collimated microwave beam power transmitter and this device produced a relatively efficiently focused beam.

Within fifteen to twenty seconds, the attackers began shouting in alarm and began dropping their weapons as they were becoming too hot to hold and one man was screaming and slapping at his waist. Seeing this, Kevin, Jeremy, and Peter, followed by Denise, moved in on the men and, in a very rapid series of moves, had them all down on the ground. Tamara quickly disassembled her device and stowed it back in her backpack as Amelia

came flying out of the door. She ran out to Jeremy as Andrew came running out the door with Emma.

“What the hell, Emma?” Andrew asked as he looked at the carnage.

“Some miracle work by Tamara,” Emma told him. “That girl is bloomin’ deadly. She’s definitely very much like her dad. Tell you later, honey.”

Several minutes later, in addition to the small crowd gathering around the screaming, writhing men on the ground, several police units arrived. Some of them had already been enroute to the facility to prepare to set up traffic control for the upcoming event. Emma had also phoned her security supervisor, who had come running from the tent, to tell him to get the crowd to stay away. Then the police took over, called for medical aid, and began asking questions, only to be stopped by two plainclothes officials who had arrived and identified themselves as MI5 officers. They had already been enroute to interview Emma about the warehouse explosion.

The MI5 officials told Emma and the others with Kevin to stand by and then began examining the area, noting the weapons and the attackers’ burned hands.

Meanwhile, Tamara had whispered to Emma. “Quick! Is there anyone in the tent that you can trust who can operate the storage unit?”

Emma nodded. “Dr Thomassan should be there.”

“Call him and let me talk, okay?”

Emma made the call and told Thomassan to do whatever Tamara said to do, then handed the phone to Tamara.

Tamara got on the phone. “Listen, it’s Tamara. Yes, it’s me; we’re all okay. Point the unit’s microwave broadcast antenna at the commotion near the west building door; that’s where we’re at. Do that now.”

“...”

“We’re okay, tell you later what happened, okay? Listen, when the police ask, if they ask, tell them that Emma called you and said to turn on the broadcast power to max. You know the settings?”

“...”

“Right. Then she told you to turn it off after twenty seconds. Don’t change what I told you and don’t ask why. Just remember what I said.”

“...”

Tamara whispered to Emma, “That should explain how the guns got hot. Tell the cops you had a wild idea; that they were just in the right place to point the beam at and that microwave power feature is still experimental. It heats metal quickly but it’s not harmful to people in small doses. Ad lib as needed.”

Emma smiled at her. “Again, you saved the day and saved all of us too.”

Tamara grinned mirthlessly. “Had a premonition this morning and it got very strong as we went out to the tent. The fake guard? When I first saw him, I could sense his evil but he wasn’t acting right. He also had a bulge under his arm. You said that guards can’t be armed but he was packing a gun. Shit, did you see the move Amelia put on him?”

Emma nodded. “She’s a real firecracker, isn’t she? And damn dangerous herself, as well.”

The police were primarily questioning the others—Kevin, Jeremy, Peter, and Denise, since they had been identified as the people who were being held at gunpoint. Only after further questioning did they learn about Amelia’s role. Since Emma and Tamara were inside the building at the door, the police and the MI5 officials

were treating them as just witnesses.

“Ma’am, I’m Officer Bixby and this is Officer McDougal, MI5. Can we go to a quiet location?” Bixby asked Emma. “I understand you’re in charge?”

“Not operationally; I’m the chairperson of the directors,” Emma told him. “The CEO is in charge and he’s probably still with the device in the tent, getting things ready to begin the unveiling. How long shall I ask him to delay it?”

“Perhaps a half hour? We need to get some final details sorted.”

“I’ll ring him and let him know. Are the others all right? Those talking to the officers over there.”

“Excellent shape, no injuries. We’ll tell you their details after your interview,” Bixby said.

Emma called Stafford to have him delay things if needed and then took the MI5 officers inside to a quiet room where she explained how they had been accosted as they were walking to the tent.

“Earlier today I was on the bell with an MI5 supervisor, Inspector McFadden and one of your detectives, didn’t get his name, and they told me that Russian agents were involved in trying to steal the details of our energy device,” Emma told them. “Apparently their covert attempts failed and they were trying for a direct approach.”

“It looks that way, ma’am,” Bixby said. “Somehow, amazingly, your people stopped them. But we don’t understand a number of things here. How did you happen to have a number of martial arts experts available? Those suspects are big blokes, there’re five of them, and three blokes and one gal totally wrecked them. And they’ve all got second- and third-degree burns on their hands and two of them on their bodies where they were carrying pistols. Your martial artists also insist that they have no knowledge of how the suspects got burnt.”

Emma smiled. “Sometimes coincidences do occur, Officer. Mr Coris is a taekwondo master and his fiancée and Mr Porter are his students. Mr Winsberg, I understand, studies judo. We’re together because six of our group here were knighted by the queen last week.”

“Blimey. You as well?”

Emma nodded.

“My congrats, ma’am. And the guard? That little girl...” he consulted his notes, “Miss Amelia Hadad...”

“*Dame* Amelia Hadad,” Emma corrected.

“Really then? Her as well? Well, the perp she accounted for has a compound fracture of the humerus and what appears to be a broken back—several fractured vertebrae.”

“Good for her. Jeremy—that’s Sir Jeremy—must have taught her. That fake guard—did you see that he was armed?”

Bixby nodded.

“That nit grabbed her, or tried to, but she put a move on him and slipped out of his grasp and then just threw him down. He must have weighed double her weight. Then she ran with us to safety, thinking that the others would get to safety too, but those berks pulled those weapons out of the van then.”

“And do you know where their burns came from then?”

“I made a lucky guess. An experimental feature of our energy storage unit is a high-energy beam transmitter. It’s not ready for prime time yet but it can heat metal that’s in the beam. When I saw the guns come out, I rang Dr Thomassan—our chief technology officer—and told him to point the antenna to where those berks were

standing and turn the beam on. Their guns got too hot to hold.”

“Hmmm, that could be a powerful defensive...” Bixby started but Emma laughed.

“It could, if you could carry a three-tonne, two-and-a-half meter cube in your pocket. Sorry, an energy storage unit like that can’t be miniaturized either.”

“Well, it was a thought,” he sighed. “How to keep firearms out of the U.K. is a big issue.”

“Certainly. Oh, a thought. We have security cameras around this building pointing at the walkways. I should think that the driveway and walkway where that happened was in the field of view. Our security head should be able to get a copy for you.”

Bixby nodded. “That’s excellent; thanks.”

“Now, about the others?” Emma asked. “Are my four friends all right?”

“Oh yes,” McDougal responded to her. “Apart from their clothes being a bit rumpled. But the perps? Serious damage there. One was kicked in the throat and it crushed his larynx and shattered his jaw. And the medics say he was struck while he was standing upright; that must have been an impressive move.”

He looked at his notes. “Mr Coris called it an axe kick, a ... um, *naeryeo chagi*, he called it. Another was kicked in the sternum hard enough that most of his upper ribs appear to be broken. Both of those injuries could easily have been killing strikes but the two who admitted to doing those, Mr Coris and Mr Porter, said that they pulled back on a full strike.

“Another has a skull fracture and concussion from being thrown head-first into the side of their van; there’s a huge dent where his head hit. Apparently that was Mr Winsberg’s contribution. Miss Roberts kept herself busy too, it appears; she accounted for two down. One with two broken knees and the last one, a broken shin and a broken clavicle. And the suspects never even got a shot in themselves. And those are teens too? Late teens. You said that Mr Coris did their training, three of them? I’d like to know who trained *him*.”

Emma chuckled. “Kevin Coris told me that he learned from a high-level grand master in Seoul. And as I mentioned, Sir Jeremy was Mr Coris’ student for a few years and Jeremy trained Dame Amelia. Mr Coris trained Miss Roberts. So go to South Korea and get your own training. Are we done then?”

McDougal laughed. “Yeah. Blimey, I’ll put my travel request in at the end of my shift.”

“You’ll be available to answer any further questions, should we have them?” Bixby asked.

“Certainly. I’d like to find out how that one berk got one of our security uniforms, though. If it weren’t for Miss Alexandre’s alert, they would have taken us by surprise.”

“I did question her about that,” McDougal replied. “She’s apparently very observant and noticed a bulge under his arm. She told me that you had mentioned that security guards can’t be armed so she knew something was amiss. Smart gal.”

Emma nodded. “She *is* smart. She’s the inventor of the energy unit we’re unveiling.”

“You don’t say. Impressive, innit,” McDougal replied.

“If your duties allow, you can stay for the roll-out,” Emma offered.

“Sorry, they don’t,” Bixby responded. “We’ve got to backtrack on these suspects, find out where they’ve been, and liaise with the interrogation team. Lots of things to get sorted now. Thanks, Dr Clarke, for your help.”

“And thank you for your quick response to our ... erm ... invasion,” Emma replied.



She led them back out of the building to where the police were finishing up. Tamara, Kevin, and the others were talking with Stafford while they were watching the police finishing up. The invaders had already been taken away by ambulance. Stafford went to the nearest police official.

“Are you finished with us, then?” he asked and the officer glanced at Bixby, who nodded.

“Yes, you can carry on, sir. We may need to ring you or visit if we need any details answered,” he commented.

“That will be fine; thank you.”

Meanwhile, people who had been heading to the event tent had become curious and wandered into the area while several reporters from recently arrived news vans had seen the police and came walking over. Bixby and McDougal were returning to their vehicle, but Bixby turned, caught Emma’s attention, nodded to the reporters, and shook his head. Emma nodded back.

A reporter approached the group. “Who’s in charge here? Why are the bobbies here?”

Emma whispered to Stafford, “The police said to say nothing.”

Stafford spoke up, “I’m the head of this facility. If you’re here for the unveiling of our new energy device, the event is over at that tent.”

“What about the bobbies?”

“They were called on an internal matter; nothing to do with the unveiling,” he responded.

“I heard a call for ambulances, why were they called?” another reporter asked.

Emma spoke up then. “They were called for a few people who had burns and it had nothing to do with the unveiling. Now if you’ll excuse us, we need to get over to the tent to begin.”

Looking disgruntled, the three reporters started off to the tent.

Emma turned to Tamara and the others. “We’ll need to talk about this afterward. Meanwhile, the police said we should say nothing about what happened here.”

They all nodded assent, and Tamara told her, “With all this going on, I just about forgot. Peter bought a Harry Potter robe and wand on his trip here from London. Do you or Dr Stafford want to wear it when you pull off the cover on the unit?”

Emma grinned at her. “Blimey, that’s ace. It’ll bring some humor into what’s been a dreadful day so far. But we’ll make a change then; you’ll be the one pulling the cord, my dear.”

“Me?” she squeaked.

“Of course. The speeches—brief ones—are by me, Stafford, and then Thomassan. Then instead of your doing your speech and me doing the honors, as we had planned, I’ll say something to introduce you. You’ll put on the robe out of sight behind the unit while Nils is talking and then pop out when I call you. You wave the wand, pull the cord, and the drape will get pulled off. Then that’s when you give your little speech. Got that?”

“Oh sure. Okay; this should be interesting.”

People were taking seats in the tent as they entered and walked over to a row of seats next to a podium facing the audience at one side of the front of the tent. Also at the front and centered on the tent side was an eight-foot tall boxy-shaped object covered with a drape. Emma, Stafford, and Thomassan took the seats at the front and Emma indicated to Tamara that she should take the seat closest to the unit. When it looked like the people in the audience had mostly settled, she rose and went to the podium. Smiling and looking out at the group, she began.

“Welcome; most delighted you could be with us today. I’m Emma Clarke, one of the leaders of EEC Energy Solutions. We’ll keep this short; no point in dragging out your having to wait to see the biggest revolution in energy storage since the invention of the battery. About four years ago, when we created this company, our goal was to try to improve battery technology, but some unrelated discoveries led us to explore better ways of storing energy, as opposed to creating it or storing it chemically inside small packages—that’s basically what a battery does. Our new technology allows energy to be collected at a very high efficiency as it becomes available and stored for later use with virtually no losses over time. Think of a battery charged by a solar cell. It collects energy during the day, the energy chemically charges the battery, and that stored energy is used when the sun goes down. But there’s an energy loss in each step, isn’t there.

“Energy is also lost by batteries over time. Who hasn’t experienced a flat battery, even though the device hasn’t been used? Our device eliminates all of those losses and stores the energy without any chemical reactions involved, so there’s nothing to leak. It also gathers energy directly from the environment—think of all the energy present in a thunderstorm. This unit before you will not simply store generated electricity; it will also gather the energy that goes into making the lightning in those storms. Our company’s economists have calculated that when units like this one are fully deployed, your electricity costs will drop at least 40 percent. Now let me introduce Dr Sir Henry Stafford, our CEO, and he will talk more about those deployment plans. Dr Stafford?”

“Thanks, Dame Emma. Dr Emma Clarke is our distinguished founder and chairperson of the directors of EEC Energy Solutions...”

Stafford went on to briefly describe the deployment plans for the storage units. Then he introduced Thomassan, who spoke about how the unit differed from the industrial lithium-ion storage units used in conventional energy farms, and the company’s plans for developing wireless energy transmission. Then he called on Emma to return. She rose and smiled at the audience.

“It’s almost time now. When the process that resulted in the invention of this device was first developed, we physicists thought that it couldn’t possibly be real; some kind of magic must be involved. After all, if you throw a twig into a moving river, it shouldn’t start floating upstream, should it. But that’s precisely what the electron flow in our device does; it flows against the charge gradient. Physicists couldn’t figure out why. Must be magic, right? Well, let me introduce our magician; she’s the one who invented the process that our unit employs and which promises to revolutionize our understanding of electrodynamics. Here’s our magician, Miss Tamara Alexandre DBE.”

Tamara appeared from behind the cube decked out in the Gryffindor cloak and scarf, waving the wand, and wearing a big grin. The audience was quiet for an instant and then erupted in laughter, cheers, and applause.

Emma went on. “Miss Alexandre, although she’s been knighted, isn’t a subject of the queen so we can’t call her ‘Dame,’ and she hasn’t yet completed her doctoral work, but her inventions rival those of the world’s most accomplished scientists and engineers, haven’t they. As I said, a magician. Let me introduce to the world, EEC Energy Solutions’ ‘ElectroPowerCube’! Tamara, if you will?”

Tamara waved the wand at the cube; nothing happened. She shook the wand up and down, tapped it against her hand, and waved it again, to no effect, to the uproarious laughter of the audience. Then she grabbed the rope hanging next to the cube and pulled on it while waving the wand, and the drape was rapidly pulled up off of the cube to the cheers and laughter of the group. Then came their enthusiastic applause. Emma motioned to Tamara to come to the podium.

“Hello everyone. That was fun, thanks for letting me do that.” Applause again. “Seriously, about our magic, though—you know that science can be a lot like magic to those who don’t understand it. Robert Heinlein, the

famous science fiction author, said it best: ‘One man’s magic is another man’s engineering.’ Or in my case, it’s ‘gal’ instead of ‘man.’”

Laughter.

“And there are lots of things that happen in the natural world that aren’t understood. Is that magic? No, those things are simply discoveries that are waiting to happen. I’m lucky to have a very active imagination and a large amount of curiosity, so perhaps I’ve had more than my fair share of discoveries. Since I was a child, I’ve always wanted to help people have better lives and I’m so glad that the ElectroPowerCube will be able to help do that.

“But there’s more to this device than this eight-foot cube. EEC Energy has under development small power cells which use the same technology—it’s where the idea for our big unit here came from. We will soon be introducing power packs which will be available in AAA battery size all the way up to the nine-volt package size and power packs to run electric vehicles are being developed right now—they will give electric vehicles the same range as petrol-fueled ones too. Another unique feature of these so-called ‘accumulators’ is that they actually can recharge themselves, even while they output energy, and they can last for many years, store power indefinitely, and never leak.”

There was applause.

“One of Dr Clarke’s initial ideas for the company was to produce tiny long-lasting batteries for use in things like watches, mobile phones, and even hearing aids. Our energy-storage technology can do that as well, so her goal was achieved. Is this all magic? I recall what the author Arthur C. Clarke, no relation to Dame Emma but there should be—she’s as creative as he was—once said, ‘Magic is just science that we don’t understand yet.’ So we definitely can say that EEC Energy Solutions is in the magic business,” Tamara said as she waved the wand to more laughter. “The magic of finding solutions to the world’s energy problems. Thanks so much for your time.”

Everyone in the tent rose to applaud her and Emma wrapped her in a hug.

“That was inspired, dear, and very moving,” she whispered in Tamara’s ear. “You did that on the fly, didn’t you?”

Tamara nodded. Then Emma took the microphone out of its holder and spoke, “Thanks, Tamara, that was not only entertaining but also inspiring...”

The group applauded again.

“... but now I want you to see the features of our ElectroPowerCube. To show you that, let’s get Dr Thomassan to show you its working parts. But first, let me say that everything in the tent and around it is currently being powered by the device.”

Applause.

“Nils? Come show us.”

As he rose to go to the unit, Tamara stood up and ceremoniously handed him the wand and the place broke up again. When he shook the wand and then complained that he hadn’t read the manual yet, the laughter redoubled and applause broke out.

“The secret inside here,” he tapped the unit’s side, “is that there are two blokes furiously peddling bikes connected to generators,” he joked, and that resulted in another burst of laughter.

“All right then,” he went on, “Let’s open it up. Here’s the control panel and you can see...”

Thomassan had popped a panel open, exposing a bank of controls and several meters. He briefly explained their

function, and then took a few side panels off. He showed the banks of modules and how they just plugged into the unit and how they could be hot-swapped while the unit was running.

“We used a modular design, so these power packs could be swapped out to go into our various accumulator designs, as for instance, a mobile power unit.”

He pulled over a stepladder, climbed onto it, and pulled off an upper panel, pointing out the antenna receptors which could pull in free environmental electrons.

“Remember, static electricity is created when two surfaces move together and that action produces free electrons,” he told them. “So there are always free electrons circulating in the environment; a thunderstorm gathers enough of those static charges together to create a lightning flash. Our unit has a series of receiving antennas to capture and store those free electrons. These are the antennas.”

After some further explanation, he opened the floor for questions. Very few were technical and those were handled quickly. Most of the others were of the nature “When will we get cheaper power?” The answer was “As quickly as we can ramp up production and get the environmental approvals for the energy farm sites that these will occupy. Talk to your MPs. Get the government to speed the funding and site approval process.”

The event wound down and that’s when the press descended on Emma and the company officers to get their own reporting angles for publication and TV, and to get some sound bites too. After everyone had finally gone, Emma called the remaining people together—the technical staff who set up the tent and the displays, the security people, and the company’s officers. And Kevin and his group.

“This was blindin’ brilliant, you lot,” she told them. “You all did a crackin’ ace job. I’ll leave you tech wranglers to start breaking everything down; get the unit back to the fabrication building. Security, please police the site to be sure the public is all gone. Look for hidden photogs; you know how the paparazzi like to get shots of events when everyone’s guard is down. The rest of us, let’s go the main conference room—my friends too.”

They all began working on their assigned tasks as Emma’s group left for the conference room.

## Chapter 57 - After-action Reporting

When they got to the conference room, everyone began speaking at once. Emma immediately took charge.

“We need to settle down, you lot,” she called out. When things quieted, she went on. “Our company first, we need your impressions. Publicity, PR, problem issues that need attending to, all that rot. By seniority, so Henry, you first.”

Stafford nodded, grinning. “Apart from that horrid affair earlier, I couldn’t have wished for a better outcome. Of course we might learn something different from the telly this evening, but I doubt it. Tamara, your stunt was blinding brilliant! There were lots of bored faces when I was speaking, but then, that’s what I usually see when I give a speech.”

Laughter.

“Seriously, after Tamara came out and did her act—and then that speech—everyone was hanging on all our words. Even on your demo, Nils, sorry.”

More laughter.

“Tamara, that was extemporaneous, I’m certain. It wasn’t anything like what we discussed you’d say, innit. Although I must say that you did hit all your planned talking points. I was gobsmacked by what you did there and gratified by the response,” Stafford finished.

Amelia raised her hand and Emma nodded to her.

“I must agree. I do acting and have absolutely *never* seen a better performance, Tamara. And you ad-libbed it all too. Your expressions and gestures were as good as a trained actor as well. All I can say is ‘brava,’ girlfriend.”

Tamara nodded as everyone in the room agreed with Amelia.

“Say, you pulled those quotes off so easily,” Denise commented. “Almost like you had them prepared. How...”

Tamara laughed. “Something Emma does too; she loves to quote famous physicists—others too. Well, I read a lot and have a very retentive memory. Some things I read just resonate with me and references to magic fall into that category. I’m sure you can see why—some of the things I do may seem like magic.”

Denise chuckled ruefully. “They sure do.”

“Very good, Amelia and Denise. Anything else, Henry?” Emma asked.

“Besides the fantastic publicity I think that we’ll get from Tamara’s magic act...”

Laughter.

“...I do believe we have the potential to create an incredible sales and publicity campaign, one based on the magic of science and engineering. I’m going to get our marketing people on that idea and see if we can license some rights from the Harry Potter people. Tamara, can we use quotations from your talk? You know that we videotaped it, right?”

“Oh! You did?” she exclaimed, whereupon everyone in the room began clamoring to get a copy.

“Sure we did. Is it okay?”

She nodded.

Stafford went on, “And the last item is the audience. The composition, that is. There were about 250 in attendance. I was checking in with our PR people to see who all we recognized. A quarter were employees and

family. Another quarter were from Cambridge University, other local universities too, mainly science and engineering faculty. Another quarter appeared to be from the business and manufacturing community in the area. This was a typical mix for an event like this. The last group was likely composed of interested citizens and the press. As I mentioned, it went well, judging by the smiles on faces as people left.”

“Excellent summary, Henry; thanks,” Emma said. “Nils, anything to add?”

“First my congratulations to Tamara,” Thomassan said. “It made my dry presentation easier for the audience to tolerate.”

Laughter.

“Henry did an ace job in his summary, but the technical questions and some followup conversations after the formal program gave me some ideas. I want to check with the engineers and with Tamara after I put something concrete together.”

“Thanks, Nils,” Emma said. “Any thought about how the press will react? Some were frustrated when we sent them away from the ... erm ... ‘invasion’ site. Beverly? You have something?”

“Actually I might,” Beverly Norris commented. “I took a seat near the rear where I could watch everyone and also because there was a group of physics faculty from Cambridge nearby and I wanted to get their impressions after the event. There were two telly reporters with their camera people close by and I heard them chatting. Before you began, they were talking about looking into why the bobbies were here, but at the end, all they were saying was only about what a tough editing job this event coverage was going to be because of all the great material. So I reckon that the press treatment will be favorable.”

“Good job, Beverly; thanks. What did the physics group think then?” Emma asked.

Beverly laughed. “They just *adored* what Tamara did. Several told me that they’re planning to adopt some magic references into their physics lectures; said it should liven up the classes.”

Laughter again.

“Ten points to Gryffindor, Tamara,” Emma joked and the laughing increased. “Actually that’s not a bad idea for me to do as well, in my own classes,” Emma mused and then chuckled. “Anything else? Kevin, Denise, if you have anything, please add it at this point.”

Denise raised her hand and Emma nodded to her.

“You know about my ability for sensing group attitudes,” Denise started and Emma nodded. “So what I noticed and Amelia backs me up—she’s empathic too—was that the entire group was with you almost immediately when you began talking, Emma. Your delivery was compelling and magnetic and the positive group feelings lasted even through Dr Thomassan’s part. So you didn’t do that badly, sir.”

Laughter.

“But when Tamara came on and pulled off that stunt, and then began to talk, the sense from the audience turned to, um, help me, Amelia...”

“It was almost like adulation, Denise, what I feel from audiences after I have a good performance. See, she got a standing ovation as well, right? It wasn’t just the words, either, it was the delivery too.”

Emma nodded. “I believe I felt that as well. Thanks, Denise and Amelia. So based on the reaction of the group that saw our presentation, it appears that we’ll have not only a commercial success but also a PR one as well. And Henry, your magic idea in our marketing plans is brilliant, so definitely get that department onto that idea

next week. Anybody have anything else to share? If not, thanks, and I want to meet with my friends privately now.”

When they were alone, Emma said, “I didn’t have a chance to say this before, to all of you, Tamara especially, but my company and I are both in your debt for your gallant defense out there this morning. Andrew, you didn’t see what happened; you just saw the aftermath.”

“I saw six big berks lying on the ground and just four of you?” Andrew said wonderingly.

“Five. Amelia knocked off one first,” Jeremy said proudly.

“But what about those dropped weapons and burned hands... Peter, you’re grinning,” Denise accused him. “Out with it!”

“Saw her do something like it before,” Peter grinned. “Tamara’s got a secret I can’t divulge unless she says okay.”

Tamara nodded to him. “They’re all okay, Well, maybe Andrew isn’t... just kidding!” she said, grinning, as she saw his face fall. “Andrew, you weren’t part of the five musketeers, that’s all, but I know you all can keep a secret—actually it’s a lethal one, so I’m not kidding here, people.”

Tamara’s voice and face had turned dark and steely at her last few phrases as she glared at them and again, those in the room cringed at her forceful intensity.

“Shit, Tamara, I wish you wouldn’t do that!” Kevin complained.

“Just being sure that you all know that I’m deadly serious, okay? Peter, go ahead.”

“Sure, honey. Tamara’s developed a not-weapon gadget that’s top secret; at least the part that the U.S. government knows about, but she’s gone even further with the idea. It’s a not-weapon because it doesn’t kill or wound but it can heat things. Particularly metals and dense plastics, they get *very* hot. That’s what happened to those Russians’ guns. She spoke about magic before; so you should know that the backpack she carries is a magic kit and somehow she always seems to have the right tools in it to deal with the current problem.”

“But Emma told us that guns, knives, pepper spray—all that—was illegal,” Amelia said.

Tamara chuckled. “Yep, when Emma mentioned that, suddenly my premonition of danger that I had all morning increased, and I got a vision of needing to use that device. So I got on my mobile and looked up the law here. Jeremy’s the legal beagle. Jeremy, are you familiar with the Firearms Act 1968? It actually regulates things besides firearms, things like air guns and pepper spray.”

“Huh. Not when I researched the laws that applied to school nudity. Never ran into a naked kid with a gun that ... erm ... shoots anything, unless, maybe...” he started, grinning, but Amelia slapped him on the arm.

“Nope! Don’t go there!” she admonished him and everyone laughed.

“Good one, Jeremy. Anyway, that firearms law mentions the terms ‘firearm,’ ‘weapon,’ ‘missile,’ ‘barrel,’ ‘rifle,’ ‘gun,’ ‘pistol,’ ... um, and ‘ammunition,’ My device is or has none of those things. It’s like a flashlight but it makes metals and other dense, solid things very hot. The closest provision in that law that could apply is the part that bans stuff like pepper spray. Wait a sec, I’ve got it bookmarked. ... Ah. Here. Prohibited things are, I quote, ‘any weapon of whatever description designed or adapted for the discharge of any noxious liquid, gas or other thing.’ Okay, the device isn’t a weapon by definition; I looked that word up. A weapon’s a thing used to inflict bodily harm or physical damage. There’s no harm in a body getting warm and heating things up isn’t physical damage. Otherwise things like heating pads and electric heaters would be illegal.

“And electromagnetic waves aren’t noxious ‘other things,’ or else flashlights and cell phones would be illegal, since they discharge electromagnetic energy. No lawbreaking then, right, Amelia?”

“Damn, Tamara, you’re using legal logic just like Kevin taught us, you know,” Jeremy told her. “Take apart a law by using its defined terms.”

“Sure; that’s just logical, right?” Tamara smiled at him. “And Emma? Yes, like I promised, I did turn over my previous device to Dr Tarmson and DARPA, but in my agreement with them, I reserved the right to do further development work using the maser idea and they agreed, provided that I keep them informed. And I do keep them in the loop. This device is related to the maser; it’s a new research direction and one that’s connected to my ideas for wireless power transmission; it’s one of my designs to try to collimate an RF beam. But the beam this produces heats stuff, metals and dense plastics. So, everyone... the device’s small size, its focusing circuitry and antenna, and the masing gas mixture, are secret. I got the idea to use the thing on those Russians from what I did to those thugs from that gas-station incident last year, remember, Peter?”

“Sure,” he answered and then had to relate that story. The others looked at Tamara in awe.

Emma broke in, “I told Andrew right after the affair this morning that Tamara was deadly. She is, in her special way. You all see that? We all probably owe her our lives, actually.”

Amelia excitedly said, “She gave the alert that the guard was a fake too! That wrecked their plan of surprise.”

“Okay, then, I see everyone wants to talk about that horrid mess. So why don’t we take this in order and discuss what we did as individuals,” Emma suggested. “That should allow us to decompress and talk it over.”

“I can start,” Peter said. “I saw him using a cell phone and that didn’t seem right—he had a radio so I thought something was wrong right away. When I felt Tamara tense when that guard called I realized he was an imposter too, and suddenly got a shove toward where that van was pulling in, like I had to get there quickly. Then...”

Tamara interrupted. “Sorry, dear, that was *Ogorin*, the warrior spirit. That’s how he works. He protected my dad for years before Dad knew about that. Go ahead.”

“Wow, really? Crazy. Then I felt Kevin and Jeremy following me, but before that, I saw Amelia make that awesome move,” he finished.

“Yeah, sweetie, I was gonna help you but you moved so fast, even before it registered on me that he was gonna grab you,” Jeremy said.

“You showed me how to turn a grab into a shoulder throw, honey,” Amelia said. “After I was attacked in school that time, I vowed to never let something like that ever happen again. But that thug felt so evil that I kept hold of his arm when he went over and twisted it as he went down. Ugh, I felt it snap too.”

“The police told me it was a compound fracture,” Emma told her and Amelia shivered.

“Ugh again,” Amelia said. “But Tamara had called for us to run for the building and my feet just went like I couldn’t stop them from running there, but I really wanted to be with Jeremy.”

“You know, I felt that compulsion too—to run for the building,” Emma said. “That was you, right, Tamara? Did you ‘push’ us somehow?”

“I did; sorry, but I was trying to protect you. I didn’t realize that Amelia was so good at hand-to-hand combat,” she laughed. “Peter, what happened near the van?”

“It got messy real fast,” Peter said. “First, the side door slid open and two thugs jumped out but got distracted by



the screams from the jerk that Amelia took down, so I thought I could incapacitate one or two before they realized what was happening. I could feel the same intentions coming from Kevin and Jeremy—but from Denise too! That’s when I saw the guns they had pulled out and backed off a ways.”

Jeremy took over. “Yeah, the berks had pulled out some AK47s from the van and they wanted us as a shield to walk to the building door; they were after Emma but they needed the guard to ID her. Apparently that imposter guard had rang them to say that he was going to grab her. I had learned a little Russian from a friend and heard what they said.”

Emma gasped.

“Yeah, I assumed they wanted you as a hostage to get the device plans or something. But they were arguing among themselves about how to find you since you had gone into the building.”

“You speak Russian?” Kevin asked. “When did you learn that?”

“Can’t speak it so well, but a friend in my school orchestra, my co-principal trumpet, is Russian and he’s been teaching me a little. I understand a lot of it, though. I’m good with languages.”

“Damn, that’s cool,” Kevin replied. “When I saw them arguing, I figured that they really had no plan for what they were doing. So I stalled them, using Japanese to make believe that we didn’t understand. That confused them a lot. I was hoping to delay them till help arrived. I think that these jerks were just the muscle; the brains of the operation must have died in that explosion Emma heard about.”

“That was brilliant, your doing that,” Emma complimented him. “Quick thinking.”

Jeremy picked up the story again. “That’s when I noticed that the berk nearest me had begun to juggle his gun and look down at it instead of at us, He put his hand on the top—the receiver? Yeah. And jerked it away. Then he grabbed the grip part and trigger area and gasped, then dropped it.”

“The jerk nearest me got his hands burned too and dropped his gun,” Denise said. “But he had a pistol in his waistband and it looked like it was burning him there ‘cause he began to pull at his belt. I rushed at that one first; he’d be easy to take out since he was pulling at his belt and didn’t see me coming. Kevin had taught me the knifehand strike, it’s the *son ’nal mok chigi*, and I hit him at the junction of his neck and shoulder. I felt the bone break and he gasped and bent forward as I twisted around and did a back kick with my heel into his shin and felt that break; he shouted something and dropped.

“Also, the dude next to him had dropped his gun too, but he bent down to try to pick it up when the this really big hulk facing Jeremy yelled something at him, and he stood up just as I had kicked the first one down. The second one was facing kinda sideways to me and I was behind him, so he didn’t see me. It looked like he was about to double team on Jeremy, who was looking for an opening on the guy in front of him, what a giant he was. That dude in front of me was a perfect target for a side kick into his legs; that would bring him down real fast. That was one of the first kicks Kevin had worked with me on, so I had good training on it and my muscle memory let me drill him good, both feet in a double kick right into his knees. Knees aren’t designed to bend sideways. His did. I definitely broke the knee closer to me and probably the other one too, ‘cause he really screamed when he dropped.”

“Wow, Denise, I felt that one go down but I didn’t see his threat; thanks,” Jeremy told her. “The berk I was facing, I thought from his stance that he might have some martial arts training. But anyway, he was huge; I couldn’t let him grapple me, but it looked like he moved slowly. Big guys are usually slow. I did a feint with a hand strike at his face and that drew his hands up high; then I went into a side drop kick, aiming at his sternum. I got a good shot in and he staggered back, tripped, and went down. Through my street shoes, it felt like I crushed his chest, even though I pulled back at the last second. That’s when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Peter

throw his guy. What happened, Peter?”

“He had dropped his gun but I kicked it away from him and it skidded about eight feet away from him. He tried to scramble after it but I tripped him and he stumbled. Then he got up, turned around, and just ran at me; that’s a perfect opening for a *seoi-nage* shoulder throw and instead of letting the throw pull him to the ground, with his forward momentum, I helped him ram his head into the side of the van. I pushed him really hard ‘cause I wanted him out of the fight. When I looked up for more attackers, I saw all of you guys looking around too—we were the only ones left standing.”

Kevin looked embarrassed. “I almost killed my opponent with my favorite kick, the axe kick. I was aiming for his chest to stun him and knock him down, but he tried dodging my kick and it caught his neck and jaw. It’s a good thing I pulled it when I realized I was wearing street shoes; if I’d done the full move, a strike like that could have severed his spine.”

“Ahhh...” several of his listeners sighed.

“When I saw them drop the guns, I tried to run outside, but Emma stopped me,” Amelia complained, “but I can see now what she was thinking. I did run out there when they were all on the ground, though, and I saw Tamara taking something apart. Your not-weapon, right?”

“Right. Don’t ask ‘cause I won’t tell,” she joked.

“Hey, I noticed surveillance cameras on the sides of the building,” Jeremy said. “Won’t that show Tamara and what she did?”

Tamara shook her head. “Saw them too, but that door is under an overhang on the building there, just enough that by staying close, the two cameras wouldn’t see me.”

“Damn, you noticed all that too with everything else go...” Jeremy started but then Emma’s phone rang.

She answered and got up, went to a corner, and listened for a minute. Then she came back.

“Okay, that was the MI5 inspector and he’s got some loose ends sorted. First, about the guard uniform. One of my guards was ambushed on his way to work this morning and his ID and uniform were taken. He’s okay; he was left tied up in his vehicle in a remote area. I’ll have to change some procedures about wearing uniforms home, looks like. As well, the imposter guard actually had photos of me and our management team on him; they had been taken secretly because the backgrounds were of our labs and hallways. Our engineering tech spy was busier than we knew.”

“Are they getting those Russians to talk?” Andrew asked.

“He said that they were too beat up. You blokes did quite a number on them. The fake guard has the arm fracture plus a broken back and they don’t know if he’ll be able to walk again. He’s been sedated for possible back surgery. The one with the broken jaw; his voice box was damaged too badly for him to talk; his jaw’s a real mess too, they said. The one Jeremy hit has rib fragments embedded in his lungs and is in critical condition in surgery. Peter’s casualty has massive swelling under his skull and is in an induced coma until they do surgery.

“Only Denise’s playmates are in better shape. She played nicer with them—she just broke a few of their bones, but the one whose knees she took out will need extensive surgery and likely knee replacements. They’re also being sedated. And the Russian embassy is disavowing any knowledge. They claim those berks were free-lancing. But there was serious money invested in the equipment in that destroyed warehouse.”

“Did they trace who was leasing it?” Kevin asked.

“He had told me this morning that it was a shell company, negotiated by email, and the records stop there.”

“Is there still a threat?” Andrew wondered.

“They don’t really know. But that gives me a thought; we need to adjust our business model, I think. Instead of selling the units to utilities and industrial users, perhaps we should go to a lease model where we control ownership and access... I’ll get switching to that model organized right away. Okay, you lot, I’ve got to get a few more things done yet today. I’ll see you back at the estate later, good? Kevin, your group is still planning on returning to London tomorrow morning?”

“Right. We all have things to do tomorrow afternoon and everyone has their own plans for next week.”

They returned to Emma’s estate, still talking among themselves about the day’s events. When they arrived at the estate, Tamara told them that she had to have a serious conversation with Kevin’s little group.

“Guys, I hate to be a meanie, but this is very important,” she told them when they were alone. “You know about me now and know about my abilities, such as they are...”

“Right,” Kevin snorted. “Mr Spock, Wonder Woman, and Obi-Wan Kenobi all rolled into one person.”

“Oh jeez, stop the hyperbole; it’s embarrassing,” Tamara said. “A year ago or so I had the same conversation with other friends about people’s supposed super-powers. I pointed out that we all have special skills and what looks like a super-skill might simply be a small improvement over what other people can do. I told them that everyone is special, in their own special way. Sometimes that specialness is easy to see and sometimes you just have to look for it.

“My abilities come from the culture I grew up in, mostly. And they aren’t unique either; my mom and grandmom—especially Grandmom—has or had them too. And others that I know about; Peter’s own grandmom is one. Anyway, back to the topic...”

“But you can control minds, Tamara...” Kevin tried again.

“Not like you’re thinking, Kevin. I can’t make you or anyone else do something that they don’t want to do. I can suggest emotions or strengthen impulses. I can make people receptive to suggestion, but only if the suggestion concerns something that they ordinarily may do. And I can use people’s emotional apparatus to intensify an emotion already present. Lots of people can do that; think of speeches from highly charismatic leaders—how they can mobilize a crowd. Basically it’s the same skill. Amelia does it in her acting; she projects emotions and the audience responds—right, Amelia?”

She gulped. “Is that what I do? It’s like you?”

“Sure. I believe it’s a function in all of our brains and that some people are better at using the ability. Just like some people are good enough to be major-league baseball players while others struggle on a sandlot field.”

They laughed.

“One of my research projects is learning how the brain’s emotional system—it’s called the limbic system—works, and I have a very large group of collaborators for that. I told you about that.”

Everyone nodded.

“Now, back to the issue. You can see what would happen to me if governments got wind of what they think my abilities can do, like what Kevin assumed, right? What would happen?”

“Um ... Tamara would disappear into a deep underground lab to be tested on,” Denise gulped.

“Exactly. So you see why I need to be so careful about not even hinting that such abilities are even possible, let alone the fact that I may seem to use them. You following?”

Mute nods.

“So I have told very few people about this; my parents know, of course. Emma knows the details and so does Peter. And Peter’s grandmom. Peter and his grandmom are very special people, you know. Peter, because we’ve committed to each other, and the other reason is tied to his grandmom’s ancestry. She’s a descendant of an ancient culture which knew how to interact with the spirit world; some of Peter’s relatives still follow those ancient ways although Peter wasn’t brought up in those ways.

“But it seems that those ways have found Peter, much to his surprise—and to his grandmom’s too. It appears that somehow his soul has become linked with the *lwa* called *Damballah Wedo*. He’s the creator spirit and father figure and is regarded as benevolent, innocent, and a loving father. I can feel the power in him and so can my mom and his grandmom. How long it takes for Peter to fully feel *Damballah*’s influence isn’t known. My dad carries the personality and power of another *lwa*, *Ogorin*, the warrior and diplomat, and it took him years before he realized how *Ogorin*’s influence affected his life. In my case, the knowledge of my own personal *lwa* mentor came very early, mainly because I grew up in the culture and was closely attuned to it.

“And now you four know about me. I sensed very early that I could trust you, the way I could trust Emma. I can sense people’s ability to both be able to keep confidences and also to *want* to keep them. You four have both the ability and the intention to keep secrets, or else I would have never let you into my confidence.”

“Goddamn, Tamara,” Denise whispered. “Emma is one of the most impressive people I’ve ever met, but you’re ... ah ...not just scary, you’re formidable. On the surface, a charming, happy young adult, but inside... brrr. What’s your true nature, exactly? I’m being frank here.”

Tamara laughed. “That’s fine. For my close friends, I can be frank. I like to think of myself as a happy and outgoing person. But I’ve had experiences, my whole family has, that would shake up the most confident of anyone. And I mentioned to you about my mentor, *Ayizan Velekete*, who’s the anathema of those who would harm people whom she would see protected. I’m a protector, it would appear, and that aspect of my personality seems to show up when those whom I want to protect are threatened. Is that an acceptable answer?”

“Much more than I expected; thanks,” Denise said. “You’re a good person to have on one’s side then.”

“Cripes, yeah,” Jeremy sighed.

“Okay. Now this is difficult for me because I feel a very strong attachment to all of you. Your desire to keep my secret is totally clear to me and I have no doubt that you will. But I do know a bit about psychology and how the mind works in making connections. That’s how memories work, actually—they’re a web of connections of experiences, both semantic and episodic. Someone may not *intend* to divulge a secret, but a thought about an unrelated topic can bring to mind an association with the subject of the secret, leading to an unintentional revealing of the secret or parts of it. I’m certain that you’ve seen that happen or even had that happened to yourself.”

“Oh sure,” Amelia said. “I’ve had that happen and it’s embarrassing to try to wiggle out of it so I don’t have to explain why I can’t say more.”

“Totally true,” Tamara went on. “So here’s the deal. I can help you so that you won’t accidentally spill the beans about me—this isn’t mind control; it’s just an emotional bookmark, let’s say. If that page in your memory starts to open, the bookmark will wiggle and you’ll say, ‘okay, not now,’ and skip that page.”

They all chuckled at the imagery.

“But what can you do?” Kevin asked. “What does that feel like?”

“So okay. If you four are alone and talking—that’s in person, not phone or email or videochat—you can talk

freely. Also, this effect fades over time too; it lasts maybe a year before it goes away. But that's good, because it's the recent episodic memories that are the most likely culprits for an accidental comment. Here's how the bookmark feels. It's a bit different for each person."

She "pushed" a tiny amount of yellow taste with a bit of light green at them.

They all blinked in surprise and Tamara chuckled.

"Okay, what did you feel?"

"That was weird. Kinda like my wakeup alarm in the morning but it was only an instant," Amelia said.

Kevin smiled. "It was the feeling I get when first facing an opponent in a sparring match. Get centered. So odd."

Jeremy nodded, "A bit like Kevin said, but it's like when my meditation session's about to end. Like, 'get ready.'"

"Um, like the butterflies I get when I have to give a speech publically," Denise shared.

"Okay—you all see that was like a personal alert to you? A 'pay attention' message?"

"Ah yeah." ... "Sure." ... "Right." ... "Oh my, yes."

"That's how your mind will re-*mind* you not to turn the page," Tamara said gently. "Nothing else will change; all your memories will be intact. If you wanted to, you could go on TV and tell the whole world what you learned about me; this little alert won't stop that. But I sense that you'd never do that."

They all nodded gravely.

"So are we all okay with it?"

They all spoke. "Yes." ... "Yeah." ... "Okay." ... "I am."

"Good. Okay. Hey, look, it's almost time for Emma to return and Andrew and Peter are probably wondering if I killed you all."

They laughed and Denise asked, "So when are you doing the ... um ... 'operation'?"

"Oh. It's done. When you agreed."

"No shit?" Kevin exclaimed. "Damn, Tamara. I don't care what you say; you've got some kind of super-power there."

## Chapter 58 - Beach Trip

Evening was approaching and Tamara, Emma, and the others were eagerly waiting for the local TV evening news program to see how the press treated the energy cube's introduction. But when the news program started, they were amazed that the event was actually covered as the day's lead news story.

It opened with a quick shot of a robed Tamara appearing and waving her wand while the announcer, in a voice-over, intoned, "We had a bit of magic happen at a major energy company in Cambridge today. The company, EEC Energy Solutions, introduced a new device which, they claim, promises to revolutionize energy storage and distribution." A photo of the device itself was displayed as the commentator briefly explained that units like these would soon be installed around the country to provide energy at a lower cost. Then there was a sound bite from Emma, who had been interviewed after the event.

Reporter: "Dame Dr Emma Clarke is the chairperson of EEC Energy Solutions and its chief scientist as well. Dr Clarke, in a nutshell, what does this device do that's different to electric power distribution now?"

Emma: "Currently, energy is produced at sites very remote from most users and needs to be transmitted distances to the user. And usage typically is highest when most people are at their jobs, meaning that the producing facilities need to be able to provide enough power to accommodate those peak times. Our devices will be located close to the points of usage and will even out the times of peak and low demand. The ElectroPowerCube provides a reliable way of storing excess energy from the distribution grid; it will allow the generating facilities to operate more efficiently; and the device can collect and store energy, at a very high efficiency, for later peak-time use."

Then the announcer came on again as the video of Tamara shaking her wand and the drape lifting off the unit was played as the announcer spoke, "This bit of magic was performed by Miss Tamara Alexandre, a physicist and engineer at Johns Hopkins University in Maryland in the U.S. Miss Alexandre was the inventor of the energy storage system used in these devices and she gave the group at the event an entertaining description of the magic of science and engineering. Here's what she told the group in concluding her remarks."

The video showed Tamara, still robed and holding the wand up, and saying, "... 'Magic is just science that we don't understand yet.' So we definitely can say that EEC Energy Solutions is in the magic business." Tamara waved the wand and laughter could be heard. "The magic of finding solutions to the world's energy problems."

The screen switched back to the announcer. "So there you have it; this was a unique and entertaining introduction to a new power storage device which the company says promises to revolutionize how energy is generated, stored, and distributed."

"Wow. Just wow," Andrew said as the program switched to other news. "I was there and saw it, but the news program made it so much more compelling."

"Better than any advertising could possibly do for us..." Emma started but her mobile rang and she answered it, then listened for a bit.

"It most certainly was," she said.

"..."

"I'll tell her. 'Bye.'"

Emma looked at the others. "That was Henry Stafford. He saw the news and he's delighted with the coverage. He..."

Her phone rang again.

“Emma Clarke...”

“...”

“Thanks. I agree.”

“...”

“Oops, gotta go. Another call waiting. ‘Bye, Greg. ... Emma Clarke.”

“...”

“Okay, possibly, we’ll see. Call the EEC Energy Public Relations Department on Monday with your details to see if we can get that organized.”

“...”

“...Right. ‘Bye.”

Emma put her mobile down. “I think I’ll let any others go to voice mail; the congrats are coming in now. Okay, Henry’s very happy about the piece. Tamara, he wants you to know that your little part was a publicity goldmine for us.”

Tamara blushed and nodded.

“The next call was Sir Gregory Hodges; he’s the vice chair of EEC Energy and takes the reins when I’m in the U.S. He wanted to say that he’s delighted with the coverage. But the last one? Tamara, you’re probably not going to be happy, but that was a producer from the ‘Conan McLoughlin Show’; Mr McLoughlin wants you and me to appear on his show.”

“What!” Tamara exclaimed. “What show is that?”

“A very popular evening talk show, with a format more or less similar to ‘The Tonight Show’ that’s still running in the States, if you know about that one. They get people in the news to talk with the show’s host.”

“I know the format. But who’s ... um, McLoughlin?”

“He’s an Irish comedian turned talk show host who does an informal chat with celebrities and other public figures that they invite to appear,” Emma told her. “When I was here on sabbatical, I saw the show a few times. The bloke’s pretty funny and he’s very good at making the guests feel comfortable. He gets four people on, he asks them a bit about their current activities, and then they just chat about whatever comes up.”

Tamara made a face. “Mmm, well, I don’t really like the idea... But when would this be? You know that I’m returning to the States on Monday. Then Peter and I are going to California with his sister and some of their cousins.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Emma said. “You did tell me about that. Okay, I’ll have our PR people see what the show producer wants to do.”

“Where in California?” Denise asked. “I’ve never been.”

“LA area down to San Diego. One of the cousins is considering studying oceanography so she wants to visit UCSD and Scripps Institute. Plus we’ll do the touristy stuff there,” Tamara said. “Also remember what I said about my visiting Caltech, Emma—I’ve got that invite to visit that group in physics there who’re doing work on correlated electron systems and their recent publications suggest a possible collaboration. And Peter’s interested in what they’re doing in their research on nanomechanical and nanoelectronic systems. We planned two days at Caltech while the cousins play.”

The group continued to discuss their summer plans; Denise taking her class and writing her thesis and Kevin being involved with the Coris Foundation's getting settled in London. In August, Jeremy's family would be going to the States to visit relatives in Colorado while Amelia would be on a business-pleasure trip to several southern Europe countries with her father and step-mother; as Coris Foundation representatives, they planned to talk to officials about the region's African and Middle-Eastern migrant problems and do some vacationing as well.

Kevin and his group left for London in the morning after an emotional farewell and many promises to stay closely in touch. Emma and Tamara spent a working weekend with Tamara planning her doctoral research project activities for the fall. She had been keeping track of the cloud-storage site where a large amount of data on the coil force was being added virtually daily by Emma's engineers at the APL, and Tamara and Emma had started to try to fit the experimental findings into mathematics which could describe the observed physical behavior.

While they worked, Peter and Andrew played. Andrew's day job as a consulting econometrician allowed him to work from anywhere he could get an internet connection, but this weekend he took Peter around Cambridge and the local countryside and they visited many of the sights. Many of the buildings in central Cambridge were four hundred years old; some were even older.

### ***Baltimore, Maryland: end of June***

Back at home, Tamara had just enough time to catch her breath before she had to pack for her California trip. She and Peter would be going with Barbara and Terence, and they were chaperoning Eddie and Audrey Winsberg, Mike Gibson, and JoAnne and Frank Winsberg. They would be flying out from Baltimore-Washington International Airport on Thursday morning.

On Tuesday afternoon, Tamara got a call from Emma; it was evening in Cambridge.

"So that telly show's producer called our PR people yesterday," Emma told her. "She was quite unhappy that you 'fled the country,' as she put it. They really wanted you on and, get this, they wanted you to appear in that Harry Potter cloak."

"Oh really? Well, they could just stuff that idea," Tamara huffed. "I'm a scientist, not an entertainer. That would be undignified. At the device rollout, that was like a celebration and I was using a visual cue to emphasize an important idea."

"Funny, that's about what I told her."

Tamara giggled, "See, I told you we spend too much time together. We're starting to think alike."

"Indeed we are. So the show's format has the host doing a brief monologue leading up to the first guest's introduction," Emma told her. "Then the guest makes an entrance and the two go to a seating area and chat for maybe five minutes. Then he goes to center stage and monologues again, and has the second guest do the grand entrance routine, then a three-way chat. Rinse and repeat for a third and fourth guest."

"The show's main dynamic is the interaction of the guests sitting together and all talking together with the host. So I asked the producer if they ever had a scientist or engineer on the show; 'No we haven't,' she said, 'we've had actors, musicians, politicians, sports figures, society people, restaurateurs, and a few business people...'"

"In short, mostly all entertainers," Tamara interrupted.

"Just so. Then I asked who they were considering pairing us with, and there was silence for a few seconds. Then she said that they'd probably have an actor or two. I asked her then, 'So what would we all talk about? I can talk knowledgeably about classical and quantum mechanics but not about which celebrity was seen with someone



else's girlfriend.' Then I said, 'Picture the scene where a scientist and an engineer-scientist are trying to have an entertaining conversation with a couple of actors, sports figures, or whomever. Is that the scene you're looking for?'"

"Emma, you do keep up with current events, you know," Tamara objected.

"Ah, you haven't seen where the guests' conversation gets to, have you. Plenty of inside stories get revealed to the audience, and they just eat up that stuff. Don't get me wrong; it's actually very funny, innit. But I don't do that kind of banter. Back to her comments then; she responded with 'That's the reason we want Tamara to wear the magic cloak,' and she went on about how you'd talk about magic and possibly about how the magic in Harry Potter could be done with technology."

"It's good that she spoke to you, then. If she had told me that's what they wanted, I would have tore her a new asshole," Tamara growled.

"Blimey, girl, what's that from?" Emma asked.

"Ha, my dad. Marine. I picked up some bad habits and worse language."

"The worse language I know. What bad habits?"

"Go for the kill. Give no quarter. Don't let them get a second chance. Make the first shot count. All his aggressive comments; I grew up hearing them and the philosophy behind those comments rules how I do stuff."

"Oh yes, of course," Emma said, "I can see it in how you approach problems. You confront the issue head-on and with single-minded intensity, don't you. All right then; appearing on that show's not a good fit for you and as well it's not for me—I agree. I told the woman that I would be open to an informal interview but the topics that I'd discuss would be limited to my company, its technology, and to the science, engineering, and economics of power generation and distribution. If Mr McLoughlin wanted to have a little chat which includes me, like he does with the typical group of four guests he features, then the other three would all have to be knowledgeable about those topics. I also told her that I would be returning to the States on Monday next and wouldn't be able to appear live after that. She said that she'd discuss the matter with Mr McLoughlin and the show's writers and let me know."

"Okay; good," Tamara said. "I'll be back from the trip in the middle of July. I've got some preliminary calcs done on the coil force problem, so I hope to have a lot to show you when we get together."

"Excellent, Tamara. Enjoy yourself and don't work too hard at Caltech—I should say, don't work them too hard," she laughed. "Good-bye; till a few weeks, then."

"Bye, Emma."

~~~~~

The group of cousins met Tamara and her friends at the airport to travel to Los Angeles; while they were waiting for their flight to board, Peter told Eddie and Audrey about meeting some of the original developers of the Avery Program in England.

"What were they doing in England?" Audrey wondered.

"The queen knighted them for bringing it to England; it replaced their own Naked in School Program and apparently by their adopting it instead, it saved the Brits a ton of money," Peter said. "We met them at the ceremony where Emma and Tamara were knighted too."

"Oooo, yeah; I forgot," Audrey said, looking at Tamara with wonder. "So you're a knight? Do we call you 'sir'?"

or something, now?”

Tamara chuckled. “You still get to call me Tamara. No, only if you’re a Brit citizen, or I think in the commonwealth countries too, do the knighted guys get called ‘sir.’ The ladies are called ‘dame.’”

Peter continued, “So one of the people we met, Denise is her name and she goes to Avery University; she and her fiancé did some more work on developing the Avery Program in England and we told them that your school was starting to run it. They said that they’re gonna send the updated curriculum to your school.”

“Wow, a custom version,” Ernie laughed. “That’s cool.”

### ***Los Angeles and San Diego, California: end of June***

When the group got to Los Angeles, they spent the first three days visiting tourist sites. The ones they chose to see were the famed “Hollywood” sign, and they took the four-mile hiking tour to get a close-up look. Ripley’s Believe It or Not and Universal Studios Hollywood were also on their schedule.

Then they traveled to La Jolla to visit UCSD and Scripps Institute. Audrey was thinking of studying oceanography and the program UCSD ran at Scripps was highly regarded.

The next day, they had planned to visit the San Diego Zoo Safari Park but Mike thought he had a better idea.

“Hey guys, today’s gonna be hot and it’s a long ride out to that zoo place. Black’s Beach is right here, right down the cliffs. Let’s go there today.”

“That’s the famous nude beach? It’s here?” JoAnne asked.

“Yeah. Maybe a half-mile walk, then down the trail on the cliff there,” Mike said.

“Do we have stuff for a beach trip?” Barbara asked. “We don’t have any blankets and I doubt the hotel would appreciate our using the ones from the beds.”

“Maybe the gift shop has something,” Audrey suggested. “I like Mike’s idea.”

“Does everyone agree?” Peter asked. “You guys want a beach trip?”

Everyone agreed but Tamara and Terence were less enthusiastic and Peter and Barbara noticed. When the cousins were dispatched to see about locating the supplies for the beach, Peter spoke to them.

“Are you really okay with doing this?” he asked.

“Uh huh,” Tamara answered. “I did pack some beach stuff in case we decided to go to a beach, but I was figuring on Santa Monica Beach; that’s the famous one. I do have some reservations about a nude beach because beaches are uncontrolled areas. The resort has security and access is limited.”

Terence agreed and said, “Ah was thinkin’ of the gals’ safety too.”

“Let me check with the desk,” Peter replied and then made the call.

He was switched to the concierge and spoke for a while.

“Okay,” Peter told them when he disconnected. “It’s pretty safe. The beach is very popular and there are beach patrols but it’s not an easy beach to get to, he said. The trails down the cliffs are steep in places. He said to watch the warning signs because there are unstable areas and that good footwear is essential—no sandals going down or up. The upper entrance to the Saigon Trail is closest to us here but that trail’s very difficult and kinda long. The trail near the gliderport is easier; it’s only a little further away, and we can get packaged lunches at a restaurant at the gliderport. The hotel gift shop sells rolled-up bamboo mats and they’re inexpensive. We should pack light but bring sun protection, plenty of water, and any food we want because there are no services down

there.”

“Let’s get what we need together,” Barbara said.

They got their backpacks out and started to fill them with supplies that they would need at the beach. Then the others returned.

“We looked in the gift shop and they have these mat things you can lie on,” Ernie began. “We also got a map of the trails to the beach.”

“They have bottled water in the shop too,” JoAnne told them.

When everyone had packed what they needed, the group visited the gift shop and bought mats, water, and snacks, and then set out on the hike. They walked to the gliderport, where they bought some packaged lunches at the restaurant, and then made for the close-by trail going down the cliff. It was a challenging hike but there were spectacular views and soon they got to the beach. It wasn’t busy yet, but the temperature was rising and it soon would be hot. There were a lot of surfers riding the waves and paragliders sailed overhead every so often. There were several dozen people on the beach in the vicinity of the trailhead and most were nude, although there were some women who were just topless.

“Oh, this is a nice beach, but look at those waves; looks pretty rough,” Audrey said as they walked toward a likely spot to get set up.

They were passing a blanket and umbrella where a couple in their 50s, nude, were sitting and the guy called out, “First time visiting here?”

“Yeah, it is,” Ernie answered. “That trip down the cliff was an experience.”

“Heard you say something about the waves,” the guy told them. “Don’t go in to swim unless you’re really a strong swimmer, and I mean *strong* swimmer. We’ve got some serious riptides here and bad currents when the surf’s up like it is now. And if you’re wading, watch for sting rays. You know the ‘sting-ray shuffle’?”

“Um, no,” Ernie answered.

“You don’t lift your foot off the sand, just slide it along. That way you don’t step down on top of a ray. They like to lie on the bottom and don’t like being stepped on. By the way, my name’s Seth and my wife’s is Wilma.”

Tamara’s group introduced themselves all around and Seth invited them to set up nearby. They unpacked and rolled out their bamboo mats. Tamara surprised them all when she pulled a two-foot-long, six-inch diameter string pouch out of her backpack, opened it, and began pulling rods and a large fabric rectangle out.

“It’s a folding beach shade,” she told them, “wind-powered to keep it open,” and she and Peter began setting it up while the others undressed.

In a few minutes the shade was set up so that all their mats fit into its shadow as it flapped in the breeze.

Wilma looked at the shade setup and said, “Nice. Interesting design; easy to carry.”

“It only weighs about four pounds too,” Tamara said.

Then they all went down to the water and waded in; after a few minutes, JoAnne let out a squeak and the others looked at her.

“Eep... it *touched* me again!” she yelped.

The others looked at where she was standing and saw three rays swimming around her feet; their “wings” seemed to be brushing against her legs.

Audrey shuffled over to her. “They’re feeding on stuff you stirred up when you passed by there, They won’t bother you; they’re busy eating. Just keep shuffling away.”

“That was so strange—it felt like sandpaper rubbing me,” JoAnne told her. “You know about stingrays then?”

“Sure. I read about that stuff lots,” Audrey replied. “Damn though, the water just a bit further out is crazy rough. Must be a really sharp dropoff just off the beach. Seth was right, it’s way too rough to swim without having a board or some other flotation here.”

Terence was close by and he called to them, “Ah really agree with y’all; it’s way too rough. An’ Ah don’t want’a get so friendly with the rays like JoAnne did.”

They all laughed and started back for the beach, while remembering to do the “sting-ray shuffle.”

When they returned to their spot, Seth commented, “Good choice, not swimming. That surf can be wicked.”

Terence told him, “That was good advice y’all gave us, Seth. Y’all must come here a lot.”

Seth grinned. “Grew up in San Diego and still live here. I used to go surfing on this beach all the time. Best surf in SoCal.”

“I made him stop,” Wilma told them. “After he wiped out and broke his shoulder on the rocks once. That was enough.”

“Oh yeah,” Terence agreed. “That would do it for me, too.”

“You look very athletic. Ever surf?” Seth asked.

“Naw; grew up in the middle o’ Texas and the nearest big water’s the Gulf. Supposed to be good surfing at South Padre Island, but that was way too far away. Ah played football and got my share of nasty hits, but the pads did their job.”

They traded stories with Seth and Wilma. He was an attorney with a maritime shipping company and she was an elementary school teacher. They told stories about the beach’s history and the visitors told a few about their nudist experiences at their family’s resort. A group of mid-twenty-year-olds had arrived nearby and began setting up a volleyball net. Barbara and Tamara perked up at seeing that and walked over to the volleyball group and the others joined them.

Soon they were playing and the regular players quickly saw their skill.

“Hey, we have a league here and the beach club organizes tournaments,” one of the regulars told Barbara. “Do you live nearby? We’d love to have you join.”

Barbara laughed, “So sorry. We’re visiting here from Maryland. Actually, Tamara and I are on a team that played in the Naked Volleyball Superbowl in Pennsylvania. Heard of that?”

“Oh sure,” he answered. “How’d your team do?”

“Second place in the ‘B’ level,” she told him and he whistled.

“I could see that you were good. That’s cool.”

Soon the whole group was talking together and sharing stories while playing. At about 2:30 p.m., however, the weather started to appear threatening and some of the volleyball people pulled out their mobiles. Then a few of them began packing up.

“Storm coming,” was the word getting passed around. “Time to leave.”

Seth came over to the volleyball group. “Heard on the weather; a severe thunderstorm is forming over the Laguna Mountains and may hit here in about 90 minutes. Unusual to get a storm in July.”

One of the volleyball group members commented, “Yeah, we’re gettin’ out. The trail’s bad if there’s a storm.” “What’s the fastest way out?” Peter asked Seth.

“The way I saw you come down. The gliderport trail. It’s about a third to a half mile, I think, going up 300 feet or so. But hurry up, because the footing gets slippery when it rains.”

There wasn’t much to pack and within a few minutes they were on the trail heading up the cliff—the word of the storm’s approach had reached the other beachgoers and the trail was filled with climbers. Tamara’s little group was climbing the trail along with Seth and Wilma and were glad to see that the older couple had no problem keeping up.

Terence commented on that and Seth laughed. “Wilma and I make this climb almost every week, even on nice days in winter. We also run five miles every morning. Just because I gave up surfing doesn’t mean I became a couch potato.”

They parted ways at the parking lot and Tamara and the others hurried on to the hotel, just about a half-mile away. When they had almost reached it, the thunderstorm hit and they ran the last hundred yards but still got thoroughly soaked. It was raining seriously hard now.

JoAnne laughed as they got under shelter, “Well, we didn’t get wet swimming but we certainly got wet now. But going to that beach was quite an experience.”

“Well, I had read about that beach and how it was full of pervs,” Frank commented. “I didn’t see that at all; a few gawkers, maybe. Lots of single guys, but that’s common—we see that at the resort too. But that hike down and up? I got a serious thigh burn going.”

“You’re just out of shape, buddy,” Ernie joked.

On the following day they were to return to the LA area and Peter and Tamara would be visiting Caltech in Pasadena for two days while the others planned to go to more touristy sites including the California Science Center and Disneyland Park. Then it was time to return home.

### ***Arundel Nature Society, Davidsonville, Maryland: four weeks later***

Tamara spent the rest of the summer working on the coil force data, taking three-day weekends off to visit the nudist resort. She and Peter enjoyed taking long walks through the woods surrounding the resort, and in August, they found out that the property to the south had been put on the market. It was a sand and gravel quarry and the low sandy hills which made up most of the terrain on the east side of the river had been excavated to harvest the sand and gravel.

Resort owner Vicki Allerman told Tamara and Peter the news when they arrived at the resort on a Friday afternoon in mid-August.

“Got word they’re selling the quarry next door,” she told Tamara and Peter.

“Do they have a buyer?” Peter asked. “We’ve walked down that way and the land is kinda stripped bare, dug down to the water table in places.”

“I don’t think so,” she replied. “It’s pretty ugly. I’m hoping they don’t sell it to use for a landfill.”

Ron came in just then. “I was wondering about that very thing,” he said. “So I called the county. They won’t allow a landfill there; it’s too close to the river and the natural areas nearby. They are requiring that the property

owners backfill the low spots to five feet above the water table, though. I doubt that a developer would want that land for housing and there'd be no return on reclaiming it for agriculture. The site work cost for either would be huge."

Later that evening, Tamara was talking with Peter, Barbara, and Terence about that land.

"I've got this little thought nibbling at me," Tamara told them. "How much land does the resort have?"

"Um, maybe a hundred acres?" Peter said and Barbara nodded.

"I'm guessing that the quarry property must be about that size too," Tamara mused.

"You're not thinking..." Barbara started but Tamara raised her hand to stop her.

"When I get these thoughts, I've learned to pay attention," Tamara said. "I'm sensing a big change sometime in the future and I may want to have land available. The work I'm doing will be changing a lot of things in the country..."

"You don't mean putting a factory there, do you?" Peter asked.

"Not a factory—nothing commercial. Something ... ah ... service for community, like. It's nothing definite. I just have this feeling. But it's something long-term, so it would be smart to try to buy land now and I like this area. I'll call my lawyer on Monday and have him look into it."

"You don't need a lawyer—Gramps is coming; ask him," Peter said. "I'll bet you forgot he's got a real estate business."

"Oh right, thanks, Peter; I did forget. Hey, tomorrow starts the volleyball clinics, guys. Barbara, you up for another trip to the Superbowl?"

"Sure, why not?" she answered. "Last year was fun..."

She was interrupted by voices from outside. More of Peter's family had arrived. They were expecting the Gibsons from Frederick and the Winsbergs from Wilmington. Before they could get to the cabin door, Ernie and Audrey came roaring up to their porch.

"We're here!" called Ernie as he ran up and Barbara opened the door. "The folks say to come up to the big house."

"Sure. Need a hand unpacking?" Peter asked.

"Nope. The others got that covered. I see Gram and Gramps aren't here yet," Audrey said.

"They should be here any time now," Barbara told her. "You guys gonna do the volleyball clinic tomorrow?"

"Yeah. It's fun," Ernie said. "Even if I'm nowhere as good as Barbara—or Tamara!"

When they got to the main house, they saw a flurry of activity, but then Shelly grabbed Tamara and Barbara.

"We need you to help getting dinner ready," Shelly told them. "Mom and Dad will be here in about a half hour and we'd like to have the dinner started. Barbara's parents are coming with them."

"Any changes in who'll be here this weekend?" Barbara asked. "Did Grandma and Grandpa Richardson and the Pennsylvania group say they can come?"

"Not this weekend," Shelly said. "Next weekend."

"I see Mike's solo," Tamara said. "Theresa's not coming?"

“Her family’s not back from their trip yet. Mike’s been moping around because she’s gone. Just for two weeks!”

“Young love,” Barbara laughed.

In about twenty minutes, the guys called that the barbequed meats were almost ready; the sides and salads were finished, and the remaining Winsbergs had pulled in. After quick greetings, everyone began getting the food together and to the tables. Werner made an announcement as they sat to eat.

“Alright, no one ask any questions of our traveling family members about their trips till after supper when we can all participate. Now let’s give thanks for our being together and for this bountiful food set before us.”

Everyone set to their dinner and were soon finished.

“I’m done. What’s for dessert?” Mike asked, and everyone laughed.

## Chapter 59 - Honors

While dessert was being brought out, Werner commented, “This is the first time this summer that so many of the family has been able to gather. Some of us have traveled widely this summer; as you know, Peter went with Tamara and her folks to England where she was knighted and then most of the youngsters went to California. Peter’s told a lot of us about their England trip and I think most everyone’s heard the details. Am I right?”

Everyone replied with a variation of “yes.”

“So Audrey, what did you think of UCSD?” Werner asked.

“I really liked it, Gramps. They have great facilities and Scripps is awesome. I visited the Marine Biology department too but I think I prefer their oceanic and atmospheric science program. And Eddie found out that UCSD has a cool program for himself, too.”

“Yeah, they have something new there, a cognitive science program,” Eddie said. “From talking with Tamara, I got interested in learning about how the mind works. I wasn’t sure which area was best to major in to learn about the mind—whether it should be AI in computer science, neuroscience, psychology, whatever. Then I found out that UCSD has this cool cognitive science program where you can do all of those things and fit them into your own study program. I liked that idea.”

“Yeah, and he mostly liked it there ‘cause they have an awesome nude beach,” Mike teased and everyone laughed.

“Say, that’s right,” Scott commented. “I’ve been there. I was stationed at San Diego early in my Navy career, when I was with the Pacific Fleet. So you climbed down those cliffs—or did you go in along the shoreline?”

“The cliffs,” Audrey said. “We had a good time; met some nice people, and played volleyball, but got chased off by a thunderstorm in the afternoon.”

“So how was that beach?” Werner asked. “Is it as nice as reports make it out to be?”

“Oh yeah, except for the water. We didn’t go in ‘cause we were warned about real bad rip tides when the surf was up,” Mike said. “We went wading though, and JoAnne made friends with some sting rays.”

He had to explain what happened for everyone’s amusement.

“And there were lots of people surfing—and they have paragliding there too. The views there were just awesome.”

“He means the scenery, not the nudists, I think,” Audrey snickered. “Hey, Peter, tell the folks what you told us about those guys who brought the Avery Program to England. Mom, they’re gonna send the latest version to our school.”

Peter told the group a little about Kevin, Denise, Amelia, and Jeremy, and what they had done to be selected for knighthood.

“And they’re totally awesome people too,” he finished. “We spent quite a while talking and then they came for two days at Cambridge too. They came to the unveiling of Tamara’s and Emma’s energy device. We really hit it off—we have lots in common and they all can fight like demons too... oops, sorry, Tamara... damn, you were right about memory association.”

Claire jumped right on that. “Fighting? What’s that about? What happened that you didn’t tell me?”

“Um... I didn’t want to make you anxious, Mom. I asked Tamara not to talk about that part. Some Russians were trying to kidnap Emma, it looks like. But Tamara, with Kevin, Denise, Amelia, and Jeremy, stopped them.”



“And you too, Peter,” Tamara grinned at him. “According to the British queen, you’re a hero too. You’re going back to London to get your award from the queen, I heard that from Emma yesterday; I was waiting for a good time to announce it.”

“*What?*” Peter exclaimed. “What do you mean? What award?”

Tamara walked over to a corner of the sitting area and picked up her backpack.

“Oh no, not her magic backpack again,” Peter groaned as Tamara pulled out some papers and brought them over to Claire.

“I figure your mom can read this to everyone,” Tamara said, grinning. “Emma emailed this to me and I printed it; it’s an extract from *The London Gazette*, the U.K.’s official government publication. Go ahead and read it to us, Claire.”

Claire took the papers and looked them over, shaking her head and chuckling. “My goodness. Okay, here goes. It reads:

CIVILIAN GALLANTRY LIST | LONDON GAZETTE | SUPPLEMENT NO. 11

CENTRAL CHANCERY OF THE ORDERS OF KNIGHTHOOD

St. James’s Palace, London SW1

“It’s dated August 8,” she commented. “It goes on:

THE QUEEN has been graciously pleased to approve the following awards of The Queen’s Gallantry Medal and The Queen’s Commendation for Bravery and for publication in ‘The London Gazette’ of the names of those shown below as having received an expression of Commendation for Bravery.

### **The Queen’s Gallantry Medal**

Sir Jeremy PORTER KBE, civilian  
 Dame Amelia HADAD DBE, civilian  
 Denise ROBERTS GBE, civilian  
 Kevin CORIS GBE, civilian  
 Peter WINSBERG, civilian

*For confronting heavily armed criminals and thwarting an attempted kidnapping.*

On 21 June of this year, Jeremy Porter, Amelia Hadad, Denise Roberts, Kevin Coris, and Peter Winsberg, together with many others, were attending a corporate event in Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, when they were accosted by an armed foreign criminal impersonating a security guard, just as a panel lorry carrying five additional heavily armed criminals drove up to them. Dame Amelia Hadad was able to subdue the guard when he attempted to restrain her, while Denise Roberts, Sir Jeremy Porter, Kevin Coris, and Peter Winsberg, at the risk of their lives, rushed the men at the lorry. They all had understood, from previous police reports, that there might be an attempt at kidnapping of a prominent scientist who was also present at the event. While the criminals were being kept at bay by Denise Roberts, Sir Jeremy Porter, Kevin Coris, and Peter Winsberg, Dame Amelia Hadad and others rushed the scientist to safety.

Despite the fact that the five criminals from the lorry possessed and were brandishing automatic assault weapons, Denise Roberts, Sir Jeremy Porter, Kevin Coris, and Peter Winsberg, were able to subdue and incapacitate them, risking their lives to protect the target of the kidnapping attempt.

Sir Jeremy Porter, Dame Amelia Hadad, Denise Roberts, Kevin Coris, and Peter Winsberg were all

aware that the criminals were armed, yet were willing to risk their own lives to ensure the safety of the intended kidnapping victim.

“Then there’s some more,” Claire went on, “other people and other decorations, but that’s it about Peter and his new friends. Trial by fire, Peter? That’s a real bonding experience. So tell us what happened—why did you risk yourself like that?”

Peter was looking at Tamara in shock and Tamara had to give his shoulder a little shake.

“Your mom asked you something, Peter,” she prompted.

“Yeah, that did happen. But it was so quick! It was over so fast,” Peter told them. “But Tamara was behind our success, you know—she used one of her magic devices to disarm those jerks. I don’t know why I reacted that way but it was like the four of us—me, Kevin, Jeremy, and Denise—just acted like a trained unit. I never thought that I was in danger, actually. We were able to put them all down so easily, it seemed.”

“Your judo?” Barbara asked.

“Yup. And Kevin knows taekwondo, he’s a high-degree black belt and the other three learned from him or something. Anyway, those four are very close.”

Tamara broke in, “Those Russians had been trying to steal industrial secrets from Emma’s company. Like the citation read, there were six of them and Amelia clobbered one, Then it was five against four and Denise, bless her, actually destroyed two of them. All I did was get them to drop the guns they were waving around.”

“All? Damn, Tamara, that’s a mighty big ‘all,’” Werner said. “Can I ask what kind of magic you pulled off?”

Tamara grinned, “You can ask, but...”

Most everyone in the room chanted, “...if I tell you, then I’d have to kill you!” and everyone burst out laughing.

“I’ll give you a hint,” Tamara teased, “Remember what happened to that drone last year. My gadgets don’t only work on electronics. Speaking of magic, though, Emma sent me a link to a little video from that roll-out she did. Let me pull that up on my phone and you can watch it.”

She passed her phone around and Peter passed his too; he also had it on his phone. Soon everyone had seen it and were laughing.

“Wish I saw that in person,” Scott chuckled and the others agreed. “That was very entertaining, Tamara. Emma’s got good marketing people to come up with that,” he said.

Peter snorted. “Dad, that was all Tamara; she got the idea of doing it after I bought the robe and stuff and she thought of all of that herself.”

Then he had to tell everyone about London’s King’s Cross Station and the Harry Potter setup that the station management had created there.

“I got that Harry Potter stuff thinking that somehow Tamara could use them, but she came up with the whole idea on the fly, right after the stress of the battle with those Russians,” Peter finished.

“So what happened with those Russians?” Claire asked. “What were they trying to do, anyway? Why a kidnapping?”

“So, they had a spy planted in Emma’s company,” Tamara told her. “The guy stole some materials that make up part of the energy-storage unit. But the company has tight controls on the actual manufacturing part so the spy didn’t get everything; just enough to blow himself and more than a dozen others to kingdom come. So

apparently the survivors came up with the idea to kidnap Emma, probably to ransom her for the device plans; they had a photo of her from the spy and an imposter guard they planted to alert them when he saw her at the roll-out event. Peter and I noticed that the imposter had a bulge under his arm, like from a shoulder holster, and Emma had just told us that her guards couldn't be armed. Guns in England are totally illegal; even the cops usually aren't armed."

"Amelia's only five foot three or so," Peter said. "When the fake guard tried to grab her, she just ruined him with an awesome shoulder throw. Broke his arm and back, we heard afterward. Kevin did a taekwondo kick—I didn't see it—but it crushed his guy's throat and shattered his jaw. Jeremy's guy wound up with most of his rib cage shattered and that bruiser must have weighed 300 pounds. He was a giant. But Denise? Damn, she took on *two* of them and broke a shoulder, a leg, and two knees, on her jerks."

"And your own opponent?" Claire prompted.

"Um, did a shoulder throw and helped his head put a nice dent in the side of their van," Peter told her. "I didn't want to go round two with my guy; he looked like he had seen some fights before and I had him off balance. Sensei told me, in those situations, you just end the threat."

"That's absolutely right, Peter," Barbara said. "Good for you."

Claire shook her head. "Peter, I hope you know not to go looking for dangerous situations..."

"Mom, sensei drums that into our heads. Use the skills for defense, he drills us. Um, Tamara, so when am I supposed to go back for that award?" Peter asked her.

"Emma told me that Amelia and Jeremy are getting theirs when they get back to London—that's in about two weeks. Kevin and Denise are already back in the States, so she thinks you three should go together—according to Sir George, that would be appropriate, the three of you at once; that would allow a single presentation. Sir George told Emma that the queen was enraged when she heard about what had happened and she had personally called the Russian ambassador to the palace to ream him out. Anyway, we'll need to contact Kevin and Denise and work out when you all can go. Sir George will be getting suggested dates from the palace. Emma said that these awards are mostly done in private presentations, not huge ceremonies."

"Jeez, I said those four were awesome," Peter sighed. "Knighthood honors and now heroism awards."

Tamara grinned at him. "Well, Peter, work on doing something dramatic with your collaborator at Imperial College London and you can get to be a knight too."

Everyone laughed at Peter's sputtering attempt to deny that was possible. After a little further discussion about Tamara's and Peter's experiences, everyone began leaving the table and started to clean up from the meal. When they were finished, Barbara grabbed Werner's attention.

"Gramps, Tamara's got a real estate question," she told him.

"Really? That's interesting; Tamara, you're not house-hunting, are you?"

Tamara laughed. "Nope. Not yet, anyway. With the intelligence service your company seems to have, you've probably heard that the quarry next door is on the market."

"True, we did hear about that. Its resources are about exhausted and the outfit doesn't want to keep paying the taxes on a non-producing property. Don't tell me you're interested in the site?"

"I have a thought—like a shadow of an idea," Tamara told him. "From my discussions with Kevin, I got a premonition that having a land site handy would be useful and my premonition tells me that I'll be staying in this area for a long time. How big is that property?"

“Right around 125 acres. The resort is 98 acres, so it’s a bit larger.”

“So the quarry part only takes up about half of the site?” she asked.

“About 60 percent. They weren’t permitted to dig closer to the river. Exactly what were you thinking of using the land for? Something commercial? Any site work would be expensive, in order to make the property suitable to build on.”

“I just have the impression of needing a site for something involving research, possibly in educational psychology, teaching methodology, and applied neuroscience research. It needs to be in a rural setting, away from any background neurological interference that can be found in populated areas, but close enough to those areas to draw the needed expertise. This area would be close to ideal.”

Werner shook his head. “Peter was right; you don’t think small. Okay, several questions. Any timeline?”

“Nope. Nothing firm. Maybe when my doctorate’s done. I have a feeling that Kevin and Denise, Amelia and Jeremy too, they’ll somehow be involved. Others I haven’t yet met will be too.”

“All right. Does your ‘vision’ include how you’d use the site?” he asked.

“The clearest picture is of a kind of school building but with large open areas. Perhaps several low buildings, spread out in a natural setting.”

“Okay, let’s go with the school idea. If we get the property, we could apply for a much lower tax rate. Are you aware that the site has some significant holes to fill?”

Tamara nodded. “Peter and I have seen the area on our hikes in the woods. What’s the best way to fill them? We wouldn’t want to bulldoze the surrounding woods to level the site out.”

“Since you apparently have a few years before you start doing anything there, I’d suggest making the site available for dumping clean fill or hard fill and not charge a dumping fee. That way, builders will have a place to cheaply dispose of rubble and you’d get much of the holes filled fairly cheaply.”

“That’s not trash, is it, Gramps?” Barbara asked. “Ron told us that the county wouldn’t let the site be used as a landfill.”

“Oh, no,” Werner said. “Hard or clean fill has no general garbage in it; not even scrap lumber. It’s typically demolition materials like concrete or brick rubble, broken up. Rocks, unclassified gravel that can’t be used for construction, sand, even clean soil like they get when a basement or pool is dug. The trucks would have to be monitored, though, to prevent anyone from bringing trash in.”

“So when rubble arrives, they’d just dump it in the quarry?” Tamara asked.

“Right. Since you’d not be building on it for a while, it could compact itself mostly naturally, but you’d still need equipment there to do gross compaction or else any voids would make the soil above somewhat unstable. You’d need to have a civil engineer do periodic checks. As I said, reclaiming land like that is expensive, however you proceed. Would you make the purchase as a private individual?”

“That’s the other thing, Werner,” Tamara said. “My tax attorney has been urging me to set up a kind of foundation as a tax shelter. A 501-something he called it. The income from my patent royalties and licenses is growing huge and the trust can’t shelter most of it now, he says. So when I set up the foundation, I can have it buy the property. I spoke to Kevin; his dad set one up years ago for charitable work and he told me how that kind of foundation can do all kinds of good things.”

“Yes, that’s a 501(c)(3) organization and named after the section of the IRS code that covers their taxation,”

Werner told her. “That’s a charitable foundation and has very favorable tax rates but also strict rules about what they can use their money for. As an example, no political expenses are allowed like the direct support of a candidate for office. Are you moving ahead with getting such a foundation set up?”

“Yep, he’s got the paperwork almost ready to file. He said that I need to have a board of directors appointed; he’s setting it up using some attorneys from his firm as temporary directors but I need to identify people as officers and directors. I was thinking of asking you and Greta...”

“Okay, stop,” Werner said, smiling. “I’m sure your attorney knows his stuff, but setting up a foundation or corporation board is a complicated business. Let me help you with that, okay? And I’ll look into the quarry site and see what they’re asking. If the purchase is by a charitable foundation, I may be able to swing a good deal.”

“Wow, thanks a lot, Werner,” Tamara said and Peter and Barbara echoed their thanks.

Greta had joined the little group as Werner finished talking and he told her about Tamara’s request. Then as Werner walked away with Barbara and Terence, Greta asked Peter if he had experienced any unusual spiritual encounters during their trips.

“Actually I think I did, Grams,” he answered. “Tamara said it sounded to her like *Ogorin* gave me a push right when the Russians showed up. He definitely was with me when those Russians pulled those guns. I also had a strong premonition of danger all that morning and Tamara said that was *Ogorin* too.”

Tamara smiled at him. “Remember the language demo, honey?”

“Oh! Right, Tamara was telling our four new friends a little about the *lwa* and she showed how ... um... it was...”

“*Papa Legba*, honey.”

“Right, how *Papa Legba* knew all the languages and they tried speaking Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Filipino and Tamara could translate it—and I heard *Papa Legba* speaking the translations in my head too. That was crazy.”

“I think that the *lwa* have adopted Peter too, Greta. And Denise and Amelia both could sense the *lwa* that seem to accompany me these days, and they sensed that Peter has some companions too.”

“Yes, dear; that’s why I asked,” Greta said. “I can sense that Peter now has his own small entourage. So you mentioned, ah, Denise and Amelia, was it?”

Peter nodded.

“Do you know their heritage? I’m curious because of their unusual sensitivity.”

Tamara smiled at her. “Great minds and all that, Greta. I did ask them. Kevin told me that his teacher, a Korean grand master—I even remember the Korean word, *sahyun*—taught his students a very ancient form of meditation. Kevin told me that the meditation exercises he was taught predated even Confucianism and Buddhism.”

“Oh my,” Greta exclaimed, “this is starting to make sense. Korean shamanism, called *Mugyo*, is indeed ancient and has many parallels to Vodou and the beliefs of my own Nordic ancestors. You said the other boy, Jeremy, I think it was, learned from Kevin?”

“Yep. He also studied in Korea under Kevin’s taekwondo *sahyun*.”

“Do you know anything about Denise’s background, then?” Greta asked.

“Sure. Kevin taught her, but it gets better. Get this; she’s part Native American, actually. A quarter? Her dad’s mother was a member of the Eastern Cherokee nation and her family has a legend that her grandmother’s grandfather was a tribal medicine man.”

“That leaves Amelia then,” Greta commented.

“Her ancestry was tougher to characterize,” Tamara said. “Her dad’s parents are Muslim, but they grew up in England and she told me she doesn’t know much about their ancestral background, except that the family is originally from Jordan when it was a British mandate. Her mom’s Muslim, from Indonesia, and that part of the family is extremely conservative.”

“That’s interesting as well, Tamara. There’s a long tradition of animistic beliefs in Indonesia, its shamans are called *dukuns* and they practiced healing rites. When Islam came to the region, those animistic beliefs became combined with Islamic mysticism. Possibly Amelia’s ancestry includes shamanistic practitioners.”

“That could be, Greta. But my sense is that they all are quite empathic; Denise is a powerhouse of both empathy and charisma and the others aren’t far behind. My MRI studies from last spring seem to show that people with a high degree of empathy have certain structures in their brains which have a greater activity than people having lesser empathy. Those structures and their linking pathways have never been noticed before. My own research goals are to find a physiological basis for those traits and my hypothesis is that the answer is in the electrical structure of the human nervous system.”

“Could it be that a shamanistic ancestry might predispose a person to having greater activity in such structures?” Greta asked.

“Jeez, that’s right,” Tamara said. “Mom said you were scary smart. Sure, that’s totally possible and I need to let my collaborators know about considering possible genetic links in the level of activity of those structures.”

“Tamara, on another topic, was it safe to let your new friends know about your ability?” Greta asked.

“I’m really sure that they won’t deliberately tell anyone about me; besides, I gave them a little mental speed-bump so they won’t inadvertently slip and say something, like my boyfriend did earlier,” she said with a smile at Peter.

“I’m sorry, Tamara,” Peter said humbly. “I was...”

“It’s not a problem, sweetie; it happens and that ‘secret’ really wasn’t meant to be a secret anyway.”

“But it means that I still could slip about your ability,” Peter retorted.

“Oh, so you don’t recall our conversation when I first told you about my ability. I said that the *lwa* told me that I could trust you and that they had done something to be sure you couldn’t accidentally reveal anything.”

“Oh, yeah, sure, I remember that. But you never finished explaining how that worked.”

“‘Cause I didn’t know. I worked out how to do something like it and used it on Kevin and his group but I still don’t know what the *lwa* did with you. The very fact that they could influence you like that is awesome, though, and that my attempt to activate part of your limbic system shows that you are most likely attuned to the *lwa*, so that they were able to influence your thoughts. Like the premonition sense you’ve developed, for example.”

“Yeah, and since you ‘powered me up’ like that, I noticed that I can really control how other people’s emotions affect me.”

“Oh my goodness, you can do that now?” Greta exclaimed.

Peter grinned, nodding. “Yeah. I still can sense the emotion but I can choose how much I want to let into me.”

“Goddess, that’s wonderful,” she gushed. “Tamara, can you do anything like that to me for my own sensitivity?”

Tamara looked at Greta carefully, then said, “I learned to activate a small part of the limbic system but it affects different people differently. It also needs a catalyst—um, that’s not the proper term—the activation needs a facilitator to work. It’s not a catalyst ‘cause the other person gets changed too. And it appears to require an opposite-gender facilitator, it seems to take two people who share a strong emotional tie.”

Greta looked crestfallen. “Werner, although he worships me, doesn’t care for my spiritual skills somehow. I suppose I could persuade him, especially after I tell him about Peter’s new skill. Did you ‘power up’ anyone else besides Peter?”

“Just Mom with Dad’s help. And a woman whose husband had an experience in Vietnam as a soldier and he was affected like Peter but never could pull out. Extreme dissociation. She, together with her husband, was the second couple after I worked with Peter. I tied the soldier’s emotions to reality and gave his wife some tools to reinforce the healing. But I made sure that they weren’t dependent on each other, long term. Each person reacted differently, though, like the effect on Mom and Dad was pretty different, but related.”

“Goddess, Tamara, do you know what this could do for psychiatry? A revolution!” Greta exclaimed.

“And I’d be dead,” Tamara joked. “Doing that activation with Mom and Dad took a huge mental effort. I don’t even have a clue about how to train others to do that.”

“Still...”

“Sure, Greta. That shows important stuff about the mind and emotions. And all signaling interactions with the nervous system are mediated biochemically, so if there are target receptors involved, which is virtually certain, then possibly drugs could be designed. But I can’t change the medical world all by myself. I do let those I’m collaborating with know about what I find.”

“The academic grapevine is humming about how those collaborations are revolutionizing many medical fields, dear. So your work is already having an impact.”

“I’m so glad.”

They spoke for a bit longer and then other family members interrupted and, since the sun was setting, they all trooped over to the community campfire.

While they were walking there, Tamara remarked to Peter, “Somehow that sense of foreboding that I had before we had that Russian affair is back—or maybe it never really was totally gone. I hope I’m not being paranoid, but it feels like I’m being watched.”

Peter looked at her. “Strange you mention that. I’ve had this undefined feeling and that must be what I feel too. We’ll need to keep alert—but you’re always alert, aren’t you?”

“Yep. Dad drilled me on self-protection while I was growing up and he said the best way to get out of bad situations was to anticipate problems, avoid them where possible, and keep bad situations from getting worse.”

“So I need to stay alert too.”

“You got it.”

~~~~~

In the morning after breakfast, most of the group went to the sports field to participate in or to watch the volleyball clinic. Terence showed a lot of improvement overall, but his passing still needed a lot of work. Barbara and Tamara were in their usual fine shape and Peter was a consistent and reliable player but not at his

sister's level. There was one new person there this year who was outstanding and everyone wanted to know who this superb player was.

It turned out that Dawn Simpson was the new assistant women's volleyball coach at the University of Maryland. She had been on an athletic scholarship at Stanford University and during her junior and senior years on the team, the Cardinal had won the NCAA women's volleyball title. She had stayed on at Stanford for graduate school for a master's in sports administration and then had been hired by Maryland. When she agreed to join the Arundel resort women's team, there was a great celebration.

Dawn pulled Barbara and Tamara aside after the games they had played.

"You two guys are just top-notch," she told them. "Barbara, you look older than a college kid; Tamara, maybe a junior or senior. Either of you play in college?"

They told her they hadn't; that they were both in graduate school, and then mentioned the "B" team that they played on at the Superbowl the previous year.

"You're both seriously talented," Dawn told them, "and you play really well together. You each anticipate what the other is going to do. I've only seen that in very experienced players. Tamara, very few players I've seen have your skills at the net; you have an awesome kill percentage and even with my experience, I'd find it difficult to defend you. I hope you can come to the Superbowl. But we'd have to enter as an 'A' level team this year. I'm 'A,' actually 'AA,' obviously. I heard you guys were a 'BB' level and Robin's also 'BB.' The others are 'B' and 'C.' But both of you are better than 'BB'; I'd say you both are at the 'A' level. Can we get you and the other gals together after lunch and run through a few offenses and rotations?"

They agreed and that afternoon, Dawn put them through a grueling session, together with some members of the men's team. They all agreed to meet the following weekend for another practice session.

### ***Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore: end of August***

Back at school on Monday, Peter found an email from Kevin. Kevin had been contacted by the U.K. embassy to the U.S. about the heroism award, so Peter arranged a phone call for that evening. And Tamara dove back into her many projects.

The most important one was, of course, her doctoral research. This was her project on the monopole force discovery and included the link between the coil force and the electron charge tunneling hypothesis that she had advanced. Reviews of her paper on that topic were mixed but Emma assured her that that kind of reaction was to be expected. The mathematics, of course, were irrefutable; it was the interpretation of the meaning of the mathematics that was giving fits to the most conservative factions of the physics community, but in general, the work she described in her paper was being lauded as significant and important.

What was needed now was for her to work out the mathematical basis for the coil force. The group in Emma's lab at the APL had been doing extensive tests on different configurations of the "super-coil" Tamara had designed, and they were using target objects with different magnetic properties to characterize the forces produced by the coil assembly. This gave Tamara reams of data to analyze and to try to fit into the prevailing physical theories.

Tamara had been working on an idea to try to improve the quality of the data; much of it didn't have the resolution she felt was needed for many measurements, particularly in the timing of when the coil-activating current was applied to when the target object began to move. She also wanted to experiment with scaling up the coil assembly to determine if the effect was scalable at dimensions greater than her "super-coil" design. This would have implications for possible commercial uses of the coil force.

Terence was working in the lab and Tamara went to talk to him.



“Hey, I need a camera that can capture images very quickly—possibly at a picosecond time resolution. I think that your detector could work for that if it’s fitted with some visual light optics and with my MRI detector’s data system, we should...”

“Hold y’horses, Tamara,” Terence interrupted her. “No sense in reinventin’ the wheel. ‘Sides, doin’ that would take lotsa time and money, anyways. Ah heard about this ultra-speed camera; uses a laser to capture images very quickly. Wait a sec, let me look it up... okay, here. It’s called compressed ultrafast spectral photography and the camera was developed a few years ago. The camera’s speed’s 70 trillion frames per second...”

“Say that again? Trillion?”

Terence nodded. “Yeah, way faster than my detector could acquire images. Hey, the group that developed this is at Caltech. Y’all know some people there from when you went?”

“Sure; but I only saw some people in physics. Maybe they can refer me. Hey, thanks for thinking of that. I need to make a call.”

Tamara called her physics contact at Caltech, Dr Sean Pomeroy, and learned that the “camera” that Terence told her about was actually a complicated optical apparatus which took up most of a room, but Tamara knew that she didn’t really need its mind-boggling speed either.

Pomeroy told her who to call in their Electrical Engineering Department.

## Chapter 60 - Back to London

Tamara made the call and the person she wanted to speak to answered her call.

“Dr Carter here.”

“Hi there, Dr Carter, my name’s Tamara Alexandre and I’ve begun a collaboration with Dr Sean Pomeroy’s group in Physics on correlated electron systems,” she began when the person she was told to contact got on the phone. “Dr Pomeroy said you might be able to help me with some high-speed photography.”

“Hello, Dr Alexandre...”

She chuckled. “Not doctor yet, but soon, I hope. I just began my doctoral work at Johns Hopkins and their APL.”

“Ah... Alexandre... by any chance, are you that young Draper Prize recipient from last year?”

“That’s me. My research is extending that work but I find myself in need of a camera that can capture frames in excess of 80,000 fps and I need a resolution of around 1280 x 800. The APL has a Phantom TMX 7510 that I’m using but I need a faster one. I heard about your department’s 70 Tfps apparatus; that’s way more than I need but I thought perhaps you know of something not so complex and that led me to call you.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, even if it’s by phone, Miss Alexandre...”

“Just Tamara, please.”

“Sure. Congrats on the Draper Award; that was outstanding work.”

“Thanks.”

“Dr Pomeroy was right to refer you to us; we’ve developed a portable advanced optical detector and can theoretically capture images at about 200,000 fps, but you do know that the limits of data capture and storage apply at such a speed, don’t you?”

“Sure; I faced that problem with acquiring the data from my high-resolution MRI coils. We have to compress the data; it comes in so quickly for each scan, so the scan is very similar to a video for data capture. We have a team at the APL working on lossless data compression. Some of their work isn’t classified.”

“Oh, that’s right—you’re the person behind those innovations too,” Carter said. “Say, we currently don’t have the resources to work on improving data handling above the 200,000 fps rate, but... tell me, Tamara, are those data algorithms you’ve developed classified themselves? Because they may be useful for our video research.”

“Well, DARPA is funding that work but the MRI piece was a side project and doesn’t use anything classified.”

“All right, how about this? Ordinarily we rent out the use of those ultra-cameras which we’ve developed, but if we can work out a collaboration arrangement, possibly you could license your data algorithm in exchange for the free use of the cameras in your project.”

“I don’t see why not,” Tamara said. “I think it would need to be a non-exclusive, limited and non-transferable license, since we’re using those algorithms commercially.”

“Understood. Okay, email me the details of your planned camera use and get me what your folks want for a licensing agreement and I’ll get things started.”

“Sure, and thanks.”

“It was a pleasure talking to you, Tamara. When I get your project info, I’ll be happy to advise you on the best

ways to use the cameras. We have two we could lend to you to use. I hope to speak to you soon.”

“Bye.”

Tamara found Emma in her office and told her about that conversation.

“So they rent those cameras for about \$2000 per day, Emma. I think that the data algorithms are APL property since their employees worked on them. The APL will be licensing the MRI coils for manufacture the way they did for the unit where you did the magnet development. And the data-handling algorithms have commercial value too.”

“That’s correct, Tamara. You’re really thinking like an entrepreneur, aren’t you.”

“Sure. That’s ‘cause you and the patent attorneys keep pounding this stuff into my head.”

“That’s ace. So get me the outline you plan to send to Carter and I’ll check with the APL administration for the licensing part of the deal. Now, about the work on the coil-force data. How far have you gotten?”

“Up to the point where very accurate timing measurements are needed. That’s what the cameras are for. Our cameras are too slow; they have about a twelve microsecond response. The Caltech cameras can get to five microseconds and down to 600 picoseconds if we sacrifice a little image resolution. That will allow calculating target inertia effects which will allow seeing how the field strength develops. We still can’t figure out how that coil force field propagates. And I want to run an idea past you about that problem.”

“Oh? This should be good,” Emma chuckled.

“Now stop that!” Tamara complained and Emma just grinned back at her. “So if the coil force is to have commercial possibilities, we need to see how it scales up, right? We need to map the field of force, especially looking for edge effects. We saw a huge scale-up problem with the accumulator and also when we increased the size of the small coils.”

“Correct; go on.”

“My idea is not to just build a larger super-coil; I did some calcs on the geometry of an array of super-coils arranged so that the direction of the projected force is aimed at an area in the center of the coil arrangement. We would orient the coil array horizontally so that the target ‘object’ would be the surface that the coil is resting on. But since we don’t know anything about peripheral effects, like air displacement or lateral forces when a large area is exposed to the energized coils, the experiment should be done in an isolated area.”

“How big a coil array are you visualizing?”

“About a half-meter diameter, with a mass of 100 kilograms inclusive supported by it. My calcs show that the half-meter coil, drawing one ampere of current, has the ability to produce roughly 12,080 joules plus or minus 6 percent, and raising the 100 kg by one meter in a second will take 9,800 joules.”

“Did you account for inertia of the moving parts?”

“Yep. Everything attached to the coil would have to be well secured and the coil assembly would need to be enclosed in something so that when it moves up, it can’t fly away. The current to the coil would need a one-second auto-cutoff too and damping resistors to kill any induced current in the circuit.”

“You said ‘isolated area.’ What do you intend by that?”

“Maintaining a five-hundred-foot area open around the coil should be fine,” Tamara said. “The enclosure it’s inside of could be made of any non-magnetic material but the walls should have strain or pressure gages located at intervals, including the roof. And remote visual monitoring should be done with standard slo-mo video

cameras, the 480 fps versions we have should work just fine. There should be three cameras, 120 degrees apart in a circle. And several ionizing radiation detectors too, just in case. We had no hint of any kind of radiation in previous tests but scaling up may open a portal to more than just the coil force repulsion when it lifts that mass off the ground.”

“Hmm, more science fiction, Tamara. Sounds like you’re visualizing anti-gravity.”

Tamara laughed. “Not really; it’s just mag-lev without the mag. It’s somewhat equivalent to a ground-effect vehicle, actually. I think that, at the macro scale, the coil force repels most normal matter and my coils seem to focus it centrally, so it appears that the forces produced by the assembly should remain directional. I hope. That’s what this macro test should show.”

“So we already know that the coil force seems to be relatively safe around people,” Emma said. “Remember, I told you that James accidentally walked in front of an energized coil and he said that all he felt was tingling and a push away.”

“Oh right, I remember how angry you were then when you learned how careless he was,” Tamara said. “Hey, we should get him to try a human version of the frog-levitation trick. Remember that Dutch experiment? They used a 16 tesla magnet to make the frog float. That’s ‘cause the water in cells of organisms is very weakly diamagnetic so the frog’s tissues were repelled by the magnet. I saw the video of that very confused frog floating in the air over the magnet. So funny.”

“Yes. Well. I don’t favor deliberately stupid acts,” Emma told her. “If this invention goes commercial and people begin to think it’s antigravity, I have visions of some plonker trying to be Superman and jump off something.”

“Ugh, yeah. The field drops off so quickly, by the time the ground is close enough for the field to repel the generator, he’d be going so fast that he’d be squashed by the inertia caused by the field’s stopping him. Yuck.”

“Well then, my dear, leave me your calcs and the sketches I see that you’ve made. Let me go over them and I’ll check with the APL bosses on whether your plans look feasible. We’ll also need to figure the costs and do a budget. I reckon you’re planning on using some more of your Draper money for this experiment?”

“That’s right; that’s what I planned. This is on my dime.”

“Huh, it’s so funny,” Emma reflected. “That’s just what I did when I began my own research. I funded it myself. Okay, get outta here, girl. Go play with more of those data numbers; perhaps they’ll suggest a new Theory of Everything to you,” Emma grinned.

~~~~~

During the next several days, events involving the loan of the high-speed cameras moved surprisingly quickly, given that attorneys were involved. The licensing agreement for the data algorithm was ready within the week and Tamara had sent her proposal for using the cameras to Dr Carter. The APL attorneys had contacted the Caltech attorneys directly and soon the details were finalized and the agreements had been signed.

Transporting the cameras, which were fairly large, was the next challenge, since all of the previous rentals of the units were within California, mostly in the LA area, where they could be transported by truck. But Carter had an idea; JPL, the Jet Propulsion Lab, a NASA division, was run by Caltech, and NASA employed their own aircraft to fly weekly shuttle trips between JPL and the NASA Goddard headquarters in Greenbelt, Maryland. The flights used Joint Base Andrews for the D.C. terminus, which was only 25 miles distant from the APL. The cameras were sent out on a NASA flight and an APL vehicle was at the airfield when the flight arrived. Soon the cameras were installed at Emma’s coil force testing lab and the engineers and techs had begun collecting the

coil-force data using the setups that Tamara had designed, to measure, in exquisite detail, the precise timing of the activation of the coil force.

The very-large-scale experimental setup which Tamara had proposed took longer to get approval. The APL administration wanted to be very sure that the proposed experiment would not pose a hazard to people and facilities in the area. The APL did have an open area on its grounds which could potentially be used, and after Tamara provided reams of calculations showing the maximum range of any forces using the most stringent of assumptions that the APL's engineers could devise, she got her approval.

### ***Beginning of September***

Right after Labor Day though, Tamara and Barbara finalized their arrangements to go to the Volleyball Superbowl, and this year they drove up on the Thursday before the team competitions began. Again, Peter and Terence accompanied them and they stayed in their teammates' RV and camper. During the opening ceremonies on Friday evening, their team was recognized as the second-place finishers in the "B" division from the last year. But this year, playing other "A" level teams was a whole different world for them, totally unlike the games the previous year had been. The matches were very close, and by the quarter-final round, Tamara's team was in third place.

Both Tamara and Barbara had made numerous important plays and when they were at the net, Tamara's spikes were deadly, sometimes forcing four defenders to cover her—which left large open areas undefended for when Tamara faked a kill, allowing a teammate to make the score. But it was Dawn's skills and experience that really kept them in the games. She was an expert setter and also a defensive specialist who had good offensive and serving skills, rounding out a complete player. Her setting skills gave their team two superior setters and this allowed the team to run offensive plays which were difficult to anticipate. Dawn's defensive skills were what kept them in the games though, because the opposing teams all had very powerful offenses.

The tournament ended with Tamara's team in fourth place, but Dawn was fairly pleased with that result. There had been ten "A" women's teams entered and the members of those other teams had played together for years; while their own team was an inexperienced newcomer to "A" level competition. In fact, as she pointed out to her team members, their scores were very close to the top team when they played them, only losing by the scores 26-28, 25-22, and 27-29. And the worst score that they had in losing any game was 21-25. The men's team was third again this year in the men's "B" competition. Both teams vowed to meet during the winter and spring to work out. But this trip was over now and it was back to work.

### ***Mid-October***

During the following six weeks, Tamara concentrated on the scaled-up coil apparatus. She had a non-ferrous test frame built to contain a polypropylene disk which would hold the coil assembly and its payload, and the frame's supports were sunk five feet into the ground using large concrete footings. Then a small pole-barn structure, consisting of aluminum support members and fiberglass corrugated panels, was built around the frame. The panels were fitted with pressure sensors and strain sensors; these were placed to monitor any direct effect of a force on the structure's walls and roof. The most difficult job was building the coil assembly itself and Tamara worked on that project with her engineer, Betty Miskin, and John Wolbers, one of Emma's mechanical engineers.

### ***London, U.K.: middle of October***

In mid-October, Tamara took a break to travel to London with Peter, Barbara, and their parents. Emma had given them permission to stay at her Lambeth flat, and Kevin and Denise were to join them so that they could travel together to St James' Palace, where the gallantry awards were to be presented. Kevin and Denise would be staying with Kevin's long-time friend Janet Hadad, CEO of the Coris Foundation, and her husband Elliot,

who lived in Beckenham. Kevin wanted to meet with Amelia and Janet to discuss some of the foundation work Amelia had been doing.

For the day of the awards, Emma had recruited Sir George to be the group's guide and protocol advisor. The award presentation would be nothing like the formal investiture ceremony that had taken place during the summer. Instead, this was a mostly informal affair, attended only by the awardees' families and several Crown officials. Since Kevin had no remaining family and Denise's mother couldn't come, Janet and Elliot Hadad attended as Kevin's and Denise's family representatives.

The Duke of Gloucester welcomed everyone and told them that the queen would be there momentarily; then he gave the awardees their instructions and as he was finishing, the queen entered the room.

The queen was gracious and effusive in her comments about the heroism of the five young adults as she presented Kevin, Denise, and Peter with their heroism awards. Then she looked over to where Tamara was standing.

"And here is Miss Tamara Alexandre," the queen said, looking at her and smiling. "We are delighted to see you again; please approach us now, my dear."

Tamara shot a look at Sir George but he just flicked his eyes from her to the queen. She walked over and curtseyed, briefly touching the queen's hand as she extended it.

"Ah. Miss Tamara. We were most pleased when we heard that you planned to be here with your friends to receive our recognition of honor. We only recently heard more than just a hint about your own role in your friends' heroism, my dear. As of last week, our police investigators had finally deduced, from the evidence collected from that unfortunate affair and from questioning the miscreants, that you played a substantial role in helping to subdue those criminals, allowing their capture. You alerted the others of the threat and then ensured that Dame Emma reached safety. We saw the video of your marvelous explanation about the magic of science and engineering and our police officials have come to believe that it was your own magic, using some kind of secret device, which disarmed those criminals. It could have been done in no other way. Is this not true, my dear?"

Tamara blinked at the queen's intensity and made an instant decision. "It is true, Your Highness. I have been working on a device to allow wireless power transmission and from that research, I developed an application of it which has the effect of producing an ultra-radio signal which can heat metals at a distance. It's very experimental, delicate, and temperamental, but fortunately it worked when I needed it to."

"Ah, this is precisely what our investigators have deduced. We assume that you do not plan to make such a device commercially available?"

"No Ma'am. I am under contract with our Defense Department for applications related to that kind of electromagnetic effect, but when or if such devices do become available, I am sure that my country's allies will be given access to such technology."

The queen nodded and smiled. "This is just the answer we were told to expect. Indeed, Miss Tamara, your impressive inventions and service to our nation were well worthy of our conferring knighthood on you. But your own heroism in that unfortunate event demands our recognition of that fact, as well. Accordingly, we hereby officially recognize the gallantry of your actions in that affair and present you with The Queen's Commendation for Bravery."

Tamara was speechless but merely nodded as an official brought a presentation case to the queen who opened it and handed it to Tamara, as she took Tamara's hand.

Recovering, Tamara nodded to the queen. “Thank you so much, Ma’am. I appreciate that you consider my act to protect my friends as gallantry; it was my own protective imperative which guided me in helping them.”

“We appreciate your sense of modesty, my dear. We are very pleased that everyone involved was safe and uninjured. Thank you again.”

Tamara curtsied again and returned to Sir George’s side, who nodded approvingly at her as the queen left the room. Then the Duke of Gloucester reassumed his organizer’s role to oversee the rest of the award ceremony, including supervising the taking of some final photos by the official photographer. He then handed a copy of the latest issue of *The London Gazette*, where her award citation had just been published, to Tamara .

“Here’s the copy of the official announcement, Miss. When Her Majesty learned about your true role in that affair, she wanted you included in today’s awards.”

“Thank you, sir,” Tamara replied. “It was very kind of her to recognize me that way.”

***National Security Agency, Fort George G. Meade, Maryland: about the same time***

“So what did the boss want?” Mel Bearton asked his partner as he came in the door.

“This is weird and I’m uncomfortable with this assignment,” Seth Parker answered. “We’re supposed to pick up the girl and bring her here to be questioned—but no one is to know where she is.”

“What?” Bearton exclaimed. “That’s basically kidnapping!”

“Tell me about it. The boss assured me that there’s a national security justification for doing that. Communication security, and that’s NSA’s domain.”

“What communication? The only communication, if you can call it that, that her journal articles mention was the theoretical possibility of detecting brain activity at a distance from a person. She theorized that a charismatic person could possibly cause a response in other people close by. I read the articles; no way does that fit the definition of communication,” Bearton objected.

“Yeah, but the boss thinks that this kind of research can lead to mind reading. He said that if this is a skill that can be developed, nobody will be able to keep secrets. He thinks that this is an area that the NSA should be keeping tight control of. He wants to get the girl to tell the agency scientists everything she’s learned and he plans to intimidate her into working only for the NSA.”

“Damn, he’s gone bonkers. Is he aware of the contacts that kid has? Not to mention a bunch of DARPA agreements? True, we’re a DoD agency like DARPA, but Secretary O’Rourke has gotta know all about her. And our research into her background showed that she’s got ties to people in the CIA, the FBI, and the State Department. Hell, even the president—he gave her a Medal of Freedom. And the boss thinks that he can intimidate her?”

“All we’re supposed to do is pick her up and bring her here,” Parker said. “She’s returning from London tomorrow, from what the intel section people told me. We’re supposed to get her separated from the people she’s with. The boss said he’s arranging to have contraband slipped into her luggage when her flight’s unloaded and we’re supposed to get the Border Control people to take her into custody and bring her to a private office; we take it from there.”

“So what kind of contraband?” Bearton asked. “Something that Border Control can hold her for?”

“Yeah, it’s nasty though. Boss is arranging for \$10,000 in counterfeit bills. That’s the intimidation factor.”

“Blackmail, more like,” Bearton objected. “This is illegal as shit. If it gets out...”

“Boss says we’re covered. We gotta get to B.W.I. [Baltimore-Washington International Airport] now to get the Border Control people set up to take her into custody. We tell them that we got a tip and there are national security issues involved. Her flight arrives tomorrow, early afternoon.”

Muttering unhappily, Bearton left with Parker for the airport.

***Westminster, London, U.K.: two hours later***

The group, Janet and Elliot Hadad included, met again for an early dinner which Sir George arranged. Amelia and Jeremy couldn’t be there; they had rehearsals—Amelia for a musical and Jeremy was in the orchestra. The travelers from the U.S. were scheduled to return home the next morning. Barbara had been delighted to meet Kevin and Denise, who in turn were amazed at her empathic power. Tamara agreed with the others that they should try to stay in close contact until their graduation.

While the older folks were talking among themselves, Kevin gave Tamara and Peter an update about their plans after graduation. “Westphalia University contacted me and Denise about a week ago; they want us to apply to their university—me for my graduate work and Denise for their med school. They had a special educational proposal to discuss and we had a video conference with them. Their proposal looks very enticing, actually.

“So Denise and I are considering that idea; they have a highly rated med school and Mr Gerston is assembling an international poly-sci and economics think tank there. Gerston’s trying to get a rep for it like the London Economics Institute has. One of my profs at the London Economics Institute told the class that from what he was seeing, that new institute of Gerston’s was shaping up to be one of the five top research and teaching institutions in the world for international relations. Some high quality people have already joined Westphalia’s faculty and the institute.”

“For sure,” Peter said. “My grandmom is a department chair there and Tamara’s mom was just hired. I think that they’re top scholars.”

“And Emma’s father-in-law is the Political Science Department’s chair.” Tamara added. “He actually has his doctorate from the London Economics Institute.”

“Nice. And Westphalia’s right in your neighborhood, no?” Denise asked.

“Only about a half hour from the APL, where Tamara spends most of her time now,” Barbara told her. “I’m at U of Maryland and that’s just a half hour away too, unless there’s bad traffic.”

“Oh, we know all about bad traffic. We live in Atlanta. So, Cindy Denison—remember we told you about her?” Denise asked.

“Only a few dozen times, I think,” Peter responded, grinning.

“Right. Okay. So Cindy’s in med school at Georgetown University in D.C.,” Denise said. “If we went to Westphalia, then we’d all be relatively close. Cindy’s brilliant and comes up with great ideas. Kevin’s a really good planner and has ideas for things his foundation can support. It would be so cool to have all of us work together, like Kevin mentioned when we were in Cambridge back in the summer.”

“I’m unclear on what it is that we’d be doing,” Peter commented. “We all agreed to stay in touch and that we’d do some kind of big project together. Tamara’s even negotiating to buy a parcel of land but...”

“Really?” Kevin interrupted. “If that was prompted by our conversation about working together, I hope it’s a rural property. In your area?”

Tamara nodded. “I think that your thoughts have aligned with mine, Kevin. My sense is that we’ll be doing some kind of research in education methods, using psychological and neuroscience research methodology based



on my MRI work in discovering new neurological pathways in the brain. My own goals include bringing cheap energy technology to disadvantaged people everywhere and give them ways to support their families—and I anticipate that providing a good education is an important element of raising standards of living. You do that in the Coris Foundation, right?”

“We try. Education’s one of our core focus areas,” Kevin replied. “You’re right in your assumption that my grand plan is to try to do something on a larger scale than what the Coris Foundation can accomplish.”

“I’m channeling most of the money I’ve been getting from licensing my inventions into a foundation myself,” Tamara told him. “I had my lawyer set up a charitable foundation. The property purchase I’m negotiating now is because I had a premonition that I would need it for one of my goals. Perhaps it’s really for our group’s goals.”

“Is that enough of an answer, Peter?” Denise smiled at him.

“Yeah, but how would an electrical engineer fit into those plans?” he asked.

“I think that you’ll get that answer when the time is right,” Denise responded.

“We do need to keep in touch,” Kevin said. “Denise, honey, how about let’s tell the Westphalia people that we want to come for a visit to talk to them some more?”

“Yeah, I think so. I’d like to talk to some of the med students there too. I was leaning to Georgetown where Cindy is, and for your program in international relations, it’s the top school in the country. But the deal from Westphalia sounds better, ‘cause they said you’d be able to incorporate what the Coris Foundation does into your program and link it to their new institute. Another thought: I like the way Westphalia does their MD-PhD program better. Also, it’s not like Cindy and I’d even both be at the school at the same time. She’ll be doing her clinical rotation classes then so she’d be in the hospitals all the time. Besides, if you and I wind up going to different schools, it’d be hard to see each other except at night, and one or both of us would need to commute.”

“So even if you both went to Georgetown, we’d still be close enough to see each other frequently,” Tamara said. “Peter and I go to Hopkins but I’m mostly at the APL these days. And Barbara mentioned that she’s going for a PhD in psychology and she’s at Maryland, in College Park. Did you know that she’s been working on an applied psychology project about the Avery Program? She got interested in it when she heard that her cousins’ school had started to run it.”

“That’s awesome, Barbara!” Denise exclaimed. “Cindy plans to go into psychiatry but she wants to do it from the research side—like you, maybe. If you want to hang with us when we get our group together, I think that the Avery Program will be kinda like the other projects we might be working on. Think that you’d be interested?”

“Um, it’s so undefined... maybe,” Barbara said uncertainly. “But I can’t do anything to interfere with grad school though.”

“None of us want to, Barbara,” Kevin told her. “We’ll all still be in school for several years more. Our idea still needs a lot of thought.”

“Sure. Something about the Avery Program got me interested in how it works with kids,” Barbara said. “So I’ll keep it in mind.”

Peter noticed that Tamara had developed a very thoughtful expression. He looked a question at her.

“Later,” she muttered. “Something’s happening. I’ve been feeling it stronger lately. I’m gonna text Mom; see if everything’s okay.”

She used her phone for several minutes and then looked up.

“Say Kevin?” she asked. “How do Amelia and Jeremy figure into your plans?”

“Amelia’s already a Coris Foundation director and she’s doing great. She likes that work too but has a lot of schooling to go yet. I’m thinking that she’d make a great CEO when Aunt Janet eventually retires, in fact. Jeremy wants to go into international law so he’s gonna need lots of school. He’s got a head start; some universities here are already recruiting him and promising him legal intern jobs—he’s shown an outstanding facility for research and has an amazing memory for details. So long-term, a few years longer than for us here, they will probably be joining us in what we wind up doing.”

“Hey guys,” Denise said. “Need to get going, unfortunately. We need to be at the airport at about 6 a.m. tomorrow so we’ve got a hotel room out there. We’ll keep in touch, okay?”

After some hugs and handshakes, Kevin and Denise left and Janet and Elliot left soon after that. George and Isabella brought Tamara and Peter and his family back to Emma’s Lambeth flat. After another farewell ritual, the Marshalls left and the Winsbergs and Tamara went into the building.

“My phone buzzed when we were saying goodbye out there,” Tamara remarked as they waited for the elevator. “I told Mom about my getting the award too.”

She pulled out her phone looked at it. “Okay, Mom and Dad say congrats to me and to you, Peter. They’re sorry that they weren’t here to see it. There’s no problem with them but Mom says that Dad’s gotten a premonition of something too but his is very weak. Peter, do you feel anything?”

“Only that low-level kind-of warning feeling that I’ve had for several days.”

“What kind of warning?” Claire asked as Barbara looked at Peter in alarm.

“Why haven’t you told us before?” Barbara demanded.

“Calm down, everyone,” Peter urged as his dad was starting to speak. “I got this ‘not-gift’ from Tamara’s spirits and they run this warning service that tells us when something’s gonna happen. But this time it’s a really low-level thing, so it means we should keep alert. When that Russian crap happened, it was a very urgent warning and this isn’t anything like that.”

“What do you think, Tamara? You feel it too?” Barbara asked.

“Yeah. But in my case, the urgency’s picked up a bit. It doesn’t seem to be a personal danger warning; I know what those felt like, so I’m sure this is a general warning. I’ve had the feeling of like someone watching me for weeks now.”

“All we can say, Tamara, is to watch out,” Scott commented. “We know that you do, but still...”

“All right,” Claire said, “We have a 9:35 flight; the car service said to allow an hour from here, and the airline said to arrive an hour and a half before departure. So we’ll leave here at 7. Pack everything tonight except stuff for the morning. Tamara, I like how you travel light and how you taught Peter how to do it too.”

Tamara laughed. “Yep. Only three days away means nothing complicated to pack. But getting a dress into my carry-on so it isn’t smooshed was interesting to do. Dad’s the master at packing light and he taught me.”

Early the next morning, they left for the flight home and Tamara had news for the others.

“I had something like a dream last night,” she told them. “A not-dream—more like a vision, where *Ayizan Velekete* gave me some... instructions? Advice? Warning? Maybe all of them. I mustn’t go through Customs at Baltimore. Don’t ask why; I never get any details. I’ll probably figure it out afterwards. But my feeling of foreboding is very strong this morning.”

“How are you going to skip Customs?” Scott asked.

“I have an idea. So we’re on British Air again,” Tamara replied.

Scott nodded.

“Okay, I’ll need some cooperation from the Brits first, then some U.S. officials involved. It’s good Dad has those connections. I’ll call Sir George; he can fix it with the home secretary; he knows her. I’ll try to stay on the plane after everyone gets off—he’ll need to set that up. That way I won’t have to go with the entire passenger horde to Customs at the international arrivals hall. Next, I’ll get Dad to call Mr Masters from the State Department and they can figure how to get me off the plane and avoid Customs in the terminal. You guys take my carry-on and I’ll keep my backpack. I do have a diplomatic passport so I bet that I can get through a checkpoint that doesn’t serve the current arrivals. At least that’s what I assume.”

When they got to the airport, Tamara called Sir George and explained the problem; that she had heard that she would be facing some kind of danger at the Baltimore arrivals terminal.

“Maybe it’s another case of industrial espionage,” she offered.

“I’ll get Patty—erm, the home secretary—to arrange for you to stay on the flight after it arrives. What’s your flight and seat number?” he asked and she told him.

When she got off the phone, she told the others, “That’s set; I’ll call Dad at 6:30 his time. He gets to work at 7. It’s around 3 a.m. there now, so I’ll call about two hours into the flight. It’s good that British Air allows phone use on international flights—and I’m glad that I’ve only been using this pay-by-minute phone that I got for my international trips and not my regular one; I’ll bet my regular phone is being monitored. I’ll send a text to tell Dad that I’ll be calling later.”

Tamara had arranged for first-class tickets for everyone, so they were among the first to board when the passengers eventually were called for boarding. As everyone had finally got settled and the cabin crew began preparing to close up the aircraft, some noise at the door behind the first-class cabin prompted Tamara to look back there and she saw a burly man with a backpack enter, say something to the crew member there, and go down an aisle to the rear of the plane.

Tamara whispered to Peter, “Cool; they sent an air marshal. Maybe that’s because of my request.”

“How can you tell?”

“Lots of ways. Late arrival, back of the plane, very plain clothes, doesn’t stand out at all. He’s carrying a Marine backpack like Stuart has, too—he has that warrior look that Dad and Stuart have, so I’m guessing he’s a retired Royal Marine.”

She attracted the attention of a crew member. “Miss? Excuse me, but I’m sure I recognized that last man who came in. He served with a friend’s dad—I’d like to say hello when we’re under way. Can you let me know his seat so I don’t have to hunt? If he needs my name, it’s Tamara Alexandre.”

The woman looked confused but then agreed to get her the man’s seat number. Soon they were being pushed back and the crew began the passenger instructions as they taxied to the runway.

“You’re gonna go talk to him?” Peter asked.

“Right. About what happens when we arrive. We’ve got about seven hours till then. I’ll call Dad in two hours.”

## Chapter 61 - Disappearing Act

When they were in the air and the seat-belt lights had been turned off, Tamara signaled to the crew member she had spoken to earlier.

“Is it okay to go see that guy now?” she asked.

“I reckon so,” the woman answered. “It seems that he knows your name, he does. But don’t go to his seat; he’ll meet you in the first-class galley right behind us. I’ll get him now. Oh, I’m Jamie.”

Tamara got up and went to the galley and a minute later the man arrived, looking very puzzled.

Before he said anything, Tamara said quietly, “I’m glad to have an air marshal here, sir...”

“Missy, if I can ask, how did ‘ee know who I was?” he interrupted.

“Dead giveaway,” Tamara grinned at him. “How you showed up for the flight and all; other things too. My dad’s a U.S. Marine; my friend’s dad is a Royal Marine. You all have ‘that look,’” she made finger quotes. “Know of a Col. Stuart Marshall?”

“Blimey. Tiny world, innit; ‘ee wus moi team leader on one o’ moi tours. Wus a cap’n then. So you’re Tamara Alexandre. I got this rush assignment to be on this flight n’ I wus to wait to contact you close to when we arrived.”

“Good; I guessed that you were sent when I saw you come aboard,” Tamara told him. “I’ve had some trouble with industrial espionage agents and had an alert that I might have some problems at Baltimore. I called a friend in London and he got the home secretary involved. I’m to stay on the plane until it’s empty. I still need to make arrangements for the U.S. side to get an escort off the plane.”

“Aye, that be what I were told. An’ not to let anyone take ye off the aircraft ‘less ye said it were alright. But that be my only authority, Miss. Oh, the name be Oliver.”

“Hi, Oliver. Sure. But I did want to meet you, thank you, and be sure you knew about the plans I was making. We both need to be using the same playbook.”

“Blimey, you’re plannin’ this just like a Marine,” he said, grinning.

“Dad taught me. Every detail of a campaign is important. Missed details cost lives.”

Oliver grinned wider at that and nodded. “That’s ace.”

“When I find out what’ll happen in Baltimore, I’ll let you know. Thanks again.”

They shook hands and Oliver returned to his seat. Tamara went back to hers and told the others that the first part of her protection had been arranged. She called her father at 6:30, his local time.

“Hi, Tamara,” he answered when she called. “Saw the text when I woke up. So your *lwa* says to avoid the Customs checkpoint?”

“Yep. You know how indefinite their messages can be, but that was the best sense I could make of the warning. There’s a Brit air marshal on the flight here and he’ll watch out for me as long as I stay on the plane. I’m guessing that the only way I could be removed from the plane when we arrive would be by police or FBI, not by a Customs person.”

“Not sure, but maybe,” Wilson told her. “But I’ll make some calls. Evan Masters at the State Department should know how to get you to bypass the Customs checkpoint at arrivals. I’ll assume that your reason is the industrial spying problem that you had in Miami?”

“Sure. And the Russian problem in Cambridge this summer too,” she said. “The warning was about something that might happen at the Customs and Immigration Control checkpoint. I might be able to handle the situation but it’s best to just avoid it, right?”

Wilson laughed. “You learned well, sweetie. The best way out of a bad situation is to avoid it in the first place.”

“That’s what I’m doing. Okay, I don’t know if you can call me back and reach me while I’m in the air so I’ll call you back in an hour or a bit more. Gotta go, this call costs about four dollars a minute.”

“Bye, honey.”

An hour and a half later, Tamara called back.

“Any news, Dad?”

“I’ll say there is. It helps when you know people. Evan Masters is clearing you to be checked through Customs and Immigration at the airport’s general aviation area. That’s where the smaller charters and private traffic go and the BWI port director will meet you there. Now, to get there from your aircraft, Masters told me that I should get help from the FBI. He was gonna get someone, but I thought of our friend John Norris, the Miami FBI agent, and called him since it was early and I had his private cell number. He told me that one of the FBI agents who interviewed Mom and me when we arrived in Miami, Sarah Wilkins is her name, is now the special agent in charge of the FBI Baltimore field office. Norris had her private number so when I called her, she remembered Mom and me quite well, and when I explained about your situation, she said that she’d handle it herself. She did hear about your attempted Miami kidnapping and would very much like to meet you. She said to wait on the aircraft and that she’d board it, bypass the arrivals terminal, and get you to the general aviation area. Remember, the name is Sarah Wilkins.”

“Got it, Dad. Thanks.”

“Oh, another thing. I’ll be at the general aviation office to pick you up, so tell Claire and Scott not to worry about where you’ll be.”

“Cool. Thanks again. I’ll let my favorite air marshal here know what’s up. See you in a few hours.”

Tamara asked her crew member Jamie to tell Oliver that she had news for him.

“How do you know him then, dear? Funny to meet someone like that on a transatlantic flight.”

“He served with my friend’s dad in the Royal Marines. They’re a really small, close-knit unit and most everyone knows each other,” Tamara told her.

“Brilliant. I’ll bring him the message.”

They met again in the galley and Tamara told him the FBI agent’s plan for when they arrived.

“Sounds proper bost, Miss. I reckon you must know loads of highly placed folk, don’t you.”

“Actually the ones I know are the ones with those good contacts. But you’re right and it’s those people who get people, like yourself, to help me. Here’s Stuart’s cell and email address if you want to get back in touch with him, and I’ll tell him how you helped me.”

“Cheers, Miss. It’s jobs like this that make my life less borin’,” he joked.

### ***Baltimore-Washington International Airport, Anne Arundel County, Maryland***

“The flight’s in on time,” Parker remarked to his partner, Mel Bearton, when Bearton returned to the TSA office near the immigration control area of the airport. “Is the baggage trick all set?”

“Yeah... the boss got Gondon and his team to do the dirty work. The baggage train will come through the secluded area you picked and they’ll find the right bag and do the drop. Since she’s in first class, they only need to check for the priority tags and the supervisor said they’ll be on the first cart, probably.”

Parker nodded. “She’s on the flight and the Customs people flagged her name on the passenger manifest; they know to signal you or me and a CBP agent will take her to the private inspection area like we discussed.”

About ten minutes later, an out-of-breath man rushed up to where Parker was standing.

“Gondon says to tell you that there’s no baggage for Alexandre,” he told Parker. “I had to run ‘cause we get no signal in that impound area. We can’t hold the carts there any longer.”

“Shit! Boss never thought of that—who travels overseas with just a carry-on?” Parker asked and the man just shrugged. “Okay, tell him to, um, release the carts, find a lost baggage item or something and tag it with her name, and get it over to the baggage claim. I’ll get the agents here to delay her, asking why she left her bag in the claims area. That an item with her name was still there.”

He rushed back off to the baggage area and Bearton came over. “Snag?” he asked.

“Yeah. No one thought of what to do if the target has no checked bag.”

“Huh. Wouldn’t occur to me either,” Bearton said. “Ah... here comes the first group.”

He went back to where he had been waiting. And waited. And waited while everyone on that flight had been processed through the checkpoint.

The supervisor went over to Parker. “That’s everyone and your person hasn’t come through here.”

“Is everyone off the plane?” he asked.

“Yes; it’s been checked,” she answered. “No one is left in the security area either.”

“So how could someone get off and not go through customs?” Parker asked.

“It’s possible but only with official or inside help and those people would be breaking the law,” she replied. “An airport employee with secure-area flight-line access would have to help someone get through the doors that lead to outside the terminal. That’s the only way anyone can bypass security and avoid customs, but going out that way leads to the flight line and then they’d stand out like a sore thumb for the security people stationed outside at the flight line. They do watch the terminal doors to keep people from slipping through.”

Parker called the airport manager’s office and asked to meet the flight-line crew supervisor; then he called his contact in the NSA signal communications office.

“This is Parker. Has there been any cell phone traffic today for subject Tamara Alexandre? ... None? When was the last traffic? ... I know we don’t have international data yet. ... What about any calls she made from transatlantic air traffic? ... Nothing? Damn. So the last traffic on her phone was over four days ago? ... Thanks.”

Bearton had come over during the call; he had gone to check the baggage claim area.

“No baggage left from that British Airways flight,” he told Parker as Parker’s phone rang.

“Yeah? ... You did? Well, the bag’s not there anymore and the subject has pulled a disappearing act too. ... I know, the shit’s really gonna hit. I’m still checking. Bye.”

Parker turned to Bearton. “That was Gondon. He put the stack into a 26-inch pink and grey rolling bag and got it on the carousel along with the last of the bags from that flight.”

“What about its baggage tag?” Bearton asked.

“He pulled one off another bag. Had to staple it together since the self-stick got torn. Said that happens sometimes so it’s not unusual. But the bag’s gone, you said?”

“It is, and there wasn’t anything from that flight in the unclaimed baggage office either.”

“How the hell did she do that?” Parker asked, looking up at the ceiling in frustration. He got no answers from up there. “Anyway, we need to get to the management office; I asked to meet with the flight-line supervisor up there.”

When they arrived at the office, a man in a coverall came in right after them.

“You here to see the manager?” a woman asked Parker.

He confirmed that and she showed him into a little conference room and were quickly joined by the coveralled man and a suited one.

After a brief exchange of names, Parker asked the supervisor if he had seen anyone sneaking off the aircraft.

“I don’t look for those things, sir; I’m directing the ground crew. Security monitors the doors from the flight-line to the terminal security area and watches for people who don’t belong out there; if anyone not authorized was there, Security should have noticed anything wrong. If they did, they would have apprehended the person. I know that everyone nearby was servicing that craft and was authorized, for sure.”

“Any video coverage?” Parker asked. “What can we see?”

“An overview of the general flight-line and aircraft service area,” the manager told them. “Which gate again?”

He made a call, asking for a replay of the scene from that gate to be set up.

“We’ll go a few doors down and can see the replay there,” he told them.

The replay showed the normal arrival and baggage-handling activities with many people rushing in all directions, entering and leaving the camera’s field of view.

Parker asked the supervisor, “See anything out of the ordinary?”

“No sir. Just the normal orderly chaos of servicing an arrival.”

Parker looked at Bearton, who looked back and shrugged.

### ***Aboard the British Airways Airbus 380 at BWI: an hour and a half earlier***

“Bye for now, sweetie,” Tamara told Peter as he prepared to leave the craft; then she said goodbye to the others. “I’ll see you all at my parents’ house, 4:30; Dad’ll take me there and we’ll have dinner with them.”

As she waited, Oliver came up and sat in a seat near her as several cabin crew members came over and began fussing over him.

When Tamara looked at them with amusement, one winked at her. “Ollie’s our favorite air marshal. Too bad he’s hitched; else he’d have his own harem.”

“Now belay that, Rita,” Oliver chided her. Then to Tamara, “Our mob ‘as to keep a reyt low profile, fer sure, so I was proper shocked that you picked me roight out, Tamara.”

Tamara chuckled. “I’m extremely observant; always have been. Also, I knew that someone in the Brit government was doing something to protect me so when you appeared, it was kinda obvious.”

“Ooooh, a spy thing...” Tamara’s own adopted flight crew member, Jamie, said, wide-eyed.

“Nope, just a bit of difficulty about keeping me safe from some unpleasantness,” Tamara said. “I do stuff that both the U.S. and U.K. governments want to protect and some baddies seem to be hanging around me lately.”

“Well, that’s ace, almost like a spy,” Rita objected. “Hey, write a book about it; I’d buy that.”

They all laughed and a flight-deck crew member popped his head in. “Gonna get over to the crew lounge now, mates?” he asked. “Got the overnight flight back in nine hours.”

“Okay, wait up.” Rita said. “See you later, Ollie... Oi, are you going back with us?”

“Possibly. I need to check in with the ‘eadquarters; this were a special trip. I’ll see you lot in the crew lounge... erm... just hold up...”

Someone had just appeared at the passenger door.

“... well. It’ll be reel quick now; so wait up—looks like my relief’s ‘ere,” he finished as a tall woman in a ground-crew coverall came into the cabin. The cabin crew members hung back and watched, curious. The newcomer pulled out a leather case and flipped it open, displaying a shield.

“I’m Special Agent Sarah Wilkins, FBI. I assume you’re...” indicating Tamara, “Tamara Alexandre?”

“Yes, ma’am, and good to see you,” Tamara said. “This is Oliver, my valiant British bodyguard.”

Everyone laughed as she continued. “He came to my rescue on a difficult transatlantic trip—difficult to stay awake, that is. Anyway, Oliver, it’s been a real pleasure getting to know you and your harem...” more laughter, “... so a fond farewell and maybe we’ll cross paths again. Remember about Stuart Marshall, okay?” and she hugged him as he blushed.

Oliver’s “harem” members all lined up to shake Tamara’s hand and wish her well; then they all left as the cleaning people began to arrive. Wilkins pulled a ground-crew coverall out of the small duffle bag she was carrying.

“Here, slip this on over your clothes and I have a worker’s cap for you too. You just have that backpack, right?”

Tamara nodded as she slipped into the garment. “My friends took my carry-on.”

“Good. I’ll carry the backpack in the duffle—good, just fits. Here’s your ID card; of course the lanyard goes around your neck. Okay, just follow along with me like you belong and we’ll walk purposefully. When I heard about your problem, I figured this was a good time to get to meet you. Your parents are very impressive and it would seem you are as well, judging by what I saw you doing with the crew when I boarded.”

Wilkins led Tamara out onto the jetway and then turned toward the jetway’s control station; opposite to that was a doorway, now standing open, that door opened to a metal stairway leading down to the apron.

“When we’re halfway down, keep your head down as there’s a camera on the wall almost directly in front of us. We’re heading straight to the wall ahead and there’s a blue utility cart parked there. Climb in on this side—I’d let you drive but you don’t know where we’re going,” she joked.

As the two discussed Tamara’s situation, Wilkins drove the vehicle along a marked vehicle lane parallel to the concourse building, over to an open area, and then followed several trucks as they drove along a road which circled around the end of a runway. The road led to a large open apron area across from several taxiways and and a runway; the main terminal was on the opposite side of the airport now. She pulled up to a building near the apron’s edge.



“Here’s the FBO, or Fixed Base Operator. The general aviation office. We’re to meet a guy from Customs here, so do you have your form filled out?”

“Yep, all set.”

“Okay, give me the ID and you can slip off the cover-all. You can keep the hat,” Wilkins said as she shed her coverall. “Here’s your backpack. Let’s go see the man.”

The customs inspection involved his checking her diplomatic passport and taking the paper declaration form.

“This isn’t what I usually do,” he told Tamara, “but I’ll go through the motions. Anything you need to declare?”

“No, sir.”

“Good. You’re done, then. I sincerely hope that your security problem will be straightened out soon. It’s not every day that I’m contacted by the Homeland Security deputy secretary and asked to check in an international arrival, after all.”

He left the office and went to a car parked on the apron. Tamara and Wilkins went out to a waiting area and found Wilson there, pacing anxiously.

“Hi, Dad, everything went smooth, thanks to Agent Wilkins and everyone else who helped,” Tamara said as she hugged him.

Wilkins smiled at her as she shook Wilson’s hand. “Good to see you again—and you can call me Sarah; John Norris said to tell you that he misses you guys and the excitement you brought to his office in Miami.” She grinned. “But I’ll be pleased if you don’t import that kind of excitement to the Baltimore area.”

“Sorry, but I think that it already may be starting,” Tamara offered. “You see, three months ago, I was with a group of friends at a British research company—I have a small ownership stake in it—and we were introducing a new energy device...”

She went on to briefly relate the Russian incident.

“So I have good intelligence sources through a number of various contacts,” she finished, “and I got a warning that I’d be in some kind of trouble if I went through the regular Customs here. I’d like to know what that was all about, though. I’m not working on anything that’s been made public yet, so I hope that I didn’t create this whole uproar unnecessarily.”

“We’ll see, Tamara; I’ll keep alert for anything the Agency hears through the grapevine about you,” Wilkins said. “It’s been great meeting you—and Wilson, good seeing you again; send my regards to Nadine.”

She left and Tamara followed Wilson out to his car.

“Dad, I’ve got this incessant feeling of being followed lately so I want to keep using an anonymous phone. Not this international one I’ve been using on the trip; the fees are too high. Can we stop somewhere and I’ll get one?”

Wilson laughed. “Sure. A burner phone, they’re called.”

“Yeah, I heard of them. Mom’s at work?”

“She had a class or she’d be here now. But somehow she knew you’d be okay. Strange, but I also knew you’d be all right but it’s hard to shake years of military training of being prepared for the unexpected. It’s hard to let other people take care of stuff that you want to do yourself.”

Traveling home after the phone purchase—she bought four of them using a pre-paid debit card, and Tamara told

him, “This will only be a short-term solution; I’m sure someone determined can eventually find out my number or numbers by watching other phones that I call and eliminate known numbers. But that would take a huge effort. That’s why I got four; make it that much harder. But I sense that I only need them for a short time.”

“What time are Peter and the others coming by?” Wilson asked as they entered his driveway.

“I told them 4:30. Let’s see; it’s 3:25 now. Gives me a chance to freshen up.”

About fifteen minutes later, Wilson’s phone rang and he answered and spoke for a few minutes.

“Hey Tamara,” he called. “That’s Sarah Wilkins. She has some news already but wants to come by to see you.”

“When?” Tamara called back.

“She’s not far, maybe twenty minutes.”

“Sure. Tell her okay.”

When Wilkins greeted them again, her first words were, “You were so right, Tamara, you *are* bringing some excitement here. After I left you, I was about to head back to my office when one of our airport liaison agents called me; airport security had called him in after they apprehended an offender who they caught trying to steal a checked bag from the secure baggage claim area, of all places. Snuck in somehow and then tried to bluff his way through Customs; apparently he’s done it before; he’s got a stolen airport ID. There was a name tag on the bag he was caught with that read ‘Tamara Alexander’ but spelled...”

“But I didn’t have any checked luggage...” Tamara started.

“Wait, I know; presumably you know how to spell your own name—the name was spelled ‘er’ and not ‘re.’ There were other inconsistencies with the bag too, but when it was opened by Customs, since it was from the secure area, they found a stack of counterfeit hundred dollar bills in it...”

“What!” Wilson exclaimed.

“That was why they called our ALA. So I went back to the terminal. The belongings in the luggage were nothing like a twenty-some-year-old gal would travel with, or would even own. And there was a name and address in a pocket inside. A Maryland address. We ran the name and it turns out that the bag belongs to a 72-year-old woman who flew out of BWI with her husband on a 1:47 p.m. flight to Raleigh, North Carolina. She reported a lost bag when they arrived there.”

Tamara was looking thoughtful now. “Some things are making sense now, from what I heard about the danger to me. Tell me, Mrs Wilkins, could this be a botched attempt at setting up a blackmail scheme of some kind?”

“Jesus, gal, you deduced all that so quickly?” Wilkins grinned. “Good job; that’s what my agent and I thought of too. But what makes no sense is how they’d pull it off—if you had been there when the bag was found, perhaps the plan was that Customs would try to link you to it, despite the wrong name...”

“Actually, no, Mrs Wilkins, there are some other wrong things,” Tamara objected. “What about the airline luggage claim tag on it?”

“Ah, yes. It was a coach tag and was stapled together, like it had gotten torn off at one point.”

“So I had a first-class booking. And then there’s that name and the stuff inside it. Here’s a thought. Possibly whoever set that up had planned on my having a checked bag and when I didn’t, they botched up some kind of intended frame-up.”

Wilkins nodded. “Makes sense. But that implies collusion between whoever did that and the airport and some

Customs officials too. We know that the port director wasn't involved since he cleared you. Damn. Tamara, please take your grief back to damned Miami and John Norris. But you're right; your idea makes the most sense. A couple in their seventies going to visit their grandkids isn't gonna be carrying ten thousand in counterfeit hundreds in their checked luggage. I gotta kick this one up the chain; looks like an interagency corruption issue here. Well, thanks for helping me sort this out, I guess. I'll let you know what I learn, if the matter isn't buried. Great seeing you guys."

She left.

Tamara and Wilson provided great entertainment for the others that evening with that story.

***NSA Offices, Fort George G. Meade, Maryland: that evening***

"And Customs has the counterfeit bills now?" Logan Ames, an assistant director of the NSA, who was called "the boss" by his subordinates, asked, fuming.

"The FBI agent in charge there called the Secret Service, so they probably took custody," Parker said. "You didn't have a backup plan if the girl didn't have checked baggage. We tried to rescue that operation with no resources."

"Who the fuck travels overseas with practically no baggage?" Ames growled.

"This one did."

"So tell me how she could have completely disappeared right under the noses of people from multiple agencies. She walked off the plane, through the terminal, past security and Customs checkpoints, and bing, gone with no trace?"

"It looked that way at first, but somehow she did clear Customs," Parker told him. "After the whole uproar with stopping the baggage theft attempt, the Customs supervisor ran the flight manifest to see if the actual owner of that suitcase had been on the Brit flight. That's when I saw that Alexandre's name came up as being cleared and it even showed that a Customs declaration form had been submitted. And the clearance showed that she came through the regular arrivals area. But both Bearton and I had been watching every station and for sure she never came through there and besides, that's the only Customs area that was operating then. So she must have had some high-level help, boss. Remember, she and her family have important contacts."

"Not as powerful as this agency..."

"Don't be so sure. And now she's completely disappeared electronically too. We were tracing her activities by phone and through bank card use, until she left the States. Then all of our tracking stopped. She had to be communicating to arrange her disappearance but we have no traffic from her phone. Nothing for four days, even internationally; she just dropped off the signal comm radar. It's very possible she might somehow have figured out that we were watching her."

Ames snorted. "A kid? Really?"

"Don't underestimate this 'kid.' She got the world's top engineering award at seventeen. She invented a battery thing that's going to revolutionize electronics. Gerston gave her a Presidential Medal of Freedom. She's got DARPA contracts as a private person. That's unique; no one else has that. The British queen knighted her this past summer and our info section sent me a message this morning that the queen just gave her a gallantry award—that's why she was in England. Her family has close friends at the State Department—the dad is actually on a presidential detail as an special ambassador for them. I heard that they have contacts with people in the CIA too. But it looks like she got spooked about going through the Customs checkpoint; why else would she make such an effort to avoid it? Somehow she must have figured out that we planned something. I for sure don't

want that family on my bad side.”

“Now listen...”

“One sec, I’m not done. When Customs found the counterfeit money in that baggage, they called the FBI in, and the agent who showed up called in the agent in charge of the area. Guess what? That FBI supervisor was really close by, because she showed up almost immediately, and she began asking some very, very pointed questions that suggested that she knew much more than she was letting on. I’m not going to prison over this stunt, boss. I won’t accept any assignment that even *suggests* that it will affect the Alexandre girl. After all, what you’re trying to do is *way* outside the NSA’s mission.”

“If I order you...”

“Don’t say it. If you do try to do something to me for backing out, I have enough evidence about your own involvement to ... let’s just say, you’d regret what would happen. That’s it; not sayin’ any more. Enjoy your evening.”

Parker walked out and Ames sighed and leaned back in his chair. What should have been a simple, straightforward job had turned into a complex mess. Perhaps he should try a direct approach and simply have an agent contact her. But she’d need to be alone. He wondered how he could convince her to divulge her secrets; perhaps researching her past—or maybe searching her possessions—could find something to give him an advantage.

***Applied Physics Laboratory, North Laurel, Maryland: several days later***

“Tamara, while you were gone, we finished the suite of tests using those ultra high-speed cameras; you wanted the timing data as soon as it was calculated. The results are now on the secure server,” Betty Miskin told her. “The file’s in the ‘CalTech’ folder.”

“Oh, good. You did that real fast; I wasn’t expecting the results till next week.”

“This time we knew what we were doing; besides, we still had the test apparatus set up so we didn’t have to build much.”

“Oh yeah, Betty, on my trip I got an idea about using an EEG on a person in an MRI. You know that the magnet interferes with the electrode pickups?”

“Sure. What’d you figure out?”

“I visualized how a circuit could use the Meissner effect locally, right at the electrode. You recall, I’m sure, that a superconducting circuit can exclude a magnetic field; that’s known as the Meissner effect.”

“Right. Superconducting circuits act as a perfect diamagnet and repel or nullify the field. But can you do that on such a tiny area?”

“That’s what I think the circuit can do. I scaled it onto a chip sized the same as an EEG electrode and the chip itself is the electrode. Can you get the techs to run five of them to test? I’ll email you the specs, schematic, and chip layout.”

“Damn. You did all that on your trip?”

“Hey, not very much to do on transatlantic flights. And the CAD program on my laptop is easy to use. I hope that design works. It should let me get readings in the room with the magnet and maybe even work in the MRI field when the RF pulses occur—but I won’t be crushed if that part doesn’t work. That’s a big stretch.”

“All right, shoot me the plans and I’ll get some chips made. And please let me know how those timing numbers

work out. Those cameras are totally sweet to use.”

Tamara went over to speak to Saul Freeberg, her engineering tech, who was working on one of the larger coil assemblies.

“Hey Saul.”

“Hey Tamara. What’s up? I’m still working on getting the effective field sizes for the different coil configurations; should be done in maybe a week.”

“Got a side project I thought of when I was sitting in the plane on my last trip. I did some quick calcs on the  $\pi$ -electron wave functions in steroid molecules and I think that the coil force can affect the molecules enough to help in some chemical synthesis problems that Joyce is having. The stereoisomers are causing a roadblock.”

“Yeah, what’s that all about? I didn’t pay a lot of attention to that stuff in chemistry.”

“Okay, I’ll keep it simple. You know that molecules aren’t just atoms that hook up like tinker toys—balls and sticks—but that their atoms are closely joined, interlocked and held in place by their electron clouds, and when three atomic nuclei are connected as in a molecule, their orientation follows certain discrete angles, called the bond angles?”

“Okay, I remember that.”

“So stereoisomers are identical molecules; they have the exact same atomic compositions and are structurally identical, but certain bond angles inside them are flipped so that the molecules are mirror images of each other. Think of gloves. A left glove won’t fit well on a right hand. You might be able to force it, but your hand won’t work well at all. So when a biologically active molecule attaches to its cellular receptor, it has to have just the right physical shape to properly fit and the mirror-image version either won’t fit at all, or will fit badly and interfere somehow with the receptor’s function. That’s the molecular version of a left-hand glove trying to fit a right hand. Following this?”

“Sure. Makes sense. You had mentioned before that the synthesis makes both molecule versions and the wrong molecule version won’t work.”

“Yep. So complex steroid molecules—they are based on three or four aromatic ring structures—are rich in  $\pi$  electrons. These are electrons which are not localized to their related bonds and are free to move in the vicinity of their ring structure. Kind of like a  $\pi$ -electron cloud. So I did some wave-function calcs and noticed that the coil force can likely kind of stabilize the  $\pi$  electrons and I’m thinking that this might be a way to separate the stereoisomers or maybe even selectively synthesize each version. I’d like you to try to use some coil assemblies and try to build this chamber...”

She gave him a sketch of a tube showing how she wanted the coils arranged.

“I’d like two versions,” she continued. “One would be a closed tube to do reactions inside and another would be open at both ends so that a volatilized gas stream could be passed through. Here’s what a gas injection device looks like for a gas chromatograph. I’d like you to figure out how to make this using the coils. I’ve done a batch of sketches. You and Betty already figured out how to use that ferromagnetic colloid you guys made as a coil-force indicator for looking at how the coil force field is shaped. So use that colloid to tune the coil assemblies. Is this possible to do?”

Freeberg looked at the sheets. “Don’t see why not. This looks like an interesting job. I’ll let you know how it’s going—maybe a week or two to get something you can test.”

“That should be fine. If this works, it would be an application of principles that are about a hundred years old, so

it would be really cool to have a working device.”

~~~~~

Toward the end of the day, Tamara met Emma and they discussed her processing of the coil-force timing study.

“Emma, I’m getting some very interesting results there. In a way, it’s disturbing because I can’t believe what the numbers are showing. I need to try a new approach; perhaps my initial conditions weren’t properly set and that would change the integration limits.”

“That’s correct; that’s one of the most frequent sources of error in working with quantum theory. Oh, Betty says you had another of your inspirations. A new kind of EEG electrode.”

“Yeah, it was an obvious thing to try. I think there’s a good chance it’ll work. At least the calcs show that enough of the magnetic field is excluded around the electrode that any tiny electrical activity won’t be masked. And I might be able to use mathematical filters to separate the electrical signal from any RF pulses the EEG picks up.”

“Okay, that’s ace. I plan to leave in 45 minutes if you want to ride with me. If you’re staying later, you’ll need to call for your Uber ride.”

“Sure, I’ll be here then. I don’t have to work late.”

Tamara had been staying at Emma’s home during the week and riding to the lab with her this semester, since all of her work was at the lab. She still hadn’t bothered with getting a driver’s license. On weekends, she stayed at Peter’s Baltimore apartment since all of his research work was at the university, but he sometimes came out to the APL to visit or as an occasional subject for her work.

“Good, Sam and Jay are coming over and bringing dinner and Abi and Ryan will be there. Sam says that she’s got news about a crazy case that she got a huge settlement on and wants to celebrate.”

“Should be an interesting evening, then,” Tamara grinned.

## Chapter 62 - Sharing Emotions

### *NSA, Fort George G. Meade, Maryland: end of October*

“All your reports for the last ten days have been uniformly negative,” Ames complained to Nathan Gondon, the agent who had taken over the Alexandre project. “This is your first time back in the office since you began trying to contact the girl, in fact. What’s keeping you from making contact with her?”

“You know, boss, if this were a normal surveillance activity, we could have located the girl within a day or two. But you told me not to use any NSA or police powers, so my hands are tied. I simply can’t track her down. We know where she works, probably—the Hopkins APL, but not where she lives. She stopped using her registered mobile phone a while back so we can’t trace her movements or get a likely home location. Here’s some other things too: First, she doesn’t have a driver’s license from any state. Second, she’s stopped using the credit cards that we know about. We found one bank card and a corporate card and the addresses are a lawyer’s office. She could have others we don’t know about. Third, I can’t find any current apartment or home rental record. Her parents own a home in the county but she’s never there, that I’ve been able to determine. I can’t stake out that home; it’s rural, has several approaches, and a waiting vehicle would stand out like a red flag. That home’s on several acres and has a fence around it and a gated drive. Fourth, I tried Johns Hopkins and they won’t tell me anything. Student privacy, they claim. Next, we queried the State Department passport database and her record still shows a Miami address. That site has multi-story buildings going up on it.

“The APL in Laurel is mentioned in several of her papers but when I went there to ask about her, they blew me off. They don’t give out any info about their workers. I have no idea about how she travels to work, but some of her past credit-card statements show charges from a Uber account and from some executive car services. Those outfits also won’t give out any info about subscribers. I also spent time outside the Physics building at Hopkins watching for her; never saw her. I tried asking various students at Hopkins if they knew her, but someone called the campus cops and they told me that I was banned from the campus for stalking.

“What about tracing incoming calls on any of her possible contacts, like her parents?” Ames asked.

“I tried to have the comm section do that. She’s gotta be aware someone’s tracing her, because after we filter all of the incoming numbers, we find various calls which come from what appear to be a bunch of burner phones—bought with a prepaid card or cash—and anonymous VoIP numbers; that’s mostly a dead end too. It sure looks like she’s aware that someone’s trying to track her. I think that there are only two possibilities to reach her other than sending an email to one of her addresses. One, we use the normal NSA powers for a national security investigation. Or two, try to make a contact through her parents. But to use number one, you really need a strong case and this one is far from that.”

“We’re not using NSA powers; we don’t have any concrete data to back up justifying a warrant for a regular investigation. I’m going on a strong hunch and those hunches have served me well. If you involve the parents, then that would involve other outsiders and most likely make it difficult to convince the girl...” Ames mused. “If she uses a car service for transport to the APL, could you watch for when a car arrives?”

“Watch what building?” Gondon asked. “There are dozens.”

“What about her social media and email contents?”

“We looked; she’s not on any social media—at least with her actual name. She has two email accounts that we could find. One is through Hopkins and then there’s what appears to be a business one with her own domain but that one is registered to an attorney’s office address. She’s very security conscious; all of her emails are encrypted. You nixed it before, but should I try to contact her using an email address?”

“That would be better than trying to go through someone else, like the parents,” Ames said. “But the email can’t

come from a government address. Let's figure out how to set up the email contact. And we need to come up with a way to convince her to work with us and a backup plan if your attempts to reach her don't work."

***Applied Physics Laboratory, North Laurel, Maryland: early November***

Tamara had recruited Peter as her emotion-"pushing" subject to test her EEG electrodes. She was ready for the test on a Friday in early November. She decided to first try the more difficult trial of her wearing the new EEG electrodes while the MRI was performing a scan—more difficult in terms of the likely MRI-generated RF interference with the EEG signals.

"Peter, can I try a little more unpleasant emotion with you first? One I found that makes someone kind of limp for a bit, so it apparently affects the motor neurons. I'd like to see how that appears on the MRI and EEG, if you agree."

"Um, I guess. Don't hurt me too bad, though," Peter said uncertainly.

"This is for science, honey," she said and he snorted.

When Peter was ready, from about twenty feet away, Tamara "pushed" a yellow-brown taste with black-tinted edges; Peter had no response.

At fifteen feet, she had no response until she caught his eye and then "pushed." He jerked and told her, "I felt a painful sensation, like a punch in the gut but not *in* the gut."

She tried it at inside twelve feet and again needed direct eye contact before Peter yelped as he slumped in the MRI's chair. She quickly sent a silver healing taste and Peter quickly recovered and sighed as the scan ended.

"Shit, that last one actually hurt, Tamara! That wasn't funny, you know."

"Oh, I'm sorry. One time I used it on someone and Dad got the fringe; he said that it hurt him. I thought maybe only the fringe hurt, 'cause the loss of muscle control didn't fully affect him. What did you feel?"

"Like I got slugged, but it was crazy, since nothing in my body felt like it got hit. But I felt my muscles go slack, like I had no control. So crazy."

Tamara went to check the scans in the control room and was pleased to see that the MRI scan, at least, looked good. Both Fox and Foster were there; Foster was monitoring the MRI and Fox, the EEG output. She couldn't tell about the EEG tracing; Fox was still working on the output.

"Okay, Peter, let's do the thirst one. No pain this time, okay?" Tamara said when she came back out.

"Sure, but you owe me," Peter said, sulking.

With Peter sitting about fifteen feet away, she "pushed" thirst to him. When that scan finished, and as Peter hurried to get a bottle of water, Tamara went back into the control room.

Fox looked up from the instrument tracing. "Lots of interference in the EEG here," he commented. "But I can see a pattern, if I'm reading this right."

Tamara looked at the chart.

"I see what you mean," she remarked. "It sort of looks like two signals superimposed. Say, Davy? We still have that brain phantom?"

"Yeah, it's in the cabinet with the other coils. Oh I know... you want to try the EEG run with the phantom in the MRI, right?"

"Yep. A control. Dumb of me not to think of that first," Tamara told him as Peter came in, guzzling his third



bottle of water.

While Foster was setting up the phantom, Tamara looked at Peter's scans when she "pushed" the muscle-effect taste. The scans showed what appeared to be an overload of the neurons in the motor cortex; that overload would also produce a kind of "ghost" pain because the overload extended into the nearby motor sensory area. Tamara now knew about another brain function her ability could affect.

When Foster returned to the control room, they set up an MRI run with the phantom using the same settings as they used with Peter's scan and then examined the EEG tracing, which, of course, showed no "brain" activity at all.

When Peter returned, he looked at both tracings.

"Marty, do you record the EEG signals in addition to getting the paper output?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think I see where you're going. Subtract the control run from the live one, right?"

Tamara grinned as Peter nodded. "Sure, that's a better idea than my trying to use a noise-reduction mathematical filter, I think," Tamara said.

"I can use the signal-comparison software in the MRI program suite to do that," Foster offered. "The team working on the data-compression routine set up all of the instrument data acquisition files to use the same format and that includes the EEG signals."

When they ran the comparison program, they could see that the remaining signal, after subtracting the portion contributed by the MRI's RF, looked much more like an EEG tracing. Then Tamara tried the experiment with Peter in the MRI and wearing the EEG electrodes while Tamara again sent "thirst" to him. She already had EEG tracings of her "pushing" thirst without the MRI operating.

"Okay, this is enough for now, even though it's a data set of one subject," she declared, as Peter was finishing up the last of the case of bottled water. "I want to ship these tracings over to the neurologists at the med school and they can tell me if it shows what we're looking for. But it does seem to work, so thanks, guys. This is great."

They started closing up while Peter visited the rest room—he had drunk more than a few bottles of water during the session—and later, when she was alone with Peter, she mentioned the email she had gotten earlier that day.

"I got the strangest email," she told him. "It came to the foundation email address. The sender was asking about having his company arrange to have me design a training program to improve a person's sense of smell to enable them to get a job in an industry where scents are marketed—like perfumers or other cosmetics developers."

"That *is* strange," Peter responded. "That idea must have been based on your use of scents to show activation of the olfactory tract. You just mentioned that in passing in one of your papers, right?"

"Yeah and the email got my 'alert' sense going. I told you about hearing from Emma that someone was asking about me. Emma told me that she got several calls from people in Hopkins' admin offices—and a call from the campus police too—that a guy was looking for info about me. The APL admin people also told me that a guy came in there and asked about me."

"So where'd that latest email come from? Was it like a company address you could check on?"

"I didn't have time to look it up, sweetie. With it being Friday afternoon, I wanted to finish testing those new electrodes. When we go home, we'll look it up when we get there. You know, I kinda miss seeing Barbara there all the time; Terence too."

Tamara had moved into Barbara's apartment when Barbara graduated. Barbara and Terence were now living together in an apartment in Russet, a town along the Baltimore-Washington Parkway midway between College Park and Hopkins. Barbara was in the psychology doctoral program at Maryland and Terence was finishing up his physics degree at Hopkins, and they were both commuting now.

"So let's go home now, sweetie," she told Peter.

Tamara liked Peter's two-bedroom unit better than her old single, especially since she and Peter were sleeping together now. She was using the spare bedroom as her "extra-curricular" lab now; that avoided having a big Faraday cage occupying part of her living room. After dinner at their apartment, Tamara got her laptop out and began searching for the company name used by the email sender. It was a fairly generic company name and she couldn't find any company whose work or products could reasonably fit the emailer's request.

"So you think that this might just be another attempt to find you?" Peter asked. "Like that airport thing?"

"Uh huh, I told you that my warning sense was tickled by it. Kind of a 'watch out' sensation."

"It's funny; I didn't feel anything when you told me about the email," Peter remarked.

"Really? Let's try something more direct."

Tamara started her email app and opened the person's email; then she pushed the laptop over to Peter.

"Read it," she ordered.

He did. Then, "Damn. This is crazy. I got a warning tingle. How does that work?"

"No idea. But see? Seeing the evidence directly was the key. Somehow you're tuned to me."

"I'm tuned to you in other ways, and I'm feeling the need for a tuneup now," Peter said as he leaned over and kissed her.

As usually happened when they kissed, sparks flew, but this time was different. When they pulled apart, Tamara looked at him, eyes wide.

"Shit, you feel that?" she gasped.

"God, that was crazy," Peter groaned. "I'm hard as an iron spike!"

"And that kiss made me cum!" Tamara exclaimed.

"And I felt it like it happened to me!" Peter gasped.

They stared at each other for a second and then clothes began flying off. Dropping his underpants to the floor, Peter reached for Tamara, who had just unclasped her bra, and began kissing her chest and caressing her nipples before he dropped to his knees while his kisses traced a path down to her navel. She giggled as Peter tickled her innie with his tongue. Then he grabbed the waistband of her panties and tugged them down, slowly revealing her delta. He buried his face there and she grunted, slightly spreading her legs and Peter found that her vulva was flooded with moisture.

He stood up and in a quick motion, swept her into his arms and lifted her as she squealed in surprise and he headed for their bedroom, carrying her with one arm under her shoulders and the other, behind her knees.

"Oooo... don't drop me ..." she started, but as they approached the doorway, "... watch my head," she giggled as Peter turned sideways going through the opening. "Are we both horny or what?"

"You bet," Peter muttered as he deposited her on the bed. "Talking about how our emotions get entwined—like

whenever we make love—got me like this.”

He pointed to his erection, now pointing almost straight up.

“Oooh, nice, swee... eep!” she choked off as Peter dove between her legs, pushed them apart, and began lavaging her vulva with his tongue.

As he wormed his tongue between her lower lips, Tamara’s breathing got so heavy it seemed to him that she was going to hyperventilate, but her gasps and moans drove him on. Peter moved around to get a better angle and then with several fingers, moved her lips apart to expose her clitoris, which was quite engorged now. He blew on it and then gave the area a swipe with his tongue. Tamara screeched. She was so loud that it startled him.

Peter tried to ask if she was all right but couldn’t move his head away from her vulva; she had clamped her legs behind his head, crossing them, and pulling him against her.

“Ooooh... so good... yes...” she was gasping.

Encouraged, Peter attacked the area with vigor, eliciting some additional squeals and “Yes...yes... good...” gasps between her louder vocalizations. Peter dove his tongue as deeply as he could into her pussy opening and began trying to tongue-fuck her, but then backed it out, licking her perineum from her flowing pussy opening up to her clit. Tamara shuddered and gasped with each stroke whenever he hit her clit.

Then with his other hand, Peter licked his middle finger and slid it into her vagina. As he felt around for her G-spot, he sucked her clit between his lips and as he rubbed that sensitive spot inside her, he nipped the little organ.

Tamara’s screech then cut off at mid-squeal—it actually turned into a voiceless scream—as she went rigid and her whole pelvis shuddered and her hot channel pulsed around Peter’s finger, as Peter suddenly realized that he himself had ejaculated at the same time that she had orgasmed. That’s when it occurred to him that some of the noise that he had heard actually came from him.

He moved up her body to hold her; she had gone quite limp, but Peter was amazed that even though he had shot a few jets of cum, he was still semi-hard and still quite horny.

Tamara recovered quickly, though, and told Peter, “That was amazing, lover, and I could feel your passions going up the scale too. Did you cum? It felt like it.”

“Yeah, I sure did. I think I felt almost everything you did, too.”

“Awesome...” She glanced down. “Oh! Poor boy, looks like you still have more shots left in the cannon...”

Tamara pushed Peter onto his back, then leaned over him and kissed the end of his cock, which quickly sprang back to almost full rigidity. Tickling Peter’s ball sack, she gently sucked Peter’s organ into her mouth. Using her tongue and lips, she worked his cock until its head was pulsing and almost purple. Then she raised up and straddled Peter’s hips, aiming his cock to impale herself.

She sunk down, plunging Peter’s shaft deeply into her until she was fully embedded. Then leaning forward, she began rocking herself back and forth, allowing her clit to rub on Peter’s pubic bone as she mashed herself against it. She began gasping and groaning again, but when her sounds began to reach a crescendo, Peter grabbed her around the waist and rolled her onto her back.

Peter raised himself up and began stroking into her and she began vocalizing again with gasps and “yes”es and “good”s and “harder”s. Harder Peter could do, so he did, hammering into her with increased strength. Tamara shuddered in a little orgasm and locked her heels behind him, pulling him in tightly with each of his lunges, then

she began thrusting herself upwards into each of Peter's downward strokes.

Both Peter and Tamara dimly realized that once again, they were feeling the sensations that the other felt, as the heat of their passion blossomed into the flowering of the total pleasure that they felt. The flower pulsed as it grew, gathering waves of sensation like additional petals, until suddenly their entire combined consciousness was filled with blinding colors as their flesh erupted in the molten heat of orgasm.

After Peter's rigid muscles relaxed and he was able to catch his breath, he pulled back and his cock, still a little hard, made a *pop* sound as it dropped out of Tamara's vagina. It was followed by a big glob of their mixed fluids. Both of them were still panting from the exertion.

"Jeez, that was intense," Peter said after his breathing returned to normal.

The couple was lying on their sides now, facing each other, and their hands were softly stroking each other.

"More intense than I can remember—except maybe for our first time, sweetie," Tamara murmured. "Even your hand touching my body now feels different. Yeah—right there. You stroked my boob and I felt your touch but also a sensation of my own hand on a boob. Like a touch-echo, I guess."

"Um... I hate bringing up reality now," Peter said hesitantly, "but ... before we ... um ... got involved, were you thinking of getting that FBI agent involved with that email?"

Tamara stiffened and looked at him. "When did you get that thought?"

"When you pushed the laptop over and said, 'Read it.' Before I began to read it, that thought popped into my head and it seemed that it wasn't mine. It felt ... um, you know how I used to feel unwanted emotions? They just popped in, and that thought came the same way."

Tamara sighed. "Yeah, right then, I had just made up my mind to call the agent on Monday, in fact. You do know that you and Barbara—at least Barbara, anyway—can sense you? Not your thoughts, exactly, but your feelings?"

Peter nodded. "Yeah, and I can sense her. Or I used to, but it's been getting weaker, probably since we're not around each other as much."

"Damn... so much to figure out," Tamara reflected. "I wonder if mind-to-mind communication is actually real or if it's just sensing the emotions of others and that a sharp intuitive sense is helping interpret the probable thought... Eep! You rat."

Peter had tweaked her nipple. "Don't wanna talk now, lover," he whispered as he leaned in to kiss her.

As he did, Tamara felt the pressure of a firm, damp object against her thigh and looked down.

"Oh good, lookie, it's gotten nice and hard again," she sighed as she lovingly stroked him and its leaking increased as it began to throb.

They rolled together and passionately kissed, which soon turned into another round of lovemaking. But this time it was a soft and gentle session, and when they were sated, they fell asleep, still wrapped in each other's arms.

~~~~~

On Monday morning, Tamara left a message for Special Agent in Charge Wilkins at the Baltimore FBI office and forwarded to her a copy of the strange email she had received. Then she went off to Werner's office to sign the final papers for the purchase of the quarry property. Werner's people had been able to negotiate an acceptable price, primarily because the purchase was by a charitable foundation. One of Werner's employees would be overseeing the clean-fill project and they had already secured the services of a civil engineer to advise

on the proper compacting of the fill as it was added.

Later in the day, she was able to talk to Wilkins.

“It is an odd email, certainly,” Wilkins agreed. “We did some checking on the source of the message and it’s from an address that appears to be registered to a shell organization. Someone really does want to contact you, but the way this is being done is very suspicious.”

“What do you suggest I do?” Tamara asked.

“It would be interesting to learn who’s behind this. If you agree, we could put a wire on you and you could meet at a public location. Then sound him out about what he really wants.”

Tamara paused, thinking. “One sec, Mrs Wilkins. I’ve got a thought on this and I need to put it into words...” A few seconds later, she continued, “Okay, how’s this. I’ll go with that suggestion, but consider this: the people who arranged that ambush at the airport appear to have some fairly decent resources, probably even governmental, since they must have gotten Customs involved somehow. Don’t you think that they’d have a way to block or detect some kind of eavesdropping gadget?”

“Yes, that’s true, but that would give us more info on your stalker,” Wilkins observed. “Then we can have him followed.”

“Okay, but how about doing this?” Tamara asked. “An adaptation of one of my new discoveries can be used as an undetectable communicator. It’s based on something I found when developing my power storage device and it’s related to energy flow in a kind of extra-dimensional region. I’ve observed that a circuit based on that discovery can send a signal from a source to a unique paired receiver. My engineer and I put together a prototype as a proof-of-concept; it can send signals, like a telephone does, from the transmitter to receiver, and since the signal doesn’t travel through normal space, it can’t be detected. The best part is that the transmitter can be very small and would use only tiny amounts of power.”

“Interesting; so how big is the transmitter?”

“We made it a bit larger than a half-inch diameter disk, like a button size,” Tamara told her. “The receiver needs to be larger ‘cause it needs the electronics to process the signal into sound and has to provide some kind of output like a wired port or something like a bluetooth transmitter.”

“And this thing works like you said and it isn’t detectible? That would be a powerful surveillance tool,” Wilkins remarked.

“It needs more work, but my proof-of-concept prototype sends understandable sound, but the quality is probably not much better than Alexander Graham Bell’s first words on his telephone invention, when he said, ‘Mr. Watson—come here—I want to see you.’”

Wilkins laughed. “Do we actually know how that sounded?”

“I read somewhere that those words were intelligible, despite their being crackly and indistinct. The sound from my device could best be called blurry and hollow but it’s clearly understandable. I’ll do the meeting wearing your hidden mike but I’ll also use my device. If he or they find the wire, then I assume they’ll not go looking for other devices. To use my receiver at your end, there’s a wired output which connects to a simple recording device, just like a microphone. It’s self-powered. And its range appears to be immaterial; you could be miles away or even on the other side of the planet.”

“That will work for me; but I’ll stay closer to Baltimore, thank you,” Wilkins laughed. “Where do you want to meet the subject? If you don’t have a site, I can suggest some.”

“I’m thinking of the Café Charles. It’s a fairly roomy and popular coffee shop and is generally busy; it’s right across the street from Hopkins. All the seating is in the open too—no booths. I’ve had experience with getting shot with ketamine, so I won’t put myself in a situation where that can happen again.”

“I was told about that incident, Tamara. I agree, you shouldn’t put yourself in danger. There’ll be two agents in there watching. And I don’t want you to be unduly concerned, but in some operations where the perp’s intention is doing a snatch, their accomplices will stage a distraction to draw attention away from their target. I believe that you’re a cool customer, Tamara, and wouldn’t panic, so if a distraction happens, when we meet to give you your wire, I’ll tell you the backup plan. And I’ll send you some text to use in your email back to that sender. You can put it in your own words; just use the same points.”

Tamara agreed and ended the call. About a half hour later, she received the email from Wilkins and used it to compose her reply to the unknown sender’s email address, telling him that she agreed to meet; she would consider a detailed proposal, but because of her schedule and other demands on her time, she would only meet at that given time and place.

### ***NSA, Fort George G. Meade, Maryland***

“She took the bait,” Gondon reported to Ames. “She agreed to meet at a coffee shop near Hopkins next Monday.”

“Okay, and I’ve got the hook set up now to force her cooperation. Take Kruse with you, but be sure he doesn’t mess up like when he put the counterfeit in some random luggage. Let me play one of the recordings now and you’ll see how you can use it to get her to agree.”

The two began planning for the meeting.

### ***Applied Physics Laboratory, North Laurel, Maryland: same day***

Tamara was reviewing the results of the coil-force experiments using the ultra-high-speed cameras with Betty Miskin, her engineer, and Emma. She had completed most of the calculations which appeared to describe the effects of the coil force at the macro and quantum scales.

“Emma, early on you told me that if current theory doesn’t match observations, then new physics needs to be developed,” Tamara opened the discussion. “So that’s what’s needed now. And new math too.”

Emma grinned at her. “Go ahead; I’m going to enjoy this, I’m sure.”

Tamara frowned at her. “Please. Okay, I needed a new kind of number to make the calcs easier to follow, so I made up one. A nonreal number.”

Miskin asked, confused, “Like real numbers? Nonreal? How?”

“Teaching mode on,” Tamara chuckled. “Here goes. Numbers are grouped into classes according to how they are related. Like integers—whole numbers. That’s one class. If we use mathematical operations on numbers, we can produce number classes other than whole numbers. Like division can create fractional numbers and doing certain geometric operations, such as taking the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter, makes a special number called *pi*, which is an irrational number, yet another class. Strange name, but it simply means that *pi* cannot be expressed as a ratio of two numbers—it’s not *ratio*-able, if that’s a word. Also irrational is the length of the diagonal of a unit square. That’s the square root of 2 and it can’t be expressed as a ratio. Irrational. Okay so far?”

Emma was smiling broadly and Miskin was still looking uncertain and asked, “Where are you going with this, Tamara?”

“Be patient. As an electrical engineer, you obviously know about complex numbers. A real number paired with an imaginary one. The square root of negative one is an imaginary number and its symbol is  $i$ . Another number class. Double-E theory depends on calcs using complex numbers and they were invented to allow for the solution of quadratic equations, among other uses. So when the need arises for creating a special number, math allows for that; there are many such special numbers. I needed to create one to handle my calcs and I call it a nonreal number because, well, it isn’t real. The number is the quotient of one divided by zero.”

“Wait!” Miskin objected. “Division by zero isn’t allowed. It’s undefined in math.”

Emma’s smile got broader. She was certain that Tamara was going to pull not one, but thousands of rabbits, out of that hat. She began feeling sorry for those rabbits. And the hat too.

Tamara nodded wisely at Miskin [and turned to the reader of her story to apologize for this hugely technical description of her math calculations. Skip over it all if you want], and said to her, “Sure. That’s why I said that it isn’t real. It’s true that division by zero is undefined in usual mathematics, but it’s actually allowed under very certain circumstances. There’s a geometrical structure called the complex plane and the geometry it describes is useful to particle physicists. It’s visualized as a planar geometry where simplistically, the x-axis, also referred to as the real axis, consists of the real numbers, and the y-axis, called the imaginary axis, consists of the imaginary numbers.

“Now if we take the complex plane and include with it one point at infinity, we get what’s called the extended complex plane. We can visualize this kind of structure better if we imagine warping that plane into a spherical form; that structure is known as the Riemann sphere; it’s a model of the extended complex plane, and because a sphere’s surface has no end, it can be used to substitute for an infinite surface. Why is it useful in math to do this? Because the extended complex numbers, as visualized using the Riemann sphere, are useful in complex analysis because in very limited cases, they allow for division by zero, such that expressions like  $1 / 0 = \infty$  are well behaved. ‘Well behaved’ is kind of a mathematical shorthand meaning it follows a certain set of applicable rules. I see your eyes glazing over so I’ll try to get to the point.

“The Riemann sphere is important for many areas in physics, particularly in quantum mechanics. Manipulations using it provide natural values for photon polarization states, they yield spin states for massive particles of spin  $\frac{1}{2}$  and do so for two-state particles in general. In string theory—you know about that?”

“Not a whole bunch,” Miskin remarked. “Heard the term. Something to do with cosmology?”

“It’s used there,” Tamara answered, “but it’s more about particle physics. The textbook definition is that it’s a theoretical framework where the point-like fundamental particles are replaced by one-dimensional objects called strings. The wave theory of matter is that those particles can be described by waves. These give us three different ways of mathematically describing matter.

“Finishing up with the Riemann model, there’s a structure called a ‘worldsheet,’ which is a two-dimensional visualization which represents the embedding of a string in spacetime. Those are Riemann surfaces. The Riemann sphere is the simplest Riemann surface and it plays a significant role in string theory.

“So in order to describe what the coil force is doing, I had to go to string theory and found it useful to assign a number to the  $1/0$  quotient; I called it  $\mathfrak{Z}^*$ , zee star, a nonreal number. I had to avoid using  $z$  because that’s the name of the third dimensional axis in geometry. Now you’re hoping that I’m getting to the real issue, right?”

Both Emma and Miskin shouted, “Yes!”

“I only did that teaching moment ‘cause in the calcs I’ll show you, you’ll see that the symbol  $\mathfrak{Z}^*$  shows up in places, and that’s where I’m referring to cases involving projections on the Riemann sphere. The calcs speak for themselves, I hope, but here’s what they mean when translated into human language.

“The first set shown here is a derivation of how forces are moving or transmitted within the area of the coil force. Remember, it first appeared that we had something like a magnetic monopole, but the force lines didn’t appear to be radial like a monopole’s should be. The calcs show that there’s a supermassive something that’s somehow projecting a repulsive force through the window or portal that the coil-force circuit created. Supermassive as in the meaning of a fundamental particle, that is. This calc here shows its mass and properties. I went on a naming spree now ‘cause these particles needed names—can’t just call them Thing One and Thing Two... like Dr Seuss.”

The others laughed.

“So my theory is that we’re seeing dark matter and energy here, and I believe that these calcs can support that idea. Narratively, here’s what they show and I’ll throw in my names for the new particles. Dark matter is composed of ‘darmatons,’ they’re equivalent to hadrons, and were created in the high energy of the Big Bang. They’re supermassive. They behave kinda like monopoles might be thought to do and repel positive matter; they attract electrons and antimatter. They don’t exist in three-dimensional space but they interact with three-dimensional space through exchange with gravitons, which are the theoretical force carriers of the gravitational force. It’s the repulsive force from this exchange which is driving the universe’s expansion. Darmatons have an internal structure, symmetry demands this, and these calcs show that they must be composed of three snarks (the boojum snark makes the person softly and suddenly vanish away, that is, makes them invisible, according to Lewis Carroll, and that’s why dark matter can’t be seen) and their real-matter equivalent is the quark.”

Emma began laughing. “Who says physicists don’t have a sense of humor? Or aren’t literate? Tamara, this is brilliant; please do continue.”

“Okay, not much more to go now since we’re reaching the end where words can be used to explain. The math is ruling what the theory says now. So that’s the dark matter; the dark energy (what we’ve been calling the coil force and I suggest that we rename it the G-force) is made of the particles (I call them ‘cofons’) that mediate the repulsive force and they are exchanged between the snarks in the same manner as the gluons exchange between the quarks in hadrons to keep nuclei together. This idea all fits with supersymmetry theory and the standard model and fills in some of the standard model’s holes too.

“It also explains magnetism; magnetism is the projection of the G-force from the dimension of dark energy and matter into our own three-dimensional world. It’s a projection from the higher dimension, or whatever it is, of the darmatons in the same way that shadows are the two-dimensional projection of the blocking of photons from striking a three-dimensional object. I was disappointed though; this still isn’t the ‘theory of everything.’”

Emma had been examining Tamara’s notes carefully and looked up when she stopped speaking.

“My dear, you have truly outdone yourself here,” she said. “I’ve run out of superlatives long before this; I’ve never seen the extended complex plane used in the way you’ve done and I know maths intuitively. But I don’t see anything here that looks like an error or an invalid assumption. The zero division operation is very tricky but you did it within the strictures of the extended complex plane and Riemann sphere projections. But this work is so monumental that I need to have a lot more eyeballs on it. Let’s discuss who we should bring into a group to review your maths, shall we.”

After finishing up the discussion with Miskin about the preparations for the large-scale test of the G-force generator, Miskin left and Emma and Tamara began talking about the best people to involve in reviewing her dark energy-matter theory.



## Chapter 63 - Blackmail

The following day, Tamara had arranged a “chemistry” day. She planned to meet with her biochemistry postdoc collaborator, Joyce Darner, two medical school endocrinologists with whom she was also collaborating, and her first medical school radiologist consultant, Dr Jose Marcos. About two weeks prior to this meeting, Tamara, together with Darner, had worked out how to synthesize small amounts of her “pheromone” and separate the stereoisomers formed. She recalled the day when she had proposed to Darner the method that she had theorized.

### *One month earlier*

Tamara entered Darner’s lab and greeted her. “Joyce, tell me if this wild-assed idea is feasible, okay?”

Darner grinned at her. “What did you come up with? This should be good.”

“Damn, you must have been speaking with Emma. She tells me that all the time. Anyway, here’s what I thought. I had the idea of looking into the quantum-mechanical properties of steroids, particularly those of the sex-hormone class. I came across the Franck-Condon principle, you know, the one that describes the electronic and vibrational energy levels of a molecule when it absorbs energy. I found that under quantum-mechanical rules, the molecules’ vibrational wave-functions behave like harmonic oscillators. It turns out that the coil-force circuits that I’ve been working with appear to affect the harmonic oscillations of molecules and I’ve calculated that the effect should be slightly different based on the symmetry of the molecules.

“The Franck-Condon principle is based on the molecule’s absorbing photons. Optical activity is based on the molecule’s ability to polarize light, that is, filter out only the wave forms of the incident photons that match the molecule’s polarity. This effect should work really well in aromatic compounds like the steroids because of the presence of the delocalized electrons from the rings’  $\pi$ -bonds. The wave functions from the Born-Oppenheimer approximation appear to support that idea. I wrote out most of a paper that discusses that idea; here’s a copy; look at it and see what you think. So it appears that by using the coil-force circuits I’ve developed, you could use the effect their forces causes on the  $\pi$  electrons to assist in the synthesis of the pheromone molecules. I also think that the coil device can help separate the different optical isomers of the compounds in the gas chromatograph. Do you want to try to do that first? If it works, I’ll submit the paper to a journal.”

“That’s a really way-out idea, Tamara, but the way your gadgets seem to work, it might be worth a shot. I see you have a box with you. Is this a device based on your coil things?”

Tamara nodded. “Yep. I had Saul, my engineering tech, cobble up a device that can be connected to your gas chromatograph.” She opened the box and took out a Rube-Goldberg-looking contraption. “It’s not pretty, is it. Okay, inject the volatilized sample in the side port here, connect the carrier gas line here, and this end goes to the GC column. If you take samples at the detector as the sample exits the column, you’ll probably get the separated stereoisomers. The battery here powers the coil assembly—all you need to do is switch it on right over here,” Tamara pointed. “It’ll probably take you a bunch of runs to get the bugs out, but let me know if it works.”

“Okay, I’ll give it a go. How’d you get to know so much about chemistry, anyway? This is really advanced stuff.”

“Um, it’s just physics as applied to molecules and molecules are linked by their constituent atoms’ electron interactions. I understand how electrons perform very, very well, I guess,” Tamara told her. “Many of my devices depend on electron flow, storage, and properties.”

Darner grinned at her. “My prof told me that you’ve got a rep as an engineering physicist. What you’re doing here is actually chemical physics; it’s a combination of atomic and molecular physics and condensed matter physics. I can’t wait to see how this works.”

“Those are just labels; they only serve to pigeonhole people into artificial specialties. I’m more of a generalist

and use whatever principles I need to solve problems. And about solving problems—solving the one about the inactive stereoisomers. The coil assembly should also work in your steroid compound synthesis,” Tamara said, handing her another folder. “Here’s the procedure to try with that. Part of the reaction needs to be done inside the energized coil assembly.”

She took another little device out of her box.

“Works the same way; uses the same power supply. Turn it on when you’re running the ring closure reaction sequences through your doing the Diels-Alder reaction. Those are the parts where the stereospecific synthesis should be corrected.”

“Cool, Tamara. Damn, if this works, it’ll be an incredible addition to organic chemical synthesis and analysis, I’ll let you know.”

About a week later, Darner called, excited. The devices worked and she had managed to synthesize and purify two of the compounds at a microgram quantity by coupling Tamara’s synthetic methods to a set of techniques popularly called “click chemistry.” Popular among chemists, that is, and that technique proved worthy of recent Nobel Prizes to its inventors. And Tamara’s device had allowed her not only to efficiently separate the different isomers; it had also worked to allow for synthesis of selected optical isomers. They both agreed that the device was unique enough to warrant submitting the scientific paper Tamara had written, after Tamara’s patent application had been filed.

### ***Back to the present***

Now it was time for her meeting with the clinical people. Tamara had designed a research protocol to test the pheromones that had been synthesized and purified. She wanted to test those two pheromone isolates on subjects while performing a MRI scan in an attempt to visualize the nerve signal pathway from the triggering of the olfactory nerve receptor to the signal’s destination in the cerebral cortex.

“Tamara, you do realize that you’re effectively looking for a needle in the haystack, don’t you?” one of the endocrinologists, Dr John Oglebie, asked. “We know that humans have only about 350 olfactory receptor subtypes in the olfactory epithelium and a total of only twelve million olfactory receptors, which are distributed among hundreds of different receptor types that respond to different odors. The result is that humans can sense only about 10,000 different odors and your putative pheromone is just one molecule. Catching single receptor binding events will be difficult, don’t you think?”

“Maybe, John,” Tamara responded. “But the MRI scan really lights up when there’s any chemical activity, so the depolarization of the receptor upon binding should be visible and so should the signals as nerve action potentials change during the relay of the signal into the brain. This experiment should show the parts of the limbic system that get activated by that particular molecule.”

“Wow, twelve million olfactory receptors in humans?” Darner asked. “That seems like a large number.”

“Not when you consider other animals,” Oglebie remarked. “For example, most dogs have about one billion receptors while dogs like bloodhounds have four times that number.”

“My department keeps a roster of potential volunteers for imaging studies,” Marcos commented. “Tamara, this new protocol of yours for the study can go as it is to our human subjects committee as a supplement to your first study. That should speed its review. John, what she said about visualizing receptor depolarization is correct; the resolutions we’re getting are amazing. It’s sensitive down to possibly thirty receptor activations and they would all come from a single olfactory receptor cell. This is a valid approach and we should pursue it. The evidence we get may finally settle the question about the existence of human pheromones, I’m sure.”

The group set to work to outline the details of the experimental procedure. When they finished, Tamara spent

the rest of the day working on refining her dark matter/energy theory, and when she and Peter got home in the evening, she told him about getting her last major project underway.

“What do you mean, sweetie?” he asked. “Your work on the MRI and the coil force were your priorities, I thought.”

She chuckled. “I guess you’ve forgotten your excellent summary of my goals which you outlined the day before my folks moved into their new home here. I haven’t forgotten how you listed them. One was the MRI studies to learn how my ‘pushing’ emotions affects areas in the brain. The results of those scans show stuff that they’re still analyzing; there was so much data, but we’re getting lots of good information there. Another was to see if the chemicals I secrete are different for each emotion I ‘push.’ We found out that they are; there appear to be slight differences. Next was seeing if I generate a detectible EEG signal when I ‘push’ an emotion and it appears that I do; those tracings are still being analyzed. And I figured out how to do EEG studies in an active magnetic field and while accounting for RF pulses, in addition. Today we began on the last of those goals; seeing if my pheromones have an effect on a subject when I don’t ‘push’ that emotion.”

Peter grinned. “Well, that means you can retire now. You finished your bucket list.”

“You wish. I still have that large-scale G-force experiment. And I want to *do* stuff with all the things I found now—develop my inventions. Help people, improve their lives. I’ve got that deal I made with Gerston, remember. And the project that we’ll do with Kevin and Denise, whatever that turns out to be.”

“Yeah—and that meeting you have on Monday with that stalker of yours.”

“Ugh. Right.”

~~~~~

Tamara got to the coffee shop early; she wanted to stake out a table in a very exposed part of the shop so that she would be easily visible and wouldn’t be cornered. It took her a lot of convincing, but she got Peter to agree to stay away. She was wearing a small recording device that Wilkins had provided and, in addition, the tiny G-force transmitter was hidden in a necklace pendant. Wilkins had the matched G-force receiver. The transmitter-receiver pair had been tested and it worked, although the sound quality was far from ideal.

Tamara was sitting at the table nursing an iced tea when two men arrived and looked around. Spotting her green blouse, which was the recognition signal that she had included in her email message, they walked to her table.

“Miss Alexandre?” one man asked.

“That’s me,” she replied.

“Ah, this table isn’t a satisfactory meeting site,” he commented.

“It is for me, sir. Now state your business or leave. I trust you’ve brought your business proposal?”

The man glanced at his companion who shrugged; then they pulled out chairs and sat.

“First thing now,” Tamara looked at the spokesman with a steely expression. She didn’t detect any overt evil intent but got the impression that the man felt that this contact was somehow extralegal. “You know my name but I don’t know yours. Nor do I know anything about the outfit you say you represent. Do you have a business card?”

The men looked at each other again and the spokesman replied, “Our names are immaterial. I see you have your phone out. Is it recording?”

“Correct. I want a record of our meeting.”

“We cannot allow that. Please turn it off and let me watch as you do that.”

The other man took out a little device from the briefcase he was carrying and turned it on.

“She’s got another device on her,” he told the first man.

“Okay, miss, this isn’t a hide-and-seek game. Let’s get that device out and turned off too.” He looked at his companion. “See any wireless signals or other any surveillance device on her?”

“No,” was the response.

“We intend that this meeting will be private. This table location is totally inappropriate for our discussion. Since you refuse to move to a less-exposed table...”

“I do,” Tamara interrupted. “I’ve already experienced one kidnapping attempt and I’m ensuring that my risk here is minimized. Just so you know, it’s possible that some of the people in here are my college friends and if they are, you should know that my friends will watch out for me.”

The spokesman looked at his companion again. “Detect any remote listening device?” he asked and got a negative head shake in reply.

“This table will have to do then but I’ll be speaking softly. You must not let anyone know about this discussion; you won’t like the consequences if you do. We are here representing an official agency. We would like to offer you a position continuing your work on the human brain, along the lines of your papers describing the use of MRI technology, but concentrating on training the brain the way you trained the subjects to improve their sense of smell. You will be compensated appropriately.”

Tamara replied, “I’m sure, since you appear to be familiar with my papers, that you know that I’m a physicist and not a neuroscientist. I must decline your offer; my work is mainly in quantum engineering and physics, not human physiology and neuroscience. I’m sorry to disappoint you and your agency, but there’s no way that I’d agree to change career paths.”

“I was anticipating that you would decline the offer,” he responded, “but I’m afraid that you will have no choice and will have to agree. Your professional services are required by us, you shall work for us exclusively, and you shall not tell anyone about this conversation. You would be most unhappy to suffer the consequences of outright refusal to cooperate.”

“One second there,” Tamara interrupted again as she “pushed” a compulsion color. “What agency do you claim is making this demand? Federal? Foreign? What right do you have to dictate who I can work for? Are you aware that slavery was abolished by the thirteenth amendment in the middle of the nineteenth century?”

“Ah... the U.S. govern... ah shit... It matters not, exactly who we work for. Listen, I’ve said too much now so I’m going to tell you why you’ll have to cooperate. My associate has a memory card which contains digital copies of recordings of your telephone conversations with agents of several foreign countries. In the recordings, you agreed to cooperate with those agents to sell classified research materials. Each recording is labeled with the date and time that it was intercepted together with the locations of yourself and the agent you spoke with. There also is a video clip of you making a drop of the information as agreed in one of the recordings...”

Tamara looked at him in disgust. “Your body language is shouting that these statements are outright lies, you know. This is a miserably poor attempt at blackmail. You’re also claiming that you wiretapped my communications; I’d like to see a copy of the search warrant that allowed this. What if I refuse and expose you for this felony?”

“You’d greatly regret that, miss. You see, under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, Section 702, we

don't need a warrant. If a U.S. citizen communicates with anyone outside of the United States, a non-citizen, then their conversations can be monitored and recorded. And that act also set up the FISA court which approved this investigation, so we will have you arrested under the terrorism laws and those recordings will prove your guilt. We can have you tied up for years, probably in prison custody during that time. I'll give you until next Monday to decide; if you don't respond by Monday evening using the email address I contacted you with, we'll begin the process to charge you with terrorism on Tuesday."

The second man passed the SD card to him and he laid it on the table.

"Take this and listen to it; then I'm sure you'll be contacting me."

The two men got up and walked out; they didn't notice that when they did, they were followed out the door by a middle-aged couple. Another man came over to Tamara's table as she sat, lost in thought.

*I could probably make this problem go away, but that's really a sticky situation and it might expose me to a greater risk...*

"Miss Alexandre?" the man interrupted her thoughts. "Where did they touch? We need to get fingerprints."

"Ah, yeah. That SD card, for one. They both handled it. And the backs of the chairs and possibly the table edges in front of them."

A man came into the shop carrying a case and looked over at Tamara's table, then hurried over. It was a tech, who began to check for prints. Then Tamara remembered her phone and turned it on; a text message appeared. It was from Wilkins: *call me asap*.

Tamara looked at the two FBI people working on the table. "You guys need me now?"

One looked up. "No, the boss'll handle this now. She'll call you."

"Already happened. I'll go somewhere quiet and call back."

She took out a different phone, made the call, and heard, "Wilkins."

"It's Tamara. Yeah, this is a different burner phone. I have four and switch around randomly. Were you able to hear that crap he spouted?"

"I sure did. We've got two tails on them now; also got some mug shots. They left the data card that he mentioned?"

"Yeah. The tech is getting prints from it."

"Did you touch it?"

"Nope. He set it on the table and left. Then one of your guys came over and secured the area; chased away a bus person who wanted to clean the table."

"Very good. Listen, can you come to my office now? I'm over at Windsor Mill, maybe eight miles away. Hang on ... okay. They lifted prints from the chip and it's being rushed here. If you come, we'll play the recording for you and listen to what they have."

"Um, sure, I can call for an Uber... oh, jeez, it's Peter."

"What? Your boyfriend?"

"Yeah. Told him to stay away. Guess he couldn't."

"He's a good man, Tamara. He kept out of the way when he had to and now's making sure you're okay."

“Right. I’ll see if I can get him to take me. Hey, can he be there when I talk to you?”

“Certainly. This affects him as well as you.”

About forty minutes later, Tamara and Peter were shown into a little conference room at the FBI field office. Wilkins greeted them.

“Okay, now we know who our targets are,” she opened with. “Neighbors of yours over in Laurel—the NSA at Fort Meade.”

“The National Security Agency? Why would they want to come after me like that? Hey, I assume they must also be behind that ambush you helped me avoid—they’d be able to get the airport CBP people to work with them.”

Wilkins nodded. “It looks like they were the ones that set it up. I kicked that one up to the agency chiefs; doing what they did, they broke a bunch of laws right there. But no way will I stick my neck out on that. Possibly someone high up in the FBI might be involved too. Anyway, we got a match on the prints and our tails followed them to the NSA headquarters. Why you? You’ve attracted their attention somehow. From the recording of his conversation with you—by the way, that little transmitter device is outstanding. Tiny, undetectable, untraceable, unhackable—I got dibs on one or more when you’re ready to produce them. Anyway, from what he said, looks like they want you to do some kind of brain research for them; but doing what is unclear. Not mind control or mind reading, I hope. But that’s really far-fetched.”

Tamara thought, *Yeah, that was my thinking too... and that’s too close to the reality.*

“Anyway,” Wilkins continued, “I played the recordings of your supposed phone calls and it does sound like your voice. I’d expect that it would be convincing since the NSA is involved and they’ve got some quality equipment and sound experts. The video looks like it’s you but it could be an actor made up to look like you; there are only fleeting images of your face. Let me play that.”

She played the video clip and Peter exclaimed, “Hey, Tamara doesn’t walk or move anything like that. That person looks stiff and unnatural.”

“And the images aren’t very clear too, so I’m certain that the video can easily be discounted as evidence. It must have been included as a scare tactic. Let me play the phone calls.”

She did and then Tamara and Peter sat back in their chairs for a minute.

“Are they dated? And do they have a phone number associated with them?” Tamara asked.

Wilkins shook her head. “Phone taps don’t have metadata internally associated with the audio in the same way that digital images allow—besides, metadata can be hacked. Someone would need to attest that the audio recording in the conversation corresponded to a particular set of phone numbers, dates, and times. Location, too.”

“So the NSA can say their people intercepted the call and recorded it and give the date, time, and all that and a court would just take that info as a given?” Tamara asked.

“It’s like a cop testifying,” Wilkins remarked. “They’re considered to be impartial witnesses.”

“Well, I have something on that,” Peter broke in. “Mrs Wilkins, have you ever heard of something called electrical network frequency matching? From a few years ago, I recall reading about its use for forensic analysis of recordings. It’s called ‘ENF matching’ for short.”

“Hmm, sounds vaguely familiar. Let me get Foster in here. Foster Simpson is one of our evidence technicians; he’s a digital forensic examiner and should be aware of different analysis techniques.”

When Simpson came in and was introduced, and then heard the question about ENF matching, he broke out into a big grin.

“Course I heard of that,” he said. “Every sound recording made in the real world using normal equipment has a digital fingerprint that can tell us when, to the second, it was recorded and whether it was doctored.”

“Yeah, that’s what I remembered,” Peter commented. “It came up in my class on power generation and distribution.”

“You’re an engineer?” Simpson asked.

“Well, I have an EE bachelor’s degree. I have yet to earn the ‘engineer’ title.”

“Cool. I see the others are looking clueless, so let me explain,” Simpson chuckled. “You know the hum you get from an audio device when you crank up the volume and nothing’s playing?” They nodded. “That’s the hum that’s generated by the electrical frequency on the power lines and it’s pervasive. In North America, the frequency is nominally kept at 60 hertz and that hum creeps into any audio device, onto recordings too.

“The key part is that it’s impossible for power grids to maintain an invariant frequency of 60 hertz; there are countless tiny random fluctuations caused by power demand changes, quirks in generator operation, and various other electrical events and that’s how ENF matching works. It matches the patterns of the tiny changes in the power line frequency on a sample recording to the database record of the frequency profile present on the power grid at that time. What I can do to determine if the recordings are fake is to pull out the 60 hertz signal and its harmonics from those phone recordings and compare them to the FNET database that the University of Tennessee keeps.”

“What if they used a battery-powered recorder?” Tamara wondered. “No connection to the grid there.”

“No matter,” Simpson replied. “That hum is everywhere and any electronic circuit picks it up, battery or not.”

Tamara nodded, “Duh, that’s right; my energy storage device actually collects that free inductive energy. How can you tell if a recording is doctor... oh sure. The background hum is discontinuous. Gaps.”

“Right. And you’ll ask about location next, right?” They nodded. “The info file here says the other party was calling from Europe. Their power grid runs at 50 hertz, not 60. I’ll take a wild guess and say that the hum in that part of the recording will be at 60 too.”

“Does it take long to do the test?” Wilkins asked.

“A day, maybe two,” Simpson shrugged. “Filtering out the signal and harmonics is simple. Finding the match in the FNET database will take longer but I recall that they have new tools to help. This should be interesting to do; I just had one case like this before, it was a few years back at another field office and I showed that the recording took place when the agency claimed it was and it hadn’t been tampered with. Nice to be on the other side.”

“Okay,” Tamara looked at Wilkins. “Let’s assume that they made the recording at the time that they claim I made those calls. What then?”

“If the other person on the line wasn’t in Europe, case closed,” Wilkins said. “That’s proof it was faked. If the results show evidence of tampering, then the recordings get tossed. We also have a case of attempted blackmail with an audio recording of the attempt plus witnesses and that poisons this chip as evidence. Another thing, FISA can’t be used if both parties are in the U.S. They’d need a search warrant, so this fake evidence would get tossed. Since I learned an hour ago that NSA agents were the perps, I’ve been suspecting that this operation isn’t an official NSA one; now I’m sure. There are way too many irregularities.”

“Ah, that brings up something in my thoughts,” Tamara mused. “I do a fair amount of work for DARPA. Isn’t the NSA under the Defense Department too?”

“It is, and your point is...?” Wilkins asked, smiling. “I think I see your idea.”

“Yep. My dad knows people in government—not only the State Department, but in Defense too. Other agencies like the CIA and you know about his FBI contacts. One guy he knows and keeps in touch with is one of the under-secretaries of Defense—in the research office, and DARPA is under him. I assume that the NSA must be in a different branch, like intel. Yeah, that must be where. Can I ask Dad to call you? I think he’s a great strategist and knows how to play a situation for maximum effect. He calls it ‘shock and awe,’ but I think it’s really a military doctrine of using overwhelming force.”

“I can see that, especially from what John Norris told me about him,” Wilkins chuckled. “Yes, we can meet—I assume you’ve told him about this situation?”

“Sure. He said to let you handle it; you know your business way better than him.”

“I’m liking him better and better. I’ve got some unrelated issues now and won’t be available until this evening, so have your dad call my cell about 7 p.m. He has that number; it’s how he first reached me. Sound good?”

Tamara and Peter left the office and while Peter drove them to the APL, Tamara called Wilson to update him on the NSA problem, which is how she was thinking of the situation now. When they arrived, she joined Miskin to continue working on the large-scale coil system. They now had a number of sub-coil assemblies built and were carefully matching their response to power input so that the complete system, when coupled, would be balanced.

~~~~~

That evening, Wilson contacted Wilkins. She agreed to have Wilson call his Defense contacts the next day and set up a meeting to discuss the NSA blackmail attempt.

“Try to make it on Tuesday,” Wilkins said. “I’d like to know if their threat was actually a bluff, and if they really had applied to the FISA court to investigate Tamara. Anyway, if they follow through with the threat, they would go to the U.S. attorney for the District of Maryland to present their evidence. The U.S. attorney would then go to the federal district court to obtain an arrest warrant. I can have an agent at the U.S. attorney’s office to see if someone from the NSA appears; if someone does, I’ll have the agent detain him. So you want to set up a meeting at the Defense Department?”

“That’s my thought. Squash this idiocy at the source. And learn how this garbage happened in the first place.”

“Direct approach,” Wilkins said. “I like it. Call me when you get something set.”

The following morning, Wilson called Robert O’Rourke, explained the problem, and asked for an emergency meeting with him, the Defense secretary, and a top-level NSA official. O’Rourke was outraged at the news and promised to arrange a meeting with the appropriate officials and Wilson suggested a few more whom he felt should be there too. About two hours later, O’Rourke called Wilson back to tell him that the meeting was set for 2 p.m. Wilson relayed this to Wilkins’ office and she returned his call later in the afternoon.

“Got your message,” she said when he answered. “The meeting’s set, right?”

“Yeah, as I said in my message, it’s arranged for Tuesday at 2 p.m.,” Wilson told Wilkins. “When I called my Defense contact, the under secretary in the research division, and told him what was going on, all hell broke loose. I had to convince him not to go on the warpath; that could wait until the meeting when they’d see what the NSA was trying to do.”

Wilkins sighed and then said, “Damn; this is getting big now. Okay, our tech has the first results of his analysis;



he's looked at two of the phone-call recordings. He said that the sections which seem to be Tamara's voice are actually computer-generated tracks and lack the noise and hum found in normal telephonic recordings. He told me that the people who did this used a technique called 'deepfake' to do voice cloning. And the supposed foreign voices on those recordings have the normal sub-audible hum and that was at 60 hertz, not the European 50."

She briefly explained the ENF matching technique for him and continued, "The computer-generated voice was saved directly to the media rather than by recording an audio signal, he told me. So there isn't any audio hum when the computerized speech occurs. But he did get matches on the supposed foreign voice. He said they matched to... let me read it ... the ENF database for the eastern interconnection of the U.S. electrical grid on October 29 between 2:19 p.m. and 3:47 p.m. My tech said the eastern grid covers most of the U.S., east of the Rockies. So those weren't overseas calls at all, and the times don't match the listed dates and times in the SD card's phone data info file either. So our technical analysis shows this is fraudulent evidence."

"Good, that's great news to have tech backup like that," Wilson said. "I assume you'll come to the meeting with the evidence."

"Wouldn't miss it. I'm bringing Mr Simpson, our evidence tech, too, so he can handle questions about the faked recordings."

### ***The Pentagon, Arlington, Virginia***

On the appointed Tuesday, Wilson, with Tamara and Nadine, met Agent Wilkins and her tech at the Pentagon Metro station, and they all went to the nearby visitor entrance. There, Wilson confirmed that everyone in his party was registered on the special access roster. Wilson was wearing his Marine class 'A's, as O'Rourke had requested. As he was attached to the Marine commandant's office, he possessed a DoD Common Access Card with Pentagon access and therefore had visitor escort privileges. Tamara, who had access to DARPA research facilities, already had her own CAC. Wilkins and Simpson had FBI "blue badge" access to the Pentagon. Only Nadine had to go through the security check and be issued a visitor's pass. She was fine with that.

When they arrived at O'Rourke's office, they were led to a large conference room—there was space for thirty people around the large table and many more chairs along the walls.

Wilson walked over to O'Rourke and shook hands, commenting, "Great to see you; hope you aren't planning to fill this room."

"No way, but the deputy secretary wanted us to use the big room."

"Let me introduce you," Wilson said and motioned to the others. "You remember Nadine and Tamara."

"Sure do. Great seeing you both again; sorry for these circumstances," O'Rourke told them.

Tamara shot him a little smile. "Wait, you should enjoy what happens here. I will."

Wilson looked over at Wilkins and noticed that she seemed to be talking quietly with one finger at her ear. She finished and smiled at him, then walked over.

"Spook phone, right?" Wilson grinned. She nodded. "Let me introduce you, then. Under Secretary O'Rourke, let me introduce you to FBI Special Agent in Charge Sarah Wilkins, out of the Baltimore office..." they shook hands, "... and Mr Foster Simpson, FBI ... you said forensic examiner, right?" He nodded. "Mr Simpson will tell us what he found when he analyzed those recordings."

They shook hands as people began to enter the room and O'Rourke told them to find their name card at the table and sit there. Meanwhile Simpson began working with one of the secretary's aides to hook his laptop up to the room's projection system.

Wilkins whispered to Wilson as they went to their seats, “We have a NSA person in custody; they did send someone to the U.S. Attorney’s office.”

Wilson nodded.

At 2 p.m., O’Rourke opened the meeting. “Welcome, everyone. This is an important meeting and I’m sorry that we were so cryptic about the topic, but it does bear very heavily on national security. This time the problem comes from within the intelligence community itself, and we’ll get to that soon, after I turn over the meeting to my associate, Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security Ralph Gross. But first, let’s go around the table and introduce ourselves, beginning with Ralph here.”

Gross gave a nod, saying, “Ralph Gross.”

Then came Dr Janine Carlson, director of national intelligence; then General Ezra Visson, director of the NSA; Mark Gray, associate deputy director of the FBI; and sitting next to Carlson, Visson, and Gray were their aides or chiefs of staff. A few seats away sat two staff members who were taking minutes. On the opposite side of the table were the Alexandres, Wilkins, and Simpson.

Tamara noticed that Visson’s eyes widened slightly when she gave her name and title, “Tamara Alexandre, physicist and engineer at Johns Hopkins University.” *Interesting, he knows something*, she thought.

Then Secretary Gross took over. “Last week I was given some extremely disturbing information about an intelligence operation being conducted in the Baltimore area and when I heard the details, to say I was distressed and angry would be an understatement. We are here now to learn exactly what happened and find out how such a thing could have occurred on my watch.”

Tamara was watching the others across the table and there was no sign that anyone knew what Gross was talking about. Even Visson looked uncertain, despite his earlier recognition of her name.

Then Gross asked Agent Wilkins to explain what had happened.

“I’ll start right in the middle of the events because this should get your full attention,” Wilkins began. “Miss Alexandre is the target of a blackmail attempt. We hope that they are rogue agents, but the perpetrators are, in fact, agents of the NSA.”

The result was an uproar, with many people standing and shouting questions and Gross called for order.

“Most of your shouted questions were asking for proof,” she went on when order was restored. “First, let me play a recording of the actual blackmail contact, which took place under the surveillance of the FBI, in a Baltimore coffee shop. The recording device used was an experimental electronic device invented by Miss Alexandre and it’s still in the development stage, but it worked just fine. You will see from listening to the recording why she wanted to use it as a backup to a regular FBI wire.”

She played the recording of the coffee shop meeting and then pointed out that the men had used electronic countermeasures to detect any recording or eavesdropping devices present. Her audience sat there, listening impassively.

“Who were they? Tamara had contacted me some weeks before; it appears that she has intelligence resources that are probably better than our agency’s or even the DoD’s. She had been alerted about a planned ambush at the BWI airport—and in fact, one had been set up; there was a plant of a large amount of counterfeit currency in a random passenger’s luggage which was retagged with her name, but Tamara’s warning, and my assistance, avoided that problem...”

Gray, the FBI official interrupted, “We’re still working on your report about that incident, Sarah. There are all

kinds of blind alleys we've chased into."

"Fine. Perhaps this info will give you some better leads. The perps who met with Miss Alexandre left her an SD memory card with recordings of her purported contacts with two foreign agents, offering to sell classified information to them."

There was another hubbub at that. When it subsided, Wilkins continued, "That wasn't all they left; they left fingerprints. Apparently they thought she'd have limited resources to fight their blackmail or extortion attempt and didn't know that the FBI was watching. We tailed them when they left, all the way back to NSA headquarters at Fort Meade. And the prints match NSA employees Nathan Gondon and Warren Kruse."

Visson slapped the table in front of him. "Damn! That's why the name Alexandre rang a bell. It was in this morning's action report, to seek an arrest warrant for her on terrorism charges."

Wilkins nodded. "Right. That NSA agent is in our custody now for attempted blackmail and other charges and we're seeking warrants for Gondon and Kruse as well. I suppose you'd like to hear the evidence that the FBI has that will prove these cases. Let me play..."

There was a knock at the door, it opened, and a head poked in and looked around. Nodding, the man came in and stood at the side of the door and announced, "Okay to enter, sir."

Through the doorway walked President Gerston.

## Chapter 64 - Intelligence Reaction

Everyone in the room jumped to their feet as Gerston said, “Relax, everyone. Please sit. So why am I here today? Because a little mouse... well, not so little and definitely not a mouse—more like a lioness protecting her cub... told me a little story about how **MY** government was screwing with her baby. Sorry I got here a bit late, but looking at the faces of some of my officials here, I see my late entrance won’t matter much. I’m guessing that all of you people now know about the problem.”

As everyone was getting reseated, Tamara glanced at her mom; Nadine was wearing a smug expression.

“Now where were you before I rudely interrupted? Oh, before getting to that, let me tell you that I know the details of what was said in that Baltimore coffee shop. I also know all about a certain airport incident. I understand, too, that the NSA is involved in this in a big, nasty way. I **will not** have a repeat of an Edward Snowden-type situation while I’m in office. Spying on civilians and attempting to frame them—I *will not* tolerate that... okay, go on, folks.”

Wilkins pulled her laptop closer. “Ah, FBI Special Agent Sarah Wilkins, sir. I was just about to play the recordings that those NSA agents left with Miss Alexandre, sir.”

“Oh, good. Go ahead.”

Wilkins nodded and spoke again. “You’ll recall from the recording of that coffee shop meeting, that those perps told Tamara that they had recordings of what they claimed were her international calls. They gave her a SD card and told her that it contained several digital files, recordings of calls which they claimed were made from Tamara’s phone, and the card also contains text files which appear to be carrier phone records showing international calls using that telephone number with the calls’ dates and times. I’ll pass around a paper copy of the text files on the card. Now I’ll play the recordings in order; there are four of them.”

She played them and everyone in the room sat stony faced as they listened.

Carlson raised her hand and Wilkins nodded to her, “Go ahead, Director.”

“Not to accuse or anything, but apart from what I heard in that coffee-shop recording, those call recordings sound very convincing,” Carlson said, carefully.

“Certainly. They were meant to be convincing and would surely frighten any typical citizen into complying with those agents’ demands, but Miss Alexandre has other resources at hand in addition to the FBI. Her boyfriend, I understand, is also something of a genius and gave us the answer to determine the validity of those recordings. With me here is Mr Foster Simpson, he’s an FBI forensic expert and when I was told how to check to see if they were real or fake, I got him to explain the process to me. It’s way technical, but he assured me that he’d use pictures to demonstrate what he found. Mr Simpson?”

“Thanks, Agent Wilkins. Jeez, Mr President, I didn’t expect...”

Gerston chuckled, “Carry on as if I’m not here. You need to convince them. I already know the truth.”

“Okay then. Let me pass out this description of EMF matching; it’s a forensic technique which is useful to learn when an audio recording was made or if it was tampered with. The handout’s a bit technical but in a sentence or two, it says that the hum that’s present on all power lines can be used just like a fingerprint to uniquely identify an audio recording. That hum can tell us the precise date and time of when an audio recording was made and gaps or discontinuities in the hum show that it was doctored somehow. With me so far?”

There were no questions but everyone was listening closely.

“So, if I show you exactly what’s happening while the clip is playing, that will explain it best, so if someone

gets the lights, I'll play the demo. The audio clip of the first phone conversation will play and what you'll see on the screen is a tracing of the background hum's frequency as it varies around the 60 hertz standard. As that handout explains, the hum is everywhere and when you record audio, the hum gets recorded too. The clip begins with a 1.5-second silent period before the ring and then the voice starts."

He played the clip and as it played, the image on the projection screen showed a wiggly line, jumping randomly up and down, but staying close to a base line that Simpson told them represented the 60 hertz frequency. When the clip finished, mostly everyone sat back in their seats and sighed.

"Okay, I see that many... most of you ... see the implications; good. You understand the process. At the beginning of the clip, you saw the continuous, unbroken tracing of the hum before the ring, which continued into the quote foreign agent's unquote voice answering the call. Point one: it's a 60 hertz hum; only 60 hertz. The European grid runs at a 50 hertz frequency and you saw that second horizontal line on the tracing below the 60 hertz line. If that voice had originated overseas, we should have been able to see a signal hovering around the 50 hertz line, even if that section was re-recorded. There was none, which means the recording of the so-called foreign voice was made totally in the U.S. Where? Using EMF matching and the national power grid database, I matched those sections of the recording to the power grid serving the eastern part of the U.S. and the time that it was recorded was on October 29 between 2:19:32.31 to 2:20:02.15 p.m. Yes, we actually can get the time down to a millisecond. Further, that's *not* the date and time of the first call as shown in the text file from the SD card; you have that printout. Still with me?

There were nods. No one wanted to speak.

"Good. Then Tamara's supposed voice came on. What about the hum? It was gone, right? That section of audio was *not* an audio recording; it was a chunk of computer-generated speech saved directly to the storage media. You saw the hum appear when the 'foreigner' spoke and stop when her voice came on—the recording is therefore a patchwork of assembled sound clips. So what about Tamara's voice? I'm sure you know that people's voices can be very accurately mimicked by AI now; the technique is known as 'deepfake'... ah, I see you all nodding, you're familiar with the term. Tamara's supposed voice was computer-created and added to make this ... well, forgery, I'll call it what it is. Do you need to see more examples? I have three more. Or do you have any questions?"

There were head shakes and "No"s from all around the table.

"Excellent presentation, thank you," Gerston complimented. He looked at Wilkins. "What is your office doing now, Special Agent Wilkins?"

"I agree that we can't let this become like another Snowden situation, sir. Or the NSA's earlier 'SexInt' sex blackmail scheme. But serious crimes have been committed here, and not only violations of FISA. Plus that airport incident. We're seeking warrants for the NSA agents we've identified so far, but several rogue agents aren't enough to gather the kind of information they had assembled for Miss Alexandre. Her own sources told her that she was being shadowed for weeks before this broke and Mr Simpson told me that cloning her voice would need hours of her voice samples."

Gerston looked at Visson, who had been whispering hurriedly to his aide. "General, you haven't said anything yet; what's going on at your agency? How could you let your people run amok like that?"

"Sir, I was completely unaware of anything like this happening. Do you want my resignation?" Visson asked.

"We'll see if it comes to that, but first, can you tell us anything that bears on this unfortunate situation?"

"Ah, we have uncleared persons present, sir."

“You’re referring to the Alexandres, I presume. Major Alexandre is an ambassador with the highest level clearances. Miss Alexandre has DoD top-secret clearance through her DARPA work and I will vouch for Dr Alexandre; she was vetted for top-secret clearance by the Diplomatic Security Service of the State Department when I appointed her as a special envoy. I will also vouch for their additional intelligence clearances,” Gerston responded.

“Very good, sir. The two agents that Agent Wilkins named earlier as being involved at that coffee shop are in our Signals Intelligence Directorate in special operations and report to one of our assistant directors. I only recall this because I read an action report this morning from that section; I have a meeting with that assistant director tomorrow morning. It would have been this afternoon except for this meeting.”

“What prompted you to want a meeting? Is that normal procedure?” Gerston asked.

“No, sir; but the action report raised some questions in my mind. I see now that my questions about what I read in that report are justified, but what I heard here tells me that some people really fu... ah ... screwed up badly.”

Tamara raised her hand and Gerston nodded to her.

“Mr President, Agent Wilkins and I have been trying to figure out why those NSA jerks have been hounding me. Why did they try to set an elaborate trap at the airport? The counterfeit money in that luggage strongly suggests a blackmail attempt right there. And then this blackmail or extortion attempt with those fake recordings happened. I also assume that they were trying to track me down from info I got from Hopkins officials and campus police, and also from the APL office where someone was asking about me. I wouldn’t put it past them that they were trying to trace my phone too and I think that my using a number of burner phones got them frustrated. Then they started to cut corners, got sloppy, and got trapped. Agent Wilkins and her team did a fantastic job, sir.

“Why was it me they were trying to trap? General Visson just gave me the answer. He said that those jerks are in a section called the Signals Intelligence Directorate. From a contact email that I received from them which used a fictitious company’s email address, I could tell that someone in that group was familiar with my MRI work, and a close reading of the papers I published about my findings suggest that the human brain is capable of producing electrical signals which, under certain circumstances, can be detected by other nearby persons. I’m assuming that whoever read those papers became convinced that I had discovered a potential method to read people’s minds. That’s a form of signals intelligence, I suppose. Maybe that person thought that grabbing someone who knew something about that kind of research fell into his sphere of responsibility—but that’s a real stretch. And because it was such a stretch, those NSA jerks didn’t have the necessary evidence to get whatever kind of warrant they’d need to arrest me, so they had to use blackmail.

“And why blackmail me? That’s a simpler question to address. It would be clear to anyone with half a brain that someone who’s in a physics doctoral program and doing research into quantum engineering would refuse outright to agree to simply give up that education and switch into an area where they have virtually no background. That’s exactly what I did, I refused outright. So to try to compel me, you heard on that coffee shop recording how they threatened to tie me up with criminal terrorism charges. I suppose that after I was arrested, I would be offered a second chance to work for them—or face a prison term. Oh, another thought just occurred to me... am I the only person that this has happened to?”

Gerston had been scowling while Tamara was speaking and he broke in, “Yes, that makes total sense, Tamara. You all probably know that all kinds of people, organizations too, have been complaining about ‘mission creep’ at the NSA for years, especially after the Patriot Act and then the Freedom Act were passed by Congress. People have maintained that those laws are at odds with the Constitution in many areas. General Visson...”

“Yes, sir!”

“...I want you to have your inspector general review every section of your agency and all its contractors to find out if anyone was recruited under duress. Start with the signals directorate; that seems to be where the bad apples are at—in this one case, anyway. And let me know immediately about your meeting with that assistant director. If he’s involved in any way, even just by ignoring what his agents were doing, I want him suspended and interviewed by the FBI, preferably by Agent Wilkins here.”

“Thanks, Mr President,” Wilkins acknowledged. “I also believe that we need to avoid a scandal over NSA overreach. Tamara and I discussed this extensively, and as she is the victim of the operation, I believe that we should listen to her wishes in this matter. Is that okay, Tamara?”

“Sure. Mr Gerston... and Mr Gray, too... Mr Gray, I know that this isn’t your call not to prosecute; that’s up to the U.S. attorney or even the attorney general, but your recommendation carries a lot of weight. I’d prefer that these goons get a real scare thrown into them. When I was talking to them, I sensed a really strong dedication and absolutely no evil intent at all—my family has a strong sensitivity to that...”

She was interrupted by both Gerston and O’Rourke, who commented, “Absolutely they do” ... “For sure; I’ve seen that.”

“I’m certain that they are excellent at what they do; I could tell that this mess wasn’t their idea but they tried to complete their mission. The NSA needs people with talent and dedication like theirs. Perhaps better management and guidance...”

Visson almost choked at that.

“...so I’d like that no criminal prosecution on these charges be undertaken for them. Possibly a secret arraignment to scare them; force them to get an attorney and make them think a bit about the consequences of blindly following improper instructions. Common sense should have told them that many of the things they did were illegal. Certainly a letter of censure or reprimand should be given to them.”

Janine Carlson, the director of national intelligence, replied to her, “That’s an admirable thought, Miss Alexandre. Most people in your position would be vindictive and demand the maximum penalties possible. Your acknowledgment of the agents’ expertise and value to the NSA shows you really thought about the matter. I appreciate that and believe that the general does too.”

“I do indeed,” Visson responded. “If the assistant director I’ll be meeting with tomorrow morning set up this fiasco, and it appears that he’s the person who did, I’ll take appropriate internal measures to handle his case, after I get the report of his interview with Agent Wilkins. That is, if she doesn’t recommend any criminal sanction; after all, he might have simply suggested that Miss Alexandre’s activities might need looking into and not ordered any overt action against her. Is that satisfactory, Director Gray and Miss Alexandre...?”

They both nodded to him.

“Good. Thank you. Now I was just asking my deputy here if he thought that our technical services directorate had a hand in those doctored recordings. He thought that they might be involved too and that’s a serious concern.”

Simpson raised his hand then and Gross pointed to him.

“General,” Simpson said, “perhaps I could make you feel a bit better about your tech people. I’m sure that they could do a much better job at making a forgery than this cobbled-up job, making it much more difficult to detect. There are many voice-cloning apps on the ‘net, *Respeecher* and *FakeYou* immediately come to mind, and those can be used by people with little technical skill. You saw how good the results were; it took some high-powered tech tools to show that they are fakes. What should be more concerning to you is how those NSA

agents got enough samples of Tamara's voice to train an app. It seems like the communications dragnet that the NSA was supposed to have stopped using must still be operating—perhaps clandestinely, even hidden from management. And there's the matter of her surveillance too. I'd suggest that you look into that branch if it's a different one than the one those agents are in."

Director Mark Gray was recognized. "I was thinking about Miss Alexandre's request not to prosecute and I concur. Agent Wilkins, this is your thought too?"

"Yes sir, it is."

"I believe everyone here also has the same opinion but for Mr Gerston. Sir, do you have a thought on the issue?" Gray continued.

"I'd like to see them squirm for what they did to an innocent party, but no, I won't order an action, one way or another. That decision is up to you experts. My political sense tells me to avoid any exposure of this—these incidents. I applaud Tamara's magnanimous suggestion; she's showed me many times that she's a true team player and wants the best outcome for the group."

"Very good, sir," Gray said. "We will proceed as Miss Alexandre has suggested. Secretary O'Rourke, as you hosted this meeting, is there anything more?"

"No, sir. And I trust that those of us in the intelligence community will get our houses in order."

"Well said," Gerston replied. "I appreciated being told about what was happening, folks, and please remember that I'm very sensitive to politically controversial incidents, as is every president. I'd prefer hearing about these issues from my officials and not from a bystander, now is that completely clear?"

There were a number of "yes sir"s from the room's occupants and the group began to break up. Gerston went over to where the Alexandres were sitting and greeted them.

"Nadine, thanks for telling me about this problem," he said as Wilson chuckled.

"I thought I had brought in the big guns for this meeting, honey, but you sure aced me there," he told his wife.

"I have to get back to my real job now," Gerston said. "There was no doubt in my mind about your part in this incident, Tamara, but I appreciate your thoughtfulness and forbearance. At least this wasn't an agency-wide problem. Dr Carlson is a Cabinet official, so I know she'll have her staff keeping track of the fallout for me. Take care, and I'll be in touch."

"Right, sir. And remember, let me know when you begin working on getting economic benefits to the world's common citizens, 'cause I'm about to unleash another major invention."

"Oh, hell, you had to go and remind me of our agreement, Tamara. Yes. That's in the works. Your mom will be part of that, you know. See you soon."

He left with his Secret Service agent, who had been patiently waiting.

Wilkins got Tamara's attention. "Do you want to be involved in this operation anymore as we root out the problem people in the NSA?"

"Nope. Let the process work and let the organizations heal themselves. That usually works best when there's no outside interference. They'll know what to do if the leadership is any good and I sensed that Visson is a good leader."

Wilkins shook her head. "Tamara, you're simply..."



Nadine interrupted, taking Tamara's hand, "...simply Tamara. Don't swell her head any more than it is already," she chuckled.

O'Rourke had been talking with his aides and then came over to them. "Thanks for all of that excellent work; you people took a nasty situation and turned it into a teaching moment, it would seem. Agent Wilkins, Mr Simpson, that was impressive work and Secretary Gross, who had to get to another appointment, told me to tell you how gratified he was about how you all handled this incident. Alexandres, you've made a number of friends in the intelligence community now, in addition to those in the DoD."

They chatted for several more minutes and then prepared to leave. On the way out, Wilkins was issuing orders to some of her agents about handling the NSA incident.

Meanwhile, Tamara was thinking, *I seem to be a magnet for stuff to happen. Jeez, blackmail even; glad everyone's okay with the outcome. I wonder why these weird things happen around me... Is it my commitment to oppose evil that attracts baddies to me? My connection to the Iwa? I wonder what it's all about...*

### ***Applied Physics Laboratory, North Laurel, Maryland: early December***

It had taken three months of work, but soon after the Thanksgiving holidays, everything was ready for the big test. It was a chilly and a bit overcast morning when the final connections were made to the coil array, the cameras were activated, and the sensor cabling was attached to the various recorders.

The watchers were hunkered down in a little reinforced concrete bunker structure about 700 feet away from the tall fiberglass shed where the coil assembly sat, ready for the test.

"Okay," Tamara called as the last techs left the shed and ran to the bunker. "All clear back at the coil?"

One of the techs called, "Clear."

A walkie-talkie radio that an APL security person was carrying squawked, "Surrounding area clear."

"Okay, people, I'll start the first sequence now, a 0.2 second activation. If the thing is gonna blow up, one amp for two-tenths will do it. On three. One, two, three."

Everyone held their breaths and sighed when all remained quiet.

"Cameras?" Tamara called.

The cameras had been triggered at the "two" count and at 480 frames per second with a two-second burst, there had been about 960 frames recorded.

The person monitoring the camera data called back, "Between a one to two centimeter movement showed on the vertical scale; then the disk dropped suddenly."

Everyone applauded; that was an excellent response given the inertia of the 100 kilogram mass which the force had to overcome.

"Any readings from the pressure or strain gages?" Tamara asked.

"Nominal," a voice called and some people chuckled.

"Well, that's all great news," Tamara went on. "None of the safety trips went and the power readings on the feed source remained steady. It appears that the coil is stable and won't attempt to pull power to sustain itself, which was another concern I had. Are we a go for the full second?"

"In just a bit," Miskin called. "One of the power circuits has some kind of fault downstream. Sector six."

Tamara scrolled through her computer readout.

“I see it. Power loss to coil segment four at 0.1892 seconds, then back on at 0.1991 seconds,” Tamara responded. “Is it that?”

“That’s it. Most likely a connector,” Miskin replied.

“Okay, let’s check that power cable. There should be just three connectors.”

Soon that was completed; the techs found a pin on one connector hadn’t been crimped fully, so they rechecked all of the connectors, and an hour later they were ready for the full sequence. Power was to be applied for one second. To ensure that the disk in which the coil assembly was mounted was kept stable, the guide rods holding it had inset ratchet togs every ten centimeters so that the disk could slide up, but couldn’t drop down more than the ten centimeters. They didn’t want a 100 kilogram mass dropping several meters onto the base of the apparatus. Tamara had calculated that, neglecting inertia and gravitational forces, the coil’s force which was generated on the application of one ampere, could move 100 kilograms 16 meters in one second. Accounting for gravitation and inertia, she calculated that with the applied acceleration force, the coil would rise about two meters during the powered second and its momentum inertia would allow it to coast, rising an additional 0.5 meters. What was unknown was the assembly’s initial inertia. The heights of the guide rods were sized appropriately, allowing for a 400 percent safety factor. Therefore the guide rods were made ten meters tall.

The full test was begun after the all-clear signals were received and Tamara set the computer to apply the power to the coils for one second. Everyone held their breaths for the countdown; on “three,” the computer beeped and it beeped one second later, indicating power off, as a loud “bang” was heard from the structure. It was the “bang” sound of a collision of some kind.

“Cameras?” Tamara called. “What happened in there?”

“Wow, the disk actually hit the top stops on the guide rail assembly—ten meters up. It’s locked on the cogs up there,” came the answer.

There was applause and cheers at that news.

“Can you do a slo-mo video replay? What happened at the beginning of the power input?” Tamara asked.

“Damn, I don’t believe what I’m seeing here,” the engineer replied. “It’s like there was no inertia—the disk just took off with only that initial two-tenths second delay and it began accelerating upward... let’s see... at about 4.2 meters and 0.6 seconds, it was going about 7 meters per second and still accelerating. Right about then, it appears that it lost steam and coasted, decelerating, till it hit the stops. I’m guessing that at around the 4.2 meter height, the repulsive force field dropped off and the coil had nothing to push against.”

“Any readings from the pressure and strain gages? Don’t say nominal either; this ain’t rocket science,” Tamara requested.

Everyone chuckled.

That person reported, “I do have readings. Small. Nothing from the wall air pressure gages; there was virtually no lateral air pressure increase. The strain gages show that the wall and roof panels were unstressed. But the pressure gages directly above the disk showed a small increase, most likely as a result of the mass moving rapidly upwards.”

“Who has the radiation detector readouts?” Tamara asked. “Any sign of ionizing radiation?”

“Nothing there; it remained at background.”

“Finally, before we go back in there, what’s the coil’s condition? Any surprises, like little green men hopping around it?” Tamara asked to a round of laughter.

“The video shows it’s sitting right up against the top stops and locked there by the ratchet cogs.”

“Thanks, everyone,” Tamara said. “We can call this test a complete success, I think. We’ll go check out the coil and the other hardware now.”

Everyone cheered again and Emma and Dr Wilfred Zucker, the APL director, came over to talk to her.

“Tamara, what I saw on the video is completely unprecedented,” Zucker told her. “From your plans, I saw that your power supply was simply three 12 volt, 9 ampere-hour sealed lead-acid batteries. And they propelled a 100 kilogram weight ten meters vertically. You only fed one amp of current to your coil?”

Tamara nodded. “Yep, it was a *total* of one amp to all the sectors in the coil assembly, actually. You saw my proposal—I calculated that the one amp input would allow the coil assembly to output a total energy of 12,080 joules, give or take a little.”

“But those were only 12-volt batteries. At one ampere, that only provides 12 joules per second of power,” Zucker objected. “How did that get to 12,080 joules in the second of powered operation?”

Tamara smiled. “Yep, the 12 joules per second is 12 watts. That’s roughly the minimum power that the coil assembly needs to open the coil-force, or G-force, portal. Energizing with more power produces a larger G-force output on a logarithmic scale but there’s also a threshold effect. The extra power comes not from the battery; it comes from inside the portal, if ‘inside’ is a valid concept there. We’re still working out the parameters as they apply to this large-scale coil assembly.

“Actually, what’s more interesting to me now is what seems to be the almost inertialess acceleration of the assembly. I had calculated what the inertia of the assembly should be to overcome its mass together with the gravitational field’s strength of 9.8 Newtons per kilogram, to allow it to lift off the platform base during the one second when power was applied. But the assembly appears to have violated Newton’s First Law, ‘cause its vertical acceleration was supposed to be about 16 meters per second squared without accounting for gravity, but after about 200 milliseconds, the assembly just took off at its maximum possible acceleration with no apparent inertial delay. We’ve gotta explore that phenomenon.”

Zucker shook his head. “Damn, Tamara, you just keep going on finding all kinds of violations of the laws of physics, don’t you. Now you’ve managed to clobber conservation of energy and Newton’s First Law.”

Tamara smiled at him, nodding, while Emma chuckled. “You have no idea what else she’s come up with, Wilfred. Solving the problems that her applied research is producing is creating a new field in physics, it seems. She’s come up with a theory of this coil force that needs to be carefully reviewed and we’re putting together a two-day mini-conference with about eight to ten physicists, high-energy, solid-state, mathematical, cosmology, and condensed matter specialists, to dissect her maths and their interpretation. It’s scheduled right after the new year. We have some top people coming; when I briefly showed them what Tamara did, they’re gagging to come, aren’t they.”

Emma turned to Tamara. “I suppose you’d like to look at your gadget now?”

Tamara shook her head. “I have faith in our people, Emma. They know the important things to look for so I’m gonna let them do their jobs; they don’t need me for that—I’d just be in the way. I want to tear into the data. I’ve got a million questions bouncing in my head now and I want to start work on them. Also on all the patents that the coils will generate. Just think if that inertialess property turns out to be real, what that could mean for engineering. And for science too.”

Zucker walked away, shaking his head, saying that he needed to get his safety personnel back to their normal duties as Emma smiled and winked at Tamara.

“He’s a good scientist,” she whispered to Tamara, “but he’s a bit old-school and conservative. Still, I think you impressed him.”

Tamara chuckled. “I guess. But he’s been good to me, even with the weird things I’ve asked the admin people to do for me.”

“So it looks like you’ve got your work cut out for you now, dear. And I suppose this test’s given you ideas for a number of followup experiments; am I right?”

“Oh, absolutely. But figuring out what happened to the inertia is a biggie and I can’t ignore that effect. It might mask something critical in the way the coil force behaves, so I need to understand that effect before I start looking at developing that coil assembly into a functional component of an engineered device.”

“I completely agree. I think that I’ll also look at the data from this test and see if anything suggests itself, if you don’t think that I’m encroaching into your work.”

“Oh no, Emma, please never think that,” Tamara objected. “I really value your insights.”

### ***Mid-December***

With the holiday season rapidly approaching, work on the “G-coil,” as it had been christened by Tamara’s team, was slowing down. The force name was now being called the “G-force” by everyone. Tamara used this slower time to arrange to bring in a 10 foot by 36 foot construction-office trailer, the kind that contractors use at construction sites, next to the G-coil structure. This was much more efficient, and cheaper, than replicating the whole guide-rod structure inside one of the lab buildings. The electronics from the makeshift bunker would be moved to the trailer.

On the second week of December, Kevin and Denise arrived in Maryland for a visit to Westphalia University. Avery University’s fall term was over and they had arranged a campus visit to Westphalia so that they could meet some graduate school and medical school faculty and talk to a number of the students. That Friday, late afternoon, Denise called Tamara.

When Tamara answered, Denise said, “Hi there, Miss Magician, cast any good spells lately? It’s Denise.”

Tamara laughed. “Well, I did figure out how to make a ‘Cloak of Invisibility,’ like Harry Potter had. I told you how I used it to disappear at the airport when we got back from the gallantry awards, when we spoke back then.”

“Yeah, and that was awesome,” Denise chuckled.

“And I now have a version of the ‘Two-Way-Mirror’ that Harry used for secret communication. No one can intercept or block it, but so far it just handles audio,” Tamara went on, continuing the joke.

“You’re not shitting me?” Denise asked. “Really?”

“Oh, absolutely. Used it in thwarting a blackmail scheme.”

“Damn. I call bullshit on that. Blackmail? You?” Denise objected.

“It’s true. It’s too complicated a story for a phone call, though, so...”

“...so you owe me the explanation. Hey, here’s why I called. Our meetings with the Westphalia people are finally over, but we had to stay an extra day—we were supposed to fly back this afternoon. Kevin rescheduled us for a Monday morning flight, so we’ve got the weekend free now. How’s about you guys getting together with us tomorrow—and guess what? Cindy and her husband, Tom Emerson, can come too, so you’ll get to meet them.”

“Oh, so she’s married? You called her Cindy Denison when you spoke about her,” Tamara replied.

“She’s keeping her maiden name professionally. So our hotel has this great lounge and a huge indoor pool; could you come around 11 tomorrow? We can get reacquainted; you’ll get to meet Cindy—and yeah, tell me all about that blackmail shit. Oh, almost forgot. You think Barbara can come? I think she’d really want to meet Cindy.”

“I think so too. Could she bring her boyfriend? He’s a Hopkins physics senior and is working on control and detector systems for radio telescopes.”

“Ooh... Tom’s an industrial and mechanical engineer. I bet they’d have things to discuss.”

They disconnected and Tamara confirmed with Barbara that she and Terence could go. Barbara, who had gotten a copy of the detailed Avery syllabus being used in the U.K., was hyped to meet Cindy.

The four friends arrived at Kevin and Denise’s hotel around 11 a.m. on Saturday. When they walked into the lounge, no one was there, but a minute later they heard Kevin’s voice in the hall. A few seconds later, he and Denise walked in, followed by a tall, broad-shouldered guy with a chiseled face and a slightly less tall, broad-shouldered woman with flaming red hair. Like Kevin and Denise, this new couple radiated confidence and charisma, but Tamara was attracted to this new woman’s strength.

*She’s tall like me... and like Emma but different... she’s got a command presence, almost, like Dad has, Tamara thought. I think if she gave a command, people would jump to do it...*

Denise was speaking. “Hey guys, great seeing you again, Tamara, Peter, Barbara. We’ve got some introductions now. These are our great friends, Cindy Denison and Tom Emerson. We met when they were students at Avery; they were renting an apartment in my mom’s house. Kevin and I had transferred from our old school to a high school nearby.”

Barbara said, “Great seeing you again, Denise, Kevin, and meeting you, Cindy and Tom. This is my boyfriend Terence.”

They began shaking hands, and when Tamara took hold of Cindy’s hand, they both gasped slightly, looked deeply into each other’s eyes, and then Tamara told the others, “Hang on; you guys talk to each other a bit. Cindy and I need to figure out what just happened.”

Tamara, when she grasped Cindy’s hand, to her infinite surprise, had felt an emotional “construct” very similar to one she associated with *Ogorin*.

## Chapter 65 - Slowing Time

Cynthia Denison was confused. What had just happened? She had just met this dynamo of a young woman—how old? Denise had told her that she was around eighteen and was scary, both scary smart but also could be completely intimidating at times. When their hands touched, Cindy had felt a spark of something, kind of like the feeling of recognizing someone you knew a long time ago. And something deep inside her made her sense that she indeed did know Tamara, on some deeper level. But Tamara was speaking now.

“Cindy... It’s great meeting you after hearing about you lots from Denise, but did you feel that sensation of recognition?”

“Ahh, good to meet you too, Tamara; Kevin and Denise told me just how impressive you are... but you said ‘recognition’? Was that the feeling I got?”

“Oh sure. You probably don’t feel it, but your psyche has the imprint of a spirit being and the impression I got is that it’s very similar to spirits I’ve sensed in someone from Denmark... Okay, you’ll think this is a weird question, but tell me, do you have any Norse relatives in your ancestry? I’m sensing a warrior presence in you.”

Cindy looked for a chair and sat down.

“Wow. This is heavy. A warrior?” Tamara nodded and told her to go on. “I guess I am; Dad’s a Marine and I’ve always tried to emulate him... I suppose that’s how I approach life, aggressively. But what do you mean by ‘spirits’?”

Tamara briefly explained about the Vodou *lwás* and Greta’s own protectors, and how they weren’t really “present” in the sense of a physical presence, but the potentiality of their attributes seemed to be part of her and Greta’s psyche. And in a somewhat weaker sense, those potentialities were present in her mom’s, dad’s, Peter’s, and now in Cindy’s case.

“Our Haitian warrior *lwa*, *Ogorin*, has given me some of his attributes and that allowed me to see a corresponding characteristic in you. Do you know if you have Nordic ancestors? Where’s your family from?”

“Huh. Let me think. Dad said that the family emigrated here from Scotland in the eighteenth century and lived in North Carolina at first. He said that there were lots of Scots that went there from the Highlands. They were farmers.”

“Do you know your family history from Scotland? I’m asking ‘cause Peter’s Danish grandmom told me that people who have this ... um... aura of a ‘presence’ like you do must have had ancestors who were somehow linked to a form of spirituality in some way. Hey, we’ll need to talk about this later. I’ve pulled you away from the others; let’s go see what’s up with them.”

They walked over to the group and found out what was up with them: they were discussing why Tamara had pulled Cindy away so abruptly.

“I found out that Cindy’s a bit like Greta, Peter, and she’s similar to you, as far as the spirit ‘presences’ are concerned,” Tamara told them. “I had already told Denise and Kevin about how that works.”

Denise looked at Tamara and then Cindy. Then she looked at Peter and back to Cindy.

“I do see something in Peter. It’s different somehow than when we first met. More ... focused? Assured? Stronger somehow,” Denise said slowly. “And I do see a really powerful internal strength in Cindy, but I always thought that was her personality...” she went on.

“Oh, but that’s exactly what it is,” Tamara told her. “That’s her psychic response to her association to that spiritual stimulus. It’s like Peter’s but more developed; more integrated into her personality. Peter’s has only

recently been formed.”

Peter had been staring intently at Cindy, so she looked at him, asking, “Something wrong?”

“Ah, no, no. You just look so familiar,” Peter said, embarrassed. “Can’t place it. Maybe someone I knew. No big deal.”

“Yeah, that happens to me too. It’s fine,” Cindy assured him.

“So who’s ‘Greta’?” Denise asked.

“My grandmom. On Dad’s side,” Peter responded. “She’s an anthropologist but also a seeress in the ancient Norse religion.”

“I was asking Cindy about her ancestors from before they came to the U.S.,” Tamara explained. “That’s why I grabbed her; I wanted to find out her background. Finding this out is exciting.”

“Say, Cindy, that sounds really interesting,” Tom put in. “I’ll bet you’d like to know too, right?” Cindy nodded. “Got an idea. Could you see if your dad is free now? I think you should call him and see if he knows about his family history.”

Cindy made the call but had to leave a message. The group remained in the lounge, talking about things—one big thing was Tamara’s experience with her attempted blackmail. She gave an edited account, leaving out the NSA’s role and attributing the incident to industrial espionage. Then about noon, they went to lunch.

After lunch, Denise suggested a swim, and Cindy chuckled, “Yeah, damn, okay. Can’t stand the wet suits, but okay.”

“A real convert there, isn’t she?” Tom smirked to a grinning Denise and Kevin, while the others looked puzzled.

Then Barbara exclaimed, “Oh! Wet *suits*! Don’t tell me—you guys nudists?”

That was a revelation for both sets of friends—having nudism in common. That led to Cindy sharing her own introduction to nudism and how she and Tom got Denise and Kevin involved. And then Tamara and her friends found out that Cindy and Tom sometimes visited Emma’s Maryland nudist resort outside Annapolis. They were in Kevin and Denise’s room, getting ready to change for the pool, when Cindy’s dad returned her phone call. She turned on the speaker.

“Hi, Dad. Something came up about my ancestry. It’s complicated, but it has to do with my aggressive personality trait. A new friend here has some insights and she thinks that it’s genetic and has to do with our family’s ancestors. Let me introduce you to our new friends. Kevin and Denise are here too.”

They both called, “Hello, Stuart!” and he answered their greetings.

Cindy continued, “Our new friends are Tamara Alexandre and her boyfriend Peter Winsberg; also Peter’s sister Barbara and her boyfriend Terence Dryer. They’re students at Johns Hopkins and Barbara’s at Maryland.”

They all said hello.

“Dad, do you know anything of the family before they came over here from Scotland?”

“A fair bit, Cindy. First, did you know that most of the male line of my family were military in some way? You mentioned a genetic link to aggression; well, that’s part of it.”

“Yeah, I do remember that,” she answered.

“So here’s some family background. I actually have a number of really old letters that my grandpa had, plus

several very old family Bibles that list births, marriages, and deaths. I recall looking through them when I was a teen and I did a report on my family when I was in high school. And I remember some things from the report.

“My family came over in the 1780s, somewhere in that decade, and settled in western North Carolina, near the part that later became Tennessee. The family came from the Scottish Highlands and our name back then was Dennison, with two ‘n’s. But the records that Grandpa had kept go back much earlier, to the 1500s, when the family, or part of it, was actually living in the Orkney Islands, way up in northern Scotland. The earliest record that I found was from 1522, a faded letter that was sent to ... ah, Kirkwall, I think the town was, and addressed to an Abigail Dennison there. So I concluded that part of our family originated in the Orkneys of Scotland well before the 1500s and I also found records that showed that the Dennisons, part of them, anyway, were a sept of the MacGregor clan. They’re a Highland clan and that group goes back as far back as the 800s. If you want, go on line and see if you can go back further than the 1500s. We didn’t have those kind of research tools back when I was in school, of course.”

They spoke for a little longer and then disconnected, then they trooped down to the pool. While the group was in the pool, Peter suggested that he could call Greta.

“She’d know better about whether the Norse had anything to do with the Scots way back then. Grams’ family has a detailed oral history,” he told Cindy and she told him to go ahead and do it.

After their pool soak, the group got dressed again and Peter called Greta.

“Hi, Peter; thought you were with your friends today,” she answered.

“I am, Grams, and we’re all here,” he answered, and then, on speaker, introduced the four whom she hadn’t met.

“We called you ‘cause it seems that Tamara’s gone and found a new person who has an attachment to the spirit world, that’s Cindy. Tamara senses a warrior spirit in her and her dad told us that their family history may go back over a thousand years to northern Scotland. So we’re wondering if she could have any genetic link to the Norse people.”

“Sure, there’s plenty of Norse history in Scotland, Peter,” Greta told them. “Vikings and other Norse settlers from Scandinavia, including Denmark, colonized parts of northern Scotland, especially the islands in the far north. Denmark is right across the North Sea from Scotland and the Faroe Islands are still part of the Kingdom of Denmark. So yes, Denmark’s and Scotland’s history are closely tied. And the time frame from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries is known as the ‘Scandinavian Scotland’ period. I’m familiar with reports of Nordic influence in the far north of Scotland as early as the late 8<sup>th</sup> century, when battles between the Scandinavian earls of Orkney and the rulers in the Hebrides were occurring with regularity. Also, there were frequent incursions by the Vikings from Norway and, later, a period of colonization of northern Scotland by the Saxons of Denmark, began.

“So to answer your question, yes, there’s almost a certainty that there is a genetic link between the Norse and the Scots of the north. I assume that you may want to know whether there’s a possibility that ... um, it’s Cindy, right?”

“Yeah.”

“That Cindy could have seeresses in her ancestry,” Greta went on. “That’s really a big unknown, since as far as religious practices in Scotland of that period go, that’s much less clear. There’s all kinds of conflicting information, but still, it’s fairly likely that pagan practices existed in early Scandinavian Scotland but those practices ended with the introduction of Christianity, which came to that area earlier than to Scandinavia. Does that explanation help you people?”



“Oh, for sure, Grams,” Peter answered as he saw a lot of heads nodding. “Say hi to Gramps. Thanks and ‘bye.”

Cindy looked over at Tamara. “So what does this ‘spirit’ thing mean for me?” she asked. “Now that I know that I might have it legitimately,” she chuckled.

“Not a whole lot,” Tamara responded. “My dad had his for his whole time in the Marines without knowing about his own spirit connection. He only began learning about it maybe four years ago and that’s when he realized how much that spirit connection did for him.”

“Oh, that’s right, your dad’s a Marine too,” Cindy smiled. “Denise told me he got the Medal of Honor, too.”

“Yep, he did, but they had to rebuild his leg so they retired him. But the president had him reactivated last year and now he’s a kind of ambassador and will be doing special gigs for the State Department.”

“Wow, that’s cool,” Cindy said. “I wonder if he and my dad ever crossed paths. Dad joined the Corps in 2000 and I was born in 2007, so I never lived at his earlier postings, obviously.”

“Well, my dad joined in 2002, I think. He got wounded in 2008. His unit was based in North Carolina.”

“That would be Lejeune,” Cindy told her. “Before I was born, the units Dad was in were based at Pendleton in southern California. Hey, we got way, way off the topic over that spirit thing and then Marine stuff. We were going to talk about the Avery Program.”

Cindy called to Barbara, who was talking to Tom and Peter just then, “Hey, Barbara, Denise told me that you did a research topic on the Avery Program as a senior.”

“That’s right,” Barbara said as she walked over to Cindy. “I started looking at social relationships between students before and after they were in the program.”

They began discussing Barbara’s project and Cindy’s work on its initial design and how so little work was being continued at Avery on continued curriculum development.

“That’s why Denise’s work in the U.K. was so important,” Cindy finished. “That kind of kick-started work on the Avery curriculum again back here. Maybe you should send them a copy of your own work; it sounds like it might be useful.”

“You know that I want to keep working on studying the Avery Program too, right? It won’t be my major emphasis in my dissertation research, but it’ll be a part of it.”

“That’ll be great. Please keep me in the loop too; I’d like to keep up with what you find.”

“Hey Cindy,” Tamara asked at one point, “you’re quite tall and have a real athletic build. By any chance, did you play volleyball in college? I recently started playing, myself.”

“Not v-ball. I was a power forward in college basketball, even though my height was more like a guards’, my aggression and power let me play up front. I was a four-year starter and was named to the AP All-American team as a junior and senior.”

“Woo, that’s cool,” Peter said. “Your team do well?”

“Final four of the NCAA tourney in my junior and senior years, so yeah, we were okay.”

“Cindy doesn’t mention it much,” Tom cut in, “but at seventeen years old, she was on the U.S. Judo Team and competed in the International Judo Federation’s world championship tournament in Tokyo, and she took the gold medal in the women’s lightweight division.”

“Shit! — sorry, everyone,” Peter blurted. “That’s where I know you from, Cindy! Sensei showed us the films

from a few selected matches and your gold medal match was one of them. He ran yours several times in slo-mo ‘cause he said your technique was just about perfect. He also said you must have had great conditioning ‘cause in the rematch they had you do to break the tie, you were much stronger and faster than your opponent.”

“Obviously you saw it, Peter—that’s exactly how it went down,” Cindy exclaimed. “So you do judo?”

“Barbara and I’ve been studying it for ... um, seven years, but I’m no way in your class... world champ... damn. Why didn’t you stick with it?”

“Several reasons. Number one, I achieved my goal, to reach the art’s highest level. But there’s nowhere higher to go than the top. Sure, I could have kept defending the title, but that’s kinda static—keeping others from reaching their top. Here’s a sort-of similar idea. A mountain climber gets to Everest’s summit. Does he stay there and keep others from reaching it? No he achieved his goal and others who make the attempt can do it too. I proved to myself that I could be the best; that was enough.

“Number two, I was a very strong high school b-ball player—even though I was short. Well, not short but not tall either. Shorter than the typical forward, anyway. I loved the game; got a full-ride college scholarship out of it. Keeping up the judo and competing in international tourneys wouldn’t allow me to play college ball. And, you know, doing both b-ball and judo is hell on the ol’ joints.”

Everyone laughed.

“Cindy, I saw Peter in action, you know,” Denise commented. “We told you about the Russian thugs who attacked us in England. Well, Peter just about destroyed the one he faced. The prettiest hip throw I’ve ever seen; he made the jerk fly.”

Cindy looked at the others in the group. “That’s cool. Yeah, look at this bunch of us... all killers, right? Me, judo. Peter and Barbara, judo. Kevin and Denise, taekwondo and Kevin knows karate too. It’s a deadly crew,” she laughed.

Terence chuckled, “Yeah, don’t include me in that. Ah don’t do violent stuff at all; Ah just played football.”

More laughter.

The group spent the rest of the afternoon sharing stories and getting to know each other, although Tamara didn’t bring Cindy into her secrecy circle about her abilities. She’d have to think about that a lot more.

### ***End of December and the New Year***

When the holidays came, Tamara spent them with her family, Peter and his family, and Emma and hers, in varying combinations, on different days. Terence was gone for part of the two-week period; he was visiting his family and had three younger siblings whom he greatly missed. After the new year, it was back to work for Tamara.

Emma had arranged a gathering of physicists to visit her lab and the APL, to look at the research that Tamara was involved in, and to review and critique Tamara’s latest theories. No one took issue with her mathematics; the issue was with her interpretation of its real-world meaning. The group outlined a few possible experiments which could be performed to answer some of the questions that her theory raised. As far as the major issue was concerned, which was how to experimentally create a particle having the appropriate mass to produce the effect that Tamara had discovered, one of the physicists, the cosmologist John van der Bellen, had joked that that particular issue could easily be resolved by building a larger collider—larger, that is, than Geneva’s 27-kilometer circumference LHC.

“Actually there’s an experiment we can do if we got the funding to build a larger collider,” he told the group, chuckling. “I did a quick computation on the size of the device and calculated that the collider ring should be

about the circumference of the inner part of the Oort Cloud ring—you know, the collection of asteroids, comets, and planetesimals that surrounds the Solar System way outside Pluto’s orbit. That circumference is roughly 2.1 trillion kilometers.”

Everyone laughed at that suggestion and one of them asked, “How’d you come up with that, John?”

“Basically, Tamara’s calculations suggest we need to reach an average energy of about  $10^{12}$  TeV. Extrapolating the properties of the LHC, that ring size would be what’s necessary to achieve sufficient energy to produce particles of that mass.”

Tamara laughed herself and commented, “You all know that we’d just be repeating an experiment that’s already been done—the Big Bang produced energies at that level, but unfortunately I’m not aware of anyone who might have witnessed it.”

Everyone groaned at her lame humor.

“Tamara, you’re not getting any points for that one,” another physicist laughed. “But you get full marks for these calculations. We just need to figure out what those results imply.”

Although Tamara got no points for her humor, her experimental devices did cause a minor sensation. When the guest physicists visited the APL and were shown the G-coil assembly and its test data, the doubters began to question their doubts. It certainly looked like energy was coming from nowhere; that was completely impossible. Tamara had reminded everyone of Conan Doyle’s quotation that went, “Once you eliminate the impossible...” et cetera.

When Emma summarized the group’s findings and recommendations at the end of the two-day session, she reminded her peers, “We know that we showed you unbelievable things here and you saw that the maths support the conclusions that Tamara’s shown you. How you view our interpretation of the maths is the stumbling block. But let me send you away with another quotation, this one from Arthur Schopenhauer. He said, ‘All truth passes through three stages. First, it’s ridiculed. Second, it’s violently opposed. Third, it’s accepted as being self-evident.’ Can we all agree that this is where we’re sitting at now, just before the third stage?”

All those attending agreed with Emma and told her that they would continue to think about Tamara’s calculations and their interpretation. Then they left for their homes after thanking Emma for her hospitality, not to mention the entertainment that this new physics puzzle presented.

### ***End of January***

The new suite of tests on the G-coil assembly had been finalized by the third week of January. Tamara was allowing her team to do the testing and they were proceeding with extreme caution, using minimal power applications, to try to define the field size and strength that the G-force exerted on its surroundings. By mid-February, they were able to determine the minimum coil activating power and were also able to obtain a steady-state condition which allowed the G-coil to float over its base where an equilibrium of applied input power and the coil’s repulsive power was achieved. But the issue of the inertialess acceleration phenomenon was still unsolved.

Tamara was performing some calculations of applied energy versus time and reviewing the G-coil’s vertical movement performance, using the cameras that the research team had mounted on the coil assembly itself, when she noticed something. The images of the coil’s background as seen in the cameras’ peripheral views seemed to be strange—distorted somehow, as if they had been speeded up.

*Jeez. What am I seeing here? Is this some kind of time dilation?* Tamara wondered. *That would explain the appearance of an inertialess acceleration.*

She got out her paper on the G-coil experiment, which she was holding off on submitting until all the patent application work was complete. Looking over the math, she saw places where her calculations might have a tie-in to general relativity theory; when she first began working on those calculations, any connection to general relativity seemed to be irrelevant. Now it seemed that the connection might be very important.

Her G-coil calculations had implied that the field created by the G-force involved some kind of curvature of the space-time of the “dimensional space”—or whatever it might be called—which was populated by dark matter and energy. This curvature should be directly analogous to the momentum and energy of whatever dark matter and energy were present and therefore, she realized, Einstein’s field equations should apply. And general relativity theory showed that time dilation was a function of differences in gravitational potential; she knew that a clock located near a massive body will appear to run slower than a clock situated further away. And apparently something very massive was associated with the projection of the G-force into the real world. How then was the gravitational potential field of her coil assembly related to the field that existed in the conjectured dark matter dimension? She dove into the math to see if it held an answer.

After a day of work, her mathematical calculations were creating more questions than answers, so she went off to discuss the matter with Betty Miskin. Emma was away; she was off again to Cambridge where the first set of ElectroPowerCube devices were almost ready for delivery to the company’s pilot energy farm outside Cambridge.

“I’ve been working on the inertia problem,” she told Miskin. “I noticed that there might be a time effect associated with the application of power to the G-coil. The calcs I’ve done seem to agree with that idea, but looking at the results another way, they don’t agree. It’s kinda like the solution to a quadratic equation—you get two answers, one positive and one negative. Quantum mechanics is like that too, it can give conflicting answers. What I need to do is to set up an array of very accurate clocks, but put them in particular locations around the coil. Here’s the plan for where to put them. You can see that they all need to be triggered by the coil power input. Do you see anything here that might need to be changed?”

Miskin looked over the materials.

“I don’t think so, but then, as far as your math goes, I can’t follow some of it. The clock idea is sound and I get why you chose those locations.”

Tamara found Fox and asked him where she could find six very accurate clocks.

“Yeah, check out the APL’s Time and Frequency Lab, Tamara,” he told her. “They can set you up.”

They did.

~~~~~

When Emma returned from Cambridge, Tamara told her about a quick experiment she had Miskin run after an idea had occurred to her..

“We took the super-coil design and made a small version of it. You know how it focuses the repelling effect? It’s how we make the disk float—something like ground effect.”

“Of course. So what new magic are you about to unveil then?” Emma grinned.

“So Betty made a few of the small coils to test this idea I had. I was planning to use the frictionless bearings we’re developing to build better wind turbines, but this is way better than wind. John Wolbers and Betty cobbled up several coil assemblies together and aimed the array at these specially shaped blades connected to a shaft. When they fired the coils, it pushed the blades and turned the shaft. We stuck a dynamometer on the shaft of this little setup and measured the torque developed—see, it’s 220 Newton-meters. This shows that we can get

the G-force to operate a turbine and skip the need for wind. Also skip huge towers, monster blades, and special sites with lots of wind.”

“Blimey, Tamara, again, you never fail to astound. With all of these spin-off developments you seem to generate, have you had the time to work out the strange inertia anomaly yet?” Emma asked.

“Yeah, I need to stop the distractions. That’s still a work in progress.”

### *End of February*

Three weeks later, after performing many experimental sequences using the large G-coil assembly, Tamara had finally learned the reason why the coil gave the appearance of an inertialess acceleration. It was, as she had initially suspected—the result of a time dilatation in the presence of a large mass—actually a virtual mass, as best as she could tell—which seemed to manifest itself when the G-force first appeared. She conjectured that this effect must be a result of the instantaneous folding of the “space” to which the G-force opened a portal; an extremely large quantity of the “mass” in that other dimension was suddenly folded into close proximity to the G-coil, until the folds settled into stability. Theoretically, the effective mass approached that of a small black hole. The time for this to occur, relative to someone outside of the field, was about 200 to 300 milliseconds. Only the immediate area around the super-coil was affected by this field, a few millimeters around the device, so exterior gravitational tidal forces never appeared, and according to general relativity, in the proximity to massive objects, clocks, or atomic processes, run slowly compared to outside the field. Thus the G-coil and its supporting disk did obey Newton’s First Law, but it was within a reference frame where time ran slower.

Of course reports of this result quickly went viral and was an instant sensation, so the APL had to set up a news conference so that they could stop the media’s insistent requests for interviews. Tamara was unhappy about the furor and all the attention but relented when Emma agreed to be with her for support.

“Tamara, I have a bit of advice about general press interviews where the topic can be open like this one,” Emma told her. “I had one press conference where one twit wanted to know about my nudist practices.”

“Shit, really?”

“Oh yes. I resolved then, that in similar kinds of conferences where open-ended questions could be asked, I’d insist that questions be submitted in writing.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Tamara said.

The press “conference” opened with Tamara describing, in non-technical terms, that she had found a way to generate a strong repulsive force using a special electronic circuit and the circuit could push away close-by solid objects. One such object could be the ground, so that an object containing her device could hover above a surface in much the same way that a magnetic levitation train hovers above its track. In the process of developing the circuit, her team discovered that, for less than a second, time within the field ran slower than outside of it. This observation agreed perfectly with the predictions of general relativity.

Many written questions had been submitted and Tamara noticed several more being written as she was giving her introduction.

One was, of course, “Why do we have to write down our questions?”

Answer: “We’ve had some experience with some members of the press asking questions which, unfortunately, were totally inappropriate. Having you write them out allows you to ask well considered questions.”

Question: “Does this mean that you invented time travel?”

Answer: “No. Time is slowed by less than a second, but only locally inside the field produced by the device. It

still moved forward.”

Question: “Can you make time stop in that field?”

Answer: “No. There’s too much matter in the universe to allow time to stop anywhere. As long as any matter exists, time will exist.”

Question: “How does your device work to cause it to float?”

Answer: “Sorry; the patent applications are being prepared, so the device’s theory is still confidential.”

Question: “Is this device like an electromagnet?”

Answer: “In some ways it is; in others, no. Again, its theory is confidential for now.”

Question: “It looks like there could be many commercial applications for your device. Can you discuss them?”

Answer: “In general. For transportation, possibly an improvement to magnetic levitation. For motors and generators, better bearings, lowering shaft friction. Applications like those.”

Question: “If the field slows time, is it safe for people?”

Answer: “It seems to be safe. The way the field operates, the time dilation appears to be restricted to the structure that generates the field force.”

Emma had been weeding out the personal questions, such as ones that asked about Tamara’s age, how someone who was “just a student” could be in charge of a project like this, and ones which suggested that Emma was the actual source of Tamara’s ideas. Also, many of the media people present had connected Tamara to the Cambridge energy device rollout and several wanted her to answer questions about “magic.” Emma bypassed those too. Several people tried to shout out their question, but an APL security person quickly stopped that. But the overall tone of the press “conference” seemed positive and soon all the acceptable questions had been dealt with. Then Tamara gave a recap.

“We’ve covered all of your questions relevant to the device which exhibited the temporal anomaly we found. Some of your questions were quite off topic and we didn’t answer them, but a few were about the new ElectroPowerCube being introduced in the U.K. Yes, I developed that invention, based on Dr Clarke’s mathematical theories. And yes, it is magic, as I said in my remarks when the company manufacturing it, EEC Energy Solutions, unveiled it. I said then that its magic was in how science and engineering intersected to allow a discovery like that to occur. It’s the power of the magic in seeing how kids take to learning STEM subjects so that they can learn to do their own magic. Remember, science can and does make magic real. As Michael Faraday, the great nineteenth-century physicist, said, ‘Nothing is too wonderful to be true, if it be consistent with the laws of nature.’ Many thanks for your interest in all of the amazing research work being done at Johns Hopkins University, including here at their Applied Physics Lab. We do magic here too.”

The whole group actually began to applaud and began to get to their feet to clap. Tamara and Emma quickly left the front of the little assembly hall, escaping through the door there; then Emma hugged her.

“Blimey, my dear, you did it again!” she enthused as Zucker came hurrying around the corner.

He had been at the back of the room during Tamara’s “conference.”

“If I didn’t see that, I wouldn’t have believed it,” Zucker told them. “That was an amazing windup to your answer session—can’t call it a ‘conference,’ can we. I’ve never seen the press do that here, give one of our presenters a standing ovation.”

“She did it in Cambridge too, Wil,” Emma said, grinning. “Her delivery style is compelling and the energy is

overwhelming.” She turned to Tamara. “Extemporaneous again, I’m sure.”

“Yep. I wanted them to leave with positive feelings, ‘cause we made it difficult for them to ask questions. But I like the way having the written questions stops the inappropriate ones.”

“Quite. That rule has stood me in good stead,” Emma agreed.

The news coverage from that meeting was positive and Tamara’s comment about Hopkins was included in the written and video reports, which led to a call to Tamara from the university’s president. He wanted to thank her for the positive news coverage.

“You can be a spokesperson for Johns Hopkins anytime you want, Miss Alexandre,” he concluded. “Thanks again for your stirring words.”

~~~~~

It was around this time that Tamara heard from Agent Wilkins about the NSA and the rogue agents.

“I can’t say a whole lot about what’s happened, Tamara, but they did root out the people involved. There weren’t many. The main culprit was an assistant director who was running his own show there and had a few cases he had successfully brought in, so he got a swelled head, it seems. We did do a federal indictment and shook him up big time and the NSA put him on probation—he’s an agent in analysis now; lost his management position. No field work for him. There were three regular agents who were indicted to scare them and they got written censures in their files. They also did find someone who was working for them under a limited amount of duress. With that bit of a shakeup, only involving those few people who all got a scare with their arraignments, as you suggested, we at the FBI have closed our part in the case, so my connection to it is over.”

“Thanks. I suspect you told me more than you should have, Mrs Wilkins, so I appreciate getting that news,” Tamara told her. “I wonder where the counterfeit money came from, if that was NSA too.”

“I didn’t hear anything about that and don’t expect I ever will.”

They said their good-byes and Tamara thought, *Well, that chapter’s finally over. I can stop thinking about it now and concentrate on my work.*

### ***End of March***

Tamara was at Hopkins this term taking one of the rare classes she needed for her degree, so she was ensconced in her little corner of Emma’s lab on a Tuesday morning, working on her problem of feeding microwave power to her linked-coil paired device, trying to work out the math which suggested how the RF beam might be tightened up, when Terence popped in. He had finished the radio telescope detector he had been designing and now had it working successfully. A year ago, he had teamed up with an astronomy professor on an NSF grant to use the device in a small telescope which was located on the roof of the Physics-Astronomy Building. He wanted to talk to Tamara about an idea he had about the dish drive aiming mechanism.

“So Ah was thinkin’ that this could be a demo for other ‘scopes, and some have those big, heavy dishes—the ones that aren’t fixed in direction. Could y’all make frictionless shaft bearings with your G-coils? Seems it’s possible.”

“Yep, it is, and bearings like that are one of the claims in my patent app. I did some calcs on the effective areas of repulsion, though, and so far it seems like there’s a lower threshold to the shaft size. We can’t get a reliable beam focus at less than about three centimeters, so about a three-centimeter diameter shaft seems to be the current minimum. The problem is with arranging three G-coils in a 120 degree array; the coils currently interfere if they’re too close. But it seems to me... why would you need special bearings? Aren’t the aiming movements very small?”

“Yeah, they are, unless y’all need to change the sector of sky bein’ looked at. Ah, well, it was a thought,” Terence said. “But y’all think it would work on bigger things? And how do they work?”

“It should. I built a model of a kind of shaft bearing with John Wolbers’ help, you know, he’s Emma’s mechanical engineer, and the bearing pair worked great. They work kinda like magnetic bearings do but take much less power than the active electromagnetic bearings do. They also don’t need a control circuit to accommodate compensation for precession and vibration. I’m working on some ideas for several different commercial applications, in fact.”

“Cool; that’s impressive, Tamara. Are y’all gonna design a hover train like those mag-lev trains in Europe and Japan?”

“I’m gonna leave that one up to others. They can license the tech from my foundation.”

Terence laughed. “Yeah, and Ah just heard the ‘ka-ching’ of more bucks comin’ in. Oh, another thing Ah wanted t’ask. Can y’all give me a hand reinstalling the detector in the ‘scope this evening? It needs to be done after 9 p.m. ‘cause another group’s usin’ a different detector up to that time for their own stuff,” Terence asked.

“Sure. I’ve got plenty to do here; it’s no problem so I’ll see you up there at 9.”

Tamara met Peter for dinner that evening at Levering Café; he had decided to work late too. They had dinner together and then headed back to their respective buildings.

When she left the cafeteria, Tamara told him, “I’ll meet you at East Gate near the Homewood Museum at 11, honey. I’ll text you when I’m on the way.”

Going that way was the most direct route to their apartment building.

“Okay, see you then, sweetie.”

Tamara finished up working with Terence at 10:50 p.m. and went down to her little office area to get her backpack. On the way out of the building, she sent a text to Peter.

*“On my way.”*

*“See you soon,”* he replied.

Tamara was walking along the path near the Blue Jay Statue, a campus feature which got redecorated with new graffiti almost weekly, when she began to get a sense of foreboding. She had noticed that the nearby area was empty of foot traffic, and the heavily treed path toward the Homewood Museum looked fairly dark. Some of the walkway lights seemed to be out, but she decided to take that path anyway. Walking warily, she was approaching the mid-point of the museum when a figure slipped out of the darkness and began moving toward her; then she noticed another figure waiting in a copse of trees nearby. Both were radiating a sense of evil.

*Oh shit, it’s my magnet for evil again, the thought ran through her mind. Damn, no time to “push” a taste... and he’s getting too close... too dark to see his eyes...*

What could she do now?



## Chapter 66 - Sharing a Gift

Suddenly another memory from her grandmother appeared in Tamara's mind. It was a recollection of how the elder Tamara had kept Vanessa from touching her. Vanessa's journal had mentioned a "gray cloud" which had prevented her from touching her grandmother, and now Tamara could see, with her grandmother's memory, just how that worked.

She yelled at the man, "Stay away!" and began to run toward the circle drive campus entrance where she had arranged to meet Peter. While she ran, she felt her mind prepare for a possible encounter with the man, who had started to chase after her. Then Tamara noticed that the second man was moving to intercept her, so she began angling away from him.

The closer man had glanced around, checking for any witnesses, before he started to chase after her. He was surprised at how fast she was running, but Tamara's winter coat and backpack were slowing her down enough that he was able to close the distance between them.

He shouted at her as he got closer, "Got you, stupid bitch, you can't get away, gonna have some fun," and reached for her as she yelled at him again to stay away and then shouted for help.

As the man caught up to Tamara, she felt him reach for her and dodged to avoid him as he lunged and missed. Then she stopped and turned toward him, releasing her "gray cloud," as he moved to grab her. That didn't need eye contact.

"What the fuck?" he exclaimed as his grab missed her.

As she "pushed" the "gray" cloud, she suddenly realized that it was just a more powerful version of her "making herself little" projection, so she used that new knowledge to try to strengthen its effect. Then she noticed that the second man was warily circling around her; he seemed to be puzzled about his partner's inability to grab her. And out of the corner of her eye, Tamara saw someone running, coming from the direction of the campus entrance. She realized that it must be Peter because the figure was running hard toward her.

*Either Peter heard me yell or got an alert from a lwa*, the thought occurred to Tamara, as she kept dodging while using the "grey" cloud to keep confounding her assailant.

He was trying to grab her, cursing at her, and couldn't understand why she was never where he grabbed.

Tamara called to Peter, "Watch it, there's another guy! Get him first! I got this one!" and he called back, "I see him!" and ran toward the second guy.

"What the fuck, bitch!" her attacker growled at her, "you think *you* got *me*?" and grabbed at her again.

But again she wasn't where he thought and stumbled when he missed her. Tamara still wasn't able to catch his eye, but she had managed to work a little confusion emotion into her "gray" cloud.

The second assailant, who had been trying to figure out his companion's strange behavior but who also had been slightly affected by Tamara's confusion "push," was alerted by Peter's shout. He turned to face Peter as Peter approached him, looking for an offensive opening—he had only practiced defensive moves. But when the man tried to throw a punch at him, Peter had that particular defensive move down pat and used a hip throw to put his assailant on the ground, hard. He had been getting plenty of practice with his hip throw. With one down and apparently unconscious, Peter turned to the guy who was trying to grab Tamara. That one was so intent on trying to grab her that he didn't see Peter coming from behind him—Tamara's confusion projection had finally worked on him and the man was now flailing at her in frustration. Peter grabbed him in a hammer lock and forced him to the ground, face down.

That's when Peter's first victim struggled to his feet and pulled out a pistol, staring angrily at Tamara.

"Now I'm gonna take care of both of you shits for that! Let go of my buddy there, you fucker. We're gonna teach you both... owwww... ugh..."

He gurgled and dropped to the ground, the pistol falling out of his hand.

"What happened, Tamara? You did that?" Peter panted.

"Yeah. It worked. Remember that time in the MRI when I tried that one 'push' on you—you lost muscle control?"

"Right. You did that now? That's crazy; damn, you're dangerous, you know?"

Tamara chuckled ruefully as she went over to the dropped pistol and picked up, holding its grip using a scarf that had been tied to the side of her backpack.

"You are too with your judo moves. Here, take his gun—hold it using my scarf—and get up off that jerk. Hey, jerk," she called to the man Peter was holding down, "we have your buddy's gun here, so just stay put. If you move, you might get shot somewhere important."

Peter grabbed the pistol, keeping the scarf in place, and got up as Tamara called 911. The guy, hearing her making the call, tried to get up but she caught his eye and "pushed" a dose of her yellow-brown with black-tinted edges taste at him. He yelped in pain and went limp too.

It took almost five minutes for the campus police to arrive, but Tamara's report of a gun also brought two units of the Baltimore police. When Peter saw all the police cars' flashing lights pulling into the nearby circle drive, he laid the pistol on the ground about ten feet away from the two men and went to Tamara, who was carefully watching the men on the ground. Then, as the first of the officers came running up, Tamara "pushed" a small amount of the silver taste of recovery at the men on the ground and when they began to try to sit up, she caught the eye of the closer one and "pushed" the greenish-gray taste of compulsion at him, whispering a suggestion to him to confess to everything. As the first officer came within view, she moved away from him.

"Police! Don't move! Put your hands out where I can see them!" the officer ordered, pointing his pistol in their direction.

Tamara called, "Those two on the ground tried to attack me, but my friend here stopped them. They had a gun. It got dropped over there," she pointed.

Several other officers were now running up to the scene and one went to collect the pistol while the second began cuffing the two men, who were still somewhat dazed.

"You took on an armed perp?" the first officer asked Peter when he confirmed that the men were secured. "What happened that they look so out of it, anyway?"

Peter answered, "I know judo and took one of them down hard and Tamara was able to push the other one away when he tried to grab her."

Tamara continued, "I was able to stay away from that other one till Peter got to him; that's when he started to pull the gun out, but Peter was able to throw him first and that's when he must have dropped it. I guess they both kinda got knocked out 'cause they didn't move till you got here."

Peter looked at Tamara and shook his head with wonder.

"Yeah, that's pretty much what happened," Peter confirmed. "We both worked late tonight in different buildings and we planned to meet here, but as I was getting close, I heard her call for help. So I ran over here as fast as I

could and saw those jerks chasing her. I stopped the first one and the other one came for me so I threw him too. I didn't see the gun until it fell on the ground. We kicked it away from where they fell."

It was 1 a.m. before Tamara and Peter got back to their apartment, where they both crashed.

And at 8 in the morning, the intercom buzzed; it was a Baltimore detective and he wanted to question them. Peter buzzed him in and soon he was knocking at their door.

"I'm Lieutenant Davis," he introduced himself, giving Peter his card. "I'm here about the attack on you last night. The complaint number is on the card. I've got some questions for you both and a transcription of your oral statement from last night for you both to sign."

"Okay. Tamara told me that they told her they were gonna rape her," Peter replied.

"Yeah, the one guy didn't say it outright but that was the impression I got from what he said to me. I don't recall his exact words. So is this attempted assault?" Tamara asked.

"Actually it's lots more," the detective said. "One of the perps confessed and ratted out his friend. Very strange; he just opened up like a floodgate. You probably won't be needed at their trials because he gave us enough details and we have enough physical evidence to charge them with several rapes. Here are the transcripts for you to sign—please read them over to be sure they're accurate. And I have a few questions to clarify parts of your statements."

He asked the questions and their responses were noted on the transcripts, Then he thanked them and left, after requesting that they not share the details of the assault with others to avoid problems should their assault case come to trial.

When he left, Peter turned to Tamara. "Okay, about last night. We were too tired to discuss what happened. What the hell did you do to those guys, anyway?"

"Thanks for coming to my aid, sweetie. You know, after Wilkins called me to tell me what finally happened with those NSA jerks, I was thinking about how I seem to have become a magnet for evil people and I don't like it. So what happened? I'm sure I was guided to go that way—tell you more about that in a sec. But when I saw that guy—then saw the second one, a memory I got from my grandma popped into my mind. It was something that she did with Vanessa. Remember, I told you about what happened to her in Haiti years before Dad met Mom."

"Sure, I remember that."

"Grandma had some awesome abilities, like mine in some ways but different in others. When her spirit was in my head—remember that story?—I was left with some of her memories that can appear when I need that knowledge. So she had a way of keeping someone from touching her. It's like when I 'push' a confusion emotion, but a little different. So I used that new ability, or whatever it was, on the guy chasing me. That's when I realized that doing that was like when I'd 'make myself small,' but this version is stronger somehow. The other thing I did, when the other jerk pulled out the gun, was what I tried with you when you were doing the MRI plus EEG test. Your muscles went limp?"

"Oh yeah. Ugh. You used that on him?"

"Yep. He was close enough so that it worked, but it needs eye contact somehow, so I couldn't try it with the shit who was chasing me. Not sure about how it works, though, but unless I get eye-to-eye contact, nothing happens. But I saw what happened in your brain from the scan we did when I 'pushed' that one to you. I can't tell anything about how the activation pathways in the brain worked when I did that, but what happened in your brain was that your whole motor cortex lit up. It fired so many of the neurons there that they overloaded and

stopped working. That resulted in the loss of muscle tone in your voluntary muscles—mainly the arms and legs.”

“Okay... but why did it hurt like that?”

“The motor cortex is immediately adjacent to the sensory cortex and parts of that area were also lit up—must have been a collateral or overflow effect. The neuron overload in the sensory cortex must have triggered a generalized pain sensation. You said that you didn’t know where the pain came from, right?”

“Yeah. Jeez, honey, that’s dangerous, you know?”

“Oh, I do. *Granmanman* could do a lot of things herself that could be nasty, but she never used any for evil. And I won’t, myself.”

“Thank goodness,” Peter sighed. “I wonder why that stuff keeps happening to you, though.”

“Maybe the ‘dream’ that wasn’t a dream I had last night had an answer, honey,” Tamara told him. “My memories of the dream are really jumbled so I don’t recall anything specific, but my impression is that... I think it was *Ayizan* and also *Erzulie Mansur*, who led me to go on that path past the museum. It was dark there and it wasn’t even the direct route to meet you. I usually avoid trouble by not going into bad situations, but somehow I was urged to take that path. Say, how did you know I was in trouble and was on that particular path, anyway?”

Peter stopped to think. “Damn, I don’t—shit, you know? I started running there *before* I heard you call. That’s crazy! Yeah, I got a sense of foreboding and I wanted to get to you as soon as I could.”

“Peter, you see? The *lwa* really are influencing you and you’re becoming more sensitive to receiving their, ah, messages. It took Dad more than twenty years to learn that.”

“I guess that I can see it... but shit, Tamara, I don’t wanna become an anti-crime vigilante—and I don’t want you to do it either. This is dangerous shit, darling. Why do you think that the spirits are pushing you into danger like that?”

“Excellent question. Remember, I told you that I think that the *lwa* are a reflection of one’s nature in a lot of important ways. So there must be something in my own psyche that’s making this happen. I’ll need to meditate on this and ask for the *lwas*’ help to understand it.”

“Okay, but I told you what I think. Please let the *lwa* know my opinion,” he joked.

“Ha ha. If what I believe is true, you’ll need to convince *yourself* that you don’t wanna be a vigilante. Hey, I need to get moving; my class is in 45 minutes.”

~~~~~

During the rest of the week, Tamara visited some of the volunteers’ trials of her possible pheromones with the subjects that the med school had recruited. While the subject was seated in the MRI, at the appropriate moment during a scan, they were told to crush a small gelatin capsule, which contained a small piece of filter paper on which a tiny amount of the chemical, together with an extremely small amount of methyl salicylate, or oil of wintergreen, had been deposited. The scented oil was there to confirm that the capsule had been broken. Then the subject was to inhale the scent through their nose. The chemical chosen was the one associated with thirst.

Dr Jose Marcos, the radiologist for the project, was in the control room during the session when Tamara arrived. Joyce Darner, her biochemistry collaborator, was present too. They were reviewing some scans when Tamara came in.

Darner looked up at her as she closed the door. “Tamara, Jose’s shown me that the chemical gets some kind of

response, but it's not like the responses from the scans you ran out at the APL when you were in the magnet room."

"Oh, really? Let me see what you mean."

Tamara looked at the last scan that they had done.

"See here," Marcos said, pointing, "this was a second after the first capsule was crushed; it's the negative control and there's no significant brain response. Here's the second capsule and see how the sections of the olfactory tract light up? Then we see the neurons in the pathways to the midbrain light up as their potential changes. Those neural pathways lead up to the cortex as the APL scans show, but then the activity dies out rapidly."

"I see," Tamara said. "How about any somatic effect? Did the subjects experience thirst?"

"Actually they did, but it wasn't a very strong effect," Marcos replied.

"Yeah, about that," Darner commented, "I used an isolation hood to contain the chemicals while I worked with them. I used the containment unit to make up the capsules, too. But even though that's a totally closed system, enough of the molecules must have escaped that I felt thirst whenever I handled the apparatus. Not strong, but it was there."

"I wonder if we need a positive control, then," Tamara remarked. "You showed me a negative one, with only the methyl salicylate present. But I don't have the isolation tent anymore. What about this? If I try wearing an isolation gown with a full face respirator when I'm in the room with a subject? The hospital has that kind of gear, right?"

"I'm sure they do," Marcos answered. "It's almost lunch time and we have four subjects coming this afternoon. Can you come back then? I'll see about rounding up a gown and mask."

"Sure. I can be back at 2:30. I can check on some things I need to do till then," Tamara told him.

She was back at the MRI lab on time, Marcos had the isolation garments, and Tamara put them on. She was wearing them when the next subject was run through the scan. A first scan was done with Tamara in the room, "pushing" thirst with no capsule, then a second scan was done just using an active capsule, and a third involved both Tamara "pushing" and a capsule. This sequence of scans was repeated with two more volunteers. Fortunately, they had stocked up with a few cases of bottled water, because Tamara's "pushing" plus the active capsule was the key to intense thirst, but her "pushing" the sense alone was a very close second.

She reviewed the scans with the others.

Marcos pointed out the difference. "It's in the cortex, see? When you were in the room and their olfactory tracts were quiescent, see these cortical patches? There's some activity there, and some neuronal activity leading to the midbrain, but it's weak. Without you in there, the capsule produces only a weak effect. Just as we've seen before. But with both you and the capsule, look how the entire limbic system responds. There's something that your presence does that combines with your chemical secretion—both natural and artificial. I've looked at your EEGs when you do that and all there is, is a very strong signal—and your resting EEG shows high amplitudes too. It's not abnormal, but you're above the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile for activity levels."

"So it appears that my pheromones work in combination with some kind of brain electrical activity, then," Tamara mused. "The scent primes the limbic system and the electrical activity completes the process."

"That would appear to be what happens," Marcos agreed. "The thing to try is to see if anyone else can do what you do."

“Right. I’ve got some ideas on that, so let me look into the next step. But you are getting enough good data to be able to show that those chemicals do indeed cause a measurable effect on the subjects?”

“Oh, for sure. This will certainly be a groundbreaking paper, showing the first well controlled study of pheromone-like activity in humans.”

On her way back to the Homewood campus, Tamara explored her thoughts about her ability to control parts of her limbic system. Some of her grandmother’s memories had begun to surface; until now, they hadn’t made much sense, but now some of those memories seemed to hold a possible answer.

“Mom?” Tamara left a message for Nadine in her voice mail when she got back to Emma’s lab. “Some interesting news. The latest MRI scans on our volunteers shows that it takes both a chemical response and an electrical one too in order to get the full effect when I ‘push’ an emotion. And then a memory from *Granmanman* started to make sense. Can Peter and I come to your house tomorrow evening? I want to talk to you and Dad about my idea.”

Nadine called back a few hours later and they set the time to come; they would have dinner together.

The next day was Friday and at the end of the day, Tamara and Peter drove to her parents’ home. During dinner, Tamara told them about how her pheromone chemical worked in the tests.

“So it looks like the maximal effect happens when the subject is exposed to first the chemical, which activates the limbic system, and then some kind of electrical signal that I produce completes the process. The brain’s electrical receptors appear to be those patches on the surface of the cortex and the MRIs of our volunteer subjects show that everyone has them, but in most people, they seem to be inactive. I thought of a way to try to activate them—actually, *Granmanman*’s memories seem to show that there’s a way.”

“What do you mean?” Nadine asked. “*Manman* taught me what she knew when I was *kanzo* and...”

Tamara interrupted, “Did she not tell you that there were some additional, very advanced things that you would learn after you had gained some experience working as a *manbo*?”

“*Mezanmi*! You are right! And she was gone before she could do that. It’s true, *Manman* knew much about the truly ancient arts... so you think you have some of her memories, things she never got to pass on to me?”

“It’s possible I might eventually be able to understand most of those memories. It’s so difficult ‘cause first, I don’t have the *manbo* training and knowledge and second, the memories have no connection to anything in my experience. That’s a vital need ‘cause without any referents, a memory is meaningless.”

“That’s actually true, sweetie,” Nadine told her. “So how are you able to understand this particular memory?”

“It started with my recalling how *Granmanman* did the ‘gray’ cloud, actually. It was really similar to what I did to make myself ‘little.’ When I did the ‘gray’ cloud, it opened up a little more understanding about how *Granmanman* used the colored auras that you told me she could see. When I activated your and Dad’s limbic systems—Peter’s too—that was using just a tiny amount of the abilities that your *manman* had. What an awesome person she was!”

Tears began forming in Nadine’s eyes and the two women hugged.

“So I have an idea about my abilities. They’re very similar to *Granmanman*’s, actually, and I think that one of the ancient skills she had learned was how to develop those skills in an experienced *manbo*, one who had proven that they would not use their *manbo* knowledge to do anything evil. When I think those thoughts, I just get the feeling that I’m correct making that assumption. I also think that the skill is strongly dependent on heredity. Remember when Greta was talking about societies where shamans were important parts of their cultures?”

“Oh, I do, and looking into that aspect of the sociology of those cultures is one of my research goals,” Nadine told her.

“So, in many of those cultures, I read that shamans took their apprentices from family—like a daughter or son—or somehow they tested prospective candidates to see if they had the proper characteristics. Guess what? Everyone here, you, Mom and Dad, and Peter too, you all have ancestors who were a kind of shaman. Greta’s whole family certainly does have that background, and she’s also been trained in using her abilities. Barbara’s inherited the ability but isn’t trained; but her spiritual presence is immense. Peter does too, but his development was stunted by its early effect on him. Exposure to the mental trauma he had because of that naked Program stopped his natural development. Peter, I think your dad missed out on the gift; I don’t sense any particular mental presence other than a healthy amount of charisma.”

Peter nodded, smiling. “Yeah, his brothers and sister call him the family’s odd one out. I can feel Aunt Shelly’s spiritual presence now; she’s strong, and Dad’s brothers have a similar presence.”

“So what’s your idea, Tamara?” her mother asked. “Do you think you know something about the ancient lore *Manman* knew?”

“It’s hard to think ‘aura’ when I’ve always thought of my ability as ‘taste,’ but my experience with using the ‘gray’ cloud opened my mind to a number of other ... ah, things, that I can project to others. Like when I ‘powered you up,’ as Peter called it. But now I think I can do more. You want to try?”

“Um, nothing too damaging, I hope?” Peter asked.

“You probably won’t feel much, maybe that your senses may become more acute. Like last time, remember? But I think that you’ll need to learn how it works. There’s no manual for all this stuff.”

They all chuckled and Nadine asked, “What do we do?”

“I think it needs a certain state of mind. I can’t force anything to happen like when I ‘push.’ You need to be receptive. *Manman*, in your *konesans*, when you were working on spirituality, *Granmanman* had you do a final special task, I can sense in my thoughts.”

“Yes, *konesans* wasn’t just about learning ritual practices and about the different *lwa*. We learn ‘the gift of eyes,’ that’s the term for psychic power, empathy, and intuition, it allows us to see the protective spirits directly. Perhaps the part of *kanzo* you mean was the *kouche*. I was in seclusion for nine days, meditating.”

“Yes, that feels right,” Tamara said. “I think this needs the person—people to be in a state of meditative spirituality, all of us together... that would be a group meditation. I think our hands should be joined too. Dad, are you good with trying this out?”

“I think so. I like the new sense I have and how it lets me ... well, *see* people in a different way.” He made finger quotes at the word.

“My sense says we need to sit on the floor,” Tamara told them and she began to arrange how they sat and would hold hands. When they were settled, she went on, “Now we’ll meditate and while you do, keep aware of the contact between us and try to open yourselves to thoughts that aren’t your own.”

After several minutes, she began to tentatively tweak her grandmother’s memory as she began sensing the others in a different way. It wasn’t an emotional sense, it felt more spiritual. She realized that her senses had gotten a little scrambled then, when she started to hear a colorful aura forming around herself and heard it flow around the others.

In a distracted part of her thoughts, up popped, *That’s new, it’s really synesthesia now. Hearing colors. Oh, and*

*now hearing the colored auras in my mental vision of them too.*

Eyes closed, in her mind's eye, Tamara heard the aura start to pulse—at least it seemed to, and it appeared to be enveloping Peter and her parents. She could feel her mind begin to connect somehow with the others even more strongly, as a wave of satisfaction flowed over her and let her reach her mind out to shape the colored sounds.

*What was that? She wondered. My mind seems to know what to do, I guess. Something in my memories—I really need to figure out how that works. Maybe Greta'll have an idea. Oooo, I bet she'd love to learn this too.*

Very soon Tamara heard-felt-sensed the aura's pulsing begin to fade and her connection to the others began to disappear. She opened her eyes and looked at them and as she did, first her mother and then Peter opened their eyes and blinked in confusion. Then her dad opened his and looked around. Her mother was the first to speak.

"Tamara, that was intense—and left me with a bit of a headache. Goodness, you're right, though; somehow my senses seem to be more acute. How will I know if I'll be able to do what you can do?"

"The way I think I discovered it was because I imagined a need. I wanted to help the people who came to worship, I think, and that's when it first began for me. It took time for me to figure it out, so I'd expect it will take you time too. Peter, Dad, did you feel anything?"

Wilson laughed. "What your mom said. A little headache and everything's sort of brighter... sharper somehow."

Peter nodded, "Same for me. But I feel like I grew another part... like this..."

He concentrated hard and all at once the other three felt a happy glow.

"Peter! Was that you?" Tamara exclaimed.

"Yeah, I was getting this really loving feeling from everyone so I tried to send it back. So you felt something?"

"It was a sudden sense of happiness, like a wave, flowed around me," Wilson told him.

"You were projecting your emotion," Tamara said. "That's awesome. Before this, you were a strong receiver of emotions; now it looks like you can send them too. Wow."

Nadine chuckled. "Looks like Peter's already got the knack of it."

"He had a head start, *Manman*; remember how strong his empathy was?" Tamara reminded her.

"You're right, honey. This should be interesting—to see how much Dad and I can learn how to use this."

"*Granmanman* used it to make others love her and to help them when she counseled them," Tamara remarked.

"In a way, perhaps it was like how some therapists use talk therapy? Or maybe hypnosis? That one's kinda controversial but maybe there's a psychological reason why it may help some people. And CBT, cognitive behavioral therapy, might have a similar basis. Possibly it's all based on fully mobilizing the limbic system."

"Tamara, you sure you never studied psychology?" Wilson joked.

"Barbara and I've had lots of long, detailed discussions. I picked up some things from her. Anyway, *Manman*, while we were meditating, I felt more of *Granmanman*'s memories surface. Not her episodic memories—her experiences, but her semantic memories. The things she taught her *kanzos* for their *manbo konesans*. That was what guided me during our meditation. I think I have a strong sense that this knowledge will coalesce in my thoughts—oh, god, *Manman*, that means that I will be *kanzo* for *Granmanman* Tamara!"

Tamara rushed to hug her mother.

Nadine held her, eyes filling with tears. "She was an awesome teacher, darling. I'm sure she'll guide you well."



“I won’t get any practical, hands-on experience though, *Manman*. I don’t actually want to be a practicing *manbo*. But my thoughts are telling me that when I’m ready, I’ll need to do the *kouche* rite, the eight-day seclusion. But I also thought of Greta and how she might want to try to learn about using that part of her mind. She has the right spiritual background.”

“You’re right, darling; that’s a good idea. You should call her and ask,” Nadine said.

“I’ll call them and see,” Peter said. “Be nice to visit; we haven’t seen them for a while.”

“So, how do your heads feel now?” Tamara asked. “Feel any different?”

“Apart from a really intense feeling that I can’t describe,” Wilson told her, “there’s no difference. I see or sense what you describe as ‘auras’ around you guys, but I kind of had that before. But I feel what seems like a warm glow.”

Nadine was nodding. “I feel something like that and I think that it’s our emotions you must feel, honey. Maybe this is something like Peter felt when he was younger and was an unfiltered emotion receiver. Is that close, Peter?”

“Possibly, but from what Tamara taught me, I found a way to shut off most of those sensations. A few minutes ago, I tried shutting off the filter and suddenly felt like I could project my emotions... so I tried happiness. Looks like that one worked. Is that what you do, Tamara?”

“Oh, yes! You think you can do something else now?”

“Okay, let me...”

“Damn!” ... “*Mezanmi!*” Wilson and Nadine exclaimed and Tamara gasped.

“Peter!” Nadine exclaimed. “That was you!? Such a sense of humiliation and embarrassment I just felt!”

“Um, I wanted something strong but different... didn’t want to try anger. I’m very familiar with the humiliation emotion, after all.”

Tamara hugged him. “Wow, so you can do it now, honey! Fantastic! Now you need to practice, but obviously remember... only to do good things!”

“I don’t have any sense of projecting, myself,” Nadine commented.

“Mom, Dad, you’ll need to try it out between yourselves. I’m sure that you’ll get the knack. When I do it, I find that if I make myself have a ‘need’ to ‘push,’ then that’s my own key.”

“All right, we’ll try it between ourselves, sweetie,” Nadine said.

“We’ll let you try now ‘cause Peter and I need to go. It’s been a tiring week.”

“Yeah, and I’ll call Grams and see if we can visit them next weekend... or you could ask her when you see her at the college,” Peter told Nadine.

“Certainly, let’s do it that way,” Nadine agreed.

Tamara and Peter prepared to leave then and did a quick farewell hug and kiss.

## Chapter 67 - More Converts

The following week was the beginning of April and was an extremely busy time. Tamara's attorneys—since she was in the process of setting up two corporations, she now had a legal practice on retainer to manage the legal aspects of those businesses and her foundation too—wanted to meet with her to go over the incorporation process and the licensing arrangements for her inventions. A major application of one of her discoveries was frictionless bearings and she planned for one of the companies she was setting up to develop and manufacture small- to medium-scale generators to be used in G-force-powered turbines. The name she had chosen for the company was AIWin Systems Corporation, combining her and Peter's names. She planned to keep control of this operation because she had hopes of locating some of the manufacturing facilities in third-world countries, where she could provide both jobs and low-cost electrical power. Some of the G-force-turbine designs she had envisioned were small units, suitable for providing local power to towns and villages. Tamara told herself that she'd need to remind President Gerston of his agreement with her.

The second corporation was to be organized to manage transportation system applications using the G-force principle she had discovered. Some of its applications would be licensed, such as one involving high-speed levitating trains. For other related applications, such as personal vehicles with levitating capabilities, she wanted to keep control of that area's research and development. That company would also continue development of her communications device and the methods of power transmission which used the related technology. This company would also continue development of the chemical chromatography analyzer she had developed to work on her pheromone project. All of those applications were based on her G-coil invention.

She had a third idea that she wanted her attorney team to investigate, one involving a pharmaceutical application to commercialize the development of medications based on her pheromone work. By using the MRI techniques she had developed, Tamara had learned from the data that there were possible nerve-cell receptor targets for pharmaceuticals which could potentially mimic the effects that she could achieve mentally. She wanted her legal team to look into licensing those patents.

And finally, she was to meet with the new board of directors for her charitable foundation. Werner had worked with her attorneys to get the board set up, and Tamara, using Emma's idea for a corporate name, came up with "TNA Foundation." This entity had been set up to receive all of the funds from Tamara's licensing contracts and used that revenue to issue research grants and pay Tamara a stipend.

The feedback which Tamara—and Emma too as her mentor—had been getting on Tamara's dark matter and energy theory was loud and varied. A preprint of the paper she had submitted to the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* covering her theory and the mathematics supporting it had come out the previous week and, like any new theory, its critics and supporters were in full cry. The media took notice, especially at comments from some scientists that this new theory was the most important since Einstein's relativity theories—special and general.

As a result of numerous requests from the press, the university decided that Tamara must give a press conference. She agreed to do it and one was scheduled for that Thursday, to be held in one of the university's large auditorium-like classrooms. The university's public relations director balked at the idea of accepting only written questions, but Tamara convinced him to allow the chairperson of Physics and Astronomy, Dr Chester Montern, to moderate and rule on each question's merit.

Tuesday and Wednesday were lab days at the APL. Her little group was working on the levitating force principle, learning all they could about its characteristics. Their current project was scaling the device down to a size small enough to be used in bearings for shaft sizes smaller than about 2 centimeters. If they could produce bearings for shaft sizes of about 6 to 8 millimeters, roughly a quarter inch, then most small motors could be made frictionless.

The press conference was on Thursday.

The auditorium was packed; several TV crews were also present; it reminded Tamara of the Cambridge event—fortunately without the violence. She had elected to use two podiums, one for Montern and the other for her, about ten feet apart. Montern agreed to introduce her. When the time came to begin, Tamara and Montern took their places and Montern announced that they were starting and the room quieted.

“Greetings, members of the media. I’m Dr Chester Montern, chair of the Physics and Astronomy Department here at Hopkins and I’d like to introduce Miss Tamara Alexandre, a doctoral candidate in our department. Miss Alexandre has made a number of discoveries that have revolutionized physics and we’re here today to discuss her latest one, a theory that attempts to explain the nature of the dark matter and energy in the universe. Miss Alexandre will give you a brief intro and then I’ll explain how we’ll handle your questions, so please hold them until we’re ready. Miss Alexandre?”

“Thanks, Dr Montern. When I began the work that led to this theory, I had no idea that it would lead to where we are with it today. I was simply working on methods to try to improve the spatial resolution of MRI scans and building electronic circuits to accomplish that goal. But one of the devices I built did very strange things. When I tried investigating what was happening, current physics had no explanation. So I began looking for solutions to the problem, and since physics is based on math, I found the proper mathematics which could explain our observations. The best interpretation of that math is that it describes dark energy and dark matter.

“Physicists have long known that most of the mass in the universe exists as dark matter—and what dark matter is, exactly, has been one of the biggest scientific puzzles since Fritz Zwicky, who in 1933, calculated that the dispersion speeds of seven of the galaxies in the Coma cluster, in the direction of the constellation Coma Berenices, far exceeded the expected amounts, based on the sum of the masses of the individual galaxies. Those of you with science backgrounds may know that the dispersion speeds of galaxies are directly related to the galaxies’ masses. In fact, a large group of clusters of stars—galaxies—behaves very much like a gas, where the individual particles are the galaxies. To account for his finding of such high velocities, Zwicky knew that it would require significant amounts of additional matter to be present in the observed galaxies, but no such matter could be seen, so he called this missing matter ‘non-luminous.’

“Further work on a similar problem by others found that the orbital velocities of stars which were located at large distances from their galactic nucleus, were unexpectedly high, meaning that the galaxy had much more mass than could be observed. This finding, together with other observations, gave convincing evidence that most of the matter in the universe is invisible, and much of it is clumped around galaxies. Thus the term ‘dark matter’ came into widespread use.

“Current theory says that dark matter is composed of an unknown type of non-baryonic particle. Non-baryonic matter is simply matter which isn’t composed of neutrons and protons. You may have heard one of the theories of dark matter; that it’s composed of hypothetical particles called WIMPs—that stands for ‘weakly interacting massive particles.’ My paper shows that this theory is correct; the dark matter, as my calcs show, will interact weakly with ordinary matter under normal conditions, and the particles are massive, on an atomic scale, that is. We’ll get to the dark energy part in a bit. Dark-matter particles haven’t been detected experimentally. Neither collider experiments nor other detection experiments, like deep underground chambers set up to capture dark-matter particles, have directly detected it. The reason colliders haven’t been able to find dark matter is simple: the most powerful of them lack sufficient energy because the particles are too massive, as my paper shows.

“The data obtained so far indicates that the total amount of all kinds of matter in the universe is about five times greater than the amount of baryonic matter, and it also shows that dark matter is largely concentrated in giant halos around galaxies and within clusters of galaxies.

“The theory of dark energy is much more recent. It was during the late 1990s that astronomers discovered evidence that gravity wasn’t slowing down the universe’s expansion as was expected—its speed of expansion was actually increasing. What was causing this to happen? Following the naming of the unobservable dark matter in the universe, the cause of the expansion was called ‘dark energy.’ You may know that Einstein had initially introduced a ‘cosmological constant’ into his relativity equations because it appeared that his theoretical universe would collapse without that modification. Then, when the expansion of the universe was discovered, he retracted the idea of that constant. But we know now that using such a constant is valid, since the existence of dark energy is actually consistent with the slow, steady force that’s causing the universe’s expansion, and it’s dark energy that is pushing matter outward to expand the universe ever faster and faster.

“So what we know now is that baryonic matter, plus the leptons—that’s all of the fermions and bosons that comprise visible matter, plus the particles which mediate the universe’s energy, only constitutes about 4 percent of the total mass and energy density of the universe. That’s the part we can see; we can’t see what makes up the rest of the universe. Dark matter can’t be directly observed because it emits no radiation and it makes up another 24 percent of the universe, and finally, the largest share of the universe is dark energy, comprising about 72 percent.

“That’s the background. As I said when I began, my work started by looking into the use of microwaves to improve MRI resolution. Along the way, some of the devices I designed produced anomalous results and one of those results made it appear as if energy was being created out of nowhere. Obviously that was a violation of the laws of physics; that energy had to come from somewhere, so I began trying to account for its appearance using math. The results of those calcs are in the *PNAS* paper, and the math stands on its own. It’s the *interpretation* of what the math means is what’s giving some physicists fits. My own interpretation of those results is that the source of the energy I’ve detected and can reliably produce is related to dark matter and energy. I’ve showed how the model fits into the standard model of physics and meets all of its predictions. And the devices I’ve developed all use that energy to do useful things, like make frictionless bearings, for example. That will result in producing energy far more cheaply. And a new form of levitating transportation, which will greatly reduce the costs of moving products.

“I can take questions now. Dr Montern will moderate, so please wait for him.”

The group applauded.

Montern went to the podium. “Miss Alexandre has done some of the most remarkable things any of us at Hopkins have ever seen, and she’s yet to finish her doctoral program here. But for this work alone, our faculty believes that she’s more than qualified to be granted that degree.”

Applause.

“But she insists that she needs to complete all of her course objectives. As she told me, ‘I want my degree to be a proper one, earned like anyone else.’”

Laughter.

“So that means we get to keep her here for another year, which is great for Hopkins’ reputation.”

More laughter.

“So it’s time for your questions. I’ll ask you all to please keep them to professional and scientific topics. I will decide if a question is appropriate—like ones asking her if she has a boyfriend or how she gets her ideas at her age are not appropriate. And please, no shouted questions; we have a dozen wireless mikes available. Get one from a staff member roaming the aisles and then raise your hand to be recognized.”

The questions were mostly general.

The first one was: “A number of physicists have said that this is the most important theory since Einstein’s relativity. Do you agree?”

Tamara answered: “I have no opinion on that. The importance of a scientist’s work is not the work itself, but how that work influences the work of others. A very good measure of this influence is how many times that original work is cited in the papers of other researchers. So I will let my peers determine the significance of my work.”

Question: “What kind of device did you build that gave those unusual results and what was unusual about it?”

Answer: “It was a kind of RF-generating coil using superconducting circuitry. And I mentioned that we observed energy flowing into what should have been a closed system. This was not possible, meaning that the system wasn’t closed and the energy source being tapped had to be the result of the coil somehow pulling energy from outside the natural, visible world. The calcs showed that the most likely source was dark energy.”

Question: “How are those coils made that they can do that?”

Answer: “That’s too technical to go into detail here. The coils are based on an array of single-electron transistors, or SETs, which are electronic devices that have superconducting properties. We now have patents pending on the devices and you can pick up a handout after this session. It has the patents’ details. We’re in the process of licensing some of the applications of the coil devices.”

Question: “This one is for Dr Montern. Why don’t you give her the damned degree already?”

Laughter.

Montern: “I did mention about that. But Tamara’s been stubborn about wanting to go the full course, as she put it.”

Tamara: “Look at it this way. If I keep doing just fine, I keep getting all of this great support from a world-class university and access to wonderful facilities and people. If I mess up, well, then I’m just a dumb student. Right?”

The audience erupted in laughter and then applause.

Tamara: “Seriously, being a student gives me time to explore options and be creative before I leave this nurturing environment and have to assume more rigid professional responsibilities. Nobody’s holding me back from getting a degree. There are a few more things I want to do before I take the degree.”

Applause again.

Question: “What kinds of real-world applications does your theory have?”

Tamara: “The science part is probably self-evident. Commercial applications of the devices that appear to use the energy from the dark-energy source seem to be many. You already must be aware of Dr Clarke’s work on energy storage; one application of my devices allows for highly efficient energy storage and her company and my own team are working on wireless power transmission applications. We’ve got batteries for EVs—electric vehicles—under development. I mentioned levitating transportation devices. I’m thinking of trains similar to the mag-lev ones used in Europe and Asia, although my device works great without the ‘mag’ part. No magnetism is involved; it actually uses something like ground effect. We’ve already built shaft bearings that use that same repulsive principle. Magnetic bearings exist; they have good efficiency, but need complicated circuitry to correct for wobble caused by shaft loading. Our bearings don’t have those issues and use just tiny amounts of power. We’re preparing to design high-efficiency G-force turbines and working on making the bearings small enough

to use them in small motors. There's much more in the works; some of it is still confidential. Is that enough?"

Applause.

Question: "Are you leaving any problems for other physicists to work on? Sounds like you're solving all of the open problems."

Laughter.

Tamara: "No way could I do it all; there's still lots more to work on. Emma—Dr Clarke—once told me of a quotation by the famous physicist Wolfgang Pauli. He said, 'The best that most of us can hope to achieve in physics is simply to misunderstand at a deeper level.' In other words, the more we learn, the more we learn that there's much more to learn."

Laughter again.

Question: "Does your theory suggest any ideas for you about understanding the nature of the universe?"

Tamara: "That's a deep question. Some of the implications of the math I worked on suggests ideas on the quantum nature of gravitation itself. Physicists joke about seeking the 'theory of everything,' kind of an extended unified field theory. I think that some of my math may give insights into linking general relativity to quantum mechanics. That's been a very elusive goal. But I'm not a computational physicist like Dr Clarke is; I'm an engineering physicist and my imagination leads me to want to solve physics questions by building devices that the mathematics suggest. So one thought I had when working out this theory is how gravitation works and what kind of fundamental particle would be the carrier of the gravitational force. If we can answer that question, then that would open an entirely new area of possible applications, even extending to space flight without the need for enormous launching facilities. But that's all speculation now."

There were many other questions, some of them restatements of previous questions or requests for clarification of Tamara's answers. And of course there were a few that were ignored, ones of the nature of "how did you get to be so smart."

Tamara was curious to see how the press conference would be treated on the local evening news, since there had been two TV camera crews there. There was a brief spot of coverage, about ninety seconds long, that had two snippets of her speaking and the rest was a simple report that she had introduced a new theory in cosmology that had the scientific community all excited about how it fit into current knowledge. She thought that it was a reasonable report.

All that week, her email in-box had been collecting messages inviting her to visit campuses all over the world to present her work. *Damn*, she thought, *if I accepted just a small fraction of those invites, I'd be on the road most of the year. Emma says she gets a lot of invites too and has a very polite way of turning them down. My own excuse will still work, but not for much longer.*

On Saturday afternoon, Tamara and Peter, together with Tamara's parents, went to Greta's and Werner's home for a visit and dinner. After they arrived, they all spoke for a while together before Tamara took Greta aside for a private discussion.

"I've come up with several ideas about how the spirit world fits into what we know about science, Greta," Tamara said when they were alone. "Part of what I've theorized is based on the observation that the cultures where spirits are venerated are very similar in their basics. It's probably no coincidence that so many different cultures have the same kind of spiritual leaders—wise man or woman, medicine man, whatever the clergy name may be. When we first met and discussed religions, you called those people shamans, so I did a little research and found that the idea of shamanism covers many characteristics of a number of religious practices of cultures

from around the world. There are two major things that kind of link the shamans of all of those different cultures—first, rituals based on achieving a trance and second, mediation in general. Other things in common are veneration of ancestors and the existence of helping spirits.

“So that gave me some ideas. The people who become shamans are generally closely related, like parent and child, but also there are people who feel a calling to become a shaman. I’ve come to agree you’re correct that there’s a genetic component to the abilities that shamans have because the trait seems to run in families. In my own case, a lot of the brain research I’ve done so far makes it appear that there’s a kind of psychic energy that seems to exist everywhere so I’ve begun to think of the skills of communing with spirits in physics terms: there are free electrons always circulating in the atmosphere and I believe that they somehow have become... like... quantum-entangled networks. The entanglement means that the information that the networks carry is present everywhere. Maybe these networks carry impressions of human personality characteristics, because the tiny electrical signal contributed by everyone becomes part of that network. I think that the brains of shamans have adapted over the millennia to be sensitive to this energy and are able to interpret and use it to derive information.”

Greta was smiling widely. “That’s a very interesting theory and a pretty accurate interpretation of shamanism, Tamara. Shall I go into my lecture mode and tell you some more? These are things I’ve learned in my own recent research on shamanism.”

“Sure. I didn’t look at cultural things—just at shamanism and psychology as applied to neuroscience and how the brain works electrically.”

“Okay, good. So maybe sixty years ago, a historian of religion named Mircea Eliade—he was Romanian if you’re wondering about the unusual name—wrote an influential text in which he claimed that the origin of shamanism goes all of the way back to the Paleolithic age and that it’s the common source of all of the original religions of humankind. This is because of the animistic beliefs and veneration of the natural world that characterizes all forms of shamanism. He traced its roots to the regions of central Asia and Siberia, where it’s still the major religion and many scholars claim that the idea of shamanism must be restricted to the original Asiatic practitioners.

“Eliade argued that in all cultures, shamans believe that everything in the universe is connected spiritually, and that there are powers outside of the mundane world which can affect nature. Those powers can be influenced by the ancestors of the society’s people, so those ancestors are remembered and venerated. One of Eliade’s key beliefs is that shamanistic ritual could be viewed as a ‘technique of ecstasy’ where the practitioners go on a spiritual journey to access the power that they’re given by spirits. Also, those spirits play a crucial role in shamanism.

“I believe in taking a more general approach to defining shamanism. Besides their achieving a state of ecstasy in their practices, another common and prominent element of shamanism, present wherever the culture is found, is the belief in the ‘spirit spouse’; these spirit husbands or wives are viewed as the shaman’s primary spiritual helpers. In this manner, shamans are usually recognized, by the people whom they serve, as the ‘masters’ or sometimes ‘servants’ of the spirits. In many cultures, the major part of being initiated into becoming a shaman is the gaining of a spirit spouse; this is typically an obligatory and expected outcome of the initiation. In those cultures, shamans interact with their spirit spouses through performing ritual ceremonies or through dreams or trance. These interactions may be purely symbolic, but they can be romantic or even sexual in nature. In those cultures, shamans have a healing role and use herbs, ritual, and prayer, and many times supernatural practices too, to heal people.”

“That’s really interesting, Greta,” Tamara said. “How did shamanism spread from central Asia? It’s present in the western hemisphere too.”

“Either through migration or possibly concurrent evolution. Or both. Remember that the Paleolithic age began 2.5 million years ago, so if shamanism began during that time, there was plenty of opportunity for it to spread as humans moved around. Besides central Asian shamanism, very similar practices are found close by in central China with the Hmong people, in many of the Nepalese cultures too, and in India, where the shaman invites a Hindu deity to use his or her body as a conduit to answer worshipers’ questions.

“Going further afield, the nomadic Bedouins of Asia Minor also use the trance for performing shamanistic rituals and like most of the other cultures, believe in three groups of entities which control nature: the gods, the ancestors, and the spirits, in their case, known as the djinn. Also in the Asian group are the Yupik and Inuit cultures, who are found in the huge region from eastern Siberia and spanning all the way to Alaska, northern Canada, to Greenland. And a type of Asian shamanism was practiced by native Americans and the First Nations of Canada, whose ancient ancestors likely originated in Siberia. My sources say that these cultures exhibit instances of shamanistic practice.

“Closer to home for me are the Finnish people, where the Sámi culture has spiritual practices and beliefs which are based on a type of animism and polytheism. In traditional Sámi beliefs and practices, there is a veneration of both spirits and ancestors. For yourself, in Africa, many cultures have animistic beliefs, some of which may include shamanism. In southern Africa, the Bantu people have shamans called *sangomas* or *inyangas*. Possibly the *kujur* of the south Sudanese Nyima tribe can be thought of as shamans. In west Africa, the Hausa Bori cult is found in a number of border regions of Nigeria and Niger and some scholars ascribe shamanistic practices to them. And of course, in west Africa’s Dahomey/Benin region, Vodou is practiced. Its priests and priestesses can be viewed as a kind of shaman. Africa has many other areas where similar beliefs exist.

“So many of the practices and beliefs of all those shamanistic cultures are closely related, which strongly suggests that they may indeed derive from a common source, although the parallel evolution of beliefs cannot be ruled out. But your idea that there is some sort of genetic adaptation which allows the shaman’s mind to tap into a global consciousness is really radical but sounds intriguing.”

“It is radical, but it could explain and account for all kinds of spiritual phenomena—as an example, let me point to my own case, the *lwa*. My theory would explain, for one thing, the help I get in translating languages. Remember what Peter told you about that, when we met Kevin and Denise in England?”

“Oh, right. Say, I was going to challenge you on that trick and I forgot to do it back then. *Jag hoppas att du inte kommer att skämmas, men vet du vad jag säger nu?*”

Tamara laughed. “Slipped that one in, didn’t you? Ah, thanks, *Papa Legba*; glad you were paying attention. Greta, you asked me, ‘I hope that you won’t be embarrassed, but do you know what I’m saying now?’ but that was Swedish, not Danish.”

“Goddess, Tamara, I simply can’t get over what you can do...”

“Not me; it’s *Papa Legba* through me. Wait... okay. Greta, this is hard to explain... he didn’t ‘speak’ to me in any sense of speech, but here’s one for you. *Papleṣḃar ʃeṣḃi, hveṣuṣ ʃamiliari eru þú með tungsamunni ói þinn ancestor?*”

“Oh goddess, I haven’t heard that language since Grandma’s death... hardly anybody outside academic circles speaks it well. Old Icelandic—the language of the Eddas...”

“It’s Old Norse, really; the vowels are broader and the consonants are more Germanic than Scandinavian,” Tamara corrected her. “You understood it?”

“Oh yes. The grammar is a bit different but it’s ‘Papa Legba’ ... I guess is the name, ‘says, how familiar are you



on tongue of your ancestors?’ Ah... ‘language’ would be better than ‘tongue.’ Oh my, this is wonderful, Tamara... Does this mean you can read and translate the Eddas in the original?”

“Um, I don’t think that it works like that,” Tamara chuckled. “*Papa Legba speaks* all languages and helps me to do it. I doubt that it extends to reading... but, well, if someone *read* it out loud, then that could work. But you’d get the Old Icelandic and not the Norse and from what I gather, there’s about a two- or three-hundred-year difference, right?”

“Yes, that’s true, but I don’t think that the language shifted all that much.”

“Well, now here’s what I really wanted you to know,” Tamara told her and then explained about her discovery of activating the limbic system. “I found that I can do it with people to make them more receptive to others’ emotions, as I told you last year. But I only recently learned how to activate it in people who already appear to have functioning parts of the system—like those with shaman skills, and yes, it appears to have a strong genetic component. Peter’s response when I worked with him was immediate and Mom and Dad also began to feel their abilities very quickly. You’re an incredibly powerful priestess—seeress, that us.”

Greta looked sad. “But Werner is...”

“Let me talk to him. He just needs to be there for emotional support, but I think that I’ll tell him that the major effect for Dad was that it gave him the ability to read people to suss out ... well... detect lies. That may be a good carrot to use.”

“Oh, if you could... how long does it take? The ‘activating,’ I mean.”

“Not long, maybe five minutes, I think. Let me go talk to Werner.”

She found him in the living room talking to her father.

“Hi, Tamara. You done with Greta now? Between you and your mom, I’ve never seen her so excited with new ideas she’s been getting from both of you.”

“Yep, and Mom and I have something coming up soon regarding Haiti. Some economic projects and planning a project on social research involving them. We’ll need Greta’s help there too,” Tamara told him. “And I’ve gotten another thought about the Davidsonville area. I’ve noticed that active agricultural use is declining along the Patuxent River Road, am I right?”

“Pretty much. Small local farming is on the decline in the whole county.”

“I’d like to acquire any land that comes up for sale in the sections closest to the resort and the old quarry. But I’d like to keep it quiet. I’m thinking of a possible planned community close to the quarry site when it’s become a school and research facility.”

“Now that’s an interesting idea, Tamara. There’ve been a few of those kind of communities built around the country and the idea is catching on in places. We already have Reston in Virginia and Columbia in Howard County, in fact. That might work in this area since we’re so close to D.C.”

“Good; glad you like the idea. So Dad, tell Werner about your being a human lie detector,” she chuckled. “Dad found that skill useful during his negotiations—tell him what happened at your diplomat’s course, Dad.”

“Well, nothing really dramatic happened, but I was assigned to go to the Joint Military Attaché School, so I did it a few months after my London gig. That was a really interesting course and Nadine also took it. They have a special program for military spouses but since Nadine will be a diplomat in her own right, she did the regular program too. Anyway, about a quarter of the people taking the course were so full of themselves—they were more out to get a good rep than anything else. My sensitivity to emotional signals that Tamara had unlocked in

me—Nadine too—let me get a good sense of the people who were real and who the posers were.

“The unusual part was this Indonesian guy; he was whip-smart and had just been frocked as a Navy light commander and was to be assigned as a military attaché at the embassy in Japan when his promotion became official. He had quite a secret, though. He actually had two wives! His ‘senior’ wife was taking the spouse course and when a bunch of us were discussing what the spouses would do when their husbands—and one wife, since we had one female attaché candidate—were on assignment, his responses, although perfectly normal, set off my senses and somehow I sensed that he had a multiple marriage.

“Turns out that polygamy—actually just polygyny—is legal in Indonesia and he had already been married to both ladies well before he came here. His second wife was when he was eighteen, actually. His dad had been a U.S. serviceman who knocked up an Indonesian gal, so he was a U.S. citizen and then at 22, he came to the U.S. to study industrial engineering. He got into the Naval ROTC program in college and he’s done really well in the Navy. My truth sense clued me into something odd about his comments about marriage and, when I asked him in private, he tried denying his marriages at first. So I told him how he had given the secret away and then he relented but asked me to keep mum about it because the Navy would frown on his multiple marriage if it became generally or officially known.”

“Huh. Isn’t it risky for him to have two wives in the military?” Werner asked.

“It is if he flaunts it. But he’s not hiding that he lives with two gals. It was my truth sense that let me figure out that the other woman wasn’t something like a cousin or a housekeeper; she was way more than just a domestic helper. When he first moved to the U.S., he had gotten some legal advice that his ‘official’ wife should claim that the other gal was her dependent, so he had gotten paperwork to support that claim. But the other woman can’t get the same family benefits, obviously. Apparently they’ve got that covered, though. But the point of this story is that my truth sense is really sensitive and it’s helped me lots—it also makes people get a strong sense of trust in me.”

“Thanks, Dad. Now, Werner, here’s your sales pitch. I’d like to work with Greta to enable parts of her brain’s emotional apparatus. To let me do that, she needs the mental support of someone close and you’re it. If you can help us, it’s extremely likely that you’ll also wind up with some benefit, possibly even something like a truth sense like Dad has. When I worked with Peter and Mom, they both acquired an ability kinda like Dad’s too, but his truth sense is much stronger. You don’t need to do much. All we need from you is to hold our hands for several minutes and meditate with us and ... well, think about Greta—you’d just think about your feelings for her. Can you do that?”

Werner looked at Wilson who smiled and nodded to him. “Try it. It’s a win-win situation and think of what you might be able to gain from doing it.”

“So this isn’t like a trance or a seeress thing?” Werner asked Tamara.

“Not at all. Nothing to do with spirits or anything supernatural. You may feel... like... um... ever get an endorphin high, like after exercise? That’s what Peter said he felt after.”

Werner nodded.

Wilson told him, “You might feel something like that. You also might get a slight headache at first, though. I did but it went away after a minute. And Tamara’s right; it did feel like a bit of a high for several minutes and the world seemed brighter.”

“Let’s do this, Werner. You’ll make Greta very happy,” Tamara grinned at him.

Greta was indeed very happy when she saw Tamara leading Werner over to her and she excused herself from

Nadine as Tamara went to get Peter.

When Tamara returned, she brought them to a bedroom and told them, “We need quiet and privacy. Peter’s here for balance. Also, when I did this with my parents, he was a source of strength. So here’s what we’ll do now.”

She led them through the meditation exercise and when she began sensing the auras of the Winsbergs, she was amazed at Greta’s strength. Werner also had a strong spiritual presence, much like her father’s.

*Wonder why he buries that?* Tamara thought. *And he’s wary of Greta’s seeress skills... I wonder if his spirituality caused him embarrassment when he was younger.*

Tamara let herself leave her meditative state and noticed that Peter was also back with them now. But the older couple was still sitting there, eyes closed, and seemed to be focused on each other. In another minute, Greta roused, followed by Werner.

“That was indescribable,” Greta whispered. “Werner, did you feel that?”

“If you mean that I sensed you... your essence...you use the ‘aura’ term a lot; that must have been what I felt. Tamara, you said that this wouldn’t be spiritual...”

Tamara laughed. “I actually said that no spirits or anything supernatural was involved. You felt Greta’s aura, then.”

“And yours and Peter’s too,” he replied. “And I still have what feels like a slight connection but it’s much stronger with Greta.”

“That’s what I’m feeling... a connection of our emotional feelings. Peter, is this anything like you felt back in school?”

“Maybe... but ... can you close it off, Grams?” he asked.

“Ah, yes, it’s like it’s still there but I’m not, ah, ‘listening’ to it.”

“Yeah, it’s kinda like what happened to me but I could never get it to stop,” Peter said. “So that’s a good sign, Grams. Say, now that you can feel an outside emotion from someone, you might be able to learn how to turn it around and project an emotion. That’s what Tamara does and I can do something like it too.”

He projected a quick sample of a comforting feeling, to the Winsbergs’ amazement.

“But how your own skills develop may take time,” Tamara cautioned them and then told them how she used hers. “Dad found that his skill was useful to detect lies and he found out that he can sense how receptive people are being to what he’s saying. He told me that the skill makes other people receptive to his point of view.”

“I can see where an ability like that would be useful, especially in negotiations,” Werner remarked.

“Shall we rejoin the others?” Greta asked. “I want to experience this new sense with more people.”

Tamara got Werner to wait with her as the others left the room.

As they left, she said, “Werner, this is just curious Tamara now. I sense a deep spirituality in you but you seem to reject it. When you were younger—maybe even as a kid—did you have an embarrassing experience when others learned about it?”

“Damn, Tamara, no wonder everyone thinks you’re a mind reader. Yes, things happened when I was a kid. One of the resort families, the mom, had ... it was a Romany background ... and I hung out with her and her kids one summer. I learned stuff from them, kid versions anyway. Tarot, palm reading, fortunes using playing cards. I really got into it, too. The next year they didn’t come back but other kids had begun ridiculing me for learning

that stuff. The teasing even extended to school. I was maybe eight years old then but I began disavowing all of that, saying that they were just games. My rejecting spirits and the like goes back to that time, I guess. Never thought much about it, though, till now.”

“Looks like an experience similar to Peter’s, you know? But in your case it ended with the problem going away. Now that you know the source of your discomfort with Greta’s skills, I think you’ll be receptive to what your mind will be able to do with emotional interpretation.”

“You may be right, Tamara. We’ll see. I love the new connection to Greta that I feel now, so thanks.”

They rejoined the rest of the family.

## Chapter 68 - History Revealed

### *Mid-April*

As the warmer weather of Maryland's spring brought the dogwoods and magnolias into blossom, Tamara's main projects continued to be the G-force and its applications, and also her collaborations with all of the groups at Hopkins who had been working on brain structure and function based on her MRI-coil design. Most of those collaborations had resulted in research grant applications, and a number of these grants had begun to be funded. Much of her time was spent in weekly meetings with many of those groups as their experimental designs were turned into plans. Several of her collaborators had a number of journal articles in preparation and she was involved with writing up those papers as well.

Several times during the month, Emma and Montern had filled her in on information coming from the unofficial physics "grapevine"—Tamara's initial experiments on the G-force coils had been replicated by a half-dozen other groups who had confirmed that the G-force effect was real and reproducible and her work was now spawning other research projects using the effect that she had discovered. She had also heard from Emma's European contacts that, despite the warnings in the patent documents about the instability of a high-efficiency electron-storage circuit device if not assembled under ultra-clean conditions, some accidents had occurred in parts of Europe involving people who had tried to copy the energy-storage device.

"Apparently those people were using your patents and tried to build a version of the device, maybe to try to sidestep your patents," Emma told Tamara.

"Sorry if people got hurt," Tamara said. "There's actually a strong warning in the patent description about the need to avoid dielectric contamination."

"And relative to that matter," Emma went on, "EEC Energy had a visit from the military; they sent a bunch of reps and brass to the company to discuss how to use the technology as an explosive. Apparently someone had read about those European accidents."

"Huh. I don't see how..." Tamara began.

"Oh, no worries," Emma chuckled. "When they were told about the basic circuit cost for just the polymer sheets, they got hesitant. Then Dr Stafford, our CEO, you'll recall, told them that the device is totally stable unless impurities somehow get into the polymer sheets during assembly. When he told them that impurities in the circuit matrix make it inherently unstable and the assembly could blow up at any random time, just by being handled, they began to lose interest. One of the brass asked if the device could be made stable and Stafford told them it could and that's the version used in our device. When it's stable, it can't be made to explode."

"There could be ways, but I won't go there. The world doesn't need more weapons. So our security precautions are working?" Tamara asked. "No sign that anyone's able to reverse-engineer it?"

"Looks that way. And the Cambridge energy farm is about to go on line at the end of the month. I won't be there—don't really need to be. Besides, that's when we have your orals scheduled."

Tamara's last formal physics class was ending this month and her oral exam for her doctorate would be on the last Monday. The oral exam was a free-form question-and-answer session that's typically intended for the candidate to demonstrate their ability to conduct the research necessary for the doctoral degree. Ordinarily, the candidate would present their proposed dissertation research plan to their faculty committee and demonstrate their knowledge; typically the questioning ranged widely across the academic field. In Tamara's case, however, she was already working on her dissertation research; her work on the G-force coil had turned into validating her dark matter and energy theory. Her committee had already given her their approval for that topic, so the part of the oral exam related to her ability to do the research was moot. In her orals, the examiners would be

exploring her knowledge of other aspects of physics that were less closely related to her research project.

She still had about a half-dozen experiments to do; some of those had been suggested by the guest physicists at the beginning of the year, so she would be spending some time during the coming months on those details. But she had other summer plans in the works too; ones involving the commercialization of her inventions.

~~~~~

Greta was overjoyed with her new empathic sense and she was learning how to affect others' emotions too.

As she told Tamara in a mid-April phone conversation, "I'm getting more sensitive every day. But it troubles me also, because I can now sense how bad it must have been for Peter to have that ability unfiltered. And as an adolescent too, when all those new emotions are so intense. How he kept his sanity is amazing."

"Yes it is, but you can see how that reveals his internal strength," Tamara told her. "How about projecting your emotions? Has that come yet?"

"Yes, but it's scary in a way. I don't want to go overboard and get on a power trip. I really see what you mean about being careful not to influence people just because you can."

"There certainly are people who use their emotional power to influence or even control others," Tamara observed. "I'm virtually certain that it's an unconscious ability in most everyone who has it. Some use it in good ways but many more use it for personal gain of some kind. Those are the people who get written about in the history books—the not-good ones, I mean. Say, Mom and I plan to have a meeting with the president soon about our Haiti project and we're both concerned about the criminal violence there lately. Mom was gonna talk to you about that."

"Yes, I heard about the civil unrest there and we've spoken with each other about that," Greta remarked. "She said that she told you something about your African ancestors and about an idea she came up with."

"She told me a lot. How much did she share with you about her idea?"

"Not very much. Just about her Ghana contact and setting up a possible African peacekeeping group in Haiti," Greta told her.

"Okay. So here's the basic idea. When I was in London at the knighthood ceremony, one of the kids I met, her grandparents work for the African Union and they're stationed in Accra, Ghana. Through my contact, Mom got in touch with the grandparents and they're collaborating now."

"Right. That part I know."

"So as part of their work, the Hadads, that's their name, Malik and Saja, need to travel to Togo, Benin, and Nigeria a fair amount. They learned a lot about the Vodou religion as it's practiced throughout that area."

"That area is its origin, as I recall, right?" Greta asked.

"Yep. It's called Vodoun locally in Benin and it goes back at least hundreds of years, even before the Dahomey kingdom was formed in the 1700s. It's a common, completely normal religion in Benin, Ghana, Togo, and western Nigeria, and is practiced locally along with Islam and Christianity. In many cases, some of the practices of all those religions have become a bit merged. In Benin, Vodoun's recognized as an official religion and forms of it are observed by about 40 percent of the people. As it is in Haiti, it's a religion where natural spirits are venerated and ancestors are revered."

"I know somewhat about the cultures of western Africa—their cultural anthropology, that is," Greta told her.

"Not the religions per se. The indigenous people in that region are the Fon, Edo, and Yoruba. Igbo too. There is

some limited evidence that at least a portion of the Edo people have roots which go back to migrants from the Nile River valley. Those migrants settled the region from Togo to Nigeria and in the eighth century, the Edo established the Kingdom of Benin. But there are many Edo people who believe that they have lived in their current location for at least two thousand years and there are many historical artifacts which tend to support this claim.

“The migrant claim can also be supported by historical evidence; some of which can be linked to the kingdom’s rulers. Dahomey was supposedly first ruled by the Ogisos, or the ‘gods of the sky,’ and that monarchy shared many similarities both religiously and politically with dynastic Egypt. I recall reading that the Benin Empire, located in southwestern Nigeria, existed as early as 1440 and was populated by the Edo people.

“What is very interesting, however, is a cultural commonality that spans the whole north African continent and more. Somehow the idea of a hermaphrodite creator god appears in Egypt, Greece, Mesopotamia, and it’s even suggested in the Bible. So we know of Egypt’s Tatenen; Agdistis of ancient Greece, Rome, and Anatolia; and the Sumerian Ninsiana. They all are typically viewed as androgynous or hermaphrodite beings who were somehow involved with creation or sustaining the world. And in chapter one of the Bible, where one version of the creation of mankind is described, the wording can be interpreted to say, ah, I need to think of exactly how the Hebrew is translated. It goes, basically, ‘So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.’ Many scholars point to that wording as meaning that Adam and Eve were created as a hermaphrodite, an idea that was very popular around that time, as shown by Plato’s dialogue, the *Symposium*, which was written about two hundred years after scholars believe chapter one of the Bible was written.

“And the same kind of hermaphrodite god appears in western Africa’s mythologies; for example, your mom mentioned that the creator god-goddess in Dahomean Vodou is a hermaphrodite. Could that idea have come from the Nile valley migrants? It’s possible. But the hermaphrodite idea may actually be universal, since it also appears in Norse mythology. My point is that there appear to be many ancient cultural ties which link the Middle East with western Africa.”

“Hmm. That information gives me something to think about, so thanks. It may tie in with some thoughts I’ve been considering.”

Later, Tamara spoke to Nadine. She mentioned her conversation with Greta.

Nadine replied, “That’s a good background about our ancestral homeland, dear. So I spoke to Saja Hadad about their experiences in Benin and she told me that they’ve gotten in touch with the leaders of a really strong community in southern Benin. It turns out that many residents there are descendants of some of the nobility, as it were, in the Kingdom of Dahomey. Those groups live in villages around Abomey, which was the capital of the Kingdom of Dahomey from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries and they have a very strong community.

“When she told her contacts there that she was working with a priestess from Haiti, they got very excited; it appears that they view the Haitians as their long-lost cousins, which I suppose we actually are. You know that they have an annual Vodou holiday celebration? It’s actually a national holiday.”

“Do they still follow the same rituals there, do you know?” Tamara asked.

“I’m not sure; some of the *lwa* that Saja mentioned have different names, but some names are closer. Our Haitian version is heavily influenced by Catholicism so there was some evolution, particularly in many of the *Petwo* rites, which are entirely Haitian.”

“Has she visited there?”

“She has. She told me about visiting two restored palaces; they’re now historical museums. There were about

twelve palaces in the city but the other ten are in ruins now. I think the area would feel very much like Haiti now; French is the official language and Fon, Yom, and Yoruba have national-language status. Actually, she said that Fon is the one most widely spoken.”

“So she could still communicate okay?”

“Oh yes. She’s fluent in French and almost everyone in the cities speaks it—a little, at least. So she tells me that among the people she’s spoken to, they are all very interested in Haiti, particularly after the earthquake ten years ago. In fact, the Benin government sent a large contingent of aid workers back then. So I asked her, given the social problems now, if she thought that their government could help now somehow, like the peacekeepers the African Union arranged with the U.N. to send. She thought that it could be a possibility. So I’ll ask Gerston about that when we meet.”

They went on to discuss the Haiti project that Nadine was working on and how her collaborators and their students were coping with the social problems there.

### *Mid-May*

In mid-May, Tamara heard from Denise that she and Kevin had accepted their Westphalia offers.

She told Tamara, “Gerston wants Kevin to be part of his institute; he’s offered Kevin a fellowship to study for his doctorate, and Kevin can use his connection with the Coris Foundation as part of his program. And I’ve been offered a full-ride for Westphalia’s MD-PhD program. I plan to do a psychiatry specialty plus do neuroscience research and they have a good neuroscience department there.”

“That’s great; then you’ll be our neighbors here. Westphalia’s only about ten miles from where my parents live. Are you gonna live on campus?”

“No, we’ll look for a house to rent; we don’t care for apartments and wouldn’t ever consider campus housing—don’t want to live with other students, actually. Not that we’re snobs or anti-social; we don’t want the distractions of carousing students. Here in Atlanta, we live in my mom’s house. Even when we lived in London, we had a row-house flat, nowhere near the universities we were attending. So what are your plans this summer? We’re planning to move up there in July so if you’re around, we can see each other.”

“Wow, nice. Mom and I plan to go to Haiti in June. It’s part of her research project for the Columbia Institute, and my own part is economic development there. We’re meeting with President Gerston—remember the agreement we made at the knighthood ceremony? We’re gonna get some details settled with him and the State Department.”

“You go, girl! So you’ll be back in July then.”

“That’s the plan. I’m involved in setting up two companies to handle the development of my inventions and the lawyers are busy with real estate people for good locations for them... say, Peter’s grandfather is in real estate and his outfit found my parents’ home. He really ‘knows people,’ as they say—he has good connections. I’ll give you his contact info, unless you already know of someone.”

“We don’t, so that would be nice. Kevin was going to ask his North Carolina lawyer friend for suggestions, but checking with Peter’s grandfather sounds good to me.”

“And in August,” Tamara continued, “for most of the month, Peter’s whole family vacations at their family’s resort. It’s usually a big group that gets together and they’re totally fun.”

“Nudist resort, right?”

“Yep. Peter’s family are part owners and have a house and some cabins in the resort. The house is nice, it’s a



four-bedroom with a huge great room. You mentioned that you guys went to a resort with Cindy, right?”

“Oh yeah. We sure did. And a lot of the ideas for the Avery Program came from those nudist resort visits.”

Tamara chuckled. “Now *that’s* a story I’d like to hear. Peter and Barbara would want to hear it too, in fact. I hope you can come to the resort for at least part of the time in August. Maybe even have Cindy and Tom visit too. We give special rates for close friends of the co-owners.”

“Yeah, I’m sure we can do that. Listen, I need to run, but Kevin and I’ll be in touch and let you know the details of when we’re moving.”

“Sounds good; congrats on your acceptances to Westphalia and I can’t wait till we can get together again.”

~~~~~

The following week was Tamara’s and Nadine’s meeting with Gerston. He had been amused when they had contacted him back in April to set up the meeting. His appointments secretary had come to him with Tamara’s request, so he had called her.

When she answered, he greeted her and asked, “I’ll bet you want to start collecting on our London agreement; am I right?”

“Yes, sir. And Mom will be putting in place the social and cultural piece of her Columbia Institute project and I’m doing my own economic part. We want you to do the political part, and Haiti’s a tough country, given its political past and current problems. That’s the main thing we want to discuss. It might be good to include some State Department specialists on the area and maybe our OAS rep too.”

“That’s about what I figured; my sources tell me that you’re close to developing some commercial applications of your discoveries,” Gerston replied.

“True,” Tamara responded. “And the companies involved will be based in the good old U.S.A., just as you asked.”

He laughed. “Okay then. Payback time for me. I’ll get a group together for the third week in May, then. And you’re planning your Haiti visit in June, my note says.”

“That’s the plan. Later in the summer, when it’s hottest there, it’s not easy to get important work started and June avoids the hurricane season.”

“Sounds good, Tamara. My staff will keep you and Nadine informed of the exact date and time and also of who’s coming. Is that it, then? I gotta go, my next appointment is here.”

“Sure, Mr Gerston, and thanks.”

She disconnected and continued to work on her presentation to the president and on the economic plan she was visualizing for Haiti.

~~~~~

When Tamara and Nadine arrived at the White House for their meeting, there were a number of familiar people and several people whom they hadn’t met. Evan Masters was there with a deputy, a person whom Nadine had met on her prior visits to the State Department. Tamara and Nadine had heard that a CIA representative would be there and Nadine wasn’t surprised to see that it was Wilbur Zane. As he told her when they greeted each other, he was now an assistant director in the Directorate of Analysis.

“You two are planning to go to Haiti and we’ve had reports of problems involving U.S. visitors there lately.

State can fill you in,” he told her.

Commerce had sent a representative and the U.S. permanent representative to the OAS, Ambassador Jose Estrada, was present. The current U.S. ambassador to Haiti would attend by video. Nadine opened the meeting with a cultural presentation. She wanted to extend the work of her dissertation research, mothers teaching daughters about the mix of their culture’s social topics, into including ideas about entrepreneurship. She, together with a focus group from the Columbia Institute, had developed an initiative for sponsoring micro-loans and her primary mission on this trip was to plan methods to recruit *manbos* to serve as loan and grant resource people. They would provide the information to their congregations on what the micro-loan program was all about and who to contact to apply for the loan.

She had also developed plans for a grass-roots educational initiative using Columbia Institute grant funds to support ten recent Haitian education graduates to recruit people in the countryside to develop a cadre of lay teachers to work in the outlying villages. These lay teachers would receive a small stipend and would teach children in the lower elementary grades about basic life skills. Most of those plans had been finalized; she had developed them together with collaborators from two Haitian universities and they had presented their plans during video consultations with the relevant Haitian ministries. This visit would mark the start of her field work with the faculty at the two universities which were collaborating in the project.

When she asked for comments, Masters told the group, “State has committed some funds in support of the education project through our foreign aid programs and several charitable foundations have also signed on. We’re also waiting to hear from the U.N. The United Nations Development Program specifically targets projects like this one.”

Ambassador Estrada also commented. “There’s a lot of interest at the OAS in seeing how successful this project will be, especially from many of the smaller states of Central America, The OAS can’t commit much in the way of direct funding but might have other resources, such as personnel for educational support, that several states could provide.”

Tamara’s presentation came next. Her idea was to try to help Haitians develop a basic manufacturing industry, similar to how countries in southeast Asia had grown a strong manufacturing infrastructure in the period following the U.S. conflict in Vietnam. To do that, she had her attorneys and university advisors assemble a plan to establish an endowment for a technical school there to set up an advanced engineering technology program. The program would specifically train technicians to staff a manufacturing facility which she would build in the country. Preliminary talks with the Haitian government had been very positive but Tamara knew that soon, hands seeking graft would start to appear. She was also aware that when a manufacturing operation was running, there was a possibility of its being nationalized, so steps would need to be taken to make nationalization very painful for the government.

After the presentations, Masters from the State Department spoke.

“These seem to be excellent plans, Dr and Miss Alexandre. But I’m sure you’re aware that Haiti is becoming an increasingly difficult place for foreigners now—Haitian citizens too. They’ve always had occasional problems with kidnappings for ransom there, but in the past year, the incidence of kidnappings has increased greatly. Two U.S. citizens were abducted in the past year; it’s dangerous to travel in the countryside now. We’ve issued a do-not-travel advisory for Haiti. There’s also been a major increase in gang violence in cities, including in Port-au-Prince, and ordinary citizens have organized self-defense or vigilante groups to try to defend their communities. These problems have been caused because the government doesn’t have enough police resources to maintain basic law and order.”

“Kidnappings have even happened on highways between the larger cities,” Zane added. “Gangs have been

watching for travelers and there have been several incidents on main roads lately.”

“I’ve heard about the situation from my Haitian collaborators,” Nadine answered. “Tamara and I have discussed the problem and she has a thought about this and then I have a suggestion.”

Tamara looked at the group. “You’ll recall, I’m sure, the instability from several years ago that involved a rogue Vodou priestess named Vanessa.”

People around the table nodded.

“She was putting into place a group to take control of the government and had accumulated a fair amount of money as well as supporters, many coming from within their government. After her death, those of her supporters who could be identified were purged and this left a vacuum of power in many ministries and in the police too, which the government never effectively dealt with. I think that the problem that underlies the current situation may be the figurehead that Vanessa planned to install as their king—several years ago, when my mother was in Haiti finalizing her affairs, she was given a redacted extract of Vanessa’s journal. That journal mentioned some of Vanessa’s plans. There was nothing written in there about any plan to set up a king, though, unless of course it had been redacted.

“But she had other information directly from Vanessa, who had spoken to Mom a few weeks before we had to flee Haiti. At that time, she bragged about how she planned to overthrow the government. I believe that the person that Vanessa had in mind to be the king—according to Vanessa, he’s from the Duvalier family—is behind this current increase in violence. Possibly he’s united some of the gangs or has convinced them to act together to cause instability and turmoil in the country, perhaps to allow him to orchestrate his own takeover. All the signs point to something like this happening.”

“That’s actually a very strong possibility,” Zane commented. “That’s an idea that the CIA has been exploring right now. Thanks to what Dr Alexandre told us when she arrived in the U.S. about ten years ago and schooled us then on her culture, the CIA has since increased our research capabilities about Haiti and has been monitoring conditions in the country closely since this latest instability began.”

The U.S. ambassador to Haiti continued speaking then.

“One of the major difficulties with outside governments helping with the population here is that about 85 percent of the population speak only Haitian *Kreyòl* but many do understand a little French. *Kreyòl* is spoken nowhere else, except in the expat communities. That makes for a real cultural divide in the Caribbean, even involving the Dominican Republic, the country that shares this island. Unfortunately, there’s a lot of distrust and animosity between the two countries over many historical issues. Haitians still haven’t forgotten the atrocities of 1937 that Rafael Trujillo, the Dominican president and dictator at that time, committed against both Haitians and intermarried Dominicans living both in the D.R. and inside the border region of Haiti. He ordered the army to slaughter as many as 15,000 people—or possibly more; the true number is unknown—on the pretext that they were smugglers and cattle rustlers, but in truth, his intent was to kill as many people of African ancestry as possible.”

“This is so true,” Nadine responded. “The animosity continues still. There’s no free passage from Haiti to the D.R.; one needs to get a permit in advance to cross the border. And the physical differences between the two countries are stark. Flying over the island of Hispaniola, one quickly sees that the Haitian countryside looks brown while the D.R. side is green. Much of the reason is a result of the geology and the prevailing winds—first, Haiti is more mountainous and has been systematically deforested in the past for its lumber for building and, before the use of petroleum for energy began, making charcoal. So the erosion there is extreme. And second, the prevailing winds are easterly, reaching the D.R. before Haiti. So unlike the D.R., agriculture in Haiti is difficult. This country can never be reformed from the top down. Reform must start by enabling its

citizens.”

“Okay, Mom,” Tamara spoke. “People, this is our vision to bootstrap the country. My mom’s ideas for cultural stability and education and my ideas for economic development are our contributions. But the biggest current problem is security. The U.N. removed its peacekeeping force in, ah, 2016, I think, saying that Haiti was recovering. That was far from true, and it’s gotten much worse now, especially given what I told you that I think has happened.

“So, Mr President, you made a deal with me; I’m delivering my part by setting up a few industries in the U.S. based on my gadgets. I’m gonna give you the political part, sir. I’m not sure that we want the U.N. back running the show; the last time they came here—after the earthquake they brought cholera to Haiti and that was a disaster then—and the country was only recently declared cholera-free. Mom’s collaborator in Ghana has developed some contacts with a number of influential people in Benin and Togo, perhaps even Nigeria. The people of those nations are very close culturally and religiously to the Haitians. There are maybe 400 Beninese peacekeepers serving with the U.N. now, they were just recently in Mali. Togo can provide another thousand.

“What we’d like to see is getting a cadre of west African security forces to come to Haiti and first, supplement the woefully inadequate police there and second, set up a crash course in effective policing. Possibly recruit Benin and Togo citizens who have military or police training to serve as an auxiliary police force to help the Haitian government. Their similar culture and French language will make them more acceptable to Haitians than using western forces. The methods and logistics should be whatever works best for the Haitians.

“Above all, we need to keep away from the idea that the U.S. is interfering with the country. I don’t want a repeat of the specter of Granada or the Nicaraguan Iran Contra affair—or earlier, the U.S. Cuban mess or its interference with the D.R. or Panama. Put the Monroe Doctrine to rest permanently. And help us pull this terribly poor country out of its economic distress.”

Gerston glared at Tamara for a second and then smiled. “It’s a tall order, Tamara. Do you think you could do your part in getting the Haitian government to accept foreign policing aid? They did allow the U.N., but that was following several disasters—hurricanes, an earthquake...”

“Well, sir, this is a social disaster, isn’t it?”

“Ah. Yes it is. Well said. Nadine, you know that you have full U.S. ambassadorial credentials, right?”

“That’s true, Dr Gerston, I do. But it’s best not to push that in their ministers’ faces. I’ve seen how leery most are about dealing with foreign diplomats. I get much more ‘street cred’...” she made finger quotes, “from being known as the priestess who stood up to Vanessa, actually.” She grinned. “And I can always threaten to put a voodoo hex on them.”

Everyone laughed at that.

“Seriously, since I know the culture so well and have many contacts, it shouldn’t be necessary to flaunt my diplomatic status. My plans—and my daughter’s too—are looking ahead five years or more. Any significant manufacturing facility couldn’t be built sooner; besides, we’d need to train the workers. And set up smaller pilot facilities to build skills. Just think—even the wealthiest communities currently get power only for part of the day. We’ll be creating the infrastructure for more industries and the people to work in them. And we can use what we learn along the way to help other developing countries too. That was your idea in setting up the Columbia Institute, right, sir?”

“A big piece of it, yes,” Gerston answered. “And achieving economic stability goes a long way to reducing hunger, crime, and warfare. If only someone could figure out what to do about religious fanaticism. That’s the world’s really huge social problem.”

The meeting was essentially ended; Nadine had some records and correspondence to discuss with Masters and she told the ambassador on the video that she'd be in touch with him within the week about her visit. Masters told her that he would be assigning a team of Diplomatic Security Service agents to her and Tamara so that they'd always have two agents with them. Then the group all began to depart.

Gerston pulled Tamara aside. "I heard that Kevin and Denise have accepted Westphalia's offer to study here. I can't wait to see how this little group of you youngsters will work together; you're all impressive as hell..."

"We've got some general ideas, Mr Gerston, and there's a few more recruits we're gonna add. It'll be a couple of years, but I hope you'll like what we think we'll be doing when we all get going. No promises, though, but Kevin is a magician about figuring out how to get things done."

"So true. Well, thanks for the update but no thanks for all the work you're making for me."

Tamara grinned at him. "C'mon, sir. You know you love it."

"Ha ha. You got me there."

Gerston reached to shake her hand but Tamara gave him a quick hug instead.

"I think we'll work well together," she said softly, winking at him and then she walked away as Gerston looked at her in admiration, shaking his head.

Tamara and Nadine left to return to Nadine's home. They needed to plan for their Haiti trip and Tamara would stay overnight.

~~~~~

The following morning, when Tamara awoke, she recalled her dreams and tears began streaming down her cheeks. She found her mother in the kitchen preparing breakfast and ran to hug her.

"What's wrong, darling?" Nadine asked, surprised and concerned.

"It was one of those dreams that wasn't a dream; it was a memory of *Granmanman*'s that came as a dream. I guess my talking about going to Haiti and Haiti's problems made it come out," Tamara said, wiping her eyes.

"Something bad? I hope not," Nadine asked.

"It's about *Granmanman* and not bad. Sad though. It's about your papa. You said you never knew much about him, other than that *Granmanman* told you he was a good man but that they couldn't live together."

"Oh dear, yes, she never wanted to speak of him. She always got emotional when I asked so I stopped asking. Is your ... ah ... memory about him?"

"It is. Let's sit; this will be hard 'cause the memory is filled with much sorrow, but more nostalgia than real sadness."

"*Mezanmi* ... go on then," Nadine said as they went to a sofa in the living room.

"I'll just jump to the heart of what's in the memory and then tell you the details, okay?"

"Please, no suspense, darling."

"So your father is actually a Beninite and a direct descendant of a Dahomey kingdom priest..."

Nadine gasped, her hand at her mouth.

"That's what's in *Granmanman*'s memory, *Manman*. He was part of the royal family—your dad's ancestor, that

is. The memory I have says that the family line goes back thousands of years and *Granmanman*'s maternal ancestors do as well, so our families have had priests and priestesses in them forever."

"Yes, the maternal part I know. *Manman* Tamara told me of our whole lineage; the written part goes back to before about 1500 and an oral part, which she put on paper, for even longer. How they as slaves were able to keep that memory seems amazing to me."

"Her memory tells me that those ancestral records were sacred."

"That seems obvious. So what are the details? How much is in her memories?"

"Lots, but much is hazy, like what you recall from when you wake up from a dream. But I recall the important parts. I need to call *Granmanman* by her name now, Tamara, otherwise I'll get confused, 'cause it's her that I'll be talking about."

Nadine nodded.

"So Tamara David's parents sent her to Benin after she was *kanzo* for her mom. She was just past her eighteenth birthday, and her family had the tradition of sending their oldest daughter to Benin for advanced study. She was their only surviving child. Apparently the David family had some wealth because they had been doing this since about 1840."

"Oh my, I never knew..." Nadine sighed.

"Cause *Granmanman* wanted a Western education for you first, *Manman*. She was planning for you to go there after you graduated. So to continue. Tamara was sent there to study the ancient techniques of the *manbos* and *oungans* with the traditional *Rada* practitioners in Tanve, a little village just outside Abomey. Greta had told me that was the seat of the Kingdom of Dahomey. Tamara was supposed to be there for two years, but about fifteen months into her visit there, her mentor was asked to conduct a fertility ritual for a well-to-do couple who were having problems conceiving.

"The memories here are confused, but it seems that this was a very hands-on ritual and Tamara participated. Enthusiastically, my memories tell me. She had fallen in love with her mentor, but he was fifteen years older and already had two wives—that was, and still is, common in that culture. Anyway, Tamara became pregnant. The folks in her village and all of the surrounding villages, which had close bonds, loved Tamara as one of their own, and persuaded her to marry her mentor."

"*Mezanmi ...*"

"She had a tribal marriage and became one of his wives then, and intended to stay, but when she contacted her parents, they first gave reluctant approval but then mentioned that their illnesses had worsened. They had contracted tuberculosis, which was endemic in Haiti, perhaps the year before. So Tamara contacted friends of her parents who told her that they had recently become very ill and needed more care than they were able to get."

"Oh, this is so sad... I never knew... such a story," Nadine was weeping now.

"I know. Telling it is hard for me 'cause I feel the emotions inside me. So Tamara had to return to Haiti to try to take care of her parents; her husband and sister wives urged her to do it 'cause they saw how sad she was after learning about them. She had a hard trip back, being three or four months pregnant, but she did return and was able to care for her parents. Her memories about this are about how careful she was to prevent infecting herself. But her parents were so weakened by their illnesses that they died within two years of her return. You were her baby, *Manman*, and you were less than two years old when they passed away."

“What a sad story. Recall any other parts?”

“Just snatches. One is very important, though, and I’ll come to that. First, her drums...”

“Ah, she cherished them. I’m so glad that I have them now.”

“Yes, well, they were her wedding gift from the Benin villages. They were well over a hundred years old, too.”

“*Mezanmi*... no wonder she treasured them so.”

“She tried to keep in touch with her husband but he died; she doesn’t know how, when you were maybe five or six. And finally, I know you have her *asson*...”

“Yes, she had it hidden in her *ounfò* in a secret place together with all of the other artifacts from our ancestors. After she disappeared, I went there and got everything I could find, the stuff that *femèl chen* Vanessa hadn’t stolen.”

“Inside the *asson*, Tamara hid a bank deposit key and ownership papers. A memory I have is that she did something legal to keep the bank from confiscating the box. Maybe that’s in the *asson* too.”

“Oh, this is such news... I’m overwhelmed,” Nadine sighed. “Let me go get the *asson*.”

Tamara waited impatiently for her mother to return.

## Chapter 69 - Buried Treasures

Nadine returned a few minutes later.

“You know, this *is* unusually large,” Nadine observed. “I never thought much about its size. Manman said that it was her mother’s and had been handed down from mother to daughter. Four or five generations, I think she told me. I did wonder why she gave me my own after my *kanzo*, but she said back then that I’d inherit it after she was no longer active. Which happened way too soon, so when I found it in her *ounfò*, I never considered using it as my own. My own *asson* is precious, since it was *Manman*’s presentation to me.”

They examined the artefact and Nadine noticed that the string of beads which was wound around the gourd’s stem was attached tightly to the shell, while the other strings were more loosely wound around the body of the object.

“I think these beads might hide a seam,” she observed. “Maybe it twists off?”

She tried turning the stem, but it didn’t work. But in handling the object, three larger red beads strung together over where she thought the seam might be, seemed to move a little when she pressed on them. That was the key; pressing those beads and twisting the stem, opened the gourd.

“Clever workmanship,” she observed, looking at how the stem part fit into the gourd’s body.

A cloth bag had been stuffed inside, so she carefully removed it and untied its draw string. She emptied the bag onto the table. There was a numbered key on a brass tag which had the name and address of a bank, tightly folded ownership papers for the deposit box, and a two-page contract with a Port-au-Prince law firm.

“I recognize the firm’s name,” Nadine told Tamara. “They were one of the largest, so they still must exist. This is so exciting; let’s see what the contract says. It’s in French.”

She read it. “Very brief. It provides for the law firm to ensure that the bank maintains the deposit box even after its owner stops accessing it and here’s a file number that the law firm says gives access to instructions for the bearer of this contract. Very mysterious.”

“I wonder,” Tamara said thoughtfully. “In my dream, I told you that I recalled that Tamara’s parents had some wealth; perhaps this has to do with that.”

“I don’t know, honey, everything was so frugal for us then.”

“But she sent you to Puerto Rico for university, right? And supported you there.”

“I’m so dense. Of course; I never considered that,” Nadine sighed. “Back then, I was so idealistic and never really thought much about money. But we lived like our neighbors, very frugally.”

“Tamara wanted to fit into the community, Mom. That’s how we lived ourselves, right? Even though I now know that Dad had saved a lot of money from his Marine days.”

“Again, you’re right. Well, this gives us an exciting adventure when we get to Haiti. A bank visit and a law firm visit. Okay then, we have two weeks to plan where to fit in these visits. Let’s see where they can fit into our schedules—which are getting tighter.”

“Sure. Let me go over the parts I need to do. Many are already scheduled, like the visits to the U.S. embassy, the Economy and Finance Ministry, the Commerce and Industry Ministry, and also the Public Works, Transport and Communications Ministry. For that last one, I’m meeting with the head of the National Land Registry Office regarding potential factory site locations and land ownership. That’s a big problem in Haiti, land ownership, and that’s essential to get settled up front. I’m meeting the officials simply to just ‘show the flag,’ so they can see



that it's a Haitian national who's behind this project. The actual negotiations and legal work will be done by professionals. I want to show my personal commitment.

"Those meetings are for the manufacturing facility itself. I'm planning for several pilot facilities which I suppose can be set up in pole barns, if nowhere else, and will do small manufacturing jobs mainly as technical training centers. This is where we'll be training the techs and supervisors who'll staff the big facility when it's built. I'm figuring that these shops can be set up to make the small G-force turbines that my engineers will design that will be sized to produce 500 kilowatts to be used in small villages."

"You were meeting with university people too?" Nadine asked.

"Right. That's the other part of my plan, the education part. I've been in touch with the administration at the Universite GOC. They have several locations and my preference is to have them set up the tech training program, since I got my start at their campus at Titanyen, right next to where we lived in Aubry. But their main location is in Port-Au-Prince. I'll meet with them and confirm my interest, but for the major negotiations and program design, I'll leave that to the experts in the field.

"We'll need local legal representation in Haiti too, Mom. I've asked my attorney firm for recommendations, but we can also check out the firm that *Granmanman* used. If they did a good job in following her wishes, they may be the ones to go with."

"I agree," Nadine said. "Okay then, let's go over our meeting schedules and see how to align them so we won't get too far from each other. Good security."

"Mom, let me show you two defensive emotion projections you can try. The first one was the very first I did when I was in middle school and the second one builds on that one."

"Are you sure you want to reveal that? Ah... maybe I should ask if *I'm* ready to learn it..."

"Jeez, Mom, you're one of the most stable people I know. You won't do bad things with this, I promise. But you need eye contact for it to work. It's how *Granmanman* gave Vanessa her heart problem. I'm sure that if she hadn't been so weakened, she could have made it a full heart attack. But I'd never go *that* far; besides, it takes enormous concentration and a whopping amount of mental energy."

"Well, okay then."

Tamara went on to work with her mother to show her how to project confusion and fear.

"These two emotions can be created by causing the body to overproduce cortisol. I've shown you how to mobilize your limbic system to become sensitive to others' emotions and that's allowed you to learn how to do some limited projecting of them. What I've always thought of as 'pushing.' So the limbic system is the key here and I'll give you the technical background in how it works.

"When you project, or 'push,' to another person, using the latent abilities lots of people seem to have—particularly those who are sensitive to spirituality of all kinds—what you're doing is activating the amygdala, the central switchboard of emotion and memory in the brain. This organ signals the hypothalamus that the body needs to act and that organ then activates the pituitary gland. These three brain structures sit right next to each other. The pituitary gland is the largest neuroendocrine gland in the body; it has several lobes which do different things, mainly secreting its own kinds of hormones and controlling the parts of the nervous system which mobilize the other parts of the endocrine, or hormone, system.

"One of the hormones that the pituitary gland then secretes is ACTH, adrenocorticotrophic hormone, and this chemical is carried by the bloodstream to the adrenal glands, which sit atop the kidneys, to alert them. At the same time, the sympathetic nervous system, activated by the pituitary, signals the adrenal glands to begin

producing catecholamines, particularly epinephrine, also called adrenaline, and norepinephrine, and these are secreted into the glands' blood supply. Those hormones prepare the muscles for violent action and they cause an increase in blood pressure and respiration.

"The ACTH produced by the pituitary causes the adrenal cortex to release the stress hormone cortisol, which also causes an increase in blood pressure and mobilizes the body's stored energy resources, like fatty acids, to give the muscles a boost if fighting or fleeing is needed.

"And I believe that, at least in my own 'pushing,' I can freeze the subject to the point where they lose muscle control. I think that there's a connection between the area of the thalamus and the midbrain area, a region called the periaqueductal gray, or PAG, and the cerebellum. I've read that the PAG gets sensory information about threats, while the cerebellum helps coordinate movement. What I read is that there's a bundle of nerve fibers that connects the PAG to a very specialized part of the cerebellum and activating those nerve fibers will cause a muscle-freezing response when the brain's central survival networks are activated during threatening situations. And this activation also stimulates the pyramidal tracts in the brainstem, which also causes increased heart rate and blood pressure."

"My goodness, such a lecture, Tamara. You sure you're not a neuroscientist too?"

"No, Mom. I just have the need to know how my ability works—to make sense scientifically and not say it's paranormal or magic. These physiological reasons all make perfect sense and it's the new brain structures which my enhanced MRI coils have detected that explain how the 'pushing' works. I still have to figure out a few things that don't fit my current theories. How did *Granmanman* come to me, take me over, and leave her memories? How the heck do I become a translating machine when I need to do it? How does my premonition work? I've still got more questions than answers.

"Okay, back to how to do this. What you need to do is to make your mind clearly visualize a frightened, confused state, then focus on the target's eyes and will them to feel that way. I know you did it with the love and happiness emotions you've tried; those are easy 'cause that's your nature. This one's much harder but it's much easier when you're faced with a threat, as I've learned. I told you all about those times. You can practice on me."

Reluctantly, Nadine began, and about forty-five minutes later an exhausted Nadine and a completely wasted Tamara called it quits.

"Damn, *Manman*, you've gotten almost too good at doing that!" Tamara panted as the two of them hugged.

"Are you okay now, darling?" Nadine asked. "You look almost as pale as a Caucasian," and the two giggled.

"Yeah, now that's awfully pale," Tamara said, rubbing her face and then stretching her arms and shaking them.

"I'm glad I've never had to face that kind of emotional attack before; some of it actually hurt! Mostly it was energy-sapping and pushing off the fear response was exhausting. That would be a very effective way of distracting someone who wasn't prepared for that kind of attack, actually. You're a good student, Mom. You look like I feel, actually."

"Yes, you were right about the physical effort it takes, but ... against someone...?"

"Oh, you don't need to keep going. Less than a minute will definitely stop most people. Maybe only twenty seconds. There's a way to up the intensity, but you shouldn't try to use that. It could give a heart attack. Remember that Kovacs guy? From the child slave cartel?"

"Oh yes, That scum..."

"*Manman*! Such language!"

“I would have used worse but for your sensitive ears... What about him?”

“That was the same projection I showed you, but he had a congenital heart issue. The burst of cortisol he got from my ‘pushing,’ together with the stress Dad gave him with that choke hold, made part of his heart muscle stop working. Same thing as I just showed you how to do.”

“That’s an uncomfortable power to have, darling,” Nadine demurred.

“Not if you consider the offensive skills lots of people have, Mom. Dad can kill with his hands alone. So can people who know other martial arts, like Kevin or Jeremy. Even little Amelia. Jeez, all you need to do is to have a gun and think of the damage that someone like that causes... school shootings and lockdown drills, all that crap. A deranged person, motivated by racial hatred or political or religious intolerance, or just someone completely unstable, can cause untold misery. The ability I showed you is mostly only effective defensively. You can see that, right?”

“Yes, I can now. Thanks for reassuring me, darling. Ah, can we finish up? I need to get into my office in ninety minutes for a staff meeting.”

“Sure. Peter’s coming by soon to pick me up. We’re going car shopping today, remember?”

“That’s right. So you’re finally going to do your own driving now.”

“Only when I have to,” Tamara pouted. “I like being chauffeured.”

Nadine snorted.

Tamara had finally given into Peter’s persuasion and agreed to get a driver’s license.

~~~~~

Tamara was getting a car. She was ambivalent about it; it seemed to be a huge responsibility. But she had done just fine in her driving lessons and didn’t lack confidence, but she felt very secure being driven around by other people. She could even get work done during that down time. But she agreed with Peter that having her own car would make her much more independent and less subject to other people’s schedules. It would give her an additional freedom which she didn’t have.

She had decided that she wanted a car in the SUV configuration and wanted one from a U.S. manufacturer. The current Chevrolet’s Electric Utility Vehicle seemed to be a good choice so she had checked with a few engineers at the APL about its specifications and range. The latest model had a number of upgrades from the models of several years earlier and its 70 kWh battery pack and 250 horsepower, all-wheel-drive electric motor gave it an approximate 250-mile range.

### ***One month earlier: April***

Emma had heard Tamara talking to one of the engineers about her car plans.

“I say, Tamara, the EEC Energy auto battery division is developing their EV batteries using that Chevy model and a Vauxhall SUV,” Emma said. “We’ve got three Chevys and eight Vauxhalls and they’re driving them all continuously now in destructive testing to run them to battery failure. So far, the battery performance has been brilliant.”

“Tamara, on that spec sheet for the Chevy, what’s the battery there?” one of the engineers asked. “And charging time?”

“Um, it’s 350-volt lithium-ion battery, 70 kWh, and weighs 1,074 pounds. It says it gets 268 miles. About seven hours to full charge when close to empty.”

“Emma, what about your company’s battery?” he asked.

“We’ve developed one that, together with its integrated controller, outputs 350 volts but has way better specs. It’s 210 kWh and only weighs 280 kilos—ah, that’s what? Six hundred pounds?”

“About 615. Damn. What’s the range they get?” he asked.

“The average of all the cars is, erm... let me think. It’s way greater because of the much lighter battery and greater energy density. About 1100 kilometers, I think I recall.”

“That’s over 680 miles. Jesus. What about charging time?”

“Now that’s where Tamara’s invention really shines,” Emma said, putting her hand on Tamara’s shoulder. “The accumulator doesn’t store power by making a chemical reaction happen; it works basically by just pouring electrons into the device. And there’s no internal heating either, or conversion losses. So to go to a full charge from 20 percent, it only takes about five minutes—the same as filling a tank of petrol.”

The group looked at Emma and then Tamara in awe.

“No shit, that’s a world-changer in cars,” one of the other listeners said.

“There’s another benefit to the new accumulator,” Emma said, smiling. “It has the ability to pick up power from the environment, so the accumulator is always charging using induced power from atmospheric static electricity and power line radiation. Now then, Tamara, if you do decide to get a compatible auto, I’ll get one of those accumulators shipped here and you can have it installed. Do you...”

“Oh, for sure, Emma! Absolutely,” Tamara exclaimed.

So that was arranged. The accumulator would arrive in three weeks, a week prior to Tamara’s Haiti trip.

### ***Back to the present***

Tamara and Peter entered the dealership’s showroom. Tamara had made an appointment with the general manager, a Mr Noland. The receptionist showed the couple to his office.

“When you made the appointment, you said that you were in the market for a car,” Noland told them after they greeted each other. “Why didn’t you want to deal with my salespeople?”

“Simple,” Tamara told him. “After what we tell you, you’ll see. It’s because you’d have gotten involved anyway.”

He looked at her, mystified.

“The reason’s pretty simple. I want to buy an EUV, but there are special conditions attached.”

“Really? We certainly can negotiate on price and features...” he began.

“Not that,” Tamara grinned at him. “*Special* conditions, ones you’ve probably never have dealt with before. A company I’m associated with has developed a new kind of battery for EVs...”

Noland was nodding, “I’ve been reading about that.”

“... and I have one of the new batteries. Actually, I invented the technology they use...”

Noland looked at her in surprise. “*You’re* the inventor?”

“Right. So the conditions of my purchase are this. I’ll tell you the model and options I want and you’ll get the vehicle and prep it, installing the improved battery, and crediting my purchase for the original battery set you remove. The new battery’s provided with the proper hardware to be mounted in the battery compartment for

proper load distribution and stability, all calculated by engineers in the company where these batteries are being tested right now. You can bill for your service department's time to remove and install the new battery. That's the special condition."

"Ah, Miss Alexandre, you know that we really can't do that; the liability alone..."

"I have a release of liability that I can give you," Tamara said. "It covers any battery performance and vehicle stability issues. Since the battery is sized specifically for this model, the warranty on the drive train and electronics will remain."

"I still don't think that I can do that. You could buy the vehicle and have your own mechanic do the replacement, you know."

"And void the rest of the vehicle's warranty. I checked; that's what would happen. I don't have to make the purchase from your dealership, you know. I'm sure that I can find one that would cooperate, after they made certain that any legal issues were addressed."

"Here's a carrot; maybe it will help persuade you. My battery will give the vehicle a 680-mile range and the charging time from 20 percent to full is about five minutes. Think what that means. There's going to be a huge demand for these new accumulators when they hit the market in about two years. I can get your dealership a contract to purchase a dozen of them and you can upsell the vehicles that they'll fit. Think about being one of the few dealerships in the world to have access to that technology. Call your legal people and your district sales manager. Here are copies of the contract and waivers my lawyers have prepared. Call me within the week to let me know your decision."

"We'll go back on the showroom floor to look at your stock now and get with a salesperson to decide on features. We'll have a sales order ready when we're done, so the next part is in your hands, sir. Thanks for listening."

"Hell, never had a reverse sales pitch like that, Miss Alexandre. Okay, I'll see what we can come up with. Good meeting you; I'll be in touch."

While they were looking at the cars, Peter whispered to Tamara, "Jeez, sweetheart, you sure know how to talk tough!"

Tamara giggled, "This was just a training exercise for when I have to meet with the officials in Haiti. They're typically not the most polite people and many have no respect for women at all, so I'm gonna have to talk tough with them."

Tamara saw what she liked and did wind up approving a sales order, subject to the battery swap.

### ***Port-au-Prince, Haiti: June***

The trip to Haiti in June was mostly uneventful at first; the two women got most of their meetings done and had reached most of their planned goals. The big surprise would come as their trip came to a close. They both felt secure with their ever-present DSS agents and had no problems with their personal safety. However, there were several major issues, two of them disturbing, that Tamara encountered during her two weeks there. First, she learned a lot about dealing with bureaucrats and other official types who only were concerned about their self-interest. Untruths and evasive language were a major part of most of their dealings.

*Okay, she thought, I know how to handle this problem. I know how to enable people to become sensitive to lies. When we set up our cadre of people here, I'll have Mom work with trusted manbos to show them that skill.*

Then, in meeting with some of the government ministry officials, she sensed that there were a few who were involved in some way with the gangs that were troubling the cities. One of those assistant ministers was actually

an official whose ministry supervised the country's police. This was a problem which needed quick attention, but all she could do right now was to plant suggestions in the offenders' minds to become ill whenever they attempted to do something that benefitted the situation with the gangs.

*Possibly use the manbos we train as lie-detectors for the new police force we will build?* Tamara wondered. *Maybe I should talk to Greta about that.*

It was only during the final four days of their visit that the two women could find the time to deal with the safe-deposit box and the law firm. Nadine and Tamara did encounter a little resistance from the bank's officials when they presented their key and the box ownership records. However, the intervention of a DSS agent helped to smooth the way, after a brief but intense discussion.

*I could have used my ability and avoided that crap,* Tamara mused when the bank official finally allowed their access. *But that would mean using it for personal gain and I refuse to do that.*

"Sexist idiots," Tamara mumbled to Nadine as they entered the vault anteroom with an attendant.

"We both need to unlock the box together," the attendant told them in *Kreyòl*. "Come in to the vault and I'll show you where your key goes."

The access to the box was by opening a large door, about ten inches wide and six inches high. The attendant inserted a key and turned it and told Nadine to insert and turn her key. The lock retracted, the attendant opened the door, and pulled out a covered metal box, about two feet long. From the way he carried it, it appeared to be heavy.

"We'll go to a cubicle and I'll leave you alone to open the box," he told them.

When they were alone, taking a deep breath, Nadine lifted the cover and looked inside. The two women gasped at what they saw. There were six gray velvet cloth bags inside, but one had split along a seam and a number of coins had slid out. They looked like they were gold. Below the bags, they could see currency—it was obviously U.S. currency but the notes looked unfamiliar.

Nadine began to reach in but Tamara stopped her.

"Mom, wait. If that's what I think it is, touching the old paper could leave a stain and hurt its value. Look on the left side of that top one—see, it says 'Gold Certificate.' And the bill is for 5,000 dollars. I never knew that bills came in amounts that high. Jeez, I'm glad the cell phone I got to use here includes a data plan. Let me get more info about that bill... let's see... okay, there's a date on it... series of 1928."

She entered the data from the note in her phone and while she waited for the page to load, she asked, "It looks like there are a bunch of notes under there, right, Mom? We'll need to get some latex gloves to handle them."

A few seconds later, the page opened and she read the information to Nadine.

"Okay, it's a Gold Certificate from 1928 and this page says that none are known to be in private hands; the U.S. government has just one, it's serial number one and kept in the Smithsonian Museum but it says here that it's not on display. The image of the bill on this web page has a comment that reads, 'One of a few known or unique. Example note has a repaired tear. Profound rarity.'"

Meanwhile Nadine had taken a handkerchief out of her handbag and used it to shift the bill to the side and a number of similar bills were revealed.

"Looks like there might be at least twenty here, they all look like 5,000s," she whispered.

Tamara glanced over at the box. "Can you push the coins aside a bit? I want to see the serial number of the note."

Okay, an ‘A’ followed by seven zeroes, then a six, then ‘A.’ So that’s number six. The Smithsonian has number one. Jeez, think of the value of these bills; they’re virtually unique!”

Nadine slid the notes aside a bit more. “I see numbers eight, nine, and ten. I won’t disturb them any further. What about the coins?” she asked.

“Let me check them, one sec,” Tamara said and checked several coins. “Those are gold \$20 coins and the years are different. Let me check a few.”

She went back to her phone browser.

“Okay, the coins are called double eagles and are somewhat rare too, some years are, anyway. Looks like typical prices range around \$2,000 but some are up at \$10,000. How many coins do you think there are?”

Nadine pushed the spilled coins around a bit.

“This bag has maybe thirty to forty. Six bags and they look similar, so 180 to 240 of them, perhaps.”

“That could be maybe a half-million in coins alone,” Tamara gasped. “Your mom’s family had some wealth, indeed. But back in the 1920s and 30s, this money was much closer to face value, but still, it was a fortune even back then.”

“I know. I had no idea. We’ll have to close all this up and lock it up again. Later this summer, I’ll get Wilson to come back with me to secure this fortune. Take a few photos, will you? We’ll need to get U.S. legal advice about this, you know.”

Tamara took some photos of the open box.

Then she said, “Let me look up everything’s face value to get an idea. Call it twenty currency notes and 240 double eagles...” She typed a bit on her phone. “The newest coin I saw was 1930, so the buying power of this money back then was close to 2 million dollars, Mom. For yucks, let’s check who the richest people were in 1930.”

She fiddled with her phone a bit more. “John D. Rockefeller. In 1930 he was worth 1300 million. This hoard is 2 million. *Grandmanman*’s family was really rich.”

They closed up and got the attendant to lock up the box again.

~~~~~

They had an even more surprising experience at the law office. Indeed, Cabinet Toussaint, Leblanc and Baptiste was one of Haiti’s largest and most respected. Nadine and Tamara had made an appointment with one of the senior partners when they arrived in Haiti, and on their twelfth day in the country, they met with him. Nadine handed him the contract from her mother’s *asson*.

“Ah, I see,” the attorney, Pelex Leblanc, said after he read it. “This was from, ah, 24 years ago? Yes. Nobody remains here in the firm from then. Let me have the file brought. It’s in our vault; that will take fifteen minutes, perhaps.”

He made a phone call.

When he disconnected, Tamara asked him, “While we wait, I have a question that starts with a preamble. My mother and I are Haitian citizens but we also are U.S. citizens now too. Mom is a diplomat and I’m a student, but I’ve made some inventions that I will be commercializing and I want to do some of the manufacturing in Haiti—it was always my wish to help my birth country. The company that I’ve formed will need Haitian legal representation. Would your firm like to be considered by us to represent us here? I will be getting other

suggestions from my stateside attorneys as well.”

“Indeed, I know about you, Dr and Mlle Alexandre; I had checked into you and your status when you called for this appointment. I have established, Dr Alexandre, that you were known as Cassandra David and had married a U.S. serviceman, one Jonas Bernard and the Bernard name is well respected in Haiti still, as is that of the David family.”

Nadine nodded. “That’s very impressive, sir. Is your firm always that thorough?”

“We try to be,” Leblanc said. “With our country’s weak laws and jurists who are less than reliable, it’s essential to have accurate information about our clients, their affairs, and their history. Ah, here’s the file; good. That was quick, thanks,” he said to the person who had brought the paperwork.

He turned to Tamara. “Indeed, we would be honored to be considered as your Haitian representative. But now, let us review this file. First, I saw from the pages you gave me that your mother had a contract with my firm to continue to rent a safe-deposit box in... ah, I see you nodding. You know of the box.”

“We’ve been to the bank and checked it. All is well,” Nadine told him.

Leblanc nodded and opened the file, read the first page, and looked up. “Good. Your visit is quite timely. The instructions here tell us that should Mme Tamara David not appear in these offices after 25 years, we are to contact you, Cassandra David, or your next of kin. Since it is just 24 years, you have saved us the trouble and expense of tracking you down.” He looked sympathetically at Nadine. “But I now recall the news from a year ago, I believe, that Mme David perished at the hands of an evil person, many years earlier, so I am truly sorry for your loss, even after such a long passage of time.”

“Thank you,” Nadine told him.

“You have received your compensation that the government arranged from the witch’s estate?”

“I have, and also the property that was stolen from my mother’s *ounfò*.”

“Excellent. As a solicitor, I’ve seen and heard things that the public or even the government never learns about,” he went on. “So I’m aware of the David family history and reputation, even prior to the 1950s when this firm was established. They were a wealthy family but hid it well. Are you aware of that?”

“Not until very recently. My mom was always frugal, but I also recall how generous she was to people in need. Now I know she had the resources to help others,” Nadine told him.

“Yes, she did have an excellent reputation, both as a religious leader and as social reformer, from what I’ve learned from other clients. Do you wish to know about the source of the family’s wealth?”

“Ah, not illegal, I hope?” Nadine asked tentatively.

Leblanc chuckled. “Borderline, I suppose. The family engaged in shipping, trading, and acting as trade facilitators. Likely smuggling was involved too; that was quite common for shippers. They were shipping agents and handled trade between the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe—mainly France. I’m sorry to say that some of your more distant ancestors may have even been involved in the slave trade—don’t object; some of the Africans who came to the Caribbean in the eighteenth century were, in fact, somewhat involved with slave trade. Possibly parts of the David family were; it’s a reasonable assumption given their family business and how influential the family was in the nineteenth century. Ah, pardon me, I’m getting somewhat away from the topic now.

“This file contains the information about your family’s holdings; that is, the part that came down to your mother from her parents. Right around the beginning of the twentieth century, a major portion of the David family emigrated to Liberia, following the American freed slaves from about forty years earlier. Actually, Liberia isn’t



all that distant from Benin and Togo, the area where most Haitian slaves came from. The David family emigres departed, taking much of the family's wealth with them, but your grandfather's branch stayed and kept up the trade agent business. They were very leery of the Haitian government and rightfully very distrustful of the Dominican Republic too, so their accumulated cash and investments were made in other places, notably the Cayman Islands, Jamaica, and the Bahamas. My firm has been the stewards of the David family investments for the past sixty years or more. Let me tell you about their holdings."

Nadine and Tamara were staring at him in shock. How much money could Nadine's grandparents have accumulated? They waited in anticipation as the lawyer opened a large envelope.

## Chapter 70 - Financial Revelations

Leblanc pulled several folders and packets out of the large envelope and looked at the two women who were still somewhat in shock.

“First, Mme Tamara David did execute a will; I have it here, and you, Dr Alexandre, are her beneficiary; you or your descendants. Having the will makes matters considerably easier when we will need to deal with tax and investment ownership issues. There’s also a letter here for you.”

He handed her a sealed envelope.

“As you can see, it’s unopened, so it must be a private message. You should read it when you’re alone. The will is simple; it conveys all of the holdings of the David family to you. They are currently managed in a trust which your grandparents had us establish; your mother drew her income from proceeds of that trust and my firm acts as the trustee. Here is a copy of the trust’s holdings as of its last general audit... ah, it’s five years ago now; no new acquisitions have been made subsequent to that and there haven’t been any liquidations either, but mergers of some of the businesses undoubtedly have occurred. The information here should still be somewhat current but any valuations would need to be reassessed.”

Leblanc passed her another envelope packet.

“The trust holdings consist of investments in businesses in various locales in the Caribbean region and also include investments in various financial securities which the trust acquired using the proceeds of the business investments. Next, here’s a list of the financial institutions where the trust has maintained accounts, mainly as certificates of deposit, and this list is current as of last December; it’s updated annually since the trust’s fiscal year runs from January to December.”

He handed her another packet.

Nadine interrupted. “How is all of this paid for? I mean...”

Leblanc raised his hand. “As the trust’s managers, as the second page of that contract reads, we assess an annual management fee. Because of the amount of the trust’s assets, our fee percentage is quite small. Its amount is 0.75 percent of the valuation of its assets with an annual adjustment made for the income or profits of the businesses owned by the trust. I assure you that this is a very fair fee and my firm is honored to have been chosen to be the trustee. I hope that you will continue this relationship.”

Nadine nodded; she was still stunned by this news. She realized that the value of the contents of the safe-deposit box was a trivial amount compared to the value of this trust.

“I did read that section, but it didn’t make a lot of sense to me because I had no idea that *Manman* had assets in a trust,” Nadine replied. “Is there anything more? This has been an overwhelming revelation for me; I need time to assimilate this news.”

“Understood. No, that is all that I have. Of course, now that we have your contact information, we shall send you updated information about the trust’s holdings and current valuations. As both a U.S. and Haitian citizen, there are inheritance issues you’ll need to face so I recommend you retain a tax solicitor in the States if you don’t already use one. We would be pleased if you continued to retain Cabinet Toussaint, Leblanc and Baptiste to represent you here in Haiti. We have arrangements which will allow us to represent you in the various countries where your trust’s holdings are located, too. That’s all I have, now, Dr and Mlle Alexandre. And Mlle Alexandre, please do consider us to represent you for your commercial activities here in Haiti. I have both of your addresses, both postal and electronic, so we’ll be forwarding your updates regularly now and I will send a representation proposal to you, Mlle Alexandre.”

“Wait, but you don’t know my needs yet...” Tamara began.

“*Au contraire*,” Leblanc responded, smiling. “My contacts in the Haitian ministries have kept me informed about your meetings with them during the past week. As I mentioned, our intelligence sources in this firm are *quite* good. If there are no further questions, it’s been an honor and pleasure to meet you both and I hope to continue this relationship.”

They all stood and shook hands, then Nadine and Tamara departed.

“What a hell of an impressive guy,” Tamara observed as they rejoined their security team in the lobby.

“True. And I’m staggered by this news. I can’t wait to see what *Manman*’s letter holds. Let’s go to the hotel now instead of going out to Henri’s and Julianna’s place; we’ll go out there a few hours later.”

In their hotel room, Tamara set up her laptop for a video call to her dad while Nadine opened her mother’s letter. She read it, crying softly, as Tamara connected with Wilson.

“Hey, wasn’t expecting your call till this evening,” he told her when he answered his phone. “Let me go to my cubicle and log on to the video.”

“We’ve got unbelievable news, Dad,” Tamara told him a few minutes later when he got connected. “The lawyer here had a letter to Mom from her mother. And there’s much, much more too. Ah, Mom’s looking at me now. Mom, Dad’s on the screen now; you okay with *Granmanman*’s letter?”

“Hi honey,” Nadine told Wilson. “Nice to have you with me, even virtually,” she chuckled. “I could use a virtual hug right now.”

“I’ll give you a real one, Mom, looks like you need it,” Tamara said and they hugged.

“Okay, honey, let’s go in reverse order to today’s revelations,” Nadine began. “I’ll start with the law firm. The firm’s partner we met gave me a letter from *Manman*—among a lot of other things. I just opened the letter and it confirms everything that Tamara had told me about my Benin priest father and *Manman*’s time in Africa and her caring for her sick parents. She wrote all about that in this letter and there’s more details too; things that our Tamara didn’t know or recall from her memories.

“You remember that Tamara had said that *Manman*’s family had some wealth?”

Wilson nodded.

“That was a gross understatement, it turns out. In *Manman*’s letter, she apologizes for keeping that information secret, and her reason was just as our Tamara told me; it was to allow her to fit into the community she served—I told you all that. But here’s something new. *Manman* wrote about a very strong premonition that she had, that something very bad would soon happen to her and that she knew that she wouldn’t survive it. She wrote that she was beginning to plan for getting me the information I would need to continue her work when she was gone. Her letter says that everything would be completed right around the time I was to graduate with my degree—which was only about a month or so later, based on her letter’s date. So she was anticipating a problem and was planning for it, but apparently Vanessa moved much faster than *Manman* expected.”

“What did she need to prepare for?” Wilson asked.

“Here’s the stunner. It seems that the David family was quite wealthy, and not just by Haitian standards. The attorney we saw gave me some information about the family’s trust; I have that here,” she lifted the packet to show him, “and we haven’t opened it yet. The attorney said that the trust owned businesses in several countries in the Caribbean area plus a lot of stock investments. Let me do the great reveal and we’ll see what’s here.”

She opened the envelope and slid out a sheaf of papers. She saw that the top several pages contained a listing of names, addresses, followed by two numbers, all arranged in columns.

“Okay, there are five pages here, it’s a long table,” she interpreted. “There’s a name—company or business name and its address... and what are those numbers? ... *mezanmi* ... Haitian gourdes and U.S. dollars! Oh, the date here is from five years ... that’s right; he said that this was an old list and needed to be updated, but it essentially hasn’t changed all that much. Let me look through the list... oh, spirits, here are two banks! A bank in the Cayman Islands and one in Jamaica!”

“You own two banks?” Wilson said in disbelief.

“Apparently the trust does. The list says it’s privately owned so even if... wait, Tamara found something.”

“Yeah. I was looking through the rest of the papers in that packet. The Cayman bank, here’s the docs on that. It’s a privately held corporation and this is a certificate for a 75 percent corporate ownership. So the trust owns three-quarters of the bank’s value. The ownership of the one in Jamaica is 55 percent, same deal.”

“Jesus,” Wilson breathed, “and how many other companies are on that list?”

Nadine looked at the sheets. “Ah, about twenty-five on a page and five pages. Some seem to be pretty small, like part ownership in several jewelry store chains around the Caribbean...”

“Damn, that’s a big Caribbean industry in itself,” Wilson mused. “Anything else stand out?”

“Let me count... six. Resorts. Two in the Bahamas, one in Jamaica, one in the Caymans, one all the way over in Saint Martin in the Anguillas, and one on Roatán Island, Honduras.”

Tamara was flipping papers. “Majority ownership in all of them. I see about eight hotel chains; two of them have large holdings but not majority ones, here. The other six are at least 60 percent ownership. Jeez, Mom, this is a whole empire. It makes what I’ve put together look like small change.”

Nadine had been looking at the the five pages of ownership listings. “Most of these other company names here seem small; in U.S. dollars from five years ago, about eighty entries have less than a \$100,000 valuation—that’s small in comparison to the big ones. Oh, this looks interesting. There are three yacht charter companies on the list. Looks like a lot of the trust’s holdings are tourist related. Wilson, we need a law firm with serious chops back home to advise us. I like the guy we saw here today; he’s really sharp and has good contacts. And my special sense of him is that he’s completely honest.”

“Mom, there’s that other packet,” Tamara reminded her.

“Goodness, that’s right... more to look at. This last batch was properties. He said that the other packet, which was valued as of December, has the trust’s securities and funds.”

She opened the envelope. The top sheets again contained a listing.

“Honey, the trust has a whole lot of stocks—ah, let’s see, common stock, preferred stock—what’s the difference?”

Wilson shrugged. “Don’t know...”

Tamara interjected, “I do. I spoke to Werner about stock ownership and then to my attorneys when we were setting up the corporate structures. Holders of preferred shares have priority over getting the proceeds from a company’s income—they’re paid dividends before those who own the common shares. But with preferred stock, you have no voting rights while owners of common stock do. And usually the preferred stock dividends are larger than for the common stocks.”

“Ah, that’s good to know, I suppose,” Wilson mused.

“There are a lot of corporate bonds listed here,” Nadine said. “Again, I haven’t paid much attention to what the difference is between bonds and stocks.”

“That one I know,” Wilson said. “Bonds are like loans and pay a constant interest rate so they’re a stable income source. Stocks’ values change with market conditions and the only income they produce is usually by dividends, which is the shareholder’s piece of the company’s profits, or income is generated when the shares are sold to make a profit. So if a stock’s price is lower than when you bought it, you’d lose money. Oh, there are different kinds of bonds, too. What are they called on that list?”

Tamara answered, “They all have names of companies.”

“Okay, those are corporate bonds. No government ones?”

“Not in these bond certificates here. Mom, any government names on the listing?” Tamara asked.

“Don’t see any.”

“Ah, I wonder...” Wilson asked. “There used to be a thing called ‘bearer bonds,’ but those haven’t been around for maybe forty years and most of them have no value anymore. Any of those bond certificates have coupons to clip off—oh, and are they the originals?”

Tamara shuffled the pages. “Um, no, no coupons, they’re all photocopies, and the dates aren’t before 2000. I wonder where the originals are... oh, here’s a separate bond list. The originals are kept in the law firm’s vault, it says. How do you know all that about bonds, Dad?”

“My Uncle Dan used to clip his bearer bond coupons when he lived with me and told me then that those kind of bonds, which weren’t issued in any person’s name so whoever had the certificate owned the bond, were being discontinued because of money-laundering problems. He told me that soon they’d be illegal. I’m not sure that was true, but bearer bonds don’t exist anymore.”

“There’s more here,” Nadine told them. “A bunch of bank statement summaries dated last December. The first batch is from the two banks that the trust owns, Cayman and Jamaica. There are CDs showing ... can this be real? Almost 15 million U.S. dollars! More statements, two banks in the Bahamas and these are money market accounts. There’s just shy of a million there. Two Haitian banks with money market and checking and these have, let me add it, about 275 million Haitian gourdes. That’s, um, a gourde is now around 135 HTG to the dollar...”

Tamara was calculating. “Two point zero-four million dollars, Mom.”

Wilson leaned back and sighed. “Sweetie, you might be one of the richest woman in the world, you know.”

“I really doubt that, honey. It’s a huge amount, but lots is tied up in non-liquid investments. Still, I wonder what the annual revenue stream actually amounts to. All those investments produce income. Where does that go?”

“Here’s the answer, Mom. Here’s the trust’s annual financial statement. It was at the back of the stack of bonds. The annual operating income—gross revenue isn’t used, this says, because of the diversity of the kinds of corporations held by the trust and their varied services, shown here is \$101,572,458. That’s exclusive of unrealized capital gains, it says. The expenses of the entities held by the trust total \$30,471,227. That means the trust is currently earning about \$70 million a year before taxes, Mom! The tax info is very complex ‘cause of the multiple countries involved but it looks like it comes out to around 30 percent. That leaves about \$50 million in net revenue. It looks like the trustees have been reinvesting that money in the businesses and in security purchases.”

“That’s a good custodial idea,” Wilson commented. “Given that it’s in Haiti, I’m glad that there was no skimming.”

“The partner was very straight with us,” Nadine said. “And he was clean. That’s why the firm has such a good rep.”

“Tell Dad about the safe-deposit box, Mom,” Tamara said.

Nadine startled. “Oh my! That’s right. Listen to this.”

Wilson leaned forward expectantly.

“What new surprise do you have for me now, darling?” Wilson asked. “There isn’t much that can beat what you’ve told me already.”

“You’re right, that would be hard to beat. But this was close,” Nadine affirmed. “We went there first. Had a bit of a situation when we arrived; the officials were wary of mere women wanting to access a safe-deposit box. But when that got settled, we opened the box. My family, my grandparents I assume, or their parents, didn’t trust banks much, it seems, because they had stashed a lot of U.S. money in there—but get this; the money was from maybe a hundred years ago. There was currency from 1928, but not regular currency. Gold certificates, as many as twenty of them, and each was a \$5,000 note.”

“The U.S. isn’t on the gold standard any more, so...” Wilson began.

“Still legal tender, Dad. But the point is, the \$5K gold note from 1928 is unique, the only one known is at the Smithsonian and it’s serial number one. We didn’t touch the stack of notes ‘cause they looked like they’d never been handled. The one on top had the number six. A lot of zeros and then six. I looked on line and found that none of these notes are known to be in private hands and the site says that they are profoundly rare. I took photos. You’ll need to get advice about what to do about this find and even come here to retrieve them.”

“You guys are right; this is another amazing experience,” Wilson told them. “Wonder how they got such high-denomination bills.”

“Um, Dad, maybe this way. That Cayman bank, from the papers we have here, was established in 1927. I’ll bet the David family was involved in its chartering and possibly those notes were involved in moving money interbank during its early years. They used those large bills to move money between banks, as the websites I looked at explained. I also read that a number of very astute investors moved a lot of money out of the States just before the 1929 market crash; they were worried about how the market had been rising crazily. So probably they got the large 1928 bills and brought them out to the Cayman bank. Or the Jamaica one; that one was chartered in 1925.”

“Sure. That makes sense.”

“There’s more,” Nadine commented. “Along with the currency, there were six bags of coins. These were twenty-dollar... what are they called?” she asked Tamara.

“Double eagles. Gold coins. We saw the ones that spilled out of a split bag and they had different designs. The dates of some of the spilled ones were between 1881 and 1930 and the coins all looked pretty new.”

“Tamara looked them up, Wilson. She found that the average price at auction for those kind of coins is around \$2,000 each but some can fetch much more—what is it, Tamara? The date?”

“Yep. Also where they were made; they have marks that show that. Some versions appear to be very rare so those get big bucks when they’re sold.”

“We figure that there could be as many as 200 to 240 coins in there,” Nadine told him. “So that find, although it represents a whole lot of money, is tiny compared to the trust my family had started.”

“For sure,” Wilson agreed. “Well, I suppose taking action to do something about the safe deposit box can wait till you return.”

“Absolutely. The box contents sat there for many years; a few more weeks or months won’t matter at all,” Nadine agreed.

The rest of their conversation was about the progress that the two women had made in their plans for Haiti’s recovery. Nadine was pleased with how her team of faculty members had enthusiastically embraced the idea of using lay teachers to supplement education in the rural areas, and she was delighted with how the *manbos* she had spoken with accepted the idea that they could be involved with helping their communities with micro-loans.

“I did learn one major thing,” she told Wilson. “These ideas won’t work well with a bunch of volunteer people doing the field work. There needs to be organizing structures here to plan and oversee progress. Fortunately, all the money I fell into here can help us greatly. I can use a lot of trust money to create an organization.”

“You know, Mom, I bet that Kevin can help; that foundation of his that started in Indonesia might be the model you could follow here in Haiti. Kevin’s people know all about setting up and organizing grass-roots self-help teams in small villages. They’re doing that in parts of Africa now as well as in southeast Asia.”

“You’re right, darling; that’s an excellent suggestion,” Nadine smiled. “Tell your dad about your own projects.”

“Sure. Both of them. The Universite GOC’s administration’s agreed in principle to create a technical training program with a bachelor’s and associate’s degree. They liked the suggested curriculum my team put together, but, you know, its corporate management is located back in France, so they need their approval too. They said it won’t be a problem, though.

“The other project is the commercial development and that’ll take a whole lot of work since the government is so closely involved. I met with all of the players, but I’ll need to get a team working here that will be composed of legal, development, lobbying, PR, architectural, and engineering people. We need a site that’s accessible but stable and anything we’ll build will need to be designed to withstand hurricanes and earthquakes. I liked the attorney we met today and think he’d do a good job. He’s going to submit a proposal for representing us. I’m gonna have our legal team hire a stateside design-and-build company, you know, construction management, to write some manufacturing facility specs and then put them out as RFPs—requests for proposals. I’m told that process can take a year. But we need at least that amount of time to do the turbine designs.”

“Sound like you have your part well in hand, then,” Wilson told her. “You going to see Henri today?”

“We are,” Nadine said. “We were supposed to go earlier but this trust thing came up and I had to get my bearings. We’re going there for dinner. They’ve invited some friends too.”

“He might have some good technical contacts among his friends and associates, you know,” Wilson remarked. “Tell him about your tech plans, Tamara. Anyone he recommends, you can trust to be honest and do a good job.”

“Good idea, Dad.”

They said goodbyes and Nadine and Tamara prepared to go to the Benois for dinner.

~~~~~

When Nadine and Tamara returned home, their Haiti trip finished and mostly successful, Wilson picked them up from the airport.

After they had retrieved their luggage, Tamara commented, “Not like the last time I came through here. I was half expecting being stopped at Customs,” she joked.

“Glad that’s all done with,” Wilson remarked and Nadine nodded. “So you’re both good with what happened back there?”

“I think so, but sweetheart, there’s just so much work to be done. The conditions are even worse now than when we were there the last time,” Nadine lamented.

“Did Henri have any good ideas for people for you, Tamara?”

“Oh, he did. And he’s got a list of my requirements. He was so excited to be part of what I’m trying to do there,” Tamara said.

“Excellent... oh, right. I didn’t mention this to you during our chats while you were in Haiti, but your new car’s finished. They installed the accumulator. And you know? They had some engineering big-wigs come out from Detroit to look over the installation. Expect them to contact you; they are *really* interested in getting a piece of that contract you offered the dealership for a dozen of the batteries. They want some to play with, they told me.”

“Ha. Good. I’ll put them in touch with Dr Stafford in Cambridge,” Tamara responded. “Emma told me that this would happen; all the car makers are lining up now to get samples for their engineering people to work with. Emma told me that they’ve begun building a manufacturing facility just for the auto accumulators. She thinks it could be a billion-dollar industry in itself. And my foundation has a fifteen percent share in it!”

“Speaking of that,” Wilson said, “any idea of how much your new empire is valued, Nadine?”

“Tamara finished some calcs on the plane coming home, honey. She can tell you.”

“Dad, I told you on our video chat that the annual income amounts to about 100 million. It’s really hard valuing all the businesses that the trust owns a piece of—it’s so diversified with banks, hotels, resorts, retail operations, and service industry operations. There’s something I found called a times-revenue method which is supposed to help determine the maximum value of a company. It’s a multiple of its revenue for a defined period of time. Then there’s another method called the price-to-earnings ratio which is a multiple of the company’s earnings. There are other methods too, but because of the diversity of the businesses in the trust, it’s really hard to get even a ballpark number.

“The best guess now, and accounting for partial ownership of a lot of the holdings, is that the business assets are worth in the range of 300 million and the cash and securities amount to about 18 million in cash, 27 million in bonds, and I-don’t-know-how-much in stocks ‘cause their value fluctuates. That December report showed it was 34.6 million then. And then there’s an unknown amount from the value of what’s in the safe-deposit box. Call that value 2.5 million. Who knows, but it’s the smallest of the holdings. So I came up with about 382 million, give or take 50 million. You guys need a financial advisor real quick, you know.”

“You’re right. I already spoke to Werner and he has some people that he deals with; says they’re good. When your mom’s ready, we’ll make an appointment to see them. Oh, back to your new car. Hope you don’t mind, but Peter and I have been out joyriding in it...”

“Dad!” Tamara exclaimed and he laughed.

“No, seriously, we’ve driven it for several days and you’ll love it. Handles really well, good acceleration, and after short trips, recharges a fair amount without having to connect the charger.”

“How’s it recharge?” Tamara asked. “I don’t think I saw a charger at my Baltimore apartment.”

“Peter says that there are six charging stations in the building’s parking garage. There are a bunch at the APL;



almost every building has a few parking spots with them. And a fair number of gas stations are putting them in—the high-output kind that can charge most batteries from 10 percent to 80 in about ten minutes.”

“The battery in my new car can go from 10 or 20 percent to 100 with a Level-2 charger in less than five minutes,” Tamara said.

“Yeah, I saw that in the battery spec sheets with the car. That’s a game-changer for the EV industry, you know.”

“I do, and Emma is really happy about it too.”

***Westphalia University and Baltimore, Maryland: end of June***

Several weeks later, Nadine was back at her regular work now after a week-long session with attorneys and a financial advisor that she had engaged, accepting a recommendation from Werner. She had also contacted Kevin to get information about how his foundation operated to provide services in the countries where it operated. Kevin had put her in touch with Janet Hadad, who was the CEO of the Coris Foundation back in London. The two women discussed forming an exploratory committee to see how Nadine and her trust could set up an operation similar to the Coris Foundation’s local agencies in Haiti, and Nadine had her local law firm begin the process of coordinating with her Haitian attorney to create a charitable foundation under U.S. corporate law which would function to allow the foundation to fund aid operations in Haiti, taking advantage of the best available tax treatments.

And Tamara was back at her dissertation research. She was designing several of the experiments which would show some of the additional characteristics of the G-force field to further support her theory that the force was derived from the dark energy of the universe. And she was continuing to collaborate on many research projects which her discoveries had spawned at Hopkins, including an interesting one she had visualized which involved a flexible polymer that, when activated by a set of tiny G-force coils, could be made to expand or contract. She needed such a device because the standard electromagnetic solenoid or mechanical relay couldn’t function properly in G-force fields.

In mid-July, Tamara got a phone call from Denise.

“Hey, girlfriend,” Denise began, “our moving date is all settled and Kevin and I will be up in Maryland on the 24<sup>th</sup> to close on the house Peter’s granddad found for us. The movers will be coming two days later.”

“Cool! I heard from Peter that Werner had found you something.”

“He sure did. We bought it without even a visit needed; can you believe that? The agent had a complete video walkthrough and Kevin had a local engineer Werner recommended go through the place carefully. It’s exactly what we wanted.”

“Yeah, something big. Why six bedrooms, eight bathrooms, and over 7,000 square feet? That’s a castle, not a house.”

“It’s got three separate living areas, each with its own kitchen and two bedrooms. There’s a great room and a central commercial kitchen. It was a large house that was made larger to turn it into a bed and breakfast but the owners retired and nobody else wanted to run a B and B. There’s a pool, a bathhouse, and about five acres too, and a little river is on one boundary.”

“Jeez. Where’s it at?”

“Near Upper Marlboro. About four miles from Westphalia.”

“Nice, give you short commutes.”

“Yeah, like we have in Atlanta. We had much longer commutes when we lived in London,” Denise said. “So

one reason why we got a large place is Amelia and Jeremy. Amelia's coming here to Westphalia too. And Jeremy."

"Damn, that's awesome," Tamara exclaimed. "What's their deal?"

"Amelia was offered a full ride scholarship and in addition to that, under the umbrella of that Columbia Institute of Economics there, she'll be involved in setting up a program for training cultural missions in third-world countries, just like she's been doing for the Coris Foundation back in London, but on a much larger scale."

"Oh, now that's something my mom will be really interested in hearing about. She's trying to do that in Haiti right now, actually, and has had several discussions with Janet Hadad about that very thing."

"Ha. Small world, it seems," Denise remarked. "Anyway, about Jeremy, he was offered a full-ride uni scholarship at Westphalia together with an internship in international law and relations in their new institute. He'll be starting in a pre-law program; he plans to go on to law school and specialize in the international law area. They'll be living with us. And we offered Cindy and Tom an apartment in the house. When Cindy does her medical fellowship, she wants to remain in this area and is thinking about living with us too. We all get along so well—that is, us with Cindy and us with Amelia. We'd have to see about Cindy and Amelia, but I'd expect that they'd get along well too."

"I didn't offer you and Peter an apartment 'cause you told me that you have other plans."

"I do. It's a planned community in the Davidsonville area. Near the research facility and school I want to build. I'd like to have my home there."

"Our place isn't far from there; I checked the map," Denise said.

"I think I know where Upper Marlboro is; there's a rodeo arena near there."

"That's the place. We're north of there."

"I checked my calendar—Peter and I can come help when you move. Where are you staying before you move in?"

"We're squatting in Cindy and Tom's place. It's okay; they have the space. Her brother and sister-in-law stay with them a fair amount," Denise told her.

"Oh, you need to tell me about them."

Denise laughed. "They're two more awesome people. They still live here in Atlanta. Roger is in the graduate program here at Avery in education and Ayame's in med school. And sure, offers of help are gladly accepted."

"You mentioned Jeremy coming," Tamara prompted. "When?"

"Right, so Amelia and Jeremy are arriving on the 26<sup>th</sup>. Usually Westphalia has a mandatory residence requirement for freshmen; that would have meant that they'd need to live apart and that was a non-starter. So the U.K. embassy worked something out. They're British knights, after all," she laughed. "I'm sure that Gerston told the university what to do."

"Be nice seeing them again, You guys too. Hey, so can you make time for the resort? This year we'll be going from August 9 to the 24<sup>th</sup>."

"Hmm, you mentioned that back in mid-May," Denise replied. "Kevin and I can do that but we need to be back at Westphalia that Monday. I did ask Cindy about her being able to come and she said that the 24<sup>th</sup> is at the end of both of their vacations; they're getting back from visiting their folks in North Carolina right around the ninth. But what about Amelia and Jeremy? They'll be here then."

“Oh, sure, they’re invited too. Have they ever been?” Tamara asked.

“To a nudist facility? Well, not to my knowledge, but we had them at a really, really hot tantric massage session with a group of uni kids when we were working out how to teach the Avery Program; everyone was starkers, and those two were just fine with that.”

“Ha, you’ve picked up some Brit lingo,” Tamara chuckled.

“Sure did; their expressions seem more natural and descriptive, somehow. Earthy,” Denise explained.

“Oh hey, they’re both high school, right? Under eighteen?” Tamara asked. “The resort checks for that.”

“Let me think. Jeremy’s birthday’s early in the year... February or March, and he’s just finished Year 12. I know he didn’t skip any grades, so he’s eighteen right now. I do know about Amelia. She was born in October—oh yeah, that’ll be her eighteenth this October.”

“She needs a permission letter from her parents then,” Tamara told her.

“Right... um, say, you know? Elliot, her father, appointed Kevin and me as her legal guardians for when she was in London and those appointment papers had no end date. I still have them; came across them when I was packing. So we’re good; Kevin and I can give permission.”

“Those papers—how official are they?”

“Pretty damned impressive, I’d say. It was certified by an Indonesian court and has government stamps and seals attached and it was co-certified by the British embassy there, with their own seals embossed. So it has the approval of two governments. Believe me, it looks official. No doubt about that. It’s why I didn’t dump it when Elliot moved to London—hated to throw that gorgeous document away. Besides, it has fond memories for me. Amelia’s like a sister to me.”

“Aww, that’s so sweet. Okay, we’ll plan for your coming. Six people. Are you okay staying in a unit together?”

“Well, we’ve stayed together with Cindy and Tom—also with Amelia—we should be just fine.”

“What I’ll do is have a bunker camper trailer put on the Winsbergs’ site. There’s a hookup there and they use one when the entire clan is there together. They have twelve bedrooms with the house and cabins there, so this’ll give the extra beds we’ll need.”

“How much will that cost—not that it would be a problem, but we can pay our share,” Denise asked.

Tamara laughed. “You guys—Kevin that is—isn’t the only rich guy in this bunch. I’m catching up and might even pass him by, the way my battery invention’s taking off. Soon the other inventions will be too. And Mom just learned that her family has boatloads of money—she even owns two banks! We had no idea. Her mom had kept it a secret but she was killed before she could tell my mom.”

“Shit, that’s some story. I’d like to hear more of it.”

“Sure. When we get together, we’ll all have lots of stories to swap,” Tamara told her. “We’ll have a super time together.”

“Looking forward to that. Great talking to ya, girlfriend! Can’t wait to see you in person again.”

“Same here.”

They disconnected and Tamara sat back in thought.

*It’s like I have a new sister—like Barbara—Denise is such a cool person.*

## Chapter 71 - Resort with New Friends

During the remainder of the week, Tamara continued work on one of her dark force experiments but she took some time to meet with a faculty member in the Materials Science and Engineering department. She had originally contacted him when she had gotten an idea about making a flexible polymer to solve a problem she had encountered when building mechanisms that needed to work within G-force fields since magnetic-actuated solenoids or relays wouldn't work properly in the G-force field. Dr Li Seang was the recommended person to contact.

"Hi again, Dr Li," she greeted him when she went into his lab.

"Hello to you, Tamara. I told you last time that you can call me Sonny. The name's Li Seang, so I made it more Western. Okay, I was able to make your polymer stiffer without losing a flexibility, but can't do much about a compression. It still bulges out, and if constrained by wall, the compressive force directs radially rather than axially. Did you have application in mind for such a material?"

"I'm looking for a non-metallic material to work in a G-force field in a manner like a solenoid. All metals we've tried are affected by the field and don't work properly. I've tried ceramics but they have other disadvantages. So do carbon nanotube fibers. So I had my tech try some polymers and the ones we came up with appeared to work but when we tried making them more rigid, the G-force kinda liquified them. That's when I approached you; you're said to be the magician with polymers."

He laughed. "I do have some successes. This is your stiffer polymer." He took out a thin flexible rod about 1.25 centimeters in diameter and about 15 centimeters long. "See, it bends and stretches easily, but this one will only stretch to about three centimeter longer before it breaking. But it does contract nicely, about four centimeter, about 25 percent. I will show you how it works when power is applied to the leads; I followed your instruction for how to include the tiny chips you provided to be used in the polymer assembly."

He connected the leads.

"Now I will apply 10 millivolt."

The rod slowly contracted about a centimeter. When the power was turned off, the rod slowly returned to normal.

"Now 50 millivolt."

The rod quickly shrunk almost four centimeters.

"Good. Now see the effect when polarity is switched. I will apply 50 millivolt."

When he did, the rod lengthened a little but bulged a fair amount.

"Now I attach a load to rod."

The rod had little loops molded into each end. Li attached one end to a stationary hook and took out a small spring gage.

"The scale reads up to five kilogram," he told her.

Li connected the gage to the other loop and reconnected the power leads.

"I will do 50 millivolt again," he commented.

The polymer contracted about 3.5 centimeters and the scale read almost 3900 grams. Tamara pulled out her phone.

“Looks like that happened in a second, right?”

Li nodded.

“The rod’s cross-section area is how much?”

“Err, 1.2 or 1.3 square centimeter. Closer to 1.2.”

She pushed some keys. “About 32.5 newtons force developed per square centimeter. Totally excellent. How thin and short can you make these polymer rods? I’d like to have about fifty that are around 7.5 millimeters diameter and 5 centimeters long. And let me know if you need more funds for the work and I’ll add it to this project’s account.”

“Yes, that size is possible. What kind of terminations are needed?”

“The loops should work just fine. I’ve begun to do the writeup for this device, so here’s the part of the discussion section of the paper that covers the theory behind how the G-force works in the polymer. Can you write up the part on the polymer synthesis and assembly with the coils? We’re going to patent this baby and I want you listed as a co-inventor of the polymer used. Then we can get together and plan the rest of the paper, but I’m gonna get started on the patent app.”

“Thank you for honor of recognizing my part in this, Tamara,” Li told her. “This was just interesting side project.”

“It was, and now something useful may come from this,” she answered. “I’ll get back to you soon.”

### ***Mid-July***

Tamara and Peter went to Kevin and Denise’s new home in the third week of July to assist them with their moving in. Cynthia and Tom were in North Carolina visiting both sets of parents; Cynthia’s father had recently retired from the Marine Corps, where he had been the top NCO at Camp Lejeune, and Tom’s mother and step-father were employed at a nuclear power plant near Wilmington. Cynthia’s parents had become fast friends with Tom’s and loved the area around Camp Lejeune, so they decided to remain in the Wilmington area. Also, Cynthia’s aunt and uncle, who had lived in Japan for over twenty-five years where her uncle was an engineer for an electronics firm, were retiring and planned to move there as well.

Tamara found all of that out as she worked with Denise, setting up the kitchen in their wing of the house. The house was a large two-story home with a great view over an expansive lawn. Its bedroom areas were private and there was a nice central kitchen, with a dining room-great room combo that had a giant flat-screen TV and elaborate sound system. Outside was a pool and bathhouse. The grounds contained several gardens and two two-bedroom cottages.

“Whatever are you gonna do with all this space?” Tamara wondered to Denise as they worked.

“Well, we’ll have our three couples living here. I didn’t tell you that Kevin is hiring a housekeeper, cook, and groundskeeper, did I? No? He is. The cook and housekeeper will live on the grounds, but Kevin thinks he found a couple, highly recommended, where the guy is currently working as a handyman and she’s working for a cleaning service. They expressed interest in those jobs.

“For the cook, it’s open what we’ll wind up doing so we’ll wait to see what Cindy and Amelia think. We could have dinners as a communal meal or have the cook make meals for us to eat in our own wings. Or a combination. I don’t imagine there’ll be anyone around at lunchtime while we’re all at school or work and breakfasts ... we’ll need to see how that shakes out. Cindy and Tom are staying in their apartment until their lease ends in December so we’ll have time to figure it all out.”

The four of them spent most of the afternoon organizing the movers. There wasn't much furniture to move here from Atlanta, Denise having moved out of her mother's home where she lived with Kevin while going to high school and then university, but Kevin had a lot of stored furniture from his home in South Korea where he had lived before moving to the U.S. for his high school junior year. Much of that furniture had sentimental value and the State Department had it shipped to the U.S. and stored. It was being brought into their new home now.

As the movers began cleaning up and packing away their blankets and dollies, the four of them had more of an opportunity to talk to each other.

"So as I understand it, Tamara, you're gonna be setting up a program to bring cheap power to third world countries," Kevin remarked to her as the final moving truck pulled away.

"More than just a program," she told him. "I'm setting up at least two companies. One'll be for manufacturing. The first product will be turbines. Different sizes. My idea is to build the turbine components here initially and have them assembled by skilled workers in the countries where they'll be installed. The first country will be Haiti and I'm setting up both a technical training program and a manufacturing facility there; I hope that within five to seven years, we can do the whole manufacturing job there for Caribbean and South American orders. The other outfit will manage the licensing of the other patents I have, do research and development on other products based on my inventions, and handle any further development of those inventions."

"Damn, you don't think small, do you? That makes the Coris Foundation look like small change."

"Oh no, it doesn't, Kevin. You concentrate on medical and legal aid assistance, and education too. My goal is to try to kick-start those economies, and that's lots harder 'cause of corruption, power-seeking, and graft. And successful foreign industries can become targets for nationalization, but that happens rarely these days because of the internationalization of commerce."

"Hey—who's the specialist in international relations here, anyway, Tamara?" Kevin laughed. "This is the realization of a total dream for me: finding someone who has the knowledge, skill, drive, and resources to carry on economic development free of government interference and foreign policy problems while social development can occur as living conditions improve. Aunt Janet told me what your mom is doing in Haiti and I think that her ideas are just marvelous. When I get with Amelia, we're gonna discuss that Haiti initiative as a model system."

"Anyway, what's the deal with your resort trip? Who goes with you? Denise said that it's Peter's whole family."

"It is," Peter answered. "Let me tell you a bit about the history of the resort and my extended family."

That discussion took over an hour and then the four decided to find a restaurant for dinner. After dinner, at which they traded their university stories—each person trying to outdo the previous one, to everyone's amusement, they left for their respective homes.

### ***End of July***

The following week, Jeremy and Amelia arrived at Dulles International and Kevin picked them up. They had their clothes for a week with them; the balance of their personal effects were arriving by air freight during the next several days. Denise was out shopping for linens and other items to outfit their bedroom until the couple could get their own furniture. Kevin had provided a queen bed and two chests of drawers that the couple would use until they bought their own furniture.

Tamara and Peter weren't able to take the time for a visit since they were both hard at work now, getting their final projects completed before the month-long vacation period of August began. Tamara, in particular, had two patent applications and three scientific papers in process and wanted them done before the first week of August was over. Virtually nothing would be accomplished at either the APL or at Peter's or Emma's Hopkins labs

during most of August because Emma took her vacation then as well.

There were a lot of text messages flowing between them, however, so Tamara knew when Jeremy and Amelia arrived, when their new furniture was delivered—with photos—and when Cindy and Tom got back to town. That was just two days before Tamara and Peter got themselves ready to go to the resort. They were both anxious to see Barbara; she had been very busy with her Maryland graduate program classes. Peter had been having lunches with Terence at Hopkins and Tamara joined them on the days that she was working in Emma's lab, but much of her own work was at the APL.

***Arundel Nature Society, Davidsonville, Maryland: August***

Peter had decided to get to the resort early on the Friday before the rest of the whole family showed up. He had learned from experience that those chaotic times when everyone arrived were best avoided; he preferred to quietly get set up in one of the little cabins, with he and his sister helping each other, and stay out of the way while mayhem reigned around them. Of course, now that all the cousins were older, the turmoil shouldn't be as bad—but why chance it?

When he rolled into the resort at 10:15 a.m., he found that Terence and Barbara had beaten them by about fifteen minutes, but of course they lived closer. They got a nice greeting from the couple, who had already opened and aired out “their” cabin. A rented bunkhouse camper-trailer was already sitting in its designated spot and connected to the water and electric services.

“Ron gave me the keys to the camper,” Barbara told Peter, “but no one locks anything here anyway. When are your friends coming? I can't wait to see Denise and Amelia. Kevin and Jeremy too, but mostly the gals. God, they're so nice. And Cindy too. Ooo, this'll be a great gathering.”

Peter smiled. “Excited, are we? Got a text just as I left the office and Denise said that Kevin was about fifteen minutes out. She said that Cindy and Tom should arrive just about the same time. Hey, let's all go back to the office and greet them there. Give them the nude carpet treatment.”

“Funny guy, y'all aren't,” Terence grunted. “Ah got my jitters up. Don't know why.”

“New people, it's natural,” Barbara said. “Naturally for naturists.”

“Not y'all too,” Terence scowled at her. “Okay, let's go.”

“Don't forget—take towels,” Barbara reminded them. “Peter and Tamara, do your sun screen? Terence and I are already done.”

“Sure thing, Mother,” Tamara giggled.

They lathered each other up and left for the office.

When Kevin and Denise and Amelia and Jeremy opened the doors of their car, they were mobbed by four nude young adults who grabbed their hands and pulled them out and then hugged them fondly.

“It's wonderful seeing you guys,” Tamara gushed as she hugged Jeremy, and she heard similar happy greetings from the others.

She did notice that the guys didn't hug—but their handclasps showed strong emotions. She also noticed that no one stared at Terence.

*That should reassure him,* she thought.

While they were greeting one another, Tom pulled his car into the little parking area next to them and hopped out with Cindy. So the mob moved over there for more greetings and hugs.

Since Amelia and Jeremy hadn't met Cindy or Tom, they took some time for introductions and Tamara had a hard time prying Amelia away from Cindy; Amelia was gushing about how great the Avery Program was.

Cindy was laughing at the attention. "And I developed the program and missy here got the knighthood for it."

Amelia looked abashed but Cindy gave her a big hug and smiled at her, saying, "And I think that you well deserved it, honey. Look what you did with it—your adaptations have made it much more acceptable to schools on this side of the pond and every year, we're seeing more schools wanting to use it."

Amelia blushed and nodded.

Peter began herding the mob toward the office. "Let's get you guys checked in—then we'll have two weeks to talk. You all have good trips? North Carolina and London?"

"Trip was fine" ... "No problem" ... "Too long," this from Amelia.

Jeremy just nodded. He was looking around at all of the nudity around the clubhouse area. Amelia noticed and giggled.

"Jeremy, you're not supposed to stare! With all your experience in a school with lots of naked kids, you should be used to this!" she told him quietly, but Tom overheard her.

"Jeremy, you were in that naked program in England?" Tom asked.

Jeremy nodded. "It was a soddin' mess, but yeah. All of two days. But I spent a whole school term dealing with seeing humiliated, terrified, and anxious kids there. Here, it's amazing to see—everyone looks so bloomin' happy. That's what I was staring at, how happy everyone looks. Not the nudity, Amelia, love. But that bunch of gals over there, now they..."

"Oh, you!" Amelia laughed, slapping him on the arm.

They walked into the office and were greeted by Vicki Allerman.

"Welcome, all of Peter's friends. What a big group! Ron will be here in just a bit. Michelle's on an errand, so this'll take a bit of time to get you all into the system. We need driver's licenses—is everyone past their eighteenth birthdays? Two of you look younger than the others."

Denise spoke up, "Amelia is two months shy of her eighteenth, but Kevin and I were appointed as her guardians several years ago. Here's the court order, my ID, and Amelia's U.K. passport."

"Oh jeez, this is a new one. Peter, you keep bringing in these odd cases," Vicki complained with a smile.

"What can I say? I got talent," Peter joked. "Obviously Amelia doesn't have a driver's license—nor does Jeremy; they just arrived here in the U.S. two weeks ago to go to college."

"I got mine now, Vicki!" Tamara shouted at her from the back of the pack, waving her license in the air.

"Oh, my lord," Vicki moaned. "Everyone, just cool it and let an old lady try to get things done."

"You're not old, Vicki," Barbara sniggered. "Just well aged. You're doing fine."

That's when Ron came in. He stopped, looked around, and turned to tiptoe back out. Vicki saw him.

"Hey you, where you think you're going?" she called.

"It looked like you have it under control, dear, so I was gonna go somewhere to hide out," he answered and everyone laughed.



Vicki didn't. "Get your ass back over here and help me with this mob, okay?" she demanded.

Ron grinned at everyone as he went behind the counter.

"Has she been in such a bad mood lately?" Peter asked innocently and Vicki snorted.

Ron chuckled. "It's an act. I hope. How should I help, dear?"

"Get them to sign the waivers first. And get licenses from those who have them. I'll do those first. Put their phone numbers on the waiver forms and I'll enter those when this mob leaves."

She gradually made her way through getting all of the newcomers registered, except for Jeremy and Amelia.

Vicki looked at their passports. "Okay, for Jeremy... do you have a U.S. address? Is it at the college?"

"Actually no, we—Amelia and I—live with Kevin and Denise. Same address."

"But they have an Atlanta address—oh, my poor head," Vicki moaned.

Kevin got a scrap of paper and wrote his Maryland address on it and gave it to her. "Ma'am, Denise and I just moved here too and we haven't changed our licenses yet. Here's our current one. Denise's mom lives at that Atlanta address so it's still good too."

"All right, then," Vicki remarked. "So now, Amelia, I have no doubt that this guardianship form is fine, so all I'll need is for Denise to complete the minor permission form. Ron, can you get one out?"

He pulled a folder from a file cabinet and passed a sheet to Vicki. She gave it to Denise.

"Fill it out and... ah... do you also have power of attorney for medical for Amelia?"

"I do."

"Good. Put your and Kevin's name on the 'emergency contact' line then, and sign it. And Peter? As a co-owner rep here, please sign as a witness."

"Sure."

"Last step, your account ID barcode tags," Vicki told them. "Peter had us put all of you on his account so these tags I'm giving you—you can put them in those wrist bands or on those lanyards over on that shelf—are all the same. Use them for any charges at the resort. The restaurant, lunch stand, convenience shop, whatever. You don't need cash here, but cash can be used if you want. Credit card charges have to go through the office here. There's an ATM in the clubhouse."

"I think we're all done," Vicki sighed. "Except for the orientation. Peter and Barbara, could you do the honors when you show your horde... I mean guests... around?" she chuckled. "Tell them about the nudist rule."

"Sure, Vicki. Let's go, guys," Barbara said. "We require non-members of the resort to strip after they register. I'll explain more about that rule in a sec. But members can go straight to their sites and undress there, so that's what we'll do; it's much simpler that way. Get in your cars. I'll get in Cindy's car to guide her and Kevin, follow Cindy. There'll be lots of cars at the site later so we've developed a scheme to efficiently park everyone. The others, you guys will walk back, okay? It's only a five minute walk from here if you don't stroll."

When Tamara and the others got back to the Winsbergs' site, everyone was nude and Barbara was explaining the difference between a nudist resort and a clothing-optional one.

"There's just a fine distinction between them and many resorts' policies fall somewhere between the fully nudist version and the C-O one, but here at Arundel, full nudism has been the policy since our founding about 96 years

ago.”

“That long. Wow,” Tom said. “The resort we belonged to in California started up in 1963 and I thought that was a long while.”

Tamara smiled at the others. “You guys all look very comfortable in your skin. Jeez, you gals, you all look like goddesses. Amelia’s like a fairy—you just need the gossamer wings. Denise looks like a Greek goddess and Cindy, like the stacked Amazon warrior on one of those ‘Conan the Barbarian’ covers. Out of my league.”

Kevin interjected, “Stop, don’t even think that, Tamara. First, it’s not just about body image; it’s what’s inside that counts for more. Besides, I think that you’re just as pretty as anyone here. And your skin color is simply gorgeous. That couldn’t be from a tan, your skin just glows.”

The others began echoing Kevin’s comments.

Tom looked at Tamara. “Tamara, I grew up in California, the land of the beautiful gal. Mostly blondes.” The others chuckled. “Let me say that you’re right up there in the beauty scale; don’t think you aren’t. Don’t measure beauty by those stick-thin supermodels; Madison Avenue would like them to be the standard, but they’re not. Not at all. Every girl here embodies a different standard of beauty. You said it yourself—a pixie fairy, a living marble statue, a barbarian princess. None look like a classic supermodel, do they? No. But I strongly feel attracted to you; it’s your appearance but I also sense that it’s your personality. Now I finally understand the meaning of a ‘magnetic personality.’ That’s you.”

Barbara broke in. “Right. Now let’s adjourn the mutual admiration society meeting. It’s time for you guys to get the orientation. Everyone here been to a nudist resort before?”

All except Jeremy and Amelia had been.

“So here are the nudist rules; these are observed virtually everywhere social nudism is practiced. Carry a towel and always sit on it. No bare bottoms on any surface, except in the pool or spa. Shower using soap every time you enter a pool or spa. Gets the skin oils off and the sun screen and bug spray too. That keeps the water filters happy. No clothing in the pool or hot tub, but since this resort is fully nudist, that goes without further explanation. We don’t allow any cell phones off of your own site—don’t even carry them with you, even in a bag. No photography, of course. No one smokes so I’ll skip that one. You got the rules handout; that has all the other resort rules. We’re just like any other resort or campground, except that we have a *very* relaxed dress code. Sounds good?”

Everyone acknowledged her.

“Say, Barbara,” Tom said, getting her attention, “you and Peter are owners here, Vicki said?”

“Minority owners. Our great-grandfather set up this place with a close friend who was Ron’s grandfather. There are a bunch of aunts and uncles who all have shares and the entire Winsberg clan collectively has about a 40 percent ownership,” Barbara responded. “They began building our cabin lodge here in 1938 and then the war came. It got finished ten years later, and you can see how it’s been added on to. The little cabins were built in the fifties and have had lots of upgrades since then. Peter and I virtually grew up here; spent Augusts here as far back as I can remember, and from when we were about six or seven and lived much closer, we came here all the time.”

“Truly born a nudist,” Denise joked.

“Hey, need to tour you guys. Walking tour. Sun’s hot, so sun screen’s the order of the day,” Barbara instructed everyone.

When that was done, they headed back to the central area with Peter and Barbara pointing out more of the resort's features.

"Who's coming, anyway?" Jeremy asked. "You mentioned a lot of cousins."

"This year is more random than most," Peter replied. "Everyone in the entire extended family will be here at some point, but not all at once, and some will come and go at various times. Uncle Bruce and Aunt Robin Richardson—Mom's brother and sister-in-law—will be here next weekend from Richmond, Virginia. They have four kids but two are married and live elsewhere. They have twin girls, Madeline and Melodie, go figure, and they're 17 now. High school seniors in the fall."

He went on to tell them about the other families—the Frederick, York, and Wilmington ones, and the bevy of cousins.

"Some cousins might be coming with a friend," Barbara mentioned. "And none of the cousins' other grandparents come; none are into nudism, nor their other children. Just Mom and Dad's own parents."

"Which is good, 'cause otherwise we'd have to take over the entire resort," Peter laughed. "A few groups will be here later today; some tomorrow. Then some during the week. We'll have them arriving and leaving all during the next two weeks."

While they were walking, Barbara was telling them about the planned events and mentioned the volleyball clinic.

"It's lots of fun. The team members work with anyone who wants to learn or brush up their game. The men's and women's team goes to this Naked Superbowl of Volleyball event in western Pennsylvania every year. Last two years, Tamara and I were on the team."

"Cool," Cindy said. "Doing it this year?"

"We need to see how my schedule is," Barbara answered. "Tamara thinks she can fit it in."

They wound up at the pool and decided to swim, so after showers—Amelia and Jeremy were nonplused at seeing the showers located out in the open—they all hopped in. The guys, mostly. The gals entered the water more sedately, except for Cindy. Holding hands with Tom, they both cannon balled into the deep end.

After a while in the water, several of them got out to lay in the sun and Peter began introducing them to the others on the deck. All of the friends eventually broke up into smaller conversation groups and Peter found himself speaking to Tom.

"We haven't spoken much to each other, one-on-one," Tom observed after they wandered off, looking for a quiet place to chat.

"Yeah. The gals suck up all the free energy, don't they?"

They laughed.

"Speaking of energy, Tamara is amazing; she's so f'ing smart but she's a sweet gal. I've seen how she looks at you, and the rapport you two have is like you guys've been married fifty years. It almost seems you know what the other's thinking."

"Um, I guess we do, in a way. You know about her family background? That all of her ancestors were a kind of priest or priestess of Vodou?"

"Yeah... we did talk about that when we first met. Strange to think about that, but I now know that the religion is an indigenous African one and not a dumb magic sham," Tom answered.

Peter nodded. “By the same token, I think I told you guys that I’m descended from a line of Norse seers—seeresses, actually. They originally followed an animistic religion too, like Tamara’s African ancestors, and its practitioners went underground when Christianity pressured them. So Tamara and I apparently have this spiritual resonance that makes us sensitive to each other. I can’t really describe how close we feel.”

“Damn, that’s so cool. Cindy and I sometimes feel like two halves of the same person but that’s only when ... um ...”

“Don’t bother saying it, and I won’t describe how Tamara and I can feel each other’s sensations when we do that.”

“No shit! Now I’m *really* envious,” Tom grinned at him.

“It’s great and it happens a lot, but the two of us are trashed afterwards. Apparently both our bodies must burn double the energy for the two of us to sustain that connection. It’s based, Tamara believes, on the high levels of empathy that we seem to have.”

“That’s some serious shit, Peter. But you know, from what you’ve described, Denise does something related when we’re, um, all doing the nasty...”

“Hell, Tom, you guys swingers?”

“No, no. Not at all. Completely monogamous, all of us; we’ve never swapped; the thought of doing that is, well, distasteful. It’s just, well, living together and being so close, we’ve made love in the same space or room and Denise does something, like projects an aura, that turns on the lust in the guys around her. She’s given orgasms to Kevin without touching him, they claim, and she came close to doing that to me one time.”

Peter laughed. “Oh... Tamara mentioned something to me that Denise told her about some tantric massage sessions she was in. Ideas from those sessions were some of the things that went into the Avery Program.”

“Right. I was there and involved.”

“Of course,” Peter said. “I get it about the massage—my sister with her boyfriend and Tamara and I, did a nuru massage session here at the resort ... um, two years ago. Turned into a bit of a group sex session, but there was no switching partners. Barbara and Tamara were okay with their getting off, but Terence...”

“Barbara’s boyfriend. He’s really hung.”

“Yeah. Sensitive about it too. He was a bit embarrassed. His family’s strict Southern Baptist and nudism is a cardinal sin. As you can see, seems he got the only liberal gene in that family.”

Tom laughed. “Hey, change subjects. So you’re doing a PhD in double E. I’m gonna be finished with my industrial-mechanical PhD next spring and Cindy will be on her fellowship—that’s like a residency—and then she’ll take the Boards for her specialty. We plan to stick around here ‘cause Cindy and Denise are cooking something up.”

“What are your own plans after your degree?” Peter asked.

“Industrial processes, that’s my research. Adapting theoretical designs into working devices.”

“Nice. Say, um, I just thought of something,” Peter mused. “You triggered an idea that I’ve been mulling around and need to find just the right kind of collaborator. I’m working on microcontrol systems—tiny low-power controls which can activate mechanisms which use larger amounts of power. My control circuits are tiny, about 100 micrometers square.”

“Something like for industrial robots? Current ones need better sensitivity to touch and pressure.”

“Yeah. For that and for prosthetics too. Last week I was reading a paper that Tamara was finishing up with one of her many collaborators, this one’s in materials science. Tamara had suggested to this professor that a flexible polymer could be made, doped with some of a ferromagnetic compound she’s figured out, and that tiny versions of her G-force coils could be used to force the polymer to extend or contract. The professor tried fabricating her idea and it worked, kind of.”

“Something that works sort of like a relay?” Tom asked.

“Yeah, that’s it. It was originally intended as a solenoid replacement. But when I read the description, I figured out that it actually works more like the way a muscle contracts. Muscles work the way they do because of how two proteins in the muscle strands interact. When a muscle gets a signal from a nerve, the actin proteins in a muscle filament are stimulated to slide past the adjacent myosin proteins and that movement generates muscle tension.

“What Tamara came up with was a flexible polymer which works to pull like that, but her version not only causes it to pull, this thing pushes too. But the pushing isn’t as efficient because the polymer bunches up; it’s not rigid enough. But the pulling action works great, so she’s writing up a patent application for that idea. I’ve lost count of how many patents she has now. Anyway, I was trying to think of a cool application for my control circuits and having them work with this stretchy polymer seems like a unique idea but I don’t know anyone who I could work with to develop something brand new like this.”

Peter looked at Tom. “Tamara’s big on NDAs, that’s non disclosure agreements. If I skip getting an NDA from you and tell you my idea, you won’t go off and develop it yourself, right?”

Tom shot him a hurt expression. “Now that would be completely unethical, Peter, why would you suggest that?”

“Sorry. I need to be careful,” Peter replied. “Tamara is a bear about her NDAs. But I can tell that you mean it; that’s good. My idea, since my career goal is developing controls for robotic systems, is to build better prosthetics for handicapped—less-abled—people. If I could use her polymer to design artificial muscles, that would be an immense improvement on using actuators and cables to mimic muscle contraction. The control circuits I can design would take over the function of the nerve stimulation. Tamara’s polymer invention could work as the muscle itself. The last part would be integrating the prosthetic into the subject’s nervous system and I know that there’s been some successful work in that area. Do you think this would be something you’d want to work on with me? We’d have the inside track to licensing her invention.”

Tom had been listening with an amazed expression.

“Holy shit!” he exclaimed. “Something like that would be a certain career-builder. But wouldn’t Hopkins have the patent rights?”

“No, Tamara didn’t do the work under any Hopkins project or faculty member and she personally funded the prof’s work on refining the polymer she developed. She has an agreement with Hopkins about her spin-off invention ideas, anyway.”

“Well, if I did the work at Georgetown, they’d want a piece of it, I would think,” Tom mused.

“There’s ways around that. If you’re doing your own research but do something unrelated on the side, then it’s yours if you don’t use any resources of your employer—or school, in your case. I assume you have a fellowship?”

“Assistantship. I have to teach classes.”

“My dad told me that years ago, schools thought that they owned 100 percent of a grad student’s time if they gave him support, and anything he did, even at home, belonged to the school. That’s not the case anymore. If

you had your own lab off of campus, as long as you kept your grad project work totally separate, whatever you do in your lab is your own. If you want, I can ask Tamara to get a copy of her Hopkins agreement and you can tailor it for your own use. Then get your admin people to sign it. This work won't be on an invention you made, but it'd be your own development work and that could lead to your own patents."

"Huh. But where could an engineering facility be set up to do this?" Tom asked.

"Tamara's doing that right now... well, after our vacation, but the attorneys are hard at work on setting up a facility right now. She'll be building a manufacturing facility and the number one product will be G-force turbines. Also in the plans are frictionless bearings. There are communication devices and power transmission projects. So the facility will have shops and labs too. We could add robotics to the mix."

"Shit, Denise was right. You guys don't think small. Hey, one big problem with powered prosthetics is the power supply. What about..."

Peter interrupted. "That's no problem at all. You know, I assume, that Tamara invented the energy accumulator? The power supply part would be the easiest part to design, actually. Hey, let's go find her. She'll be excited about this idea, believe me."

Tom shook his head. "I can't believe how I'm getting roped into this, but it really sounds exciting."

## Chapter 72 - A Naturalist's Philosophy

Tamara did like Peter's synthetic muscle idea.

"Peter! That's a wonderful idea. I had an idea that the solution that Sonny came up with seemed to work more like a muscle fiber than the rod that I had originally visualized, but then we got to talking about bureaucratic stuff, like my giving him more funds for the project, and forgot about that line of thought. When we get back to the cabin, I'll check on the characteristics of muscles to see how this polymer fiber stacks up, and email my patent guru to add your idea to the claims. I'm gonna add your name as an inventor too. Tom, I'm very open about sharing credit for innovation, so if you have an idea, let me know. I'll pay for any of your own patent legal work, even if I'm not a co-inventor."

Tom smiled at her. "That's very generous. I think that I'll like trying out this project."

"Good. Peter tell you about my NDA policy?"

"Oh jeez. He sure did. Damn, you guys are real sharks, aren't you?" Tom laughed. "I'll be happy to autograph one for you."

"It's 'cause when you work with me, I like to free-associate my ideas and my lawyers insist that I should protect them."

Tom nodded. "Sure. In my engineering curriculum, there was a course on entrepreneurship and we had a whole unit on patents and intellectual property."

"Yeah, we did too," Peter said. "Hey, that was a sophomore class. Tamara, you skipped the sophomore year EE curriculum, so I guess you didn't take that class."

"Ah'm thinkin' that she might be able t'teach it, actually," Terence chimed in.

He had walked up while the others were speaking.

Tom turned to him and Terence grinned back. "That gal just whips out patentable ideas all th'time," he said. "Her 'n' Emma too, but Tamara's in her own league. Hey, how many patents are y'all a co-inventor on with th'other Hopkins faculty, anyway?"

Tamara shrugged. "Don't really know, now. Maybe six to eight in the last year, but the university patent office is doing most of those, not my legal team, so I haven't kept up with those. So maybe twenty."

Tom looked at her. "Damn," was all he could say.

~~~~~

By mid-afternoon, some of the members of the Winsberg-and-Gibson clan began rolling in and Peter and Barbara got busy introducing everyone. When the evening came, the whole family decided to have dinner in the restaurant. Kevin and his group immediately became popular with the cousins, especially since four of them had been knighted by England's queen. A telling of their story was demanded by everyone.

Denise laughed at the attention she was getting. "Hey, you guys; Tamara was knighted too, you know!" she chided the group.

"We know," JoAnne shot back, "but she's a cousin, so she doesn't count. She's not a famous celebrity like you!"

That drew laughter.

Gradually everyone began separating into smaller groups and began drifting apart, some going to the pool for a

dip and some to the pavilion to listen to the DJ music there. Tom had noticed that all during the day, Amelia had seemed to be much more withdrawn than anyone else and that Jeremy had been staying close to her and, Tom assumed, whispering words of encouragement to her. Tom was very familiar with the problems of the acclimatization of a new nudist. His stepfather had been one, and his journey to becoming comfortable in a social nudism environment had been a difficult one. So Tom decided to see if he could help support Jeremy and talk to Amelia about being a new nudist.

“Hey, guys,” Tom spoke to them as they were leaving the restaurant. “Got some time? I’d like to chat a bit.”

“Oh, sure, Tom,” Jeremy said. “We’d like to get some peaceful time for a bit; it’s been such a rag today and Amelia’s knackered.”

Tom laughed. “Okay, translation?”

Amelia grinned at Tom. “Goodness, that’s proper queen’s English, Tom! Today’s been a rowdy time and I’m kinda worn out.”

“Oh, sure. I love your accents; make you sound like royalty. Anyway, this nudism business is a whole new experience for you, too, I can see,” Tom commented. “I heard that you both have no experience with social nudism.”

“No, we really don’t, but we did do some smaller group activities with Denise and Kevin where everyone was starkers,” Amelia told him. “They were very self-contained and structured. Nothing like this.”

Tom nodded in agreement. “You mean like a massage class. Right; Denise did mention that you guys were in those classes with them. Well, those classes are nothing like this experience. Getting used to a big boisterous nudist group like this family uses a huge amount of psychic energy. Your thoughts probably kept jumping back to ‘why the heck am I naked?’ all day. Right?”

“Oh yes! That’s it, exactly,” Amelia exclaimed. “You must know a lot about nudism, I guess.”

“I do. I grew up in a nudist family, just like Barbara and Peter did. But their family has a much older, ah, pedigree than mine. My sister and I grew up as nudists and we couldn’t understand why all the kids in our school couldn’t be nude when they wanted.”

“Oi, don’t talk about kids being naked in school,” Jeremy said with a scowl. “Amelia and I had some bad experiences with that rot.”

“Sorry. But that wasn’t exactly what I meant,” Tom apologized. “I didn’t have all that great a time in it, myself.”

“You had to do it?” Amelia asked. “In high school?”

“Yeah. But we can get to that part a little later.”

“But... but if you grew up as a nudist, then being in the Program should’ve been no problem,” Jeremy objected.

“Anyway, why do you say you thought kids should be naked if they wanted?”

“Personal philosophy. I’ve always strongly believed that growing up in a household where nudism was practiced was the best possible upbringing. My sister and I were taught from our earliest childhood years that our natural state didn’t need clothes. Being with other nude kids—and adults too—at our resort, which was virtually our second home, we could see the complete lack of concern that everyone had about seeing folks’ naked bodies and that meant that showing our own bodies wasn’t a big deal.

“For me as a kid, it seemed like seeing people who were wearing clothes, I mean people not at the resort, like when shopping and at school, was where it felt weird. Then, before my resort friends and I even hit puberty and



got interested in the other sex, we had learned that naturism wasn't about sex; we had learned that nudity was a state of being and that sex—for my friends, for my sister at age thirteen, and me at eleven—sex was a private activity that the adults did, not kids.

“Obviously this familiarity with nude bodies made us nudist kids less fixated with sex as opposed to the other kids in school, the textile ones—damn, the talk I heard in the school locker room about this guy getting to see that girl's tits or about that other guy getting some upskirt flashes—to them, naked bodies were the forbidden fruit; seeing girls' nudity was almost like a lottery win. No, I take that back. Actually ‘scoring’ was the real win. Anyway. But then that idiotic naked Program started up in my high school late in my senior year and the Program's nudity was totally all about sex and nothing except sex. More about that in a sec.”

“That's exactly right!” Amelia exclaimed. “In my school, the very first thing they did was forcibly strip a girl in front of the whole school and then tried to make her wank herself!”

“Damn, that's awful... you need to tell me what happened, but hold it for later. I was talking about growing up as a nudist. So I think that there were real and important benefits to being in a nudist family. I've heard that kids who're brought up as nudists are less likely to contract a sexually transmitted disease, and guys are less likely to get a girl pregnant or teen girls get pregnant, than non-nudist kids who're driven by hormones or peer pressure—or both—to engage in risky behavior. Another thing, I could see that many of my textile classmates had far more anxieties and hang-ups about their body image and most were fixated on how kids of the opposite sex thought about how they looked, than I did. My body is all me; I own it, and I'm proud of myself. That's what nudism did for me, it gave me a positive body image and lots of respect for girls too. I firmly believe that our world would be a better place if more people embraced mixed-gender social nudity. People certainly would be less sex-obsessed, anyway.”

“Wow, that's persuasive,” Amelia said. “You almost sold me. You mentioned that you had to be in that Naked in School thing. Jeremy told you that we both had horrid times with it in the U.K. He had it in his school and also, when my school tried to start it, that's when they stripped that other girl, the one they tried to make to wank herself. And I was attacked then by several adults who tried to strip me but Jeremy saved me. My school never had the Program start, 'cuz Denise and Kevin, Jeremy too, got it stopped there.”

“Yeah, I did hear about that; what you guys did was fantastic. And Denise told me that you know how Cindy and the rest of her Avery gang, together with my group at Georgia Poly, discredited everything about the Program.”

“Yes, but if you were a nudist, why did the Program bother you so much?” Jeremy asked. “You didn't answer that one.”

“Simple, because it sexualized the kids—both those who were forced to be naked in it and everyone else too who had to see all the crap those kids had to endure. The Program had the opposite effect to what we were taught about proper treatment of other people. That was respect for others, respect for the privacy of their bodies—no forced and involuntary objectification by others. The way it forces the victim kids to be embarrassed and humiliated is cruel. And I don't need to mention how their being coerced or forced to perform sex acts in public is... well, totally immoral.”

Amelia nodded emphatically. “That's exactly why me and Jeremy were opposed to it as well. And if you were a nudist and had problems with it, how much worse would it be for a kid without that background?”

“Sure; I think it was,” Tom agreed. “Add to that the fact that in a nudist environment, virtually everyone is nude. In the high school, only a few kids were nude each week. So they became targets.”

“And I'm glad the Program is gone everywhere now, I think. Say, you told us about what it was like growing up

as a nudist. How did your family become nudists, anyway?” Jeremy asked.

“My folks were nudists when they themselves were growing up, actually. Mom and Dad met at a resort as young kids and both of their families were naturists—their families were nudist resort members and Mom and Dad grew up together at the resort. They went to different elementary schools but eventually came to be in the same high school. Mom said that both of their families practiced home naturism too and the rest of both of their families and their friends, too, weren’t judgmental about Mom and her brother and sister or Dad and his sister being naked around their homes as kids and pre-teens.

“Say, I should mention that this period was when society was kinda permissive and open; the high-school swimming classes were done with the kids nude and several beaches were clothing optional too, so lots of kids skinny-dipped. This was southern California, after all. They even had naked group psych sessions—naked encounter, they were called.

“Anyway, Mom said that her parents sometimes covered up or even stayed clothed when friends were over. And no one paid much attention to their kids—that was Mom and her siblings—being naked at home, Mom told me. Her parents would usually be naked too but kept a coverup handy if they had visitors. Mom didn’t care if her mom’s visitors saw her nude and frequent visitors were used to her and her siblings being nude too. Mom told me that most people were fine with that and some of them even told Mom’s parents that they themselves didn’t need to put on their robes if they didn’t want to. Grandma was so open about home nudism that she made a few converts to nudism too; Mom said that her mom had convinced several of her friends to become nudists. But at times, a visitor would tell Mom’s parents that they were uncomfortable with having their nude kids around, so Mom said that she’d just hang out with her sibs in one of their bedrooms till the visitor left.

“I don’t remember hearing much about Dad’s childhood because he died when I was eleven, that was before I got curious about my folks’ childhoods. He was a Navy pilot and got shot down during one of those Middle East wars. But Mom told me that his family home life was much the same as hers.”

“Oh, how awful about your dad. Sorry to hear about that. So that was the way your household was when you were little; it was just like your grandparents’ households with home nudity?” Amelia asked.

“Yeah—pretty much. My sister’s two years older and we were very close growing up. Still are. When I was about thirteen, Mom met a great guy and got remarried, but he wasn’t a nudist. We—my family—got him to try it. I mentioned earlier that he had a hard, awkward time of getting into it but now he loves it too. So that’s how I noticed that you, Amelia, seemed to occasionally look uneasy. Is it getting any better?”

“Oh, sure. It’s ‘cuz part of my childhood was spent in a Muslim community, I think. You know how the girls have to cover up, and in Indonesia, even the less-observant cover up too since it’s a custom. My dad’s family isn’t at all observant, but my mother’s whole family is very conservative, almost radically so. So I grew up in a culture where being naked is incredibly wrong and those are the thoughts I had to wrestle with. You know, Jeremy got in trouble for protecting a Muslim girl’s honor when they stripped her in his school.”

“Jeez, now that’s a story I’d like...” Tom started to say when a bunch of the others found them.

“Hey, here’s where you guys went,” Mike Gibson, one of Peter’s cousins, called as they approached. “A bunch of us voted and we wanna hear some Program stories.”

Peter was with them and looked embarrassed. “Wasn’t my idea but I couldn’t talk them out of it,” he apologized.

The intruders included all of the cousins who were at the resort this weekend: Mike Gibson, Madeline and Melodie Richardson, JoAnne and Frank Winsberg and Audrey and Ernie Winsberg. The older cousins had only planned to come for the final weekend. With the cousins were Cindy, Denise, Kevin, and Peter.

Peter continued, “We’re meeting Tamara, Barbara and Terence. Barbara said that she’ll protect us from being hounded to tell our stories if we get too uncomfortable. Like me.”

“Yeah, but we wanna hear about the Program in England too,” Mike said as some of the others nodded, smiling.

“What, you guys perverts?” Tom grinned. “That crap’s all in the past, thank god. Why the hell would anyone want to re-hash it?”

Peter was making a thumbs-up gesture to Tom. “Yeah, Tom. You said it,” he said.

“I think it’s morbid curiosity,” Denise suggested. “They want to see what they missed.”

“I tried to convince them that they’ve already heard all about my brief time in the Program and what happened to me,” Peter complained.

“Yeah, but that was when you were crushed by what happened to Amy,” Mike objected. “That wasn’t like a real Program experience.”

“I beg your pardon?” Denise broke in. “A *real* Program experience? Anyone who’s been in it, no matter what happened in their participation and how long it was, had a *real* Program experience.”

Mike looked down, abashed. “Sorry...”

“I definitely concur with that, Denise,” Jeremy said as Peter looked at Denise and nodded to her in gratitude.

“Aw, we just wanted to hear some ... um, sexy stories,” Melodie offered. “The way we’ve heard about the Program, that was an exciting time to be in high school with sexy stuff always happening.”

“I think we need to set a bunch of people’s heads back on straight,” Kevin chuckled. “Seems that the Program’s become a legend just after its own time. Let’s find the others and give these perverts an earful.”

“Yes!” Ernie pumped a fist. “Let’s go.”

They found Tamara, Barbara, and Terence at the pool talking to some teens, including Peter’s resort friends Gary and Herb, and when Mike saw who was with them, he rushed over.

“Theresa!” he shouted, hugging his girlfriend. “Wow! You said you weren’t coming till next week. Damn, this makes my day, no, week!”

Theresa giggled. “Change of plans. Mom went to visit her sister while Dad’s still working, so that’s why Toby, Marcia, and Jack are here.” She pointed to the pool.

Peter began introducing everyone, including his resort friends, and those in the pool got out to be introduced too.

Mike looked at Marcia. “Jeez, Marcia, lookin’ good! You’re a soph now, right? Missed seeing you last summer.”

“We took a big trip last summer so didn’t get to come here,” Marcia answered. “You ‘n’ Theresa are still a real item, too.”

Theresa grinned at Mike, hugging him around the waist. “Yeah, Marcia, we are.” She looked at Mike. “Marcia says she has a boyfriend too but he’s not a nudist. Hey, Marcia, is he a keeper?”

Marcia blushed. “Let’s say that he’s a work in progress.”

“Um, I don’t like the sound of that,” Mike told Marcia. “If he’s not treating you right or not respecting you, you should think about how you really feel about him.”

“Hey, everyone,” Ernie called, “we’re going into the clubhouse for that talk about the Program.”

“What’s that?” Theresa asked.

“Um, we asked Peter’s friends about what happened to them in the Program,” Mike told her. “They were all in it. Um, mostly all. You wanna hear about it?”

Theresa nodded, then Marcia did. Toby, who had been talking to Gary and Herb, heard, and called, “Me too!”

Gary and Herb, shrugging, decided to tag along too. It had become a big crowd. After everyone got settled in the clubhouse, they began looking at each other, wondering how to begin, so Barbara took charge.

“I’ve elected myself as the emcee for this little event,” she said in an authoritative voice. “So that makes me the ref and no one argues with the ref if she decides things are too difficult for someone to recall their memories. Got it? And all you cousins know about Peter’s experience. Peter, have anything you want to say about the Program?”

“Totally no, just glad it’s done with.”

“Okay. You all know Peter’s story—the cousins, at least. If not, see him privately. Now you might not know it, but we’re honored to have some world celebrities here,” Barbara told the group, smiling at how everyone began looking around the clubhouse to see who might have entered. “To end your suspense, a bunch of people with us in our group here are the ones who got the Program ended, not only in this country, but in England too.”

Murmuring, some of the youngsters looked around while Kevin’s friends all grinned.

“Kevin, want to tell everyone what happened to the Program when you and your friends got involved?”

Kevin laughed. “Sure. We all got involved because we were dumped into it. Um, I think that the only people here who knew about the Program before they actually got involved are Cindy and Tom, right? And Denise, of course. I was shanghaied into it on my very first day when I appeared in school in the U.S....”

Denise interrupted, “And stopped it cold in our school. He disabled the Program official and forced the principal to suspend it for a week—and then he spent that week organizing the students and getting the principal to agree to make changes to make the Program ... um... actually almost fun, rather than the horror it had been the previous year.”

“Denise, lots of people helped...”

“Hush your mouth. The ideas were yours and you did the organization. And somehow got the law enforcement people on our side too. Guys, Kevin is the one who discovered that the national Program office had been taken over by those child kidnappers and got the feds alerted.”

That drew some exclamations of awe.

“How’d you make it fun?” JoAnne asked. “There are all kinds of stories about it being so bad.”

Denise explained how they had turned the first-day introductory stripping into something like a team-building exercise and got changes made to reduce the humiliation and non-consensual factors [*Kevin and Denise Naked in School*].

“But that didn’t end the Program... after the Program office scandal, it kept on going,” Audrey said.

“It did, but while Kevin and I were trying to make the Program more kid-friendly and reduce its terror-inducing reputation, our friends in California were having their own experience with it.”

“I guess that’s my cue?” Cindy laughed. “Mine and Tom’s. Okay, in southern California, some high schools had

already started the Program maybe a year and a half before my school did. The school had sent out letters to parents in one late fall about the Program and gave its starting date as the following fall. So we knew a little about it, but not many details. Then what I later heard happened is that the feds sent a Program official to our school earlier than originally planned, so the school moved up the start date with no prior notice, surprising all of us.

“I had been in Tokyo at a judo tournament with my brother just before the spring term began and the two of us got called on the first day of the term. We walked into a room and their announcement took us totally by surprise. There was no way in hell that either me or my brother would strip. They had a few P.E. teachers and rent-a-cops in the room who tried to grab us, but I did mention judo, didn’t I? They couldn’t lay a hand on us. My dad’s a top-ranking Marine NCO and our school was on the Marine base, so Roger, my twin bro, and I, organized the Marine kids to resist and refuse to participate [*Roger and Cynthia Naked in School*].

“The fed official got more rent-a-cops in to try to force participation, but the kids at my school were so riled up that they mobbed them and roughed them up; our Marine military police came in and took over; then the Marines took over the school’s security from the locals. So Roger and I never participated. Tom got picked the following week, though, and he did participate, but about 90 percent or more of all the kids refused.”

“Why didn’t you refuse too, Tom?” Mike asked.

“Was a nudist anyway and didn’t have any problem with others seeing my bare body. But Cindy mentioned organizing the kids? She and her friends sure did. She and her Marine friends got things like the ‘reasonable requests’ and naked classroom demos stopped cold—you know about those?”

Everyone assented but Theresa asked, “How could you do that? I heard that kids had to do those demos and requests.”

Cindy laughed. “For the requests, you guys know what a Roman phalanx was?”

There were blank stares.

“Guess not. Okay. A phalanx was a military formation where a large number of troops stood shoulder-to-shoulder in three or four ranks deep, all pointing their spears outward. They advanced like that and the formation was used to penetrate enemy lines, kind of like a human tank. That’s what we organized, and the naked kids were escorted from class to class while being protected in the middle of a phalanx formation like that. Without the spears, though. So no one could get close to a naked kid to make a request.”

“Awesome” ... “Way cool” ... “Wish I had seen that” ...

“Also my group of Marine kids—and lots of civilian kids helped too—disrupted any attempts at classroom demos. They were very creative and did... ah, call it classroom civil disobedience. Since most everyone in the class took part, the teachers had no one to single out to punish. And no one bothered with relief sessions because there was no sexual teasing between classes. You know about the relief part of the Program, right?”

Some of the group—the younger girls mostly, didn’t.

“Okay, this might be a shock then,” Tom said. “The people who thought up the Program rules and requirements figured that with all of the sexual stimulation that the kids would be getting, they’d be so frustrated and sexually charged that they wouldn’t be able to think in classes. Relief was supposedly to prevent having the boys get what’s colloquially called ‘blue balls’ and be unable to concentrate. So at the start of each class, time was set aside to allow the boy to jack off or have someone help him to cum. In the first year that the Program operated around the country, the rule allowing relief applied just to boys, but then girls were added in the second year. Done in front of the classroom, public masturbation, hand or blow jobs, or even the gals getting eaten out, for

educational purposes. What crap.”

“Thanks, Tom,” Cindy said. “Roger and I totally refused to do the Program, as I said, and all of the kids who had a Marine parent also refused, ‘cause the base commanding general ordered that those parents have their children refuse to participate. I guess the kids loved it since they could oppose authority and not get punished...”

“But weren’t kids forced?” a voice called.

“At first, I said that some teachers and guards tried it on us and we used them for judo practice. But then the general sent the base MP unit out and the MP presence stopped any further threat of force. Some kids did do the Program, though. Some of the kids’ parents made them do it and some were afraid of the school’s threat of their not graduating. Tom did it ‘cause the nudity was a non-issue for him. But even though he participated like an obedient student, he still had a run-in with the Program official about his participating, though.”

Tom nodded. “Oh, right, what a moron he was. If you were in a school activity while on the Program, you were supposed to do it naked. Like sports. Think about playing football naked, okay? Think that would work? No? You’re right. Well, I was on the swimming team and although swimming naked is just wicked awesome, it doesn’t work for swimming naked races. And guys, don’t try a naked racing dive, okay? I think it would hurt the gals too. But in a different place.”

Some listeners laughed while a few girls pressed their hands against their breasts, scowling thoughtfully.

“So that stupid Program official laid into me about my wearing my competition suit but I gave it right back to him and told him where he could stuff his objections. So my week being naked in school was weird and stupid. I have nothing memorable to say about it. But Cindy had a simply awful experience that was directly related to the Program. You wanna tell that? Is it okay?”

“Um, it’s okay, but you can tell it,” Cindy said, looking very uncomfortable.

“Sure. Cindy’s very sensitive about this but she knows that what happened was not her doing,” Tom went on, now having captured everyone’s undivided attention.

“Cindy’s cousin Ayame was living with her family that term and was a kind of visiting student in the high school. She’s Japanese and had already graduated high school in Japan; she was taking classes in an American school to get used to English ‘cause she was going to college in the U.S. She was Cindy’s cousin ‘cause Cindy’s aunt and uncle, who lived in Japan then, had adopted Ayame when she was little and had lost her family. To skip over lots of details, in retaliation for Roger and Cindy’s being involved in interfering with the Program, that idiot Program official had added Ayame’s name to the list of participants. But she wasn’t even a regular student in our school; her name wasn’t in the list of names that were used for the random Program selection. Roger found that out when her name was announced for participating that week and he went to the office to get it straightened out and the secretary saw that Ayame’s name shouldn’t have been added. But on the following day, the Program official had arranged to have Ayame kidnapped from the school.”

Everyone gasped.

“On that day, I happened to be in the hall, returning to class after delivering papers to the office—that was my own Program week so I was naked and the naked kids were given various duties like running errands and stuff—when Cindy and Roger heard that Ayame had just been taken out of the school. Roger was sitting near the door and was out of the room like a flash. Cindy was further away and when Roger ran out, their teacher went to the door to call for him to return and managed to delay Cindy from getting out of the classroom long enough so that she couldn’t catch Roger as he ran for their car. When Cindy did manage to get around the teacher, she tore out of the classroom and barreled headlong right into me. Now at this point, I didn’t know Cindy at all, although I was aware that she was Roger’s twin sister; Roger and I were members of the school’s

swim team. Anyway, when we collided, Roger was out the building door, going for his car, and because of our collision, Cindy couldn't catch up with him—so she didn't have a way to follow Ayame. I did, and offered to try to follow Roger. Remember—I'm naked here. So here I was, getting myself involved in a naked car chase scene.”

The others laughed, enthralled by the story.

“Anyway, cut to the end of the chase. Cindy called 911 on her cell as Roger and I, both driving like maniacs, caught up to the kidnappers. Ayame had a miniature cell phone that her father's electronics company was developing—she was able to talk to Cindy and Roger on it and used Japanese so the kidnappers couldn't understand her. We were able to catch up with the car she was in and Roger cut it off and forced it to the side of the road; I pulled right behind the kidnappers' car, blockading it with mine, so they couldn't back out. Cindy leaped out of my car in a hot instant and a heartbeat later, she was at the kidnappers' car, demanding that they let Ayame go. But a second later, the two goons had jumped out too and one of them pulled a gun on her.”

Gasps.

“Yeah, some scene, right? I was dying to jump out to help, but Cindy had warned me to stay put and let the 911 operator know what was happening. Yeah, I'm gonna help Cindy, me being naked and going against a gun too? Anyway, one of the goons reached out to grab her—he lunged for her with both arms out, and she pulled the slickest, sweetest martial arts move I ever saw. In an instant, that guy was flying through the air. But the guy with the gun had moved around, maybe to get a better angle to cover Cindy, and the goon she threw slammed right into him. As he landed on the gunman and both went down, there was a gunshot, and neither was moving.”

Cindy was looking pale and Tom gave her a reassuring hug.

“Meanwhile, just as Cindy threw the guy, a state trooper and a Marine MP unit pulled up at the site, so all the cops saw what went down. Within three or four minutes, the whole place was crawling with MPs, deputies, detectives, and troopers. Then her dad arrived with another bunch of MPs and the shift commander, and the excitement began to wind down.”

“What happened to the kidnappers?” Herb asked, his voice tinged with awe.

“This is what bothers Cindy. Both died, almost instantly.”

Gasps.

“Yep. When he went down, the gunman pulled the trigger and the shot hit the other's heart. And when he fell, the gunman's head hit an anchor point bolt of a guard-rail cable and the section of the bolt sticking up went into his skull. The officials called it a felony murder by the gunman and an accidental death caused by a felony assault using a firearm. The cops certified that Cindy's judo throw was taken in self-defense.”

Sighs.

“I still think that if I had waited a few minutes...” Cindy began.

“No, the cops were very clear on that,” Tom insisted. “You were well justified in how you responded. That jerk was about to grab you; you could have become a hostage and they'd have gotten both Ayame and you. Who knows what would have happened then. Those two were the sole cause of their deaths and they were felony lawbreakers besides.”

“Yeah, what was that kidnapping about, anyway?” Madeline asked. “Why was she grabbed out of the school? How could that have happened?”

Cindy's face was rigid with anger now. “That turd who the feds sent to our school had this rogue federal

contract operator do it. Let me back up. The Program office had enforcers, they were called that name, who were authorized by the Program regulations—not any law, mind you—to come to a school and detain a misbehaving student. They had no law-enforcement powers; they had more of a school disciplinary function. Some were actual fed employees and some were contractors. In California they used contractors. So these rogue enforcer contractors were given the names of students to pick up from the school and Ayame was one. But as Tom mentioned, she wasn't actually a student eligible for the Program. Her name had been added maliciously. So law enforcement charged her detainment as a kidnapping.”

“And shit,” Tom finished, “the fallout from that was epic when the Japanese government found out what had happened. The following fall, all of the Program officials in the entire state got removed—and then the federal office itself got shut down two months later anyway. But that didn't end the Program either; it took a while for states to stop running it. Anyway, Roger and Ayame and Cindy and I wound up in college in Atlanta. I had been accepted to Georgia Poly and the others to Avery. And in our second years in college, we met Kevin and Denise.”

“Yeah, turns out we rented an apartment in a house owned by Denise's mom,” Cindy grinned. “We met these two dynamos and learned we were so much alike, that it was uncanny. So all of us together, plus teams of students from both of our colleges and with major contributions from Kevin; Denise did stuff too; we put together a couple of research projects which finished up by that May or June. The publicity around our publications caused such a public commotion that politicians everywhere couldn't shut down the Program fast enough. And the Avery Program was the major direct result of one of our research projects—actually a college course term assignment.”

“So that's how the Program in the U.S. got stopped,” Tom finished. “I was the only one of Cindy's Marine friend's group to be a participant in it, but my personal experience was that I simply spent a week walking around the fuckin' school bare-assed naked. Wearing sneakers—no way my bare feet would touch those filthy floors and I didn't want to risk sandals slipping off on the steps. That was such a weird experience in itself, being the only nude person in a whole group. Amelia and Jeremy, I know you must have a few tales about the Program in England. Hell, you're f'ing knights for helping to kill it there.”

“I had one Program experience in England myself,” Denise broke in and everyone stared at her. “Ha, yeah, I was picked to participate in a crazy off-the-wall naked-in-college program that the U.K. government was trying to start up in their country's college—I should say university—ed schools.”

Everyone began shouting, asking for details [*Naked in School - the Exported Rebellion*].

“That wacky idea was supposed to show future teachers what the experience of being naked in school felt like to school kids, but guess what? A uni environment, especially an urban one, is nothing like a secondary school, right?” There were nods. “Of course I took a leaf from the book that Cindy wrote, the part about ways to thoroughly refuse to participate, and also took guidance from Kevin's mantra, which is to always work from a position of strength. I refused, thoroughly, and then got a bunch of uni students together and told them how to refuse thoroughly as well.”

“Yeah,” Kevin chuckled, “she did it so thoroughly that her shutting down the Program in the ed schools, within two days of her encounter it was stopped and within two weeks, word about the college program's collapse had gotten to the Brit prime minister. And then the U.S. president heard about it; when he heard that Denise, with only a tiny bit of help from me, did it, he wanted to hear the whole story. He even arranged to see us while he was visiting London.”

“Actually, he came from Brussels to London specifically to see you guys,” Jeremy told Kevin. “Dad told me that.”



Again, faces filled with awe looked at Kevin, Denise, and then at Jeremy.

Denise smiled at the group. “Jeremy’s dad is the deputy chief of mission in the U.S. embassy in London.”

“Denise killed the naked-in-ed-school program within two days of her starting school there,” Jeremy said proudly. “She met with the kids who had been picked and told them how to fight back. So they did. Two days and gone. And for my own experience in it, I didn’t know anything about that sodding high-school program until I began school in London in mid-year of my year ten. Dad had gotten his London posting and when I started school that spring term, there were these bollock-naked kids all over the bloomin’ place. And the girls I saw were getting pawed all over. The kids who had to be starkers were in awful shape—the best of them were mostly resigned to reluctantly doing it but most were right terrified about what they were going through, weren’t they.”

“Jeremy, tell them about the honor killings,” Amelia prompted.

“Honor killings?” Melodie asked in shock. “I heard about those, but in uncivilized places, like tribal Pakistan and Afghanistan. Not in England too?”

“In England too,” Amelia affirmed.

## Chapter 73 - Program Redux

“Right. Happens in England too,” Jeremy agreed. “So London—actually many cities of the U.K., especially the larger cities like Leeds, Manchester, and Liverpool and going south, Birmingham—have a large Muslim population. Almost 7 percent of the country’s population now, I think, are Muslim. And most are very conservative, which means that the gals mostly wear the hijab, but a lot even wear the burqa. Anyway, under Islamic law, a girl who exposes her hair, and especially one who wears tight clothing, anything which reveals the body shape, is committing a major infraction against her modesty and against her family’s honor, isn’t she. So imagine if a Muslim girl is stripped starkers in school and made to go to classes that way.

“During the time that I was living there, I saw some news reports of Muslim girls who got put in the Program, got stripped by school teachers and when their family members found out, those girls got murdered. It’s called an ‘honor killing’ but it does nothing for *anyone*’s honor. Four cases in two years, actually.”

“Damn, that’s terrible” ... “Barbaric” ... “Totally evil” ... “How could they?” ... Their own family?”

“It’s true though. That honor stuff isn’t anything to ignore, either. It affects others, not only family members. I don’t know if you guys know anything about the shootings in the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine office in Paris, maybe a dozen years ago. That was because the terrorists thought that the magazine had slighted Prophet Muhammad. And the *fatwa* against Salmon Rushdie is another similar example. Well, honor killings and revenge attacks still happen and they happen in London too, a few over the past ten years that I heard about. One of them was against my school’s head teacher. His auto was destroyed with a petrol bomb and fortunately, he wasn’t in it. It happened because a Muslim girl in my school got put in the Program and got forcibly stripped. I happened to be in the school office when the teachers pushed her, starkers, out of the head’s office and into the outer office, and I was able to protect her modesty by covering her with a window curtain I pulled off its rod and getting her out of the school before any of the kids saw her. Got into huge bovver over that...”

“Huh?” Frank asked and others looked puzzled.

“Jeremy really talks like a Brit,” Tamara giggled. “I love it. Emma does too, so I’ve picked up some of the lingo. ‘Bovver’ means trouble. Like how Cockney speakers say ‘bother.’ Go on, Jeremy.”

“Right then. Got in trouble. Dad got the PM—prime minister—actually the ambassador did—to tell the head teacher to back off—that I had acted properly. That was the week I got put in the Program myself; that’s why I happened to be in the office when they stripped off that girl. I had been arguing with the head about being selected; I knew it wasn’t random as they claimed it to be. I know that I got put in the Program because I was so bloomin’ outspoken against it. So I was the only kid left in the office when two teachers dragged that poor, terrified girl into the head’s office, stripped her there, and then shoved her out. But I learned something important about my temper the first day I was in it. I lost the plot a few times...”

At the blank looks, Jeremy stopped. “Ah, right... I ... erm, lost my temper. Happened a few times that day and next and I actually hurt some blokes when they attacked me, and then I nearly twisted a girl’s arm off after she grabbed my cock from behind me and yanked it. That was so unexpected and hurt me; so I reacted instinctively, but it scared me—how I could act that way with a girl.

“But the corker came the second day in a bio class. We were on an ecology unit and the bloomin’ arse of a teacher asked me to demonstrate how to wank.”

Amelia, Denise, and Kevin shouted, “Jack off!”

“Sure. So I went all snarkey on him, told him I didn’t know exactly what he wanted me to show and that he should demonstrate what he meant, like a good teacher would do. The whole class realized that I was taking the piss with him but he went ballistic and tried to send me to the head teacher... okay, those blank looks mean I

need to translate again. ‘Take the piss’ is a totally common saying in the U.K. Means to mock or to be sarcastic about something. Well, I refused to go by myself; I told him that he’d need to come too and lay his complaint there. That did it for me in the Program; I was shot of it after all that rot. I had kept my togs in my rucksack, so I got dressed right then and there.

“That led to another verbal tussle with the head teacher when he found out that I had taken myself out of participating, but I showed him where lots of parts of the Program were in direct opposition to the school’s pupil handbook, and by following the Program rules, pupils were violating the school’s own rules. I asked him how he could possibly justify and support such a conflict and told him that the Program made a mockery of most of the school’s behavior rules. So we agreed to an armistice. He wouldn’t force me into doing the Program and I wouldn’t interfere with the Program in the school.”

“Damn, Jeremy,” Tom said. “That’s an amazing story. Yeah, I can see you going into law.”

“Oh, Jeremy did way, way more than that,” Denise said. “He basically schooled the entire British government on how the Program violated not only many British laws, but also their education department regulations and international law too. The MPs—that’s the members of Parliament—who attended one meeting with us, criticized the reps from the U.K. Program office, telling them essentially that they needed to put some lawyers on their staff who actually knew the law; it appeared to them that a year-eleven pupil with no legal education knew the law better than the government’s own lawyers.”

“So you all got knighted ‘cause you stopped the Program there?” Frank asked.

“It was for a bunch of related things and mostly Denise and Kevin organized it all,” Amelia answered. “They did two major things. One, Denise and Kevin stopped the Program from happening in my school and gave the board of governors an alternative program to do instead, that was the Avery Program, and then they got that new Avery Program all set up, trained the teachers, and got the government’s backing for it. And got government money for it too, can you believe it? And two, Denise showed the government officials the horrid costs to the country if they continued to run the Program; the costs she showed them were based on the studies that Cindy’s group had done. When the officials actually ran their own numbers, they saw that Denise was exactly right. Seeing those costs actually scared them more than having a few kids assaulted, raped, or driven to suicide each year.” With an angry shake of her head and a raising voice, Amelia stood up and continued, “Absolutely, that’s how those berks at our first meeting acted; they didn’t care about what happened to those kids. Those rape and suicide cases were covered in the tabloids, and I scolded those berks that those children’s blood was on their hands.”

Everyone stared at her. Amelia was electrifying them all with the sheer intensity of her words. Sweet little Amelia had somehow turned into a forceful, angry presence; she even seemed to grow taller as she spoke.

“You heard Amelia,” Kevin told the group. “Well, she did just the exact same thing with the Brit department ministers too. They’re like the U.S. Cabinet officials. She really ripped those people a new orifice; they had no response to her accusations. She told the ministers about all the major social problems that were being caused by the Program and by running it, the government was actually torturing and killing its youth. Amelia’s other contributions were just as important; she helped redesign the Avery Program to work better with England’s very diverse pupil-body demographic. Those are some of the reasons why the queen knighted both Amelia, and Jeremy too.”

“So Jeremy helped in keeping your own school from starting the Program before the Avery Program was set up there, Amelia?” JoAnne asked.

“Er, not exactly that way,” Amelia responded. “My school wasn’t state-supported; it was independent, so it should have been exempt from having the Program. Parliament’s law only applied to state-funded schools; mine

was tuition-based. But the Program people found a loophole and forced the school into having it, actually extorted them, truthfully, by threatening to withhold education scholarships from the needy families who were sending pupils there. Kevin and Denise went to a meeting where the school's governors explained that the school was boxed in and would lose maybe 40 percent of its pupils if the government withdrew those scholarships, but even after all the parents there still objected, the governors wouldn't budge. So Denise and Kevin helped me to prepare a flyer that urged all the pupils to resist and not participate, and I snuck the flyers into school and left them so kids could find them.

"When the day came to start the Program, there was an assembly and pupils' names got called and most of those kids refused to go to up to the stage; some of them even ran out of the assembly. The Program people had sent a bunch of thugs to be there and when the kids started running away, they began grabbing some kids at random and I got grabbed too. The thugs took this one Muslim girl, tore off her hijab, and ripped her clothes off, her panties too, and after she refused one thug's demands to touch herself, one of them jammed his fingers into her privates. She had the FGM—you know, the genital mutilation that's practiced in some Islamic areas? Good, you know about that. So that berk, in jamming her down there, hurt her badly.

"Two of them began stripping me too, but before they got my panties off, Jeremy got to the stage and stopped them. He had been trying to push his way through the commotion in the audience rows and aisles and was finally able to get to the stage. He pulled the one berk off me, the one who was holding my arms so I couldn't get free, and threw him so hard he slid all the way across the stage. Then he was like a maniac, a ninja, and took down the other two big berks. He threw both of them into some chairs on the stage.

"My arms got free when Jeremy pulled the first one off me and the one berk, the one who was trying to pull my panties off, tried to grab me, so I kneed him in the bollocks so hard that he collapsed, and that's about when the bobbies arrived. I didn't know Jeremy at all before then, but he had saved me from having a serious injury, 'cause the previous week I had surgery to heal a botched FGM that was done to me a few years earlier."

There were gasps from the others at hearing that she had also experienced a FGM.

"Yeah, I was 12 then and an aunt had signed me out of school against Papa's orders and she took me to a cutting ceremony; I didn't know what she had planned. The school called Papa when they realized that the aunt didn't have permission to sign me out and he realized what had happened and where she was taking me. He got there in time to keep the woman from finishing cutting me, but the wound I had there never healed properly. So that's why I was in London with Denise and Kevin; it was to get the special surgery to repair the damaged nerves. So that's my own Program horror story. And I told the government people how the Program tortured kids exactly the same way as the genital mutilation did—they were both a horrid, forced, involuntary, immoral way of trying to modify a girl's sexuality."

Cindy went to her and hugged her.

"My god, Amelia, that's simply terrible, what you went through. Are you alright now? Was the nerve damage repaired?"

"Oh yes, the doctor was amazing and found two kinds of damage in there. A grainy lump thing and a neura thing."

Cindy nodded, smiling. "I like those terms better than the medical ones. He found you had both a granuloma and neuroma, I take it."

"That's right. Those are the words. Adhesive things too."

"Sure. Definitely adhesions, caused by incomplete and improper healing. You must have been in considerable pain, then," Cindy observed, sympathetically and Amelia nodded, blushing. "Two years like that?"

“Err, it was closer to three years, and yes, the pain never went away. But some of my friends at school were cut too and as well, their pain was always with them.”

Cindy shuddered. “What a horrible, inhuman, and barbaric practice.”

“It sure is,” Barbara agreed. “That’s a chilling way to finish our tales of Program experiences. Agreed? So, gang, are you satisfied? Heard enough about what you missed ‘cause the Program’s gone now?”

There was general agreement that their curiosity was sufficiently slaked and some of the younger ones were visibly shaken by the stories.

Then Marcia raised her hand and Barbara apologized, “Ah, I didn’t ask if there were any questions. My bad. What’s up, Marcia?”

“Um, maybe this is too embarrassing...” she faltered.

“Hey, you’re with friends here; just ask and we’ll just give you the naked truth,” Barbara reassured her and Marcia laughed, together with the others.

“Um, it’s something my boyfriend told me. Tom mentioned it earlier—it’s blue balls. My boyfriend’s been urging me to do sex with him. He says that if I go to a nudist resort, I should know all about having sex and I’ve been teasing him by refusing. He says I’m giving him blue balls from frustration.”

Theresa was incensed at hearing that. “Marcia, he’s disrespecting you! You told me that he also doesn’t like that you come here, that he should be the only guy to see your naked body and you’ve refused to get naked with him. Besides, the old ‘blue balls’ line is just a guy’s ploy to get into your panties.”

“Hold that thought for a few seconds, Theresa,” Cindy broke in. “But first, Marcia, this guy’s bad news. The pressuring you that he’s doing is a red flag. Guys who do that are all about themselves and you’d just wind up as a conquest at best or with a bad rep at worst. You need to drop him, you hear? But about blue balls? Guess what? Medically, that’s a real thing and not a boy’s myth. One of the medical names for the condition is ‘epididymal hypertension.’ I know, giving something a medical name makes it more real...”

Laughter.

“... but this one is really real. Certain conditions, and sexual stimulation is one of them, can cause a buildup of fluids in the epididymis of the scrotum. Here’s an anatomy lesson for you. The epididymis is a tightly coiled ductile organ in the scrotum that receives and stores the sperm manufactured in the testis. It travels from there on to the seminal vesicles via ducts called the vas deferens. Each testis has an epididymis attached to it. These parts of the scrotum can become engorged, causing a feeling of pressure or even a dull pain in the groin. So ‘blue balls’ does exist, but no one has ever observed that any parts actually turn blue. But the discomfort does happen and it’s real.”

“Huh, I didn’t know that,” Tom said. “Is there a treatment?”

Cindy started to laugh. “Oh, certainly. Very simple and effective. An orgasm. Works every time.”

Everyone else began laughing too.

“Seriously, Marcia, is your so-called boyfriend really pressuring you?” Cindy asked.

“Um, yeah... it’s why I don’t want to be naked with him too. I’m uncomfortable with that thought.”

“See? There you go; your subconscious is warning you,” Cindy told her. “All couples’ relationships are based on mutual respect and that seems to be lacking with this boy. Tell him directly and firmly that you don’t want to keep seeing him. He’ll try to convince you that he’ll change; don’t believe that for an instant. They don’t

change, at least until they mature more, but that could be years later. Just tell him you're done."

"Yeah, Marcia," Theresa said. "But he might start spreading rumors or lies about what you did with him or that you were an easy lay. I had that happen, remember? Remember what I did?"

Marcia giggled. "Oh yeah, that was epic."

Now the others were clamoring for details.

"Go tell them," Theresa said.

"This guy claimed that Theresa was a slut and whore when he came onto her and she refused him after they had been dating for six months, right, Theresa?" Theresa nodded and motioned her to continue. "She was in his house doing schoolwork and when they finished, he began trying to make out with her and then started demanding that she let him fuck her. Then he tried to pull off her top. So she grabbed his crotch and squeezed it hard, then grabbed her backpack and got out of there."

"When he started bad-mouthing Theresa the next day, claiming that she was a nympho and an easy lay, she started a rumor with the girls in school that when she tried to give him a handjob, she had a problem finding his cock, it was too small to find. Well, that rumor spread like wildfire."

Everyone chuckled as Theresa nodded. "Yep. After what I said, people would look at him and snigger and he had problems getting dates. My family moved away from there maybe four months later, so I don't know what happened since then."

Everyone agreed that Theresa had handled that problem creatively and soon the group broke up.

Tamara went over to Peter. "That was a really intense bunch of stories," she sighed, "and even from the limited sample size here, the problems they mentioned show that the Program did way more harm than good."

Peter agreed, saying, "That was my own experience too, sweetie. Glad it's all in the past now."

"Say, I want to head to our cabin now to check on my latest patent application. I want to see about modifying the claims to include your idea and add you as a co-inventor," she told him.

"Okay, I'll come with. I haven't paid much attention to patent apps, so this will be educational," Peter said.

After Tamara fired up her laptop, she did a brief search for muscle characteristics.

"Sonny told me that he can make the polymer fibers pretty much as long as I want, but as they get longer, the amount that it contracts decreases," she told Peter. "So if we try to make an actual muscle to use in a prosthetic, he needs to find a way to bind shorter fibers together so that they all act in concert..."

"... yeah, and my control circuits need to activate the entire bundle together," Peter finished.

"Exactly. Ah, here's something." Tamara read the screen for a minute. "Cool. This article says that the maximum force that muscle fibers can exert is approximately 30 to 40 newtons per square centimeter of the cross-sectional area of the muscle fiber, and the polymer Sonny developed exerts 32.5 newtons, right smack in the muscle-fiber range. Perfect. So Peter, your assignment is to study muscle-nerve physiology and learn how nerves trigger muscle contraction."

"Sure; I already found some papers on myoelectric prosthetics," Peter said. "In one technique I read about, a small amount of muscle tissue was grafted on the end of the amputated limb and then it was surgically attached to the end of a severed nerve. That allowed a small electrical signal to be detected, amplified, and recorded, and was used to control a prosthesis. So an engineering method to do the biological interface is possible."

“So what’s left is a control circuit to operate the polymer muscle bundle,” Tamara observed.

“Right. This project will take more than just Tom and me working on it to fully develop, you know,” Peter said.

“Oh, for sure. I think it will warrant a full division in my manufacturing company alongside of the turbine operation. I’ll email my industrial consultants and have them add this to their planning. Now let’s check out that patent app. I’ll show you how they’re structured, if you’ve forgotten the stuff from that class.”

“Um, we didn’t actually learn *how* to write up a patent, honey. Just how they work to protect inventors, the sections patents need to have, and the timing rules.”

“Good enough. Let me show you the writeup for this one.”

They spent the next hour at work, which is where Barbara found them and chased them back out to play.

“You guys are on vacation!” she scolded. “Get back out there, your job duties for these two weeks are to have fun!”

~~~~~

Saturday was the first volleyball clinic day for this season and members of both resort teams, the men and women, were there, including Dawn Simpson, the volleyball coach from the University of Maryland; this was her second year at the resort. And Barbara and Tamara had convinced Cindy to join them in doing the clinic. Denise and Amelia also participated, but it was Cindy who was the standout. It turned out that Cindy’s height, athleticism, and strength combined to make her a powerful player and the members of the women’s team were salivating at the idea that Cindy could be persuaded to join the team.

Alas, that was not to be.

“Sorry, guys, I really am,” Cindy apologized. “This game’s a real blast and I enjoyed every minute of it—but beginning on August 25<sup>th</sup>, I’m entering my fourth year of med school and that day starts my first clinical rotation where I begin taking almost complete responsibility for patient care under clinical faculty guidance. It’s going to be an intense term and the competition for local residency positions will be intense, so I can’t miss a single day.”

Barbara had to disappoint the team too, because she had learned that she had to attend a four-day teaching-assistant seminar at Maryland right after Labor Day. As part of her assistantship, she would be beginning to lead undergraduate recitation sections this year, and the seminar was to prepare the graduate instructors for their teaching duties.

Tamara’s schedule was more open, but she had decided that she wasn’t going without Barbara. But there were two college girls at the resort clinic this year, both new to the resort, and they both had decent skills. Each said that they could join the resort’s team at the Volleyball Superbowl this year, so the resort would still be able to send two teams.

Peter had gotten Kevin, Tom, and Jeremy to do the clinic too, and while they had fun, and despite their athletic abilities, they were still average novice players.

“Guys,” Peter told them, “your weakest skill, all of you, is passing and serve receive—which is passing too, actually. You attack well and block, um, that needs work too, but blocking is the hardest thing to learn to do well. Did you guys watch Tamara? She’s a blocking genius. She’s at about 85 percent, which is just about world-class. You saw her in the spiking-blocking drill. In the games later, watch how she follows the ball when she’s on defense. She always keeps herself square to the ball and maintains great balance so she can explode to where the ball’s gonna meet the attacker’s hands—and she’s right up there too with the ball. You’ll see how

many of her blocks become jousts too. That means she knows where the ball will be before it even gets there.”

“Erm, what’s a joust?” Jeremy asked.

“That happens when the attacker and blocker get to the ball at the same time. They’ve both hit the ball at the same time and each tries to force it past the other. Tamara’s body is usually moving lots faster than the attacker, who’s setting up for a spike, so her momentum is much greater than the attacker’s, and she just stuffs that ball. Watch when it happens.”

“How do you get better at passing?” Tom asked. “Any tricks?”

Peter laughed. “Like how do you get to Carnegie Hall. Practice, practice, practice. Remember the principles of body position and balance. Square to the ball and feet evenly planted. Let the ball meet your linked forearms while you gently shrug your shoulders toward your target, the setter. Try to have the ball below your waist when it meets your arms; that gives the best control. You pass using the motion of your whole upper body. Try not to swing your arms because you’ll get less ball control doing that. Eventually you’ll build the muscle memory and your aim will improve. Ah, they’re starting another set of serving drills now—this one will be for just serves, no receives, so it goes fast. Let’s join them.”

After the clinic and the games were over, the ten friends met at the lunch stand for a snack. The energy they used in their volleyball activity needed replenishment.

They were all talking about the last game, where the best men played the best women. The women had murdered the men, 25-12 and 25-8.

Tamara, Barbara, Cindy, Stacy, Dawn, and Robin played for the girls; the other girls on the women’s team wanted to see how Cindy played in a game—they were hoping to get her hooked to come play the following year. And everyone loved to see Tamara and Barbara play together. They worked like one mind in two bodies, especially how they ran their fakes. Dawn told them that she figured that they were all “A” level players and the guys were mostly “BB” level.

“I couldn’t believe what I saw in that third-from-last point in the second game,” Jeremy said. “Tamara, when did you learn to fly, anyway?”

Jeremy referred to a wicked fake the men had pulled, bypassing Barbara’s and Cindy’s block and hammering the ball to their side. Somehow, Tamara, who was about six feet away and had been moving toward the net to back up the girls’ block, suddenly leaped the six to eight feet sideways just as the spiked ball came over the net, met the ball, and hammered it down on the men’s side. Defending that kill attempt looked impossible, yet out of nowhere, she had appeared to cover the open zone.

Tamara giggled. “I saw the setup for their fake and could tell where they’d send the ball. I just jumped to get there when the ball did.”

“How many blocks did you get in game two?” Kevin asked her.

“Didn’t count. I was having way too much fun,” Tamara laughed.

“The gals got at least 12 points off her blocks,” Denise remarked. “She also had six kills. A one-woman wrecking crew, 18 of the 25 points.”

“She’s just awesome,” Cindy said. “Tamara would be an unstoppable point guard in b-ball—she’s everywhere at once and has the best sense of how the play’s developing that I’ve ever seen. I played on Avery’s women’s basketball team and coached kids in high school too and never saw anyone who had a better ability to get to the ball.”



“Guys, enough. It’s embarrassing. Playing is just fun,” Tamara pleaded. “Barbara’s just as good as me, and Cindy, you’re simply scary when you attack. The guys must have bruises from where your spikes nailed them.”

~~~~~

During the following week, various members of the Winsberg clan arrived while others departed, but all the cousins had convinced the parents to let them stay till the last weekend. And on that weekend, the remaining older cousins, the college and grad school ones and their significant others, came on Friday afternoon and left on Sunday, when most everyone else was departing too.

Kevin and his group told Peter and Barbara that they had a marvelous time and enjoyed the various activities. The massage couple staged a repeat of their nuru massage session and the five couples all participated. Amelia didn’t mention her age and no one asked. Everyone loved that session and Denise especially was hooked. Peter—and Tamara—discovered that Denise could indeed project her sexual energies, so the following morning, Tamara got Denise in private to see if she could sense how Denise did whatever it was that she did. Now Tamara had some interesting ideas and things to try with Peter.

Tamara’s thoughts were now returning back to her work. She still had three more dark energy experiments to do to work out one minor mathematical oddity of her theory and then she’d be able to assemble all the parts into a coherent whole. Research articles had been appearing in physics journals which all confirmed her mathematics; the sole controversy was the interpretation of what the math physically represented. Something very similar to that had occurred in the physics world when quantum mechanics was introduced about a hundred years earlier; trying to describe in real-world terms what the math showed was one of its biggest controversies.

She wanted to move forward with her commercial plans as rapidly as possible too; then that would allow her to expand operations to Haiti—she needed to see how the technical education piece of her project there was progressing. There was also her land acquisition plans to review and the progress of the old quarry site’s reclamation. She still had a number of MRI collaboration projects in the works and one in development to study the electrical signals that the brain produces. She felt that she had pursued the pheromone identification and action as far as she wanted; other research groups had picked up on that work and they were far better able to continue that work than she was.

Tamara and her engineering staff, still two people as of now, had found ways to enable a number of mechanical and electronic devices to operate inside the G-force field, which opened up more development possibilities. And finally, she was feeling a strong desire, a need to reconnect with her spiritual sense. It was her *pwen* calling to her, she realized. She needed to talk with her mother about doing her personal *kouche*, her ritual seclusion, very soon now.

She also wanted to continue her work with Greta, whom she sensed was a extremely powerful channel of spirituality.

### ***Early September***

Tamara’s and Peter’s friends returned to their own schooling; Cindy, going into her fourth year of medical school and Tom, in his own doctoral engineering program; they both had only one year remaining in their formal education.

Kevin started on his graduate program in international relations with a focus on political science at Westphalia University and Denise began her medical school studies there too. She was in the MD-PhD program and at Westphalia, it was a seven- to eight-year program, with two pre-clinical medical school years consisting of basic science and clinical focus studies, followed by the PhD graduate training through the doctoral dissertation, and then two years of the training program’s clinical rotations completed the program.

Amelia began her undergraduate university program while continuing to work for the Coris Foundation. In a special arrangement with Gerston's Columbia Institute of Economics and Westphalia, which was being handled like a kind of internship, she would manage a local office of the Coris Foundation which Kevin and Janet Hadad had set up, staffing it with four employees from their other sites. This office would initially undertake a pilot project to serve the medical and legal services needs of the homeless and spouse-abused population of the capital area, and Amelia's role in her first year was minimal to allow her to concentrate on her studies.

In her second and subsequent years she would take a more active role in first, developing a project to study the issue of bringing health care to poor rural communities in the U.S. in cooperation with Columbia Institute. At some point during her third year, she would become the managing director of the U.S. office with the mission to develop training materials for conducting cultural and aid missions in third-world countries. And the first country that was chosen for the office to study was to be Haiti. This schedule would allow it to become operational as physical facilities for Tamara's own educational and economic development work in the country would be under construction. It would also run concurrently with Nadine's project to develop her micro-finance entrepreneurship program.

~~~~~

It was her Haiti development plans that were causing Tamara her greatest concern. Many of the people in power in third-world countries achieve their power using ruthless means, she knew; these are typically people who are motivated more by power and wealth than by service to their country. Tamara had learned, that when she had fully activated the limbic systems of Peter, her parents, and Greta and Werner, the single trait that they had in common was sensitivity to people lying. This had given her an idea; she had thought about the problem for some time, and she wanted Greta's advice about the possible solution that she was considering. Greta might have some suggestions.

It was during the Labor Day weekend that she had a chance to speak to Greta alone.

"Greta, I've noticed that your, ah, aura, has gotten lots stronger than before the summer," Tamara told her. "That comes with the use of the talent, I think. And you only came out to the resort that one weekend. I know you were traveling but we never got to talk."

"Tamara, it's like I'm a different person—Werner is too, thanks to your ... shall we say, upgrade?"

They both laughed.

"You're using your new senses then." Tamara prompted.

"I have. And the new sensitivity is just amazing. Werner and I spent seven weeks in my ancestral areas of Denmark and I spent a lot of time with my sister and niece there; also with the *völur* my family knows. The new sense I have has added a whole new dimension to the *seid* rituals when we did them. And to other things, too," she said, blushing.

"Greta! I take it Werner likes the new sense, then, judging from your blush."

"He does. Also, he's, um, much more attentive to me now—like he was as a newlywed. Oh, goddess, did I really say that?"

"Yep, you did. I think our being physically close to each other must lower any inhibitions in sharing personal information," Tamara mused. "You know, Kevin mentioned something like that happens in face-to-face encounters and told me about Emmanuel Levinas' interpersonal philosophy; what he told me sounded interesting, so I looked him up. He talks about the face-to-face encounter of two people in his *Totality and Infinity*, and offers the idea that the encounter involves more than just the two people; the circumstances are also

dictated by the set of rules that govern that social situation. And that involves the moral structures of the society too, so I believe that must include spirituality as well. The two of us share an enhanced spirituality, so our interaction has created a kind of bonding, which has allowed our usual barriers of personal privacy to drop.”

Greta stared at her, smiling. “Did you study philosophy too, Tamara?”

“No,” she giggled, “not formally. But I read stuff. I read lots of things and interpersonal stuff interests me ‘cause of what I can do with my ability. Talking with you now, I feel so close that I can confide anything in you, and I wanted to explain why that happens using philosophical reasoning. So here’s my response to what you said about Werner’s, what? Regained physical attraction? Sharing my own deep personal experience, I will say that when we’re intimate, Peter and I can feel each other’s sensations.”

“Goddess! Then what happened was real. We thought we had gotten carried away and were hallucinating,” she blushed again.

Tamara smiled. “No, it’s real, and that shows that your empathy—both of you—is very strong. I assume that you’ve gotten sensitive to being told untruths like Dad?”

“I have, and Werner has too. He really appreciates that ability, I must say.”

“I’m sure. It’s useful in lots of ways. Anyway, I need to ask you about a matter that’s been concerning me lately and it has both practical and ethical implications.”

Greta looked at Tamara expectantly.

## Chapter 74 - Kouche

Tamara stopped to marshal her thoughts. “First, I asked Mom this question too,” she went on. “Have you had a chance to practice projecting any emotion to see how it works with others?”

Greta nodded. “Yes, but I feel uncomfortable doing that. It’s a dangerous ability, I think, and I don’t want to misuse it.”

“That’s almost exactly what Mom told me,” Tamara said, “and it’s why I trusted you with that knowledge. What have you done so far?”

“Ah, once, at a faculty meeting, two of the professors began disagreeing about a policy we were discussing and I could tell that one of them felt that the proposed policy was somehow threatening—maybe to his research interests. I caught his eye and projected ‘calm’ to him.”

“Oh, cool. What happened?”

“He stopped his almost shouting and sat, then apologized. It looked like he was thinking. A minute later, he asked to speak again and this time made a very reasonable suggestion. My new sense of empathy suggested to me that he had come to the meeting with a preconceived notion and an oppositional attitude. The calming I sent him helped him reconsider his ideas.”

Tamara smiled. “See, now that was a perfect use and how you did that showed a fine touch. Sending too strong a calming emotion can cloud someone’s thinking.”

“Yes, I can see that. Oh, another instance. Two grad assistants were unhappy with their teaching assignments. Each worked for a different faculty member. This was almost amusing since one TA felt that she was being taken advantage of—her prof actually did have her doing more than her required work; while the other complained that he had too little to do and was getting no benefit from his TA assignment.

“So I met with the faculty members involved. Ah, separately, of course. Both were defensive and not receptive to logical reasoning. So you know the inverse of the ‘truth sense’? Projecting ‘truth’? I guess you could call that persuasion. I used that and to my delight, it mostly worked. Although neither one agreed on the spot to change the way they used their TAs, they both did agree to discuss their TA jobs with them. I later heard that both TAs were satisfied with the accommodations.”

“Nice. It’s good to use gentle persuasion that way. I’ve used compulsion—mainly for my protection—and the target always seems to have a lingering emotion of resentment and nowhere to direct that resentment. Now here’s what I want to discuss with you; it’s about what I’m planning to do in Haiti. The biggest problem that I see right now is two-fold; the personal security of the people who’ll be working on my projects, and both their truthfulness and that of the government’s officials we’ll need to work with.”

“Certainly the latter is something not unique to Haiti,” Greta observed. “I know of this problem existing in many cultures.”

“That’s true. I guess that’s a common problem in economically disadvantaged countries.”

“Others as well. The problem exists in countries with oppressive or totalitarian governments too.”

“Sure, I can see that. So what I thought of is this: To counter Haiti’s security problem, which was caused by a too small and ineffective police force, the idea is to bring in experienced outside security. Forces from Benin, Togo, or Nigeria, whose people have similar cultures. They would work with the Haitian security people, but to avoid corruption, I’d like to have some form of screening to ferret out any problem personnel, especially Haitians. I can’t do all of that myself, obviously. So I thought we might be able to train *manbos* as screeners for

the new police force that will be built. Do you think that this is feasible? ethical?”

“Ethical? I don’t see any problem with that, but I’m not sure about feasibility. What’s your idea about training people? When you worked with Werner and me, that took about ten minutes and you looked a bit drained afterwards.”

“Okay, I had something a bit different in mind. When I first figured out how to activate a person’s limbic system, my first subject after Peter was a woman whose husband had a severe psychological problem. Remember? I mentioned that to you—last summer, I think.”

“You showed her something to help keep her husband grounded in reality, as I recall.”

“Yep. And you said that teaching how to do that would cause a revolution in psychiatry. But fully activating the limbic system takes a huge mental effort, even if the person already has some of the system active, like a spiritually trained person. Like a *manbo*, for example. Here’s what I figured out. I had to give that woman a certain amount of projecting ability, so that needed to involve a partner. Even so, it only took twenty or thirty seconds to do it and that unlocked her ability enough to help her husband. I’m sure that I could activate a truth sense in a receptive person by myself alone, pretty quickly, and I’m certain that you can as well, given your skills now.”

“You really think so?”

“Sure. And I have a likely subject, Claire.”

Greta looked at her doubtfully.

~~~~~

Claire was at first dubious too, but when Peter told his mom about how he could sense that someone was lying, she agreed to be a guinea pig for Greta. Peter went off to find Tamara to tell her that his mom had agreed.

“So far, Tamara’s the only one who can unlock the ability in others,” Greta told Claire. “Now she’s trying to see if that’s an ability that others can unlock. Being a human lie detector is useful for a teacher and it works much simpler than the complicated cheating detection one of my colleagues in economics pulled off last term.”

“Oh? What’s that?” Claire asked. “At the Academy we do have occasional cheating incidents but they’re rare. We’ve got a strong code of honor, after all.”

“This was a clever stunt,” Greta told her. “The instructor suspected that some of the students in his class were using their smartphones to cheat because during exams, lots more would take bathroom breaks than during regular classes. So he set up an elaborate ruse. A few weeks before the final, he had his TA post a carefully worded question to an ‘answer’ site that most college kids use for looking up answers to class questions. The question posed a supply-and-demand situation for which there was no valid definitive answer. A week later, the instructor visited the site and submitted a fake answer, one that actually failed to answer the question, but its wording and citation of a specific economic principle made it appear like a reasonable answer.

“On the day of the exam, more than a dozen of the kids took a bathroom break. And lo and behold, most of those students had regurgitated the instructor’s planted fake answer to his question. There was absolutely no way that they could have come up with that answer on their own; the economic principle he had cited on the answer site was bogus, as was its supposed source. So those students were given a zero on the exam and were reported to the dean for cheating.”

“That’s genius,” Claire agreed. “But what about the honest ones? If there was no answer, wouldn’t that have penalized them?”

“He gave full credit to any of the attempted answers—even to those who skipped the question. He only penalized those whom he had trapped if they had used the unique answer only available on that particular website. Ah, here’s Tamara. What do you want us to do now, Tamara?”

“Thanks for helping Greta, Claire,” Tamara told her. “And you’ll like having the ability.”

“We’ll see. Peter says it’s been useful for him. What do we do?”

“Greta gets to do all the work. You just need to relax and kinda let your mind go—don’t think about anything in particular. If you meditate, you can oom-chant in your head. Greta, we’ll meditate together and you know how to try to sense another’s aura? We’ve done that before. Hold Claire’s hand and meditate with me. You’ll feel a kind of different emotion that I’ll try to open in your limbic system; it has a ‘green’ sensation. When you sense that ‘green,’ feeling, try projecting it to Claire. Let’s start.”

On the first attempt, Greta’s concentration faltered.

“Greta, don’t try forcing,” Tamara suggested. “You’re tensing up. Just relax and let it flow.”

After a little more than twenty seconds after Greta relaxed, Claire gasped slightly.

“Jesus! That was... I don’t know what...” she gasped.

“What did it feel like?” Tamara asked.

“Indescribable. Almost like my mind opened to the whole universe and suddenly it was gone.”

“Cool! Excellent!” Tamara gushed. “You must have sensed the entire gestalt of the energies that pervade the world. I believe that there’s actually information in that energy too. Maybe Greta unlocked more than just a lie-sensitivity in you; that was a little unexpected.”

“Is that a problem?” Claire asked uncertainly.

“Oh, no. Not at all,” Tamara reassured her. “You might have become somewhat more empathic. You must have at least some talent ‘cause Peter has half of your genes.”

Meanwhile Greta was looking a bit dazed. “So it worked? You felt something change in your head, then.”

Claire nodded. “Definitely. So how do we test it? One of you tell me a lie?”

Tamara chuckled. “It doesn’t really work like that, so that’s not a good test. Artificial lies—ones told deliberately—don’t produce the physiological changes that an actual lie does. By the same token, you can’t really tell someone’s lying over the phone or video using that sense. The empathic lie-detecting sense works just like sensing a person’s other emotions. Think of how a lie-detector device works; that device measures the body’s physiological changes triggered by the limbic system but needs a trained person to interpret all the device’s data together.

“Some people can detect lies from body language—they notice the mouth may tighten, the eye pupils contract, the eye blinking becomes more deliberate. The body shows the stress too with shallow breathing, raised shoulders, and even certain hand and arm movements. All those body changes are responses to stress and your new sense detects them and interprets them as showing stress, therefore, a lie.”

Greta and Claire looked at each other and shrugged. “Thus speaks Tamara,” Greta chuckled and the two began laughing, hugging each other.

“What’d I say?” Tamara asked, confused.

Greta laughed. “You foisted an existentialist philosopher on me, Tamara: Emmanuel Levinas. I’m playing

‘gotcha’ using Friedrich Nietzsche. Here’s my lecture about your abilities, couched in existentialist terms. ‘Also sprach Zarathustra,’ or ‘Thus speaks Zarathustra,’ is his novel about Zarathustra, the prophet who was the first to repudiate Zoroaster’s committing the so-called ‘error’ of morality. Zarathustra believed that the submission to morality, its traditional form, that is, only serves to perpetuate people’s enslavement to it. The response to that captivity is to create a higher morality, and that takes a higher form of humanity: the ‘superman.’ Tamara, this is where you’re headed. In the direction of Nietzsche’s superman—woman in your case.”

“Jeez, Greta,” Tamara sulked. “No way can that be me.”

Greta just smiled at her.

“Tamara, the breadth of your knowledge is simply astounding,” Claire told her, “and don’t put it off by saying that you like to read a lot. Yes, you do read, but you have a unique ability to synthesize new information from widely different sources and create your own vision to see what others miss.”

“Well then, it appears that Tamara’s idea of giving other sensitive people new empathic abilities was a success, pending the result of your testing it, Claire,” Greta said. “Tamara had an idea of teaching up a cadre of *manbos* as screeners for an improved Haitian police force. Weed out any bad actors, real or potential.”

“Yes. That’s what Peter had told me she wanted to do and my volunteering could help,” Claire commented.

Tamara was pleased that her idea worked. She knew that Greta had an extremely strong spirituality, stronger than her mother’s, so she was happy to learn that she had the ability to teach others to activate some limbic system functions. The next step was to show her mother how to do it too; her idea was that her mother would have a close relationship with the *manbos* she was recruiting for her social project and therefore could teach them the skill. But as a safeguard, Tamara decided to show her mother how to plant a subconscious suggestion with the skill to ensure that it wouldn’t be used for evil purposes.

She also wanted to talk with Nadine about her planned *kouche*. She had made time in her schedule to take ten days for it in early October.

### **Mid-September**

“*Manman*, I had told you that from part of *Granmanman*’s memories, that in order to understand my abilities more, that I would need to do *kouche*. I certainly know that I haven’t been *kanzo* and that my initiation will not follow the tradition. But my strong feeling is that I must isolate completely and can’t do it where I can sense people. Even when I’m in the resort’s natural areas, I can sense emotional auras.”

“Yes, we did discuss this. Where can you go then?”

“I’ve found some rentals of very remote cabins in western Virginia and in West Virginia too, in the mountains there. I’m planning ten days. Two for travel and one to get settled and make my preparations. Then seven days of meditation. I think baths will be possible in nearby streams.”

“In the mountains? That will be cold.”

Tamara nodded. “I know. But the *kouche* isn’t about comfort, is it. Can you tell me something about the traditional *kouche* so I can adapt what I’ll need to do?”

“You’re really doing this, darling. All right. In many *ounfòs*, there’s a small room called the *djévo* where the initiate is sequestered for the duration of the *kouche*. Some traditions call for eight days, some nine.”

“*Granmanman*’s memory suggests seven ‘cause I’ll have no community support.”

“I see. Interesting. You’re supposed to have an *asson* with you, a generic one. It might not be the one you’re presented with when the initiation is complete.”

“Since I won’t actually become a *manbo*, I won’t need the *asson*.”

“True. The *kanzo* wears a white tunic, follows a special diet that’s salt-free, and sleeps on a mat on the floor. In my case, *Manman* gave me a flat stone to use as a pillow. During the seclusion, there’s one particular important ritual, the *lav tèt*. That’s a washing of the head in preparation for the *lwa* to enter. The washing is believed to remove the *gwo-bôn-nanj*, one of the two parts of the human soul, the part having a divine origin, and this makes space for the *lwa* to enter and create the new soul. The other part of the soul, the *ti-bôn-nanj*, which is one’s personality and conscience, remains.”

“So the *lwa* becomes part of the *manbo*’s soul?” Tamara asked.

“Our belief is that the *lwa* with which the initiate has the greatest affinity creates the new soul, allowing the new *manbo* to speak to and hear from the *lwa*. This gives her the ability to interpret the advice given by the *lwa* to specific individuals or groups.”

“What’s involved in the *lav tèt*?”

“That varies by the *sosyete* and who’s involved, but for the *kanzo*, it’s typically done early in the morning. An amount of water containing certain herbs and other ingredients, recipes for which are usually secrets of each *sosyete*, is prepared and consecrated. In my case, it was done seven times. After wrapping a white kerchief around my head, I spent the remainder of the day lying on my mat, which was on the floor and covered with a white sheet, meditating.”

“Ah, this is interesting,” Tamara said. “The symbolism is clear; this ritual is almost exactly analogous to Christian baptism. The water purifies and cleanses the soul to allow for the presence of the Trinity to be embraced by the initiate. I read that Hindus make pilgrimages to bathe in holy rivers or streams, and other religions have similar practices, like Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism.”

Nadine smiled at Tamara. “You’re quite correct, my genius child. My studies of anthropology show how these practices are related, too. The symbology of water was a powerful totem in many primitive cultures and with the growth of organized religions, the practices became formalized. So I’m guessing that you’ll try to incorporate a *lav tèt* in some form in your *kouche*?”

“I will. That part seems to me to be important for some reason.”

“You’ll be alone in a remote region. Will you be safe? I’m concerned about this, honey. And you said that your electronics will be off.”

“I’ll be safe. Remember my ability. And being so far from people, I’ll be able to sense anyone coming close. But it’s very important that I not have any real-world distractions.”

“Yes, that’s true for the traditional *kouche* also,” Nadine agreed. “When will you leave?”

“I’m planning on a full week, from a Friday to the following Sunday, ten days. First full week of October.”

They spoke for a while longer, Nadine telling Tamara some details about her own *kanzo* experiences.

“But I can’t say anything about what happens in the *djévo*,” Nadine told her. “It’s forbidden to discuss those things with non-initiates. Not that anything bad or naughty happens there,” she chuckled, “it’s just not done and many believe that the *lwa* punish violators.”

“That’s cool, what I’m doing is kinda distant from the tradition, though,” Tamara said.

“But it works for you. I still recall my Sunday phone call to you, several years ago, after you paid an unexpected visit to the spiritual crossroads as a non-initiate. You’re a trail-blazer—in many more ways than just in Vodou,



darling.”

***Several days later***

Tamara was finishing up her most recent work on her project, getting ready for her *kouche*. She had told her colleagues that it was something like a retreat, a period of spiritual regeneration. She had to be much more convincing with Peter, however. He was concerned that she couldn't be contacted and also worried about her safety.

One evening, when he mentioned her trip again, she sighed and went to hug him.

“Darling, remember in Cambridge, how you and I felt just before we went out the building door to the tent?”

“Sure,” Peter answered. “I felt this huge warning sensation come over me and got hyper-alert. Kinda like the mind-set I get before testing for my judo belt promotions. What...”

“Shhh... Me too. We both felt uneasy all morning. And remember what happened when we returned from London the second time? The airport?”

“Your skipping the arrivals customs. What about those times?”

“Doesn't it look like something's protecting us, somehow? Our premonition sense.”

Peter's shoulders slumped. “It's still hard to understand things which have no apparent basis in reality,” he sighed.

“I hear you. Recall what I quoted in my intro speech for the energy cube. ‘Magic's just science that we don't understand yet.’ Arthur C. Clarke wrote that line and it's so true. Besides, I'll always have my backpack with me. I'll be taking bear spray and two other gadgets that work much faster than a maser beam,” she chuckled.

“Oh, right. Damn, those two guys' attack on campus last spring inspired you.”

“Sure did. I don't wanna be in a position where I can't use my ability defensively because I can't lock eyes.”

Tamara had finally settled on the location for her *kouche*. She had found a rental for a small hunting cabin located on private property in the George Washington National Forest near Blue Grass, Virginia, right on the border with West Virginia and the Monongahela National Forest. From the website where she saw the cabin advertised, the one-room cabin was quite old and very rustic and had no electric service. Power was provided by a solar cell and a set of batteries and that ran a water pump and a lamp. There was a small propane furnace for heat and the cabin had a small propane range and oven. An outdoor privy completed the amenities. It was sufficient. There were two single beds—just the frames and mattresses, but she had planned to use a sleeping bag on a thin mat on the floor.

***George Washington and Jefferson National Forest, Virginia: early October***

The cabin's owner, Don Davies, lived in Front Royal, Virginia, so her drive there on the first Friday of October was about 100 miles, much of it on Interstate 66. She'd pick up the cabin's key and get directions; the owner had told her that finding the drive into the cabin site was tricky and gave her a photo of the turn-in to the access road to help her find it. He had told her a vehicle with all-wheel drive was needed to reach the cabin when she had arranged for the rental. “The trail in can be deeply rutted in places and climbs a steep hill in the last quarter mile,” he had told her.

“Now there's no cell service out there, so don't y'all get lost; I wouldn't be able to help,” he told her when he gave her the key and the driving instructions. “Yer phone GPS will work though. Let me enter it for y'all, okay?”

“Thanks, Mr Davies. You said there are instructions for the power, water pump, and heater?”

“It’s just Don. Yeah. Simple things, got ‘em off’n a old camper-trailer.”

“Good. I know how those work.”

Tamara had seen similar appliances in the bunk camper that she had rented for Kevin’s group.

“What’s the water source?” she asked.

“A spring down the hill t’the south. Granddad ran a pipe all the way into the crevasse there and my dad made some improvements. Until the first freeze, the spring runs good and the pump there sends water up t’the cabin an’ keeps the water barrel on the roof filled. The sink water’s gravity fed, just cold, though.”

“Anything to turn on, then? Or off when I leave?” Tamara asked.

“Nope. I’ll be out for bow-hunting season when y’all’re fixin’ to leave. Me ‘n my son’ll do any fixup work that the place needs and we’ll winterize the place when we leave.

“Should be plenty of propane,” he told her, going on. “Shed in the back has some spare tanks and they all should be full. If y’all wanta go on a hike, there’s bunches of trails all around the area. I put a few trail maps inside plastic sheet protectors; they’re in a cabinet. Take one of those maps with y’all. Keep yer bearings when y’hike. Y’all can get lost out there.”

“Is the place in Virginia or West Virginia? I couldn’t tell on the on-line map.”

He chuckled. “In Virginia. But from the cabin door, if y’all spit north, it’d land in West-Va.”

When she arrived at the road leading up to the cabin, Tamara was glad that her SUV had a high clearance because the road into the site was just a track and indeed had ruts and some were deep. At the cabin, she unpacked the car. One of the items she had brought was a camping refrigerator-freezer; the cabin’s owner had told her that the cabin’s set of batteries could power one. The sun was low on the horizon as she finished a light dinner and cleaned up.

Now the day was over; tomorrow she would survey her surroundings and figure out a plan for the week. She slept on the mat on the floor, albeit wrapped in a sleeping bag. It was chilly. She skipped using a stone as a pillow, though. The following morning, after a quick breakfast, she took two hours to scout out the surrounding trails. She found the source of the cabin’s water supply and followed the little spring from its source downhill to where it joined up with a small creek. About a quarter-mile downstream, the water ran off a three-foot high ledge, making a little pool about ten feet wide. Tamara looked into the pool; it appeared to be three to four feet deep and crystal clear.

*I could do a lav tèt complete immersion here, she thought. Bet it’s cold though.*

She bent down and put her arm in.

*Jeez, that IS cold. Well, the kouche is supposed to be uncomfortable. It was warm in the sun yesterday afternoon, so maybe I could do my full immersion on one afternoon.*

She looked at the trees around her.

*Yep, this spot will get sun in the afternoon.*

Back at the cabin later, Tamara got out her recording of Vodou drumming and spent the rest of the afternoon enacting a worship ceremony. This time she knew that she didn’t need the preparatory rituals. It was several hours later that she again became aware of her surroundings and she thought back to her experience.

She had basically been wondering about some of the fundamental questions of philosophy: what is “self”? What does it take for an entity, able to collect data from its surroundings, to become self-aware? What is thought and how does it work? What is memory and how is it connected to thought? Somehow, during her meditation session, she had the impression that the answers to those questions had been revealed. But now, like waking after a dream, those thoughts were inaccessible.

She went to her car and got out a couple of plastic jugs of water and a plain white smock. With Nadine’s help, Tamara had prepared a quantity of the ritual water to be used during the *lav tèt*, made according to her mom’s family recipe. She took off her clothes and slipped on the smock. Sitting cross-legged on a grassy spot near the cabin and after reciting the prayers that her mom had told her were traditional for an initiate, she poured a quantity of the water over her head, repeating it seven times. Even though she was chilled a bit by the water, she sat meditating for about an hour.

That night, her sleep was interrupted several times; the intensity of her dreams forcing her awake. However, in the morning, she was unable to recollect the dreams.

Tamara’s week after her first breakfast at the cabin fell into a routine fairly quickly. In the mornings, she took long walks, trying to reach out with her senses to connect with the powers of nature, with the life forces of the animals and even plants around her. Once, when she stopped and sat on a fallen tree, she looked around and noticed a number of animals nearby and some were watching her warily. A small group of deer was half hidden by a grove of trees and nearby, she saw several rabbits, a raccoon, and what looked like a fox. Birds were everywhere; she tried to remember what she had learned about bird calls from the cousins as she tried to distinguish between their different songs.

The next several days were fairly cool and she only repeated the *lav tèt* once more. But back at the cabin in the afternoon of her fifth day, she noticed that the day was warming up nicely, so she grabbed her white smock and hiked down to the little waterfall and pool. Stripping off her clothes, she slipped the smock on and hopped into the water.

“*Yeeks!*” she exclaimed. *Jeez, this is cold!*

She dunked herself seven times, gasping at the cold, and then scrambled out. Pulling off the cold, wet smock, she thought, *Shoulda brought a towel, wasn’t thinking.*

The sun felt warm on her body as she carefully stepped over to a long flat rock near the waterfall. The rock’s surface felt soothingly warm so she sat down on it, grateful for the sunlight’s warmth and the gentle warmth of the rock, and soon the chill of the water was replaced by the comforting warmth of the sun’s rays.

Lying back on the rock, gratefully soaking up the rock’s absorbed heat, Tamara let her thoughts go free as she looked at the few clouds drifting overhead and tried to use her imagination to force their shapes into recognizable objects. Gradually she became aware of the total lack of any background “emotional noise.” In this completely isolated area, with no people within miles, she realized how pervasive that noise was and how it masked her ability to sense this natural, virgin environment, totally neutral and free of any emotional chatter.

*It’s like the difference between seeing the night sky in the city and country,* she mused. *It’s so clear out here, mentally too.*

Dropping into a meditative state, she tried to explore the new, unfamiliar sensations she could feel. She became aware of how the moving air, brushing against the leaves on the trees, was creating tiny amounts of static electricity. She could feel how the motion of the water as it tumbled off the ledge at the little waterfall was adding its energy to the environment. The air itself was filled with energy as the sunlight—its photons—interacted with the air molecules. Some of those interactions resulted in free electrons, adding to the

energies surrounding her.

Casting her consciousness wider, Tamara felt these energies ebbing and flowing everywhere.

*Jeez, that energy's forming filaments too, it looks like—it's kinda like how nerve cells can form nerves, she wondered. I'm sensing bright lines, filaments lit up almost like the way nerve cells connect on the fMRIs. Let me try following a filament...*

After about a minute, suddenly in her consciousness appeared a foreign thought.

"So you have finally found us, daughter," the "words" formed in her mind but they also "sounded" like a deep voice.

"Um, what?" Tamara said aloud. "*Papa Legba?*"

"Speech is not needed, daughter. And no, Papa Legba is just a single aspect of our being."

"Being? Was my hunch correct then? The free energy of the world became organized and became self-aware?" Tamara responded in her thoughts.

"This is somewhat true, so you may regard that idea as a working hypothesis," the mental voice replied.

"Simplistically, our being contains the thoughts and memories of all organisms that have ever lived."

Tamara considered that. "*I've always wondered how thought and memory work. It's all based on energy, then? And the energy behind memory must be subject to the first law of thermodynamics; like all energy, it can't be created or destroyed. It can only be changed in form.*"

"You may view this entity in such terms, daughter, if you find it meaningful."

"Daughter? Why do you use that term?" Tamara asked in her thoughts.

"It is because you are of us. Search your thoughts for the concept of 'soul,' the philosophical entity that humans know as 'self.' We see in your thoughts that you know of man's search for an identity which Plato and Augustine wrote about. This is a 'self' that lies outside the person. We see too of your knowledge of the idea of the human entity being separated into parts as Descartes describes in 'Cogito,' where the suggestion that the personality has a different nature from the indivisible mind/soul is made. Think of what you have learned about the gwo-bôn-nanj of the Fon or the ye gaga of the Adja; both are names for the principle of consciousness and psychic life. This is the energy which survives death and lies behind the principle of immortality. We are of this energy; as you possess a portion of it, you are also of us."

"Then are the lwa part of you?" Tamara formed in her thoughts.

"What humans know of the spiritual entities that they venerate are constructions which draw on our energies, so the answer is both yes and no. Human belief systems shape the objects of veneration into their needs and our energies give them the experience and affirmation they require. However, we see from your thoughts that you wonder about ancestors. The energies which comprised the souls of all ancestors form a significant portion of our self."

"So when I believe that a lwa is assisting me..." Tamara's thought began.

"You are creating a construction which draws on the energies of our self and gives that energy a personal identity. Practitioners of every faith do this and some are quite able to make strong connections, as you can. A major reason why music, rhythmic drumming, and chanting are so effective in worship is that they channel the personal energies of the worshipers, merging their corporeal energies with ours. Any group activity which draws people together into a single shared focus can often accomplish this. Then a desired manifestation of our

*energies may occur to influence the worshipers' experience. A strong worship leader is necessary to focus the group sufficiently to accomplish such results, however. Therefore, in your belief system, the lwa do exist and are a reality of your experience."*

*"Does this answer how I can translate languages unknown to me?"* Tamara wondered.

*"Of course. You have an unusual sensitivity to our presence in the world. We are able to sense your mental energies merging with ours, as those in your family have been able to do, for multiples of generations. You have gathered to yourself others who have strong potential too, and begun to teach them the many skills which have been lost over countless years. The memories of myriads of ancestors are part of us and knowledge of languages is only a tiny portion. We see you are also wondering about having the memories of a close ancestor."*

*"My granmanman. She had come to me and left me memories,"* Tamara thought, as tears came to her eyes.

*"This is not uncommon, daughter. It was your own strength, your emotional attachment to your family, and an unusual affinity for the energy comprising our self, that made that connection so powerful. You must return to your own consciousness now, daughter; much time has passed and you are becoming chilled. You do not want to linger until darkness occurs. Now that you have learned how to commune with our energies, future visits will be easier. Fare well for the present, daughter."*

Tamara became aware that the sun had dropped below the trees and she was, in fact, a little chilled. She was awestruck by that encounter, and as she got dressed, she became aware that a small piece of her mind, which had been urging her into doing this "retreat" and justifying it as a Vodou *kouche*, was now silent.

*Huh, she thought, I guess that the energy being was trying to reach me all this time. Maybe that's why I had to be isolated from people...*

At that thought, she received a strong affirming sensation of warmth.

*I need a name for ... father? He ... it ... called me "daughter." But it felt so much like Papa Legba. Maybe I can think of him that way?*

This time a sensation of laughter flowed over her, followed by another affirming acknowledgment.

She was dressed now, and picking up her now-almost-dry smock, set off up the hill back to the cabin, her mind awash in thought.

*Hmm. Could I get info about dark energy from Papa Legba?* She wondered.

The sensation that came to her now was a regretful negative.

*Ah, well, she thought. Still gotta do stuff on my own. Jeez, it's Wednesday already. I gotta turn over the cabin on Saturday morning.*

She decided for tomorrow's hike, she'd go north into West Virginia.

## Chapter 75 - Rescue Detail

Tamara had a dreamless night; at least she had no memory of any dreams. After breakfast Thursday morning, she took out the map she had been using and looked at the trails which led north. About two miles north, there was a small group of houses with a through road nearby. The terrain to the north of the cabin was very hilly with steep 800-foot elevation changes in places. Hiking that way, she realized, she would need to be very careful and stick to the trails. Packing her backpack with several sandwiches, four water bottles, and a few energy bars, she set out mid-morning, after mapping out about a four-hour hike. She found these hikes to be very calming to her spirit and allowed her to let her thoughts roam freely.

The scenery was incredible, especially when she topped a ridge line and looked out across the steep hills and valleys to the north of the ridge where she stood. She hiked on and had gotten about half-way in her planned route when something disrupted the peacefulness of her surroundings—it was the unfamiliar sense of the presence of emotion in this otherwise tranquil environment. The emotions were ones of fear and exhaustion, and they were strong. The source seemed stronger in the direction in which she was heading, so Tamara continued along the trail, which ran parallel to a ridge line as it descended into a glen where her map showed that a creek flowed.

She walked carefully here because the terrain dropped off steeply to her right and the vegetation to the left was dense and, she noted, was dominated by hawthorn bushes with their long, sharp thorns. When she got to the creek, she looked around.

*Someone's around here, she thought. Close by. But I don't see anyone.*

She walked a short distance further and could definitely sense that she had passed the location of the emotional source. Turning around, she carefully crept back, scanning the area first visually and then using her empathic sensitivity. There, concealed under a dense hawthorn bush, she could barely see a small figure hiding. The fear pouring from the figure became intense as Tamara stopped at the bush.

"Are you hurt? I mean no harm," Tamara said softly. "I'm just a girl on a hike and I'm alone. You're terribly scared, I can see, and I can help you. Are you injured? Hungry?"

Two eyes appeared, peering at her from inside the bush. Tamara realized that this person had the same chameleon ability to disappear in plain sight that she herself had; that's why Tamara couldn't visually see the person until she used her empathic senses too.

"You can come out. I can tell that there's no one around here anywhere, for miles, except us. Watch those nasty thorns! How did you get in there without getting stabbed, anyway?"

Gradually the person carefully slid out and Tamara saw numerous little cuts on their wrists and hands.

"You've got a bunch of cuts and scrapes," she said. "I have some antibiotic cream I can put on," she said as the person began to stand.

When the person pushed back the hood of their sweatshirt, Tamara saw it was a girl, about five feet, four inches tall, and she couldn't be more than fifteen years old.

"C... c... can you really help? I'm s... s... so scared..." she said, trembling.

"Oh, you poor thing!" Tamara exclaimed, taking out a tube of antibiotic and handing it to her. "Put this on those scratches. Tell me what's wrong."

"He's chasing me. I... I think he knows this... this area ... and it was the only way ... way in here."

"Okay, sweetie. I can tell that no one's within maybe a mile or two of here right now, at least," Tamara assured

her. “Are you hurt anywhere? Can you walk?”

“Y... yeah. Th... thirsty though. I was g... gonna get a drink from the creek but heard you coming.”

“Oh! I have two water bottles and some energy bars.”

Tamara got them out of her pack and handed one each to her.

“Don’t drink it all at once, drink a little as we walk, sweetie. Let’s get you back to the cabin where I’m staying. And let’s go quickly; it’s a two-hour hike back and we’ll talk later. Save your breath for the hike. Oh, I’m Tamara. Tamara Alexandre. What’s your name?”

“It’s Awinita Nelsey. ‘Nita’ for short but Papa called me ‘Winnie,’” she said and began crying.

Tamara hugged her, and as soon as she made contact, Tamara immediately knew why she was crying. “I’m so sorry... you lost your daddy, right?” Tamara asked sympathetically.

Winnie wiped her eyes. “It was Granddad—Papa. I don’t remember my dad. Papa raised me.”

“Nita, I kinda sense that your name ‘Winnie’ is special to you. Can I call you that?”

She smiled weakly at Tamara and whispered, “Yes, I would like that.”

“Let’s talk more later. Walk now, okay?”

Winnie nodded, took a sip of water and a big bite of the energy bar, and the two set out.

The route Tamara had planned was a little shorter on the leg going back to the cabin, so they arrived back in less than two hours. Then, while Tamara began to put together a meal for dinner, she had Winnie sit at the table with a cup of hot soup and tell her story.

“First, sweetie, and most important, who’s chasing you?” Tamara asked.

“The group home witch sold me to this evil man,” Winnie began crying again. “I got away from him when he stopped at a convenience store so I could use the toilet there. I climbed out the window and got into the forest right behind the store. Then down a very steep hill. Then I followed the low areas till I got to where you found me.”

“Jeez. When was this? The closest store like that must be five or six miles from where you were.”

“I was in the woods two days,” Winnie told her.

“And two nights?”

Winnie nodded. “I know woodcraft. I ate berries and some mushrooms I found. Papa taught me all our traditions. I’m Cherokee. But Papa was the last of my family here and I have no relatives.”

“Oh right, your name. It’s Awinnie or...?”

“Awinita. Cherokee for ‘dove.’”

“Ah, pardon my ignorance, but don’t the Cherokee mostly live elsewhere? I thought they were in Oklahoma,” Tamara asked.

“My people had a very bad treatment by the government. Did you ever hear of the ‘Trail of Tears’?”

“Oh! Yes I did. That was your people?”

“Yes and the Chickasaw, Choctaw, Winnebago, Muscogee, Seminole nations, and others I can’t recall, were

forced too. They were forced by the Army to walk to Oklahoma and maybe 50,000 people died on the way there. Some of the original Cherokees, families who escaped being forced to walk to Oklahoma, still live in places in our original territory—it was big, from Alabama to West Virginia, mostly in the Appalachians. Papa told me the Cherokee names that we use now for what happened then. One is ‘*nu na da ul tsun yi*’ which means ‘the place where they cried.’ But he said most Cherokee call it ‘*tlo va sa*,’ that’s ‘our removal.’ Papa thought that it was the Choctaw that first used those terms for being forced to leave our homes.

“I know that I have no relatives at all left in West Virginia although Papa knew of a couple other Cherokee families in the county. I never met them, though. Oh, there’s a Cherokee reservation in North Carolina; I recall him telling me about that.”

“All right then, so your papa passed away? That’s so sad. What happened?” Tamara asked as she came over to take Winnie’s hand.

She sent a small amount of a silver healing taste and a green calming taste to her and Winnie startled.

“Tamara? What did you do just then?” she asked, suddenly frightened.

“Oh shit. Did you feel that? I’m so sorry; I was trying to reassure you and calm you; you’re still on edge. Still scared deep down.”

“I am. But you did something that Papa taught me how to do and he said that it was a tribal secret, passed down by the medicine man. No white person was ever told the secret... um, you’re not white, but...” Winnie ran down.

Tamara pulled up the other chair and sat right in front of Winnie.

“True, I’m not a Caucasian. My ancestors are African, but I’m from Haiti—Caribbean, you know?”

Winnie nodded.

“So we have a religion in Haiti; it comes from Africa, and some of our priestesses know how to project certain emotional feelings. That’s what I did just then. Other cultures have people who can do that too, and when we have time, we need to talk about what you learned ‘cause it looks like we learned the very same things, but as taught by our own native cultures. Deal?”

Winnie nodded again and began to cry and Tamara got up and held her.

“Sorry for all the crying... It’s been an awful two years—more than two—and now finding someone who’s like me is overwhelming,” Winnie whispered.

Tamara urged her to get up and sit on the edge of one of the beds with her; then she put her arm around Winnie’s shoulder.

“Tell me what happened when your papa passed away, sweetie,” Tamara urged. “If you can.”

“It’s okay, I think I can. He was having indigestion for two days but wouldn’t go to the clinic,” Winnie said. “We lived in a little house and had an acre of land. Raised vegetables and that and Papa’s pension was our support.”

“Where was this?” Tamara asked.

“Randall County.”

“West Virginia?”

“Yeah. And the next morning, he wouldn’t wake up,” she sobbed.



“Terrible. Heart attack?”

“That’s what I heard. The county took me over and put me in a temporary home. The social worker said that they’d sell the homestead, we had no savings that they could find, and use the money to support me in a foster home.”

“I wonder whether that’s legal to do,” Tamara mused.

“It couldn’t have been worth much. We weren’t near any town, just on the road through a holler. Our place was on a lick, a little wider, with three little farms along it.”

“A remote area.”

“Yeah. But most of West Virginia is remote. All mountains. Then I got sent to a temporary foster home while they looked for something more permanent. After getting sent to another temporary one, I got put in this group home in the county and the case worker told me that the home had a good record of placements—what a crock.”

“Is that adoptions?” Tamara asked.

“That, or permanent foster homes with a real family. Anyway, the group home manager was a real witch. We had to do all of the housekeeping and cooking. When we came back from school, we got searched for any contraband—anything that she didn’t want us to have. And those placements...” Winnie shuddered.

“What? What happened there?” Tamara asked, alarmed now.

“We—the other girls—thought that they were selling the girls. Ones who were... the witch said were ‘placed’ ... they didn’t come back and we didn’t hear about them. Every month, the witch lined up us girls...”

“The group home was all girls?”

“Yeah. She took thirteen and up. So we were lined up and couples or sometimes single men would come in and look at us. They’d pick a girl to talk to, and sometimes, maybe a week later, that girl would be gone. The witch said she got placed. We thought the right word was ‘sold’ ‘cause none of the adults who looked at us were family types. They all had a evil feeling about them.”

“Damn, this sounds like a sex-trafficking operation,” Tamara mused.

“Or a slave? That’s what some girls thought.”

“I need to get the details from you, Winnie. Where the group home’s located, stuff like that. But what happened with you?”

“Yeah, this creepy guy picked me last week. We hadn’t seen him before—oh, not every one of the adults did select a girl. That only happened, um, six or seven times in the two years I was there. This guy picked me—must have been with my picture ‘cause he just showed up. He came to the home a few days ago and I swear that I could hear him discussing a price with the witch. I have really good hearing. So I began thinking about how to get away and if I had to get into the countryside, I needed layers of clothes. That’s what I’m wearing now—four layers.”

“That’s very resourceful, Winnie,” Tamara told her. “So do you think that he’ll try to find you?”

“I heard him shouting when I was climbing down that steep slope behind the store that he was gonna track me and that I couldn’t get far in these hills. He was right; there’s lots of impassible terrain here, and when I tried to use the road, I didn’t see any cars other than his and some locals. I didn’t want to chance their finding me and kept to the woods, but the terrain forced me to stay along that run—stream. Then this morning, I thought I heard hounds barking, so I think he *is* gonna try to track me. You found me as I was trying to head south to find a road

into any town to the south of there.”

“Hmm, okay. Hounds are good at tracking, but we crossed two streams coming here, and your path joined up with mine. That should confuse them.”

“I crossed a stream too, several times.”

“That’s good, it helps. I’ll be moving from here on Saturday morning. I think that they can’t track us to here before that. Will you come with me? I know people who will be able to protect you and I have enough resources to make sure you’ll have a much better life. Please come with me, Winnie.”

She began crying again. “You can protect me? You promise?”

“Absolutely.”

“I can’t thank you enough, then.”

“I want to help those other girls in the group home too, Winnie. We have to stop terrible things like that from happening. Anyway, the owner of the cabin will be here on Saturday and that’s when we’ll leave. I live in the Baltimore area and that’s where we’ll go on Saturday. I’ll bet that the law says that you’d have to return to that county... no, don’t worry, I wouldn’t do that ever... I think that there’s a real problem in that county, so we’re getting you out of there.”

The rest of the evening after dinner, the two girls spoke and exchanged their stories, Tamara telling her about her life in Miami and then in college. Winnie spoke about her life, but especially the teaching her grandfather had done with her. He had been a game warden for almost thirty years and for the past ten or so, the state had renamed the position a “natural resources police officer.” He had taught his granddaughter the traditional woodcraft skills of living in the wild. Winnie’s grandfather’s own grandfather had been a medicine man and he had learned much about those traditional practices, passed down through his grandfather to her father, who taught them to Winnie. Tamara found out that Winnie, like her grandfather, had a superb memory; cultures with no widespread writing traditions tended to value good memory skills. Thus Winnie had been a very good student. They talked far into the night.

Tamara had a blanket in her SUV and Winnie went to sleep on one of the beds, wrapped in it. She was amused that Tamara still chose to sleep on the floor, but recognized something similar to her own traditions, in seeing Tamara following that practice now.

The following morning after breakfast, Winnie convinced Tamara that she should do her last planned day of meditation and Tamara told her that she meditated while hiking.

“I did that too, Tamara,” Winnie told her. “The lesser spirits live in the woods and I’m their friend. If I’m quiet, can I walk with you?”

“Oh sure. Oh my, we have so much to share about our traditions, Winnie,” Tamara said as she hugged her.

About two hours into the hike, they could hear the hounds.

“Shit,” Tamara hissed. “They must have run them all night long; I never expected that. That’s coming from the direction of the glen where I found you.”

Winnie began to tremble and Tamara took her arm.

“They’re maybe a bit more than two hours from the cabin,” Tamara told her. “We’re forty-five minutes away from there. If they do come, I’ve got a nasty surprise waiting.”

Winnie looked at her hopefully. “You mean that you won’t try to drive away in your car?”

“I could, Winnie, but I’d have to leave a bunch of stuff behind and your jerk might be angry enough to vandalize the cabin. Besides, I’m sure that the law would call him a kidnapper and this way, I’ll get him.”

“He’s a big lug, Tamara,” she warned, twisting her hands.

“So he’ll fall harder,” Tamara tried to joke but Winnie wasn’t convinced.

They hurried back to the cabin. When they got there, Tamara opened her backpack and took out a can of bear spray.

“Here’s a great weapon, sweetie. Bear spray in someone’s face is completely disabling, if the guy gets past me, but he won’t. I was kidnapped once myself and I handled them without getting hurt...”

Winnie grabbed her arm. “You were? Wow... okay, if you did, I can too. Give me the can.”

“I’ll take care of the kidnapper. But the dog handler, and I assume there must be one, might try to get to you. It’s not his fight so I don’t think that he’ll be a threat. If he does try to get into the cabin, shoot him with the spray. I’ll handle your tormentor.”

“I’m scared, so please protect me. But don’t let him hurt you,” Winnie cried and hugged Tamara.

Tamara got her into the cabin and showed her how to wedge a chair against the door; that would slow someone down for perhaps thirty seconds and Tamara felt that would be enough. She had two versions of a new device she had developed after the attack on her; each could restrain a person. She wondered about the dogs—were they just trackers or would they attack too?

Recalling just how sensitive hounds’ noses were, she thought she could deal with them at a distance. Since they were following a human scent, then they were sensitive to human hormonal secretions and those were mainly based on the steroid ring structure.

*I’ll bet that I can overload the hounds’ olfactory tracts if I “push” some color tastes,* she thought.

Tamara also recalled that some animals were sensitive enough that they could detect tiny concentrations of pheromones in the air, kilometers distant from their source. The hounds were much closer than that now. So she would wait outside the cabin until she could be sure that the breeze would carry the scent in the hounds’ direction.

Ten minutes later, she heard a change in pitch and volume of the braying and she figured that this signaled that the hounds had found a fresh trail. Looking in that direction, she gathered her energy and “pushed” in their direction the biggest cloud of greenish-brown streaked with yellow that she had ever tried to make before.

*Let’s see how hounds handle confusion and fear and even whether or not it works on dogs. Hey, maybe I’ll try just fear too. That’s more primal.*

She took another mass of energy—suddenly realizing that she was actually tapping the energy from around her—*wow*—and sent an even larger cloud of pale yellow toward the braying hounds. For good measure, she followed that up with a cloud of pink with streaks of brown.

*We’ll see if nausea affects dogs too,* she chuckled evilly.

Several minutes later, the sounds coming from the hounds had changed markedly; instead of the braying, the hounds were barking and yapping and their volume had decreased. And suddenly, into the cabin’s clearing, two men came through the tree line, one of them holding a number of long leashes. He was attempting to drag some hounds along with him and the hounds were apparently having none of that. The dogs were clearly pulling back against being dragged along and several were whining, whimpering, and snarling.

*Something worked*, Tamara thought smugly, as she “pushed” another cloud of pale yellow toward them.

About fifteen seconds later, four of the dogs broke loose of their leads and began to run back in the direction from where they came. The guy holding the leads turned and began to follow them and the other guy shouted for him to stop.

“Cain’t! Gonna lose ma hounds! They’s never done this befoa—som’tin’s spooked ‘em real bad!”

And he was gone. His other dogs followed him away quite willingly.

The remaining guy walked toward the cabin as Tamara started the voice recording app running on her phone.

“Hey, girl,” he called. “Lookin’ for a teen girl, a runaway. The hounds knew that she was close before they had a fit, or whatever. I know she’s gotta be around—in that cabin, I’ll bet.”

“What’s your relation to her?” Tamara called back. “You look nothing like her.”

“I’m her guardian—adopted her. She ran away from me and I want her back.”

“Oh, so you think that she’s a possession then?” Tamara answered.

“Listen, cunt, she’s my property and if you try to stop me from recovering what’s mine, you’ll regret it!”

“I heard that you paid for her at a group home, true?” Tamara countered with a leading question.

“Said she was my property, so yeah, whatever, I bought her. Nothin’ you can do ‘bout that, bitch!”

“The recording on my phone says differently,” Tamara goaded him.

She was trying to get him to come closer so that she could lock eyes with him, but he was just too far away and his baseball cap brim was pulled down a bit too much. Outdoors, her “pushing” tastes would only work effectively if their eyes connected.

“You recorded me? You’re done, bitch!”

He started to walk toward her but he was watching Tamara’s hands as she brought up a tube that she was holding by her side, pointing it toward him but slightly down. The tube was eighteen inches long and had the diameter of a softball.

“Come no closer, mister,” Tamara warned.

*Damn! He’s still watching the launcher and won’t look at my eyes!* She thought.

“Is that a pop-gun or something? Looks like it’s a plastic toy. Okay, I’m coming for her and maybe I’ll just take the both of you!”

He had taken two steps toward Tamara before she raised the launcher to his chest level and pressed its release. A G-force projector in the launcher tube activated with a loud *crump* sound and an eight-inch-long plastic cylinder streaked out of the tube and, as it cleared the muzzle, its shell popped open and eight small G-force powered metal weights, all mutually repelling each other, flew apart. Each weight was attached to one of eight corners of a octagonal-shaped nylon net and as the weights pulled it open, it dropped over the man, fully enveloping him. Tamara’s device was a mega-sized net gun, far larger and more powerful than the ones on the market. It had an extra feature; Tamara’s design of the net employed a trailing line and a pull on that line, when the net stopped its forward motion, closed the net’s open side, similar to the way that the closure of a fishing purse seine worked, trapping whatever was inside.

Her quarry was now ensnared and the net’s rapid closing around his legs, together with his forward motion,

caused him to trip and fall. He threw his arms forward to break his fall and as his body hit the ground face downward, Tamara pulled the net's closing cord tighter, trapping the man's arms against his sides. With a bellow of rage, he began cursing at her, threatening all kinds of creative punishments if she didn't free him.

"You're on ice, now, buddy," she told him. "Let's see if someone you might know can identify you."

Tamara called to the cabin, "It's safe!"

From the cabin, "I saw! That was so awesome!"

Winnie came out and over to where the guy was lying, prone on the ground, and Tamara asked for her help to roll him over.

"It's not safe to let a person lie prone while being tied up," she said. "The pressure on the diaphragm can make it hard to breathe. Although I wouldn't mind suffocating him, but then we'd be the ones in trouble."

Winnie looked at him. "Yeah, it's him," she said and hugged Tamara. They walked away from where he was lying because of his shouting. "I can't believe how you did that!" She exclaimed. "I've never seen a thing like that. What was it?"

"A variation of a net gun. I'm developing it for law enforcement to capture and immobilize fleeing or threatening suspects but there are other uses too."

"You invented that?"

"Not the concept but the propulsion and net deployment methods. Current net guns have mostly light-weight nets and those can't really restrain someone effectively. The prime patent on the concept expired some years ago."

"What do we do with him now?"

"Well, we'll have help in the morning. We just need to keep him from wiggling out of the net."

"How can ... oh, I know. During the Indian Wars, some of the northern tribes would stake a captive to the ground so he couldn't move," Winnie suggested. "Do you have rope? I know how to make stakes from tree branches if you have a knife."

That's what they did. Tamara recalled seeing an old tarp and several coils of rope in the shed where the extra propane tanks were stored, and after the man was staked out and tied down thoroughly using the rope, they covered him with several layers of tarp.

"You'll probably be cold tonight," Winnie told him, "but unfortunately you'll survive, even though kidnappers like you don't deserve it."

He cursed her.

Later that evening as they prepared for sleep, Winnie told Tamara, "Thanks for saving me and letting me stake him out that way. It felt very traditional, although I'm sure that the Cherokee didn't do that. I do recall that the tribes to the north, like the Mohawks, Seneca, and Iroquois had that practice. But doing that to him gives me closure in a way."

"That's important and I'm glad you feel like that. Maybe your dreams won't be so bad tonight."

"How'd you know that, Tamara? Are you a human dream catcher that you can know my dreams?"

"Dream catcher?"

“Ah, that’s a kinda talisman that the Ojibwa Nation used; I think that they were the first. The Cherokee knew of it through the Potawatomi, part of the Ojibwa Nation. Dream catchers are supposed to protect sleeping people from bad dreams and nightmares. Are you a dream catcher?”

“Ha, ha. No, I don’t have that talent. But I sense emotion and twice last night your emotional turmoil woke me. That meant bad dreams. Forgive me, but I sent a healing emotion to you both times and you slept better.”

“Oh, Tamara, I’m sorry to disturb your sleep...”

“Please, Winnie, sweetie. Don’t worry; I get plenty of rest and that was no bother, believe me. Now sleep well. Tomorrow will be exciting in a good way, I think.”

~~~~~

They were up early the next morning, mainly because their captive had been shouting that he had to relieve himself. Tamara went outside and told him to hold it in or go in his pants; she wasn’t letting him loose. About 8 a.m., Don Davies, the cabin owner, and his son rolled in.

“What the hell...” he started when he saw the trussed-up figure on the ground.

Tamara explained and then played the recording for him.

“Fuckin’ bastard... y’all the gal he kidnapped?” he asked Winnie.

“Yeah. Took me from a group home in West Virginia.”

“Damn ... hey Bobby,” he called to his son who was looking down at the shouting, trussed-up captive.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Take the truck down the hill to ol’ Monson’s place ‘n’ call the county sheriff. Tell ‘im we got a goddamn kidnapper hogtied up here. Give ‘im my name; they should know me, else tell ‘em we’s on the road in from 642.”

“Sure thing, Dad.”

Davies turned to Tamara. “Takes twenty minutes to Monson’s. Don’t know about the sheriff, how long that’ll take. Let’s see ‘bout gettin’ that guy standing. Did y’all see if he has a weapon?”

“No, didn’t want to touch him much after we got him onto his back,” Tamara replied as she pulled the tarp off the captive.

“All right. Let’s get the stakes and ropes off. Nice rope job, there.”

“Thank you,” Winnie said.

“How’d he get in a net like that, anyways?” Davies asked.

“I used a net gun when he tried to rush me. You heard his threats,” Tamara replied.

“Sure did.” Davies patted him down and found a shoulder holster under the guy’s left arm.

“Gal, y’all were lucky; he’s packin’ a 9-mil here. Okay, fucker, what’s yer name?”

“Go to hell, asshole,” was the reply.

“That’s where y’all’re goin’, I’m sure. He’s got a knife in a sheath in his boot here. Y’know, fuck him. No way I’m lettin’ this one up. But I’d feel better if the weapons weren’t on him.”

“Can’t leave our fingerprints, though. I have a pair of light driving gloves in my SUV,” Tamara offered.

“Doubt they’d fit my big paws, gal,” Davies replied.

“I could get the pistol out myself, I think...”

“He’d have to cooperate an’ move his arm. Hey! Will y’all let us get that pistol out?”

“Shove your cock up your ass!”

“I’ll just cut his coat away and then cut the holster straps,” Tamara suggested.

“That’s a right fine idea, there. Y’all don’t have to do that... I can,” Davies said.

He did, and then got the knife out by cutting away the pants leg. Their captive was howling with rage now.

When Davies was done, he asked Tamara, “Can we check out the cabin while we wait? Was everythin’ okay when y’all arrived?”

“It was in great shape except for a cracked window pane and some loose floor boards inside, near a corner. That water system is genius.”

“Daddy did a fine job right there, yeah. Thanks. I don’t recall any rain. Did y’all have any? Need to check the roof.”

“Nope. Good weather. Two chilly days and then it warmed up. I found a little waterfall and pool down the hill too; that was nice. You own that land down there?”

“Not quite that far. Have a hundred acres; a small part’s over the state line.”

He was checking the appliances as they spoke.

“I’m not doubtin’ that y’all took care of the place, Tamara. I’m checkin’ fer things that need t’be set fer winter. Sunday, bow season starts and Bobby and I’ll be here fer the week. See any wildlife?”

“Yeah, deer. There were...”

She was interrupted by a call from Winnie.

“Tamara, he’s trying to get out of the net!”

Tamara and Davies ran to the doorway and looked. The kidnapper was squirming around, trying to reach the tieoff line. He had gotten an arm through an opening in the net.

Davies looked at the net.

“It’s okay, gal; he’s goin’ nowhere. Jus’ makin’ it tighter ‘round hisself.”

Then they heard the noise of a vehicle coming up the hill. Bobby had returned.

“Deputy should be here, maybe ten minutes, Dad. They said they’d call a trooper too, seein’ that maybe West Virginia might be involved too.”

“Good. We’re gettin’ behind schedule, but I checked everything inside. Get the ladder so’s we can check out the roof’s condition.”

Tamara and Winnie watched while the two worked, going over the cabin’s roof.

“They take good care of it,” Winnie observed. “Like Papa did with our house. Every October, he went all over it to fix it up for the winter,” she said sadly.

Tamara put an arm around her. “You’ll never forget him, but eventually the memories will start to feel better. That’s what my mom says when she thinks of her mother.”

Winnie looked at her. “Thank you. It’s nice to be able to share private thoughts like that.”

“Didn’t you make friends at the group home?”

“It was hard; everyone was so different, and there was lots of distrust. Some girls wanted to take advantage of others. Like me, a newcomer.”

“That’s so sad, sweetie... oh, I hear something coming.”

Several minutes later, a huge SUV with sheriff’s department markings drove into the clearing, and a minute later, a state trooper vehicle drove in.

“Okay, Winnie, it’s show time,” Tamara said as she walked toward the two vehicles.



## Chapter 76 - Sharing Stories

The deputy was the first to get out; it looked like the trooper was using his radio.

“Where’s the citizen who called in the complaint?” the deputy asked.

“That would be Bobby Davies, on the roof there,” Tamara said. “Would it be better if we wait till the trooper gets here so we don’t have to repeat?”

The deputy didn’t look that happy about it, but agreed.

“To orient you, deputy, ah...” she looked at his name tag, “Wymers, the guy trussed up over there is a kidnapper...”

“Wait, that’s a person? I thought it was a few feed bags. Is he injured?”

“Just his pride,” Tamara reassured him as the trooper came over to them.

“Howdy, Mark, you got this run?” the trooper greeted the deputy.

“Yep, Hank, this’ll be one fer th’ books.”

The trooper looked at Tamara and Winnie. “Y’all the complainants?”

“I guess she is. Winnie, here. I’m Tamara Alexandre; I helped Winnie get to safety.”

“Okay, folks, I’m Trooper Laringer and y’all met Deputy Wymers. Did I miss anything important, Mark?”

“Just a suspected kidnapping perp hog-tied over there. Well, he’s actually wrapped in a net,” Wymers pointed.

“They say that he’s undamaged so he’ll keep till we’re done.”

“Jesus. Okay, if y’all say so. Are we still even in Virginia? My GPS shows the line’s right smack dab here.”

“The cabin over there’s in Virginia fer sure. The line is...” he looked to the north.

“The owner told me it’s just past the tree line,” Tamara offered, pointing to a spot about fifty feet away.

“Running east and west. And I have that guy’s confession recorded on my cell that he kidnapped Winnie here; that’s why I restrained him like that, but Winnie can tell you more about what happened.”

The trooper shook his head. “This *is* one for the books. Okay, y’all want the lead here, Mark? It’s yer county.”

“Lead for this shit, Hank? Excuse me, ladies, but this is really weird. I’d normally say yes but we have a suspected kidnapping that was claimed to have occurred in an adjoining state and the suspected perp is in ours...” He looked at Winnie. “And you say that he abducted you?”

Winnie nodded. “Yes.”

“I think that the lead needs to be the state, then, Hank,” Wymers told him. “This investigation’ll cross state lines so the AG’s office will need t’handle this fer sure.”

“Thanks, buddy, I owe y’all. Hope it’s a simple writeup. Heard that a guy phoned the complaint in, though. Is it one of them...?” He pointed to the cabin where the men were working.

Tamara interrupted, “I mentioned this to the deputy; it was the son of the owner here. With no cell service out here, we sent him to find a land line when they arrived this morning. He has no other knowledge of what happened here yesterday, though. Winnie can tell you what happened to her ‘cause, unfortunately, it is complicated. We think that a sex ring is trafficking orphaned girls and she got caught up in that.”

Both officers were startled at hearing that and Winnie began.

"I think that Tamara's right; they were selling the girls. My name's Awinita Nelsey and before the group home, I lived in Randall County, maybe five miles out of Betsley. That's West Virginia."

She went on to tell them about her time in the group home, her sale, and her escape, ending with Tamara's finding her.

"Damn, this one's above my pay grade but it sounds like that there county has some garbage they need to clean up," Laringer commented. "Okay, Tamara is it? Y'all were hiking in West Virginia and y'all came across Winnie hiding in some bushes. In y'r own words, tell us what y'all did."

Tamara nodded and told them how she had led Winnie to safety and about the following day when they heard the tracking hounds.

"So the perp got a tracker?" the deputy asked.

"Yep. I'm convinced he had nothing to do with her kidnapping since when some of his hounds ran off, he left to go round them up."

"Y'all mean that them hounds just left the track and run off?" Laringer wondered. "Now that's somethin' weird in itself... So y'all were here when the perp came to the cabin?"

"Correct. He demanded that his property be returned. I had my phone with me and when he showed up, I started the voice recorder. Let me play the recording."

She did, and Laringer told her to hang onto the phone but that he would need to take it for evidence before he left.

"The perp sure did incriminate his self there, I'd say. But I think that the evidence from the group home would be essential," Wymers offered.

"True. Glad it'll be out of my hands then," Laringer grunted. "Let's go unwrap the perp."

When they got to him, the kidnapper began shouting at them that he was being held prisoner and being tortured. Both officers ignored him while they checked out the net.

"Damn, how the hell did y'all do this? A snare trap or something? How...?" Laringer wondered.

"I have a large-size net gun I've been developing," Tamara told them. "It's basically like a popgun but shoots a big net out."

"I've seen them but them nets're very lightweight," Wymers commented. "CO<sub>2</sub> cartridge?"

"No, it's electromagnetic. Something like a magnet propels the net," she replied. "Oh yeah, almost forgot. He had a gun and knife on him. Don—the owner here—cut them off of him. We didn't touch the holster or knife sheath with our bare hands. They're sitting over there on the top of that box." She pointed.

"Excellent, thank you," Wymers said.

"Okay then, sir," Laringer said to the kidnapper. "What's y'all's name?"

"Not saying and you can't hold me. I haven't done anything."

"Fine. Call yuh John Doe then for the purpose of this statement. Y'all are under arrest for suspicion of kidnapping of a minor, possession of a lethal weapon during the commission of a felony, and other crimes to be specified later as our investigation progresses..."

Laringer continued to Mirandize the kidnapper.

When he finished, Tamara spoke. “Hey, make it easier to get him untangled. Just cut the net off him; that’s fine with me.”

“Good idea, Ma’am. Hey Mark. Help me roll this guy over to get the cuffs on him,” Laringer asked Wymers. “And pat him down for any other weapons. Since he fails to identify his self, check for a wallet and ID. Okay? I’ll start cutting off the net... thanks, Ma’am.”

She had brought him an auto rescue knife tool from her SUV’s emergency kit.

“I actually have a knife like this in my Batman utility belt here, but I’ll use yers, since it’s yer net,” Laringer grinned at her. “I’d like to see yer popgun, too, after we undo this gift wrapping.”

It took several minutes to cut the net free. Wymers found the kidnapper’s wallet and ID; he had a Virginia address. He then called his post by radio and learned that the man was a serial sex offender and the deputy knew at once that a legitimate adoption would have never been approved by a court in any jurisdiction.

Just before the two officers frog-marched their arrestee to the trooper’s car, he stopped his complaining and whining long enough to tell them that he needed to urinate.

“Damn, I don’t wanna have to clean up piss in my vehicle,” Laringer muttered. “Hey Mark. I got a set of belly chain cuffs in my vehicle. Let’s switch him to those so he can use that outhouse to take a leak.”

While their prisoner was using the privy, Tamara showed the officers the propelling section of the net gun. She had picked up the plastic launching cylinder and showed them that too. Laringer had grabbed a few evidence bags and secured the weapons, then took Tamara’s phone. He looked at it and then at her.

“This is a pay-as-y’-go phone, right?” he asked. “Why... if it’s not too personal...?”

“I don’t mind,” Tamara said. “I use burner phones when I don’t want to be contacted, like here. I was on a personal retreat to recharge myself after a very busy spring and summer. I needed to get away from everything for a week. I don’t need it back—oh wait. I have the receipt for the phone with my name. That’s useful, right?”

“For sure. Otherwise the legal guys would be contacting y’all for yer ownership proof, so thanks.”

She dug the receipt out of her backpack and gave it to Laringer and he popped that into the evidence bag with the phone.

“Y’all said y’ don’t need it back,” he confirmed.

“Yep. Want it in writing?”

“Y’all don’t mind?”

“Not at all. Let’s see.”

She grabbed a pad out of her backpack and jotted a quick note. Looking at the phone’s receipt in the evidence bag, she copied the phone’s MEID and signed the note, including her driver’s license number. She gave the note to Laringer who gave her a big smile as he sealed the note in with the phone. Then he gave her his card with the complaint number marked on it.

“Y’all are makin’ my job lots easier, so thanks,” he told her as he opened the SUV’s back hatch and locked the evidence bags in the safe box there. “Y’all’ll be hearin’ from the AG’s office soon, I ‘spect. And note that I didn’t tell y’all that y’needed t’ get Winnie back t’ West Virginia. But she needs t’git lawyered up real quick, y’hear? Legal Aid helps folks who have no resources, like Winnie.”

“Thanks for everything, Trooper Laringer,” Tamara said. “I’ll make sure she has the best representation

possible.”

“Y’all are good people. Now stay safe and best of luck.”

Deputy Wymers had already left after saying his goodbyes and then with a wave, Laringer pulled out and headed for the trail down the hill.

Winnie turned to Tamara and hugged her. “Tamara, thank you, thank you. I’m so relieved. But what happens now?” she said, looking a little uncertain.

“First, let’s check with Don. If all’s well here, we pack and head out. The first stop, you need clothes and everything else. Did you have any possessions when you were put in foster care?”

“Just a few clothes and I outgrew a lot. See how short these jeans are?”

“Any stuff from your home?”

“They wouldn’t let me take anything...” The tears began again.

“We’ll see what we can do about that. It seems to me that there must be some kind of judicial process needed to settle the estate of a minor orphan. Anyway, clothes and any other stuff you need.”

“Tamara, I have no money...”

“Hush. I do, and the only purpose for money, as far as I’m concerned, is to do good deeds for people. Let’s ask Don if everything’s okay. Hey, Don,” she called.

He was still working on the roof, replacing shingles.

“I see y’all’re done and we’re rid o’ that piece a’ shit,” he called back. “Everything square now?”

“For now. I’m gonna get Winnie home and settled and then the legal crap starts. Also taking down that crooked operation over yonder.”

“Good fer y’all. Hey, everythin’s just fine here so y’all can head out when y’want. Thanks fer y’business and hope y’all recommend my little palace here,” he chuckled.

“I had an amazing time here, Don, and I’ll never forget the things I learned about myself this week. So thanks.”

She went inside. “Help me get this stuff back in my SUV, okay?” Tamara asked Winnie.

Together the two of them loaded Tamara’s vehicle and with a wave to her hosts, she pulled out.

When they reached the paved road, Tamara asked, “Winnie, please don’t be offended, but I noticed that you don’t seem to have much of the local speech mannerisms. I hear just a little of the local lilt when you speak. How come it’s different?”

“Ah... I speak like Papa did, I guess. And he would correct me if I got sloppy. He told me that he worked hard, by listening to the TV, to speak ‘properly,’” she made finger-quotes, “‘cause he said it helped in his state job.”

“Oh, that’s impressive. So when your papa became your guardian, you were about three years old?”

“Uh huh. Gramma was alive then and I remember an elderly aunt too. But Gramma was sick; I think it was diabetes, and she died when I was seven. That’s when Papa retired from the state. My aunt had died earlier and I never knew any other relatives.”

“That’s so sad, losing everyone you know,” Tamara said gently. “I hope that things will be much better for you now—I’m sure they will. So we’re headed home now, but I don’t plan to phone anyone until we get closer to

home tomorrow. I'm loving this electronic silence."

"Tamara, you gave away your cell phone..." Winnie began, but Tamara popped open the console between them and took out a phone.

Winnie's eyes almost bulged out when she saw two more cell phones in there.

Tamara laughed, "I got into the habit of keeping several burner phones for off-the-grid use. Long story, but I find having them useful. You take this one till I get you a regular account. The bigger one in there is my main phone, but the one you have has all my contacts loaded too."

"Tamara, this is..." and the tears threatened to flow again.

"Hush again, sweetie. Life dealt you some of the worst hands ever so far. Consider that Lady Luck is sitting in your lap now. While we drive, tell me about your schools and where you are academically."

"I'm a year behind, basically, but in elementary I was a top student. I lost a year in the foster system and 'cause the witch would sometimes keep us from going to school. We had to do housekeeping."

"How much housekeeping... what were there? Six girls?"

"Sometimes eight or nine. She had a side business. A fleabag motel. She made us clean the rooms and stuff."

"Oh jeez, slave labor. This gets worse with every telling. Okay, do you mind talking about school? The subjects you took, what you liked, how far you got?"

"Sure. School was the bright spot of my days. Let's see. Last fall I was fourteen years old and in eighth grade..."

They spent the next hour and a half talking about Winnie's school progress and that's when they reached Interstate 81, after a brief stop for lunch at a fast-food place. It was 2:30 p.m.

"Let me check the car's GPS to find some shops. We're about 200 miles now from where I live and that's four hours' drive, at least, with the traffic and construction now. Add three hours to shop—now stop shaking your head, Winnie, you're getting a nice wardrobe. Especially if you're gonna be seen in public with me."

Winnie frowned, then giggled.

"And a nice sit-down dinner. Okay, I was planning to get home on Sunday anyway and was gonna sight-see on the way, so I did plan for an overnight stop. So here's the plan. We'll go to Harrisonburg now. There's a nice little college there, James Madison University, so there should be some cool trendy shops..."

"Tamara? Don't you need to let someone know you're bringing me home with you?" Winnie asked timidly.

"I told everyone that I was incommunicado until Sunday afternoon and I'm sticking with that. You have no idea how free a feeling this is without having a dozen people call me every hour to get my decision or opinion..."

Winnie was looking at her, eyes wide and mouth open. "Are... are you important?" she whispered.

Tamara laughed. "It seems some people think so, but no; I'm just me. Winnie, I'm just a grad student. I have a few inventions, but there are lots of people who do. Anyway, I told everyone who matters not to dare to try to contact me unless, god forbid, someone was in the hospital."

"You said you have money, though..."

"Yeah, I did. Some people think having money makes them important, but money is just a tool for me to improve other people's lives. The disadvantaged. Let's talk about nice stuff, not boring stuff. We'll stop and find some cool shops, have a nice dinner, and stay at a nice hotel. Tomorrow morning I want to go to Luray

Caverns; it's not far off our route and I've heard wonderful things about it. Then we'll head home."

"What's those caverns?"

"Many millions of years of water moving through the underground limestone layers of rock carved out a huge cave system, their flyer says. They even have an organ down there that plays music on the stalactites."

"Ooo. That sounds rad. Okay, that should be fun."

~~~~~

They had a blast shopping. The girls hit a number of trendy shops and looked at large selections of vintage styles, joggers, graphic t-shirts, denims, sportswear, stylish school-friendly styles, and some dressy styles. They had fun in a lingerie shop and selected a few sexy underwear items plus a dozen or more utilitarian choices.

"Now get nothing that covers more than bikini undies do," Tamara told Winnie, to her amusement.

"But I don't have a boyfriend to appreciate them," Winnie pouted.

"Yet," Tamara stated to more giggles.

And they looked at dresses but Winnie wanted to wait for an occasion before getting a suitable dress.

And shoes. Tamara suggested several kinds, including athletic shoes.

"Winnie, do you like sports?" Tamara asked at one point. "Like in P.E. Is there any sport you like, say running or swimming? Basketball? I play volleyball myself and I like running too."

"Um, yeah. I like running too. I'm like my ancestors; Native Americans were very physical people and the Cherokee have a tradition of running. I have good endurance and I do an hour of exercise a day when I can. I think I'd like gymnastics 'cause I have good coordination. I can do back flips and walk on my hands. But I'm a bit old for that. Kids start that early, don't they?"

"No idea, sweetie. But if you do it for fun and not to compete, why not give it a shot?"

"Well, sure, I guess. Yeah, swimming's nice too... oh, I'll need a suit, right?"

Tamara grinned at her. "To swim at school, sure. But my prof has a private pool and it's clothes-free..."

Winnie stared at her. "What do you mean ... um ... no clothes... shit, Tamara, you guys are nudists?"

Tamara nodded at her, smiling gently. "Yep. Basically all my close friends and their families are. My own folks, no, but they're very tolerant of the rest of us. Listen. Nobody is forced. I mention it now 'cause the topic may come up in casual conversation and I didn't want you to be surprised and embarrassed by not knowing about it. Sure, let's check out the swimwear too. But first we need to get you some decent footwear. You'll need some really good running shoes..."

They were tired after four hours of shopping including a trip to a big discount store to get two pieces of luggage for Winnie's clothes, assorted toiletries, and personal feminine items.

Tamara drove to a nearby chain hotel where her company had a corporate account and registered; again Winnie watched, wide-eyed.

"Tamara, you *must* be important!" she insisted. "They treated you like a queen or something."

"Nope; just good corporate relations. Treat the guest well."

When they got up to the room, Winnie giggled. "Sleeping on the floor again tonight?" she teased.

Tamara grinned at her. “As a matter of fact, I am, and this time I’m gonna use a rock for a pillow,” and they both cracked up laughing.

“Okay, after dinner, let’s bring the rest of our loot up and your new suitcases too. We’ll model our new clothes for each other. This hotel’s restaurant is actually a good chain brand and they have a nice diverse menu. Hungry?”

Winnie got a faraway look. “I think I’ll be hungry forever,” she whispered. “There never was enough food in the group home and I was in a growth spurt...”

Tamara hugged her with moist eyes. “Besides the lawyer, another imperative is a physical for you, my dear.”

~~~~~

The next morning, they were up early for a nice continental breakfast and then checked out to drive to Luray. Tamara planned to get there when the attraction opened. They both had a marvelous time and Winnie thought that she was falling in love with geology.

“All those rock formations and the gorgeous colors,” she gushed. “How Nature carved out such beauty. My people’s beliefs don’t really have gods or goddesses; we’re a very spiritual people though, as Papa taught me. I mostly was taught to believe that the spiritual and physical worlds are as one. But seeing the awesome power of Nature displayed here is almost convincing evidence that she is a deity worthy of veneration.”

“If you like geology, then in high school you should take the earth science class and chemistry,” Tamara told her. “Both of those subjects are very interesting. Chemistry is the somewhat more difficult class, though. When we get you settled, we need to get you into high school.”

“You haven’t told me what your plans are for me, Tamara,” Winnie prompted.

“I haven’t, have I. Well, pending what the lawyers do, I’d like you to live with us, that’s Peter and me. Peter’s my boyfriend and we’ve committed to each other. We’re only one step away from being engaged.”

“And you want *me* to live with *you*?” Winnie asked incredulously. “I would love that. But what about Peter?”

“The two of us share the same thoughts, our thinking is so much alike. I’m sure that he’d agree. We will need to see about the legal part of your status, though, but you’ll never be in a foster home again, sweetie.”

Winnie hugged her. “Thank you, Tamara.”

It was noon when they got on the road back to Tamara’s Baltimore apartment. When she was about two hours away, she turned on her third burner phone; she didn’t want to deal with the absolute ton of messages and emails she knew that she had gotten during the past week; they’d come flooding in when she turned on her primary phone. She’d deal with that avalanche tomorrow. There were no messages on this phone, but only Peter, her family, Emma, Greta, and Werner had this number.

She called Peter using the car’s Bluetooth and he answered before the first ring had stopped.

Laughing, she teased him, “Sitting on the phone, waiting for my call, huh?”

“Actually, yes, darling, I was. Have you been completely off of the grid this week?”

“That’s exactly right. Total silence and it’s been great. There was zero reception where I was. I can’t wait to tell you what I learned... it’s so awesome. And I have a little surprise...”

“Um, couldn’t be bigger than the surprise here, darling...”

“That can wait. This is more important. We picked up a stray. This poor little girl was about to be sold into a

sex-trafficking operation. It was her strength and knowledge about living in the forests that kept her safe till we found each other. And I'm bringing her home because she has nowhere else. Let me introduce you. Peter Winsberg, next to me is Awinita Nelsey and she goes by Winnie."

"Hello, Peter," Winnie said softly.

"Hi, Winnie. That's a really beautiful name, Awinita. It sounds like it's Native American. I hope that's not insulting..."

"Oh no, Peter, that's really sweet. I'm Cherokee and my name means 'dove.'"

"Peter, honey, we—the two of us—believe that the group home that she was sent to is part of a crooked operation to get teen girls. They seem to be really careful in how they work and they're very selective. I think that the operator of the group home and at least one caseworker are involved and I wouldn't dismiss the idea that a judge is too. This is in one county in West Virginia, but there could be other places that use that model.

"I put together an email for you in our hotel room last night and I'll send it to you now. It has all of the details about Winnie's situation that I got from her and some of my theories too. Could you see if you can get that email to Mason as soon as you can? I don't have his address in my contacts. ... one sec ... okay, it's sent. I know that he has a big footprint in Maryland and Virginia. Not sure about West Virginia."

"Um, he does have some... ah, got your email. Grandpa has some influence there. I think it's more with the congressional delegation than the state government, but that's still quite an influence. Let me read this and I'll phone him first... he doesn't like to get hit with things like this cold. I'll explain what you found and then forward your message."

"Super! You're a sweetie. No problem with Winnie in the spare bedroom, right?" Tamara asked.

"Of course not! We need to help her as much as possible," Peter said, his voice filled with emotion. "We certainly need to take care of her. When will you arrive?"

"Maybe two hours? Listen, the traffic is getting heavy here... oh, construction zone coming up. I need to concentrate now. Be a dear and call my folks, will you? And tell them what's going on."

"Sure thing. Missed you and can't wait. Love ya."

"Me too. Lots to talk about. Gotta go."

Tamara disconnected, switched on the "Driving Now; Do Not Disturb" message on her phone, and noticed Winnie sniffing.

"He sounds just like you, Tamara," Winnie said. "I heard it in his voice—he hasn't even met me and he cares for me. Only Papa cared for me and now two people do."

She was weeping openly now.

"Winnie, now cut that out or you'll have me crying too," Tamara scolded gently. "I won't say that I told you so, but didn't I say that Peter would accept you?"

Winnie giggled through her tears. "I think I understood what you said, if you said what I think you said."

Tamara rolled her eyes at that and Winnie giggled again.

Winnie went on, "If you're a grad student, what does Peter do?"

"Oh, sorry. Yes, he's in grad school too. We're both at Johns Hopkins."



“Oh my, that’s a good school. See, I *knew* you were important! And who’s Mason?”

“Let me tell you about our families, Winnie...”

Tamara spent much of the next hour and a half telling Winnie about her and Peter’s families and answering her questions. It gave Tamara quite a different perspective, seeing the families from an outsider’s point of view.

“So Mason is a politician?” Winnie asked when Tamara had reached him in her biographical sketches.

“We think that he is,” Tamara chuckled. “But a politician for politicians. He doesn’t hold any office but he helps people get elected to their offices. Does that make sense?”

“Sorta. And I heard you say a name, Emma. Is she in your family too?” Winnie asked.

“A very special family member. Emma’s my mentor, my faculty sponsor, and my business partner. She taught me how to marshal my creativity, how to plan my work effectively, and how to focus on my objectives. She gave me my first opportunity to create something truly valuable and guided me without being overbearing. She showed me how to be a true scientist and how to be a mentor to others in my turn.”

“Oh my, what a powerful endorsement that is,” Winnie whispered. “So she’s a professor.”

“Professor of physics and research professor of applied physics at the APL—that’s Hopkins’ world-famous Applied Physics Laboratory near Baltimore. She’s also a Nobel Laureate in Physics. When she was just fourteen years old too, mind you. And she has a faculty appointment in physics at Cambridge University in England.”

“That’s another well known university,” Winnie mused. “How did you get to meet her?”

Tamara went into the description of the Clarke Scholars Program and how Emma had endowed the foundation to create the scholarships.

“Tamara? That means that you were one of the four best high-school students in the whole country! I *said* you were important!”

Tamara glanced at Winnie and grinned. “No way. I dispute that interpretation, Winnie. Not every student in the country took those exams. I happened to score better than the others who did take them.”

Winnie grinned. “Bah! Details!”

Tamara shot her a smirk. “Anyway, smartass, Emma’s family is part of our group too, in a few important ways. And I hope that one of her sisters-in-law can help you legally. She’s an attorney and she’d be on this case like white on rice.”

“Hey. That’s a rad expression. So she’s a social justice advocate.”

“Believe it. Some of the things she’s done are epic, even before she went to law school.”

“Love to hear those stories. Any other friends, ‘special’ or otherwise? Everyone seems like such fun.”

“Sure. A group Peter and I met when we went to England. They’re back in the States now and they’re awesome too.”

A few minutes later, Tamara pulled into her building’s parking ramp and found an open charging station.

“Let’s unload the car while it charges and then I’ll move it to a regular space,” Tamara told Winnie.

“Ooo, this is an electric car? I wondered why it was so quiet but the only cars I’ve seen up close are older gas models. You just plug it in like any electrical thing?”

Tamara had removed the cable and plug from its storage box.

“That’s right. See? Big plug goes in the car’s charging socket behind this flap.”

They grabbed what they could carry and headed for the elevator. At the apartment, Peter greeted Tamara with a huge hug, kiss, and exclamations of how they missed each other while Winnie hung back, a little embarrassed. Then Tamara dragged her over and introduced her and Peter again.

*He’s very charming and funny, Winnie thought. Like Tamara in a lot of ways.*

Then Tamara, still talking a mile a minute about her trip, dragged him along down to the car to help carry the rest of their stuff. Tamara told him to leave the camping gear in the car.

“I doubt we’ll be using it for the next few months. I’ll drop it off at my parents’ home this week.” Tamara was still going strong. “Did you talk to my folks?”

Peter nodded. “Yeah. Called them after we spoke. They’re happy you’re back and want the details about Winnie. And they...”

Tamara interrupted. “Hold that thought. Did you speak to Mason?”

“Yep and he’s on the case. He knows the West Virginia AG, of all people. He told me he’ll light a fire there that we’ll see all the way from there to the D.C. area. Now I got some news...”

They were returning to the apartment and Tamara interrupted again.

“One sec. You busy tomorrow? ‘Cause I gotta get in to see Sam with Winnie and I’d like you to come too. And I need to make an appointment to get her a physical exam and check out a high school for her too. See what we need to get her registered here. We need to get her a cell phone on our plan ‘cause she has one of my burners now.”

Winnie was giggling as she watched Peter rolling his eyes; each time Tamara stopped for a breath, he tried to interject a word, but Tamara kept rolling right along.

“We stopped to pick up clothing for her ‘cause she got away with nothing. We bought a basic supply of clothes but later this week, we’ll need to fill out the rest of her wardrobe. Do you still have that laptop from last year? ‘Cause she’ll need one and that one’s only two years old. Oh, Winnie needs a key to the apartment and a keycard for the main door too. And next weekend, how about introducing her to your family and mine? Can you call tomorrow to set that up while I make an appointment to see Sam?”

Tamara stopped to take a breath and marshal her thoughts and Peter seized the opportunity. Winnie almost laughed at seeing the relief on his face.

“Sweetie? May I speak now? I’ve been trying to tell you this news ever since you called from the car this afternoon, but you just kept rolling right along—I couldn’t get a word in.”

Winnie laughed, nodding.

“Sweetie, this news is simply awesome; it’s unprecedented, and a million people are wanting to talk to you. Last week the Nobel Prizes were announced. You’re this year’s Nobel Laureate in Physics, shared with Emma.”

Tamara gasped, completely speechless for once.

“There’s more news too. You were selected as this year’s laureate in Chemistry and also in Physiology or Medicine. Sweetie, you got *three* Nobels in the year and the last two Prizes were solo. The media—the entire world—went bonkers about the news; the press went crazy trying to contact you, and Tamara here was off in the

wilderness, off the map; nobody could contact you.”

Tamara just stood there, staring at Peter and looking shell-shocked.

Winnie looked at Tamara, grinned, and said smugly, “See? I *told* you that you were important. And I was right.”

## Chapter 77 - Making History

“How can that be?” Tamara asked after she had recovered her voice. “There’s never been more than one Prize to anyone in the same year. And only a handful of people have been honored more than once.”

Peter nodded, “And now Emma’s one of those people too. She told me that only um, John Bardeen, I think, got two in Physics, and now she’s right there with him. She told me that three others got two Nobels. Let’s see, Marie Curie had one in Physics and then Chemistry, but about ten years apart. There was a dude who got two in Chemistry. His awards came twenty years apart. I think one was for the structure of insulin, the other, I don’t know. Maybe something to do with DNA. Someone else got a science Nobel and the Peace Nobel—Urey? Maybe.

“But you, sweetheart ... three different categories in the same year! The press is calling you the new Einstein. There was a stupid suggestion that the Swedish Nobel Academy had orchestrated this as a publicity stunt and that caused a real commotion as virtually all the world’s scientists came together to defend them. The selection process is secret, I heard, and different committees choose the laureates in the various prize categories. The medicine one is even from a different institute than the physics one. But the academy members in each institute can only vote to choose the winner from the final selection of nominees and then it’s a majority vote of that academy. Something like that would be awfully difficult to orchestrate. So the idea that it was some kind of a setup ended almost before it began.”

Tamara was still in shock, but she asked, “What work were the prizes for? I’ve done so much in the past several years. Was my work so significant that it was considered to be... what is it ... the most important invention or discovery of the year, I think Emma said the Nobels were for.”

“I spoke to her about that,” Peter answered. “At the very beginning, the Nobels were for work done during the prior year but it isn’t done that way now; that rule changed maybe a hundred years ago. The work is considered complete when it’s become accepted by most of the world’s scientists as being a major contribution to the discipline. Let me get the article that has the wording of the Prize citations, okay?”

Tamara nodded numbly.

Peter returned in a minute. “Here’s the article. First was the Physiology or Medicine award announced last Monday.”

The Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine is awarded to Tamara N. Alexandre “for the development of an ultra-high resolution MRI device leading to the discovery of the fine neurological structures in the brain and the pathways which connect them, allowing for better understanding of the brain’s functional areas.”

“They announced the Physics award on Tuesday.”

The Nobel Prize in Physics is awarded to Tamara N. Alexandre and Emma E. Clarke “for demonstrating electron flow against an electrostatic charge gradient allowing the concentration of electrons to develop at an exceptionally high density in a superconducting molecular lattice, which permits the lossless and efficient storage and recovery of energy.”

“And on Wednesday the Chemistry award was announced.”

The Nobel Prize in Chemistry is awarded to Tamara N. Alexandre “for developing a new chemical analytic technique based on an application of the Born-Oppenheimer approximation and the Franck-Condon principle to induce molecular electronic transitions using the characteristics of the delocalized electrons from the pi bonds in aromatic molecules, without producing changes in the positions of the

molecular nuclei, thus allowing for either the separation or synthesis of very closely related molecules.”

“Those are definitely all ground-breaking achievements, Tamara,” Peter told her. “They’re all your ideas and you followed through with convincing demonstrations of the applications of your new science.” He chuckled. “The press is raking Hopkins over the coals, demanding to know why they’re making you stay as a grad student. Some media figures are demanding that you be awarded PhDs in both physics and chemistry, but nobody can quite agree about the third—whether it should be in anatomy, physiology, neuroscience, radiology, or neurology. One wag even suggested that they give you all those degrees.”

“You know what my opinion is about graduating too soon,” Tamara said. “This can’t be real; gotta be a dream.”

“It’s very real, darling. Did you turn on your phone yet?” Peter asked.

“Huh. No, been using a burner. Oh, I had to surrender one to the state trooper ‘cause it had the recording of the kidnapper’s threats to me. He essentially confessed what he had done.”

“So you nabbed him too, then?” Peter asked. “Cool.”

Winnie gushed, “That was frickin’ awesome, how she did that. Miss Spiderwoman here shot her web and zap! Down he went!”

“Ah, so your new net gun works,” Peter smiled.

Tamara nodded. “I decided to use that secret weapon rather than the G-force bolos ‘cause I expected that he’d come too close for the bolos to be effective.”

“Okay. But I’d prefer that no more live field-test sessions against felons will be planned,” he said, looking at her seriously. “Go check your phone.”

Tamara went into her bedroom to get it and turned it on as she returned. Peter and Winnie were talking.

“... and she bought me a ton of new clothes there and...” Winnie stopped with an embarrassed look.

“Hey, girl, you needed that stuff,” Tamara told her as she unlocked the phone.

It lit up with a constant stream of incoming messages and voice mail notifications.

“Jeez. 172 texts ... and ... still counting ... 241 emails. Voice mails ... let me go there. Damn, at the limit of 20.”

“Go back to Monday, honey,” Peter suggested.

“Ah. Here, an international call at 5:47 a.m. in the call history ... one at 6:13, same number. Let me check the voice mail... there’s one at 6:14. Let me play it.”

“I am calling from the Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm, Sweden, looking for Tamara N. Alexandre. If this is the correct number, it is essential that she contact us by telephone at her earliest convenience. Our international telephone number is ...” the voice said, speaking with a strong accent but in a very formal style.

Tamara looked at Peter. “It’s real?” and she began to cry. “I just can’t believe this,” she whispered as Peter embraced her. “I didn’t think that what I did was so revolutionary. I just extended what the science could already do.”

“Which is exactly what all the other laureates before you did,” Peter chuckled. “Didn’t Newton say something about how his discoveries were made; that he saw further because he was standing on the shoulders of giants?”

“That’s true, he’s quoted that way,” Tamara said.

“You need to call Emma,” Peter suggested. “I’ll bet that she’s champing on the bit to speak to you about this.

You told her not to try calling you until tomorrow on pain of something severe, she wouldn't tell me what that was when she called me Tuesday mid-morning, a few hours after she got her Nobel call. She asked me if I had heard anything from you; of course I hadn't."

"Yeah, I should. Jeez, I feel so disoriented. Like part of me is detached and watching the scene play out. This must be a little like what dissociation is like."

"A little. Now go make that call."

Emma answered on the first ring, having seen her phone's caller ID.

"Tamara!" she fairly shouted. "So you've heard the news?"

"Yeah, Emma, congrats on your selection," Tamara said. "A double laureate too."

"Look who's talking, Miss Breaker of All Precedent. What happened last week is totally unheard of, innit. A scientist winning in three areas of research? As well, all of that work being done within the span of just a few years. You're simply crackin' brilliant, gal."

"I'm still trying to assimilate the news, Emma. You got the phone call. What happens now?"

"So it's going to be a circus now, won't it. A *three*-ring circus for sure..."

She emphasized the *three* and they both laughed.

"The media will be relentless. The blighters were out mobbing the Physics Building here all week and have been right nuisances out at the APL too. They tracked down your parents; I spoke to them on Thursday and there've been telly crews parked out at their place all week."

"Shit. I gotta call them too, after this call. Jeez, all I really wanted is a quiet life."

"Not after this news, I'm afraid. I've thought a bit about what you can do. It appears that the media hasn't figured out where you live..."

"Um, I used my folks' address for my driver's license."

"Ah. So that's why some crews went there," Emma said. "Now listen. I talked to Stuart. When he was at the British embassy, they used a really good local security firm and he's made some calls about getting security for you. I have a number you can call, yet this evening, and they can set you up with a security detail starting tomorrow. Stuart is insistent that you set up some security because when they find you, you'll get mobbed..."

"Damn..." Tamara muttered.

"... and that brings up the other half of the publicity part of this circus. Hopkins has set up an interview slash press conference with a media audience and a TV feed for Tuesday at 2 p.m. in Shriver Hall for me, so far, and we hope that you'll join me. As far as I know, your schedule's open; I even checked with your solicitors at your new company."

"I'll definitely take the security detail; cost isn't an issue. What will they do?"

"I expect they'll provide a vehicle and a personal protection agent who'll likely be the driver. He or she will bring you to where you need to go and get you in and out safely. You'll be on the media radar for at least two weeks until everyone gets their fill of news about you. There are always a few people who want more details... do a life story... that sort of rot. And unless you do something that attracts additional attention to you, the frenzy will be over. The Nobel ceremony is on December 10 in Stockholm. You'll need to contact them right away and let them know that you're back now, you were in the mountains with no phone service. They'll have a packet

sent to you by express delivery, mine is coming to my office at the university. Oh, right. After the Tuesday press conference, there's a congratulatory gathering at the JH Club with our physics faculty and a dinner later; the dinner's tentative because it's for you and your university collaborators. Is it two hundred now?"

Tamara giggled. "Not quite. In the low sixties. About thirty-eight, if you only count those who submitted the articles I collaborated on."

"Tamara, I'm gobsmacked at how you find the time to do everything you've accomplished. Are you sure you haven't found a way to clone yourself and that there aren't actually eight Tamaras running around doing all this work?"

They both laughed and Tamara responded, "Now there's a really great idea..."

"Stop, stop. I'm sorry I mentioned that," Emma chuckled. "I shudder to think what havoc in science a team of Tamaras could cause."

"I'm okay with the Tuesday events," Tamara confirmed. "Shriver's a big hall and shouting questions wouldn't work, right? Would the questions be in writing?"

"They're trying something brand new, Tamara. Questions can be written and given to the moderator in advance—it's to be the provost, by the way—or texted to a number that will be set up. The written questions will be read first. The texted ones will appear on the moderator's computer screen and he'll flag the ones that he thinks are best. Those questions will appear on a big projection screen where everyone can see them."

"Nice. That's a great idea. Emma, this week's gonna be really complicated. It was looking to be complicated before the awards came but now it'll be a real mess. Last week I got into a situation saving a teen from a sex-trafficking operation and there're lots of legal issues to work out. I was gonna try to get to see Sam tomorrow..."

"Wait, Tamara. That's a hot button issue for Sam. She'll talk to you about it this evening if you have time; no need to try to get in to see her. Do you have any details?"

"Yeah, I have a summary I wrote up and Peter sent it to Mason to start off the political part."

"Give me a half hour. Do you have Sam's email?"

"Personal. Not business."

"Personal will work. Send it in a half hour. Now call your folks and that security firm. And my most sincere congrats on your new fame, my dear."

"Thanks, I think. Bye, Emma; thanks for the great advice."

Tamara called the security company's number and a real company person actually answered.

"I was expecting a service or robot," Tamara said when the person introduced herself. "I'm Tamara Alexandre."

"We were told to expect your call, Miss Alexandre. You're probably getting tired of hearing this, but congratulations on your Nobel Prizes. That was an amazing achievement. Achievements, plural. I assume, that since you called, you wanted to engage our services? Basic personal protection?"

"I do. I was told that the media would be hounding me and some are very aggressive."

"That's true. Our organization has branches around the country and we are quite familiar with those aggressive tactics. Our LA branch specializes in protection of actors and media personalities. Our branch here handles political figures who tend to need a greater security level and I believe your case is closer to the latter. Your achievement was so unusual and unique that you might be the object of unwanted attention, in addition to

fending off multiple interview requests.”

“I can see that,” Tamara sighed, resignedly.

“If you agree to have us provide our service, I’ll have an agent at your home tomorrow at 8 a.m. The agent will have our contract to sign, go over our fees, and can answer questions. Then they can escort you for the day. If the agent proves compatible, they can stay with you, or else we can try another agent.”

“I agree and that’s satisfactory,” Tamara replied.

Her next call was to her parents. Nadine answered the phone and Tamara heard her call to Wilson, “Honey? It’s Tamara. Come quick.”

“Hi, Mom, sorry for not calling as soon as I got back but it’s been freaky wild here.”

“I’m sure that it has. It was wonderful news and you’re so deserving of the honor, darling. I’m so incredibly proud.”

“As am I, Tamara,” Wilson said. “The folks at the APL went crazy when they heard about the first prize; your MRI work was mostly done at the APL. Then the Physics one came and the place simply went bonkers. And Wednesday morning, the entire building at Emma’s lab was hopping and virtually the entire APL staff stopped by to join the happy crew there.”

“Jeez, you’d think that they got the prize themselves...” Tamara mused.

“Reflected glory, darling,” Nadine told her. “Your accomplishments reflected their own contributions.”

“Emma told me that Stuart was insistent that I get a security service,” Tamara said.

“Yes, we all spoke to each other about that,” Wilson told her. “Stuart knows a good firm. Did you call to arrange it?”

“Absolutely. They’re sending someone over tomorrow morning. Also Emma says that you have some uninvited squatters there.”

“We do,” Nadine said; her annoyed tone was evident to Tamara. “One and sometimes two cars or vans are parked opposite to our drive. They’re watching to see who’s coming and going. We’re also getting a dozen phone calls a day from unknown numbers and we let those go to voice mail. Most leave no message but some ask for a callback but leave no details—just, ‘it’s urgent that you speak to us.’ Messages like that.”

“Can you call the county police and complain? That’s actually stalking. Hey, Scott knows some county cops who’re resort members,” Tamara suggested.

“Excellent idea, honey,” Wilson told her. “If they’re there tomorrow, I’ll call him.”

“Um, just a sec. Got an email to send ... um ... done. So, while I was off in the great wilderness, and by the way, that *kouche* was absolutely the right thing to do and I learned incredible things... I need to tell you about it, Mom, when it’s much less hectic. So, at the end of my seclusion, my senses led me to this poor young teen girl who was hiding in the remote woods...”

Tamara went on to tell them about Winnie.

*Oops, where is she?* Tamara thought when she began telling her parents about finding the girl. *Good, over there on the couch, and she’s talking to Peter. Jeez, the intensity that gal has! What a powerful presence she has; it fills the room.*

“So I brought her home since she has nowhere to go and that trafficking ring probably has other members who



might be looking for her by now.”

“What a poor girl!” Nadine said. “Of course you brought her to your place. What do you plan to do?”

“Short term, get her settled here. Set up some kind of guardianship and get her legal status taken care of—I just sent a message to Sam about that and Emma said she’d call Sam about it. Start Winnie in school, get her a physical. She had very poor treatment in the group home. That’s about Winnie. Still short term, about the trafficking ring, if that’s what it is, and I really suspect it is one, Peter got Mason involved and he knows people in West Virginia and will get the political wheels moving. The Virginia state troopers have the kidnapper...”

“That was good you captured him, but very risky, Tamara,” Wilson said.

“I had at least one backup plan, Dad. And Winnie was armed with a can of bear spray, so that was backup number two. You know what bear spray can do, right?”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

“...so I expect that the group home where Winnie was living will be getting a visit from the state police. If the county sheriff or a local judge is involved, the state police will figure it out. Mason told Peter that he’s gonna ask that the child protective services department be investigated too to see if there were any other improper adoptions or guardianships made. The guy who got Winnie, the Virginia sheriff’s deputy found out, was from Virginia and a multiple sex offender.”

“That’s a chilling thought,” Nadine commented. “An adoption or whatever placement with a sex offender is unthinkable.”

“Now for the longer term. I’m still wrestling with the idea of having an instant family by adopting or fostering Winnie. She’s a delightful, amazing girl and, Mom, she has some of the same abilities that I do—she can project emotion. I had difficulty finding her because she had made herself invisible like I used to do. But do I want to tie myself and Peter down with a teen living with us? That’s difficult to answer. But I’m growing to love her; there’s a real attachment forming and it’s both emotional and intellectual. She’s incredibly smart and thinks quickly. I have a lot to think about and need to discuss this with Peter too, of course.”

They spoke for several more minutes and then Tamara saw that she had a call coming in.

“Gotta go, Mom, Dad, it’s Sam. Love ya, speak soon. ... Hi, it’s Tamara. Hi, Sam.”

“Hi yourself, your Nobel knighthoodness.”

“Oh jeez. Jay’s a bad influence on you,” Tamara giggled. “King of bad puns and worse double entendres.”

“Congrats and all that rot. Crackin’ brilliant, you are, you and my sis, the dame. Dame Emma. Another noble knight. Nobel knight.”

“Thanks, if that was meant to be a compliment. I’m never sure,” Tamara laughed.

“Compliment for sure. You’ll be forever named in the history books as the only person ever to win multiple Nobels in the same year; that’s an absolutely certain bet. Anyway, I read your email and I was bloody gutted by your account. Emma told me that you involved Mason. That’s ace because he’s really politically connected. Tomorrow, I’ll get with one of my firm’s family law experts. We also have a branch over in Charleston and we’ll seek to remove Winnie from the West Virginia CPS system and shift her to Maryland’s. She’ll need a guardian, though, or else it’s foster care again.”

“I figured. Can Peter and I, or just me myself, be her guardian?”

“I’m not familiar enough with all of the intricate workings of family law and especially with the legal precedents

involved in doing that. But we'll try. That'll come after we get her out of the West Virginia system, though."

"Also, Sam, Winnie's grandfather owned property and was a retired state employee. Winnie doesn't know of any savings and her case worker wouldn't tell her about the property."

"Blimey... sounds like a county scam right there. There might even be a will in a safe deposit box too... I'll start some digging."

"Good. I'll hit you with another one. Winnie needs to be in school and I want her health to be checked, but both of those need a legal guardian."

"That's spot on, Tamara. Okay, our firm has close working relationships with family courts in the entire D.C. area, including in Baltimore County—erm, you'd need a city court, actually. There's a procedure in state law to appoint an emergency guardian and I'm certain that your situation qualifies, since it appears that Winnie was the victim of a criminal enterprise, doesn't it. As well, I'll start that process tomorrow. I'll email you the info we need to get from Winnie."

After her conversation with Sam, Tamara went over to Peter and Winnie.

"Winnie, we got started on getting you out of the West Virginia foster system and Sam, a friend and a lawyer, will do a petition to make me your emergency guardian. And you'll stay with us, for a while, anyway, as we work out what to do. In any event, you won't be put into any foster home. Is that okay?"

She jumped up and hugged Tamara.

"Sure, and thanks for everything you've done too. Peter's great; talking to him is like talking to you."

"I know Winnie's life story and she knows mine," Peter joked. "You guys had quite a time out in the woods. Winnie's one brave gal."

"Okay. Late supper. Peter, call for a pizza delivery. Winnie, fancy any particular toppings?"

"Ah, pepperoni and onion if that's okay. Others are fine too."

"Sam is sending over a list of what we need from you, Winnie, it's biographical info for the legal petition. Let's look at your bedroom now and see how you want to arrange it. We had set it up as our study room but don't use it now."

Winnie and Tamara began moving one of the two desks in the room to the wall with the other desk to make more room and Peter came in to help. Then Tamara got an extra set of linens out and Winnie put them on the bed. After the pizza came and was consumed, Tamara sat down with Winnie and got all of her biographical data entered on the form that Sam had sent, and Tamara emailed it back.

"Tomorrow, a security person will come talk to us, Winnie. A lot of people believe that I'll need some physical protection from all the media looking for me. Some of them get aggressive..."

"Ooo, you're getting a bodyguard. I keep saying it, Tamara. You're *really* important."

"Hush your mouth. Are you okay with living with us?"

"Oh, for sure. This is like paradise. Living with Papa was nice, but the work was really hard. Vegetable farming takes lots of time to be sure the critters don't spoil the crop, keep the weeds down, cover the crop for early frosts... lots of work. Plus then go to school. And the farmers' market on weekends."

"After we talk to the agent, we'll stop off at the high school and find out what they need. You just began ninth grade in September, right?"

“Yeah... but I only was there maybe two weeks. The witch kept a few of us home about two days every week. The girls thought it was to keep us from making any close friends at school. And it worked, too.”

“Damn. Well, my friends are working on that problem. Okay, it’s been a really busy day. You all set for bed?”

“Ah... Tamara... it’s been so, so long since I had a proper shower... I was so tired last night in the hotel I just did a quick wash ... may I...?”

Tamara stared at Winnie in shock. “Ohmygod, Winnie! I’m so sorry I didn’t think of that! The bathroom in the hall is yours; my bedroom has its own bathroom. And don’t worry about the hot water; it never runs out. Go take a shower... or a bath if you want.”

Tamara hugged her and joined Peter in their bedroom.

~~~~~

The agent from the protection services company rang their apartment at 8 a.m. the following morning and Peter buzzed the main door open. A few minutes later, Tamara responded to the knocking on the door. A glance through the security viewer revealed a woman.

*Interesting*, Tamara thought.

She opened the door, keeping the security chain engaged.

“Yes?” she asked the woman.

The woman smiled at her and handed over a business card. It had an image of a generic badge on it and the name “Cornelius Executive Protection Services LLC.” Below that, “Col. Janice Marks, USMC Ret.”

Tamara closed the door, released the chain, and opened the door again.

“Welcome,” she said. “I’m Tamara.”

Marks shook Tamara’s hand and smiled at her. “I was very happy to see how you handled me at the door,” she said. “Especially how you used the door as a body barrier and had your foot braced against it.”

Tamara nodded. “Something my dad taught me. I see you’re a Marine. So’s my dad. He was off active duty for years and was recently reactivated to special detached duty with the State Department.”

“That’s interesting. We tried doing some background research on you, Miss Alexandre...”

“Please, it’s Tamara.”

“We don’t usually get that familiar with our principals.”

“I get very uncomfortable being addressed so formally, though,” Tamara told her.

“Very well... anyway, not a lot is available publically about you. There were a few bad quality photos of you taken at an APL press conference and a blurry group photo from an event where you received something called the Draper Prize. But we did find a few very unusual and unique facts. A Medal of Freedom presented by the president, a knighthood from the British queen and a commendation for bravery, also from the queen. And an absolute ton of scientific papers. Are all of those awards and achievements yours?”

“They are. But I’ve kept the rest of my life fairly private and made many people unhappy when I refuse the formal pictures.”

What she didn’t mention was that she had “confused” the various photographers so they messed up their shots. After all, she had her “secret identity” to maintain, so using her ability then wasn’t a personal benefit for her.

“That’s what we learned. We didn’t background check your family, but your own age means that your only public interactions would have been through your schools.”

“That’s right. If you mean having a paying job while in school, no, I never did.”

“Okay, you’re probably getting really tired of hearing people congratulate you but I’d feel remiss if I didn’t. Your multiple Nobel Prizes are making history and your renown has certainly stimulated an intense desire by the public to know lots more about you. And that drives the media into a frenzy, trying to be the first to get to you. You’ve kept under the radar very well so far and had so thoroughly disappeared when the prizes were announced...”

Tamara laughed and told her about her “retreat” and being without any communication for the week. Then Marks took some papers out of her briefcase and began to go over the contract and pricing. Tamara decided on having a protective agent with her every day during daytime hours, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., and on call until 11 p.m. The contract would run on a month-to-month basis.

“This sounds good, Tamara; any further questions?” Marks asked when Tamara finished completing the forms and had signed the paperwork.

“No, not now. Maybe when I see how things are working. Will you be the one working with me?”

“If you want. For today, yes. Let me give you my bio so you can see my experience.”

Tamara read it and was impressed. This gal knew her stuff. Before she retired, in addition to her other qualifications, she had been an instructor in the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program, the MCMAP, and held a grandmaster’s degree belt in shaolin wushu. She also held “expert” qualifications in rifle and pistol. She had four years of personal protection experience guarding visiting foreign dignitaries and some political figures.

Tamara looked up after reading the bio and laughed. “You could surely whup my boyfriend in hand-to-hand. Peter!” she called and Peter came out of the bedroom and Winnie, hers.

“Peter, Winnie, this is Colonel Janice Marks...”

“If you insist that I call you Tamara, then call me Janice,” Marks said. “Hello, Peter and Winnie.”

Winnie nodded to Marks shyly as Peter spoke, “Hi. Peter Winsberg. Pleased to meet you.”

“Peter, she’s a martial arts grandmaster.”

“Crazy. What discipline?”

“In the MCMAP, we teach elements of almost all of the martial arts.” Marks explained the program. “But specifically, I achieved that rank in shaolin wushu.”

“That’s kung fu, right, and isn’t tai chi based on that?” Peter asked.

“It is indeed. Which art have you studied?”

I recently passed my promotion exam for the second degree in judo,” Peter told her and Marks nodded, smiling at him.

“Hey, I hope that you can meet our other friends. One of them holds a seventh dan in traditional taekwondo, as he calls it,” Tamara said.

“In the ITF Chang-Hong Korean system?” Marks asked.

“Well, he trained with a Korean grand master in Seoul and reached his third dan with him; I recall him saying

that he reached it before age 18.”

“That’s really impressive.”

Tamara chuckled. “You’ll think I’m bragging on my friends, but another one won a gold medal in an international judo tournament in Tokyo when she was seventeen. Her dad was a Marine too.”

“Wait one second right there.” Marks exclaimed. “That’s Cynthia Denison, right? You know the Denisons?”

Tamara looked at her. “Jeez, small world. I know just Cindy. How do you know the Denisons?”

“Gunnery Sergeant Denison was a MCMAP instructor when I first took the program. Then he was the chief operations NCO at Pendleton when I had a posting there,” Marks told her.

“Wow. You must have been there when Cindy and her brother... um...”

“That would be Roger. He took a medal in that Tokyo tournament too.”

“She and Roger led a student revolt against the Naked in School Program,” Tamara said.

“Right, I was there then,” Marks chuckled. “That was quite a time. Denison was quite a good leader and his daughter kept the family reputation strong both in high school and in college, I heard.”

“You kept up contact?”

“Somewhat. Marines are a tight group. There’s a network, even among retirees. We hear the gouge, as my Marine aviator friends say. That means the grapevine,” Marks grinned. “So what’s today’s plan? I’m at your service.”

“I figure that the media people haven’t figured out that I live here; the apartment is under Peter’s name. So no one should be around when we leave. Today I want to check out Baltimore Tech for Winnie; it’s a high school, actually a magnet school with a good rep. See if they have room and what’s required. After that, we’ll see. Might need to go to a law office in Beltsville, again, to handle something for Winnie.”

“We’ll take my vehicle then. I saw you have an underground garage. Are you parked there and have a remote to operate the gate?”

“Yep. We’ll go down to my car and I’ll get the remote. You can drive in and pick us up.”

On the way to the high school, Tamara told Marks about the press conference on Tuesday.

“That would be my first contact with the media since the Prize was announced,” Tamara said.

“Okay, I’ll need to work out a plan to get you in and out of there,” Marks said. “You said it’s to be in the Shriver Concert Hall. I’ll get with the campus security people and we’ll arrange everything.”

*I wish that all this nonsense was over so I can resume a normal life,* Tamara sighed to herself.

## Chapter 78 - Guardianship

When they arrived at the high school, Tamara suddenly realized that giving her name and address to the school could expose her treasured privacy. She told Marks to wait while they were parked outside the school, while she tried to contact Sam.

*Maybe she'll answer her cell during work hours... if she's alone, that is,* Tamara thought.

She did answer. "Hey Tamara. No news here yet, but we filed the guardianship petition this morning. We should have an answer by this afternoon whether we'll need to appear for a hearing; I had planned to call you before 10 but you beat me. So what's up?"

"Oh, that's super. I have a tricky issue now, Sam. I'm at the high school and realized that if I give my name and address, that would expose my privacy. I assume there are laws about minors' student records, but when there's a chance of getting money, and little chance that a breach could be traced, I think that someone in the school office could leak my address."

"You're right, Tamara, it's possible," Sam agreed.

"Could I do this? Give Peter's name as the contact and responsible party, our post office box for mail, and the address of my corporate office as the physical address?"

"Hmm, it's not kosher. Besides, I'm sure that you'd need to provide proof that she's a Baltimore resident. You'll also need a host of other documentation, come to think of it. When Mum first registered Andrew in high school, she had to hand in lots of docs. Listen, go in, find out what they need, and then call me back. Okay?"

"Sure. Thanks."

Tamara brought Winnie into the building with her and they found the office. Tamara explained the situation to the secretary and she got them to see the principal.

"Hello, I'm Dr Borges. Mrs Hendricks tells me that you're a prospective student transfer?"

Tamara answered, "We hope. I'm Tamara Alexandre and this is Awinita Nelsey. We have a very complicated situation. I'm a grad student at Hopkins and will probably become Winnie's guardian."

Tamara went on to describe how she had gotten Winnie out of her bad situation and Borges was horrified at the story.

"The guardianship petition was filed this morning. But Winnie escaped with no possessions at all. She tells me that her case worker in West Virginia never gave Winnie any personal documents... is that right, dear?"

"It's true, Tamara, Dr Borges. From what Papa told me, I was born at home with a tribal midwife. When I was about two years old, my parents died in an auto accident but I was safe in a car seat in the back. Papa—that's Grandpa—and Gramma raised me, but when it came to starting school, there was no birth certificate. The midwife had never registered my birth. Papa had to get a late birth certificate and he had to guess at some details. I did know my birthday, though," she chuckled.

"So my first school had the records they needed. But when Papa died and I went into the system, the social services people said that they couldn't find any personal papers about me or my parents," she finished.

"I assume we can get a birth certificate copy from the state records," Tamara told Borges. "And her school records from the schools she attended. But you heard what happened in the group home about her school. She was in four different schools in two years and kept out of school randomly during much of that time. In seventh grade, she had to move schools three times and missed most of that grade and was made to repeat it. Winnie,

you told me you were doing well in school.”

“I was. Papa was so proud of me. The teachers said that I was their best student. In sixth grade, I got an award for being the top student in the grade.”

“Do you remember the schools you attended?” Borges asked.

“Yes’m. But for the ones in the last two years, I think my records are bad,” Winnie sniffled. “The witc... ah, group home lady didn’t let the girls do homework. I had to do whatever I could while in school.”

Borges shook her head. “I see, Ms Alexandre, what you mean by a complicated situation. Okay, I’m sure you know that our school is academically selective and we accept students based on a formula calculated from their seventh and eighth grade records. Clearly we’re unable to do that here. We’ve faced this problem in the past when international students transferred here, so we can arrange for a placement test for entry. Winnie, the test would be based on knowledge typically learned in seventh and eighth grades in math, English, U.S. history, and science. Do you recall enough from what you learned in those grades?”

“Oh, I do, ma’am. I read every book for my classes, cover to cover. Even though I couldn’t turn in my work a lot of the time and missed some tests too, I have a good memory.”

Borges smiled at her. “Okay then. We’ll get the exam set up for you. And Ms Alexandre, to enroll Winnie in the Baltimore schools, there are a few things we will need you to provide and the secretary can give you the list and an enrollment application.”

“Thank you, Dr Borges.”

“My curiosity is piqued now. Your name is familiar ... by any chance, are you the Alexandre who was awarded all those Nobel prizes?”

Winnie shot a knowing look at Tamara.

Tamara nodded reluctantly. “I am. But the press has made a huge uproar about it and I’m a private person. And with Winnie’s terrible experiences, I’d hate for her to get caught up in all the turmoil.”

“Oh, I completely understand,” Borges said. “But let me express my congratulations.”

“Thanks. If we do enroll Winnie here, will my details and contact info be kept confidential? I don’t want to cast aspersions on your staff, but leaking my address and Winnie’s relation to me would be harmful.”

“I understand. We’ll work with you to protect your personal information, Ms Alexandre.”

Tamara and Winnie thanked the principal and left the office after arranging Winnie’s testing date. They met Marks waiting for them in the school lobby. When they were walking back to the car, Winnie said, “I like her. I could feel that she was being truthful. She wants me to do well so that I can go to school here. And this place has good vibes too.”

Tamara stopped and stared at her. “You could feel that? You’re able to sense things like that?”

“Uh huh. It’s how I could tell about the people who came to the group home to look at the girls. They felt dirty, slimy. And the one who took me away was putrid. I *had* to get away from him.”

They got into the car and Tamara told her, “We have to discuss what you can do, ‘cause I can do that too. So can Peter, my folks, and some of Peter’s relatives. And I can teach you how to do more with your ability to protect yourself. Okay?”

Winnie looked at her, her eyes were wide with surprise. “Papa knew when someone was lying and taught that to

me. You do that too?”

“I do. Oh, this is so exciting. You need to meet...”

Tamara’s phone rang; the caller ID showed it was Sam. She turned the speaker on.

“Hi, Sam; we’re done at the school.”

“Good; listen, can you get to Baltimore Circuit Court at noon? We’ve got an emergency hearing set up for 1:30 with a family court judge. The judge authorized it ‘cause of the kidnapping issue.”

“Sure. I can be there.”

“Good, I’ll confirm it to the clerk that you’ll be there. Now, one of our family attorneys, Stacey Circeo, will handle the hearing and she can meet you at noon at...”

Sam gave Tamara the attorney’s address at an office near the courthouse.

“They’ll have lunch brought in and Mrs Circeo’s collected a number of docs related to Winnie’s case. How did it go at the school?”

“Good, the principal was compassionate and receptive to my keeping my info private.”

“Brilliant. Hey, send me the enrollment forms and other data the school wants and we’ll gather the info you’ll need. It would be much easier for us to get Winnie’s school records than you, won’t it. After the hearing, we’ll have you do a power of attorney so I can represent her.”

Tamara couldn’t believe how quickly Sam’s firm had gathered the information that Mrs Circeo, the family attorney, showed her when they met. She had an electronic copy of Winnie’s birth certificate, certificates of death for her parents and grandfather, the guardianship papers for her grandmother and grandfather, the recorded deed to her grandfather’s property, and the court orders for Winnie’s foster care. Somehow, she had also gotten a certified transcript of the recording of the kidnapper that Tamara had made on her burner phone.

“How’d you ever get that?” Tamara asked.

“Our firm has a close working relationship with the AG’s office in Virginia. They’re really moving ahead with the kidnapping case, even though it began in a different state. Both the victim and the perp ended up in Virginia and that’s where the complaint was made and investigated by a Virginia state trooper, so they assert that they have claim for jurisdiction. The FBI is involved too, especially since state lines were crossed.”

“What happens at our hearing?” Tamara asked.

“The judge will review the pertinent issues to determine whether an emergency guardian should be appointed. He or she considers the physical and emotional risk to the minor and the suitability of the proposed guardian to best provide for the care of the minor. The judge will most likely want to interview Winnie in private; there are special rules that cover how that is to be done and a social worker will be present, but you or I can’t be. Is that okay, Winnie?”

“The judge will ask if I want to stay with Tamara?”

“Basically. And most likely have you tell what happened in your own words.”

“Good, that’s way more than the judge in West Virginia did; he just listened to the case worker. When I tried to say something, he threatened to send me out of the room. Five minutes later, he was done and signed the foster care order or whatever it was.”

“That, plus other things Winnie told me, made me think that there’s a child-trafficking racket operating there



and that county officials are involved somehow,” Tamara said.

“Could very well be. Let’s see if they brought lunch up yet.”

Circeo spoke on her phone for a few seconds and then looked up. “Lunch is here. Let’s go to the conference room where they set it up. And we drew Judge Garralito, which is excellent. She really cares about the kids who have to be placed with guardians.”

~~~~~

The hearing was almost anticlimactic. Garralito had already reviewed the petition and the supporting documents. The petition had included Tamara’s biography, occupation, income, housing situation, and character references. Lacking was a report from the social services department but the judge waved off that requirement. First, however, she did interview Winnie *in camera*. When they returned to the courtroom, she went to her seat and spoke to Circeo and then to Tamara.

“Mrs Circeo, I found Winnie’s story heartbreaking and I concur with your petition that this court should immediately appoint an emergency guardian for her. And you have provided an excellent choice.

“Ms Alexandre, suggesting that your accomplishments are remarkable is an understatement, and for someone so young, they are astounding. Congratulations on your Nobel prizes too; I’m sure you’re getting tired of hearing that. Recognition of your contributions from two world leaders is just a frill; you are the very model of a perfect selection to be a guardian. Winnie has convinced me that you rescued her from a dreadful situation and likely saved her life. Do you accept being appointed as the guardian for the minor child Awinita Nelsey, for a time period to be determined by this court but not less than one year?”

“Yes, Your Honor, I accept,” Tamara said, hugging Winnie who was smiling and crying at the same time.

“So ordered!” and the judge tapped her gavel. “Our clerk will provide you with the official signed order with the seal of this court if you can wait fifteen minutes for us to print it and get it recorded.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” Circeo told her and the others echoed her.

Then Circeo led them out and brought them to a small office.

“This is the bull pen. My firm keeps this room here to meet with our clients,” Circeo told them. “Let me have you sign several powers of attorney now. The first one’s for Sam and me and it will allow us to act on your behalf for legal matters concerning Winnie, her West Virginia records, and any real property in her estate. It will allow us to search for and obtain an injunction freezing any financial records or liquid assets pending our discovery of a will, and allow us to act as an executor for the estate before and subsequent to probate. I’ll also prepare a power of attorney for you and Peter to obtain health care for Winnie and another for the school, naming you as her guardian.

“We’ll also look into the survivorship benefits of Winnie’s grandfather’s state pension and any U.S. Social Security benefits for which she might be entitled.”

“Excuse me, Mrs Circeo, my elementary school may have used my name ‘Nita’ in their records. Everyone called me by that name. In middle school too. ‘Winnie’ was Papa’s special name.”

“I’ll make a note of that; thank you,” Circeo replied. “Do you want us to continue using ‘Winnie’ then, when we don’t have to use your legal name?”

“This is my new life now that Tamara’s given me, so, yes, I’d like to use ‘Winnie.’”

Although Tamara was familiar with legal proceedings, those were limited to patents and to corporate structuring

and operating procedures. This was a whole new area and her mind was reeling.

“Jeez. So much to do. I wouldn’t have thought of some of those things.”

Circeo laughed, “That’s what lawyers get paid to do. We need to think about every possible way to protect the client. Now, a few final items. Winnie, do you know your Social Security number? I assume you have one; your grandfather would have needed it for his tax returns.”

“Sorry, ma’am, I don’t.”

“No problem; we can get it when we research your grandfather’s own Social Security records. And finally, Tamara, do you want to get Winnie a passport?”

“Oh, for sure. Peter and I travel overseas occasionally—jeez, that’s right, the Nobel award ceremony. We’ll need to rush her application. It’s good that the State Department just reissued my diplomatic passport and my regular one. They were getting close to expiration.”

“You have a diplomatic passport?” Winnie asked. “Tamara, I keep saying it. You’re important.”

Circeo grinned. “I think she is, too, Winnie. We’ll get the documentation together for applying for a passport as well.”

Guardianship papers and powers of attorney in hand, Tamara left the courthouse with Winnie after thanking Circeo for her help. Marks was waiting out in front of the building and escorted them to her vehicle.

“From your smiles, I gather everything went well,” she remarked as they slid into the back seat.

“It did and yes, all’s well,” Tamara told her. “I’ve got a grocery shopping list as long as my arm and now that Winnie’s living with us, it’s gotten longer, Janice. I think it should be safe going to a supermarket. My picture isn’t out there yet so people wouldn’t recognize me, I’m guessing.”

“I agree. If you don’t have a favorite market, let me pick one that should be safe. A generic market okay?”

“Sure. Just getting staples.”

“Sounds good. Let’s go,” Marks said.

“Winnie, we need to get you a physical and the school needs one, too, I noticed on the enrollment forms. When was your last one?”

“Um, let’s see. When I was in the first foster home—they called it an interim one—I had a doctor’s office visit. Just a nurse saw me though.”

“So that’s about three years ago,” Tamara thought aloud and Winnie nodded. “When you were living with your grandfather, did you get regular checkups?”

“I guess, but I’m not sure... ah ... oh, I must have, ‘cause my elementary school wanted it.”

“Remember the doctor you saw? We need to get your immunization records too.”

“It was a group practice so I saw doctors and nurses, never the same.”

Tamara sighed. “Okay, I bet we can get your school records and get the health records with them. I bet you were seeing a pediatric practice. You’re a teen now, and you have a choice of the kind of doctor you want to see.”

“Who do you see, Tamara?”

“I see a primary-care physician who specializes in women’s health for my own physicals. She does the same

level of a pelvic exam that a gynecologist would do.”

“Then that’s what I want too.”

“Sure. I’ll make an appointment.”

On the way home after shopping, Tamara called Emma.

“All set with Winnie; I’m her guardian now,” she told Emma. “Is the media siege still happening?”

“It is, the blighters. Campus security isn’t letting them camp out around the building anymore and stopped them from bothering people. They were asking everyone who came to our building for your contact info. So there’s a bunch now that have been wandering about, watching the paths around our building. Security warned them that if they continued stopping people, they’d get arrested for stalking. This isn’t a public university and our cops here can eject anyone. Those bounders were yelling ‘free speech’ and ‘free association’ but those are rights that the government can’t limit, but private organizations mostly can if it’s causing a disturbance. Or so I interpret what I’ve heard.”

“Guess I need to stay away for now. What about the media show tomorrow? I’m sure that I’ll get stopped if I tried walking into Shriver.”

“Security has that organized now, haven’t they. Your security agent’s been busy organizing it with the campus police. You’ll go into Shriver as a video tech using the stage door. The plan is to put you in a van at the recycling center with a few people and then drive over to Shriver. Your security person will take you to the recycling center.”

“That’s a clever plan. Okay, thanks, Emma. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Marks said from the front of the car, “We’ll get to the recycling parking area at 1:30. There will be a Hopkins van waiting for us there. The van will go to Shriver and several people will carry some video gear out of it and into the building using the stage door. We’ll be two of them. And we’ll leave that way too.”

“Good plan; I like it. Thanks, Janice,” Tamara said.

*Okay, more planning for tomorrow, Tamara mused. I’ll get Peter to take Winnie to Shriver; she’ll enjoy the experience. I need to arrange for that. Oh, jeez, I’m getting slow. I’ll bet that my “being small” thing might work with keeping attention away from me.*

Marks was pulling into the parking garage now and Tamara’s phone rang. It was Nadine.

“Hello, Tamara. Dad and I were talking and we’d like to meet Winnie, tonight for dinner if possible. Could you bring her over with Peter?”

“Sure, I think so. Is your place still under surveillance?”

“No one was there when I got home. Dad called Scott first thing and Scott said that he’d take care of it.”

“Excellent. Say, Mom,” Tamara said, “my security agent will be driving us and...”

“I know. You don’t want to leave her to hang out alone. I know my daughter.”

“True, but she’s a retired Marine. She knows Cindy’s father and from her bio, she and Dad were contemporaries.”

“Well, of course she can join us,” Nadine said.

***That evening***

When Marks and Wilson met each other at the Alexandres' home, Wilson took her aside and they began to compare notes. They were both at Basic at Parris Island the same year, just two months apart. As privates, they were assigned to the same training battalion at Camp Lejeune and Wilson recalled the names of several other members of his battalion. Marks knew a few of them.

"Yeah, we sure were in the same companies in my second year in the Corps," she told Wilson when they compared their first tour units. "Then I got sent to the Communications Electronics School in Twentynine Palms, California," Marks told Wilson.

"Tamara told me that you were an expert martial arts instructor," Wilson commented. "How does someone go from being an electronics warfare spook to a MCMAP instructor?"

Marks laughed. "Weird, right? I guess I could fight. I had learned all the cool combat stuff in Basic and in the training battalion and was really good at hand-to-hand. I was always a good shot; grew up hunting with my father and brothers in Montana. When I made staff sergeant, my comm unit was deployed and we were set up just inside Camp Leatherneck in Helmand Province. One day a bunch of t-men breached our perimeter and I was nearby and responded. The NCO from the perimeter unit was down so I took command. I... um... accounted for seven of them. Three with my carbine and four with my knife or hands."

"Crap, that's quite a story. Decorated?"

"Navy Cross. And they moved me to a combat battalion."

"When was that? I was in-country in '07 and '08; then got wounded in Ganjgal in Kunar Province..."

"The Ganjgal U.N. camp? You were there? I heard about that operation. I was in-country in '08. Say, one of the NCOs got the Medal of Honor for that."

"Um, Janice, that was me."

"Jesus, Wilson, no shit? I heard that the guy was everywhere like a ninja ghost and about wiped out a company..."

Wilson laughed. "How these rumors get started. I suppose your combat skills is how you got tapped for the MCMAP."

"That was maybe three years later. I got jumped in rank and back Stateside, got assigned as a training battalion's NCO in charge of the combat courses. When I was in the MCMAP, my instructor was Stuart Denison. We got to be friends. We were both gunnery sergeants."

"Tamara told me that you knew him. But you're a colonel?"

"Someone saw my leadership and convinced me that as a gal, I'd have a lot more influence as an officer than a female NCO."

"Sadly, I think that's true. It was when I was on active duty in-country."

"So I went through the Enlisted Commissioning Program. And began a new career in the Marines. I became an instructor myself at the MCMAP and then had an assignment overlap with Stuart Denison at Pendleton when his kids won medals at the international judo tournament that year. They went there as members of a judo team that the U.S. sent. And I kept up with my martial arts. What happened after you were wounded, Wilson?"

He told her some of his history. "And then I got tapped to go on detached duty with the State Department. I have no idea why they picked me for the job; I'm just a mechanic. But I was able to successfully complete my mission, so maybe they did make a good choice."

“They reactivated you from medical? Unusual,” Marks commented.

“Even more unusual was a direct commission from the president. They made me a major.”

Marks looked at Wilson and shrugged. “No kidding. Well, never question your orders,” she chuckled. “But that’s an amazing story.”

“Hey, we should see what my amazing daughter and new friend are up to,” Wilson remarked.

“She certainly is amazing, and I suspect that so is her new ward,” Marks told him. “I’m starting to believe that this assignment will be nothing like I’ve ever experienced.”

“That’s life with Tamara. Enjoy the ride.”

They rejoined the others and saw that Winnie had made a new friend with Nadine. They had a relaxing dinner and spent a pleasant evening, leaving about 9 p.m. to return home.

~~~~~

On Tuesday morning, Tamara spent much of the morning on the phone; most of it was with her people at the APL, who were effusive with their congratulations, but then got down to business and brought her up to date. Tamara was pleased with their progress; some of the new data would be useful in completing her dissertation research.

She also got a call into Mason and learned that the West Virginia AG was actively looking into the case. There were plans in place now to move the other girls in the group home to safety within a day or two, and the home was under state police surveillance to be sure that nothing happened in the interim.

Also that morning, Winnie, concerned about doing well on the high-school test, asked Tamara, “Is there any way to brush up on middle school work? Of course I don’t have any of my textbooks.”

“How much of that work do you remember?” Tamara asked.

“I have a good memory, but I’d like to review a bunch of it somehow. I went on line and looked at the Baltimore curricula for the seventh and eighth grades and there are a couple of areas I need to review.”

“Okay, I know a website that might be able to help,” Tamara told her. “Search for the Khan Academy website. K-H-A-N. I used to use that site when I was doing home schooling. They have middle school courses on it and those are some of the courses I used.”

“Thanks! I’ll go look for it.”

Soon it was time to go to Hopkins for the press conference. They would all go. Marks would drop Peter and Winnie off near Shriver Hall and then bring Tamara to the media van waiting at the recycling center. When the van with Tamara and Marks in it arrived at the Shriver stage door, campus police had the area cleared from any press members as Tamara and Marks carried some AV gear into the building. Emma arrived several minutes later via the same door.

As they embraced, Emma told her, “They had me come that way too and no one followed; this was a good plan. Security told me that a big crowd is waiting out front. They won’t let TV crews in; the hall isn’t set up for that—no floor space, so they’re making a live feed available through Shriver’s video system. And Hopkins people are operating that.”

The stage manager came over to them and showed them the table where they would be seated when the curtain opened.

“Oh, I get to do a stage performance, then,” Tamara joked.

Dr Chakraborty, the university provost, came out onto the stage, saw Emma, and went over to her.

“Hi there, Emma. And this is Miss Alexandre, I haven’t had the pleasure of meeting you before, Miss, but my hearty congrats on your achievements. You’ve become somewhat of a legend here and brought even more renown to our university. And with these awards, your fame is reflecting not only on yourself, but on all of your Hopkins collaborators too. Also, the trustees are wondering if you would please speed up your timetable a tiny bit so that we can get your degree or degrees awarded already so the press stops bugging us about our holding you back.”

Tamara laughed. “That’s entirely up to my doctoral committee. My research isn’t quite complete and it would be an academic insult to skip the established process.”

Emma and the provost laughed.

“We’ve already received about two hundred written questions and many are essentially duplicates, as you can imagine. These are typical questions asked of prior Nobel laureates. Do either of you have a preliminary comment?”

Emma looked at Tamara, who asked, “Emma, you’re senior. Did you want to say anything?”

Emma laughed. “Been there, done that. Have the tee-shirt to show for it too. It was your insight and instincts that allowed you to see what others never noticed, wasn’t it. I was just trying to make a better battery. You changed the rules and created something brand new and better. As well, I certainly can’t speak about your other two Nobels.”

“I haven’t prepared anything in particular,” Tamara said. “Can I see the written questions? I’ll take the most interesting ones and say something about them to start off.”

“Is that wise?” the provost asked. “You might say something that could be misunderstood and the press might not be very forgiving.”

Emma chuckled. “Tamara is superb at extemporaneous speaking. Just let her talk; she’ll have them lauding her, I’d expect.”

Tamara looked through the questions and noticed that many were similar to those she had fielded at the conference at the APL about her time-bending observation. She chose a few and began to think about constructing an introductory statement.

A short time later, the stage manager told the three to take their places and the noise from the house decreased dramatically. Tamara assumed that the lights had been dimmed. Then the curtain rose and a smattering of applause grew to a crescendo and died down as Emma and then Tamara waved their hands in greeting and the provost spoke into his microphone.

“Thank you; please, if we can start. I’m Dr Janardan Chakraborty, provost here at Johns Hopkins University. I’d like to welcome you all and thank you for your interest in meeting with our latest Nobel Laureates. As you probably know, our university has been fortunate to have many laureates on our faculty, some who have done their prize-winning work elsewhere and whom we’ve recruited to our staff, and others who have won the prize for work done while here. Today’s laureates fall into both of those classes. However, it seems that today’s circumstances are unprecedented. One of today’s laureates, Dame Dr Emma Clarke, is a repeat winner, which, although hers is not a unique case, she is just the second person to win a second Nobel in Physics.”

Applause.

“Thank you. The circumstances of the second scientist on our stage today, however, are truly unique, since she is the only laureate who has ever been recognized for her achievements in three disciplines—and all in the same year, Miss Tamara Alexandre.”

Now there was a standing ovation.

“Again, our thanks. First, some words of instruction. Because of the size of this group, we’ve asked for written questions. You can also ask followup questions by texting them to the number shown on the screen up here. I can’t promise that we’ll get to all of your questions but we’ll try to answer those of the most interest. At this time, Miss Alexandre has a few words of introduction before we get to your questions. Miss Alexandre?”

Applause again.

“Thank you, Provost Chakraborty. And thank you, members of the press and media, for your warm welcome and enthusiasm. I’m honored that you’ve come to this conference to learn about what Dr Clarke and I have been doing here for the past few years. Being quite, quite busy, as you might imagine,” she said, smiling, and people in the audience chuckled. “I’m afraid that a lot of people at Hopkins have told me that I, myself, have been way too busy ‘cause I’ve been sucking up all of the creative energies around here.”

Laughter.

“That’s actually not true at all; this university is a magnet for the most creative people in the world and I’m honored to be just a small part of it. I’ve been selected as a Nobel laureate in three scientific disciplines and that news, when I finally got it, staggered me to my core. This is an unimaginable honor and I’m amazed that my contributions to science were deemed to be so significant that they warranted science’s highest honor. Scientific progress moves in small steps. The work of one individual, or group, provides the foundation for the work of the next person to tackle that issue and, in that manner, knowledge progresses.

“In my own work, I chose to learn something about how the brain operates—this was a result of an injury I sustained as a child. I became fascinated with how the MRI can image the brain while it’s thinking, so I wanted to learn more about that process and subsequently figured out a way to greatly improve the device’s spatial resolution. In doing that, I discovered brain structures never described before. What I did was simply to develop an improvement of a device already used in medicine. To me, that was a satisfying discovery, but I didn’t think it was such a big deal. That’s my belief and I’m sticking to it.”

Laughter. Then the house became dead silent again.

“Let me skip to my chemistry discovery because it’s closely related to my medicine one. Part of what I learned in my work with the functional MRI process led to my finding that the brain is central in the instruction of the human body to make a certain kind of hormone which is active outside the body. Such hormones have been given the name, ‘pheromones,’ a term based on the Greek word ‘phero,’ which means ‘to carry.’ These chemicals work to carry information to outside the organism that produces them and I wanted to learn more about them, particularly those conjectured to be secreted by humans. But the amounts that are secreted are so infinitesimally tiny that learning how they affect another, close-by, human was difficult to do.

“So I used the work of a number of earlier scientists, themselves giants in their field, to learn how to analyze and synthesize larger quantities of those pheromones, and it was my understanding of the chemical physics of the organic aromatic ring structure that gave me the insight to develop that invention. Was this something new? Not really; the information to do what I did had been around for a hundred years or so. I simply took that older information and applied later discoveries in physics and the resulting combination gave me the key for developing the discovery. Again, to me, this was a small step in the whole scheme of analytical chemistry and physics. Did it warrant such recognition by the Nobel committee? I wouldn’t think so, but they have a very

much greater experience than I do in knowing what's important.

"Finally, let me talk about what Dr Clarke and I accomplished, which drew the Nobel committee's recognition. Dr Clarke wanted to make a better battery, one which could hold more energy and be safer and more efficient than the lithium-ion cell. She had done a lot of computations involving molecular lattice structures to learn the best configurations to store electrons at high densities. When I began working with her, my assignment was to build a device which would render her computations into a physical form. Her calculations implied that such a device could indeed be built, but its design escaped me until I decided to try a different physical configuration of the molecular matrix. The measurements of that configuration closely matched Dr Clarke's calculations, but I happened to introduce something new which wasn't part of her theoretical design model.

"As it turned out, the resulting device far exceeded our expectations; we discovered a new principle in physics, and a new method of storing energy resulted from that discovery. But I'll insist that all I was trying to do was to build a better battery."

Laughter, then some applause.

"Now I looked at some of the questions you submitted and I thank you for doing that; it definitely allows us to give you better and more detailed answers. One of the more frequent questions was 'where the heck was Tamara Alexandre and why didn't she answer her phone?'"

Lots of laughter and more applause.

"Refer back to what I said at the beginning of my remarks. I said something along the lines that too many people at Hopkins told me that I'd been way too busy and had been sucking up all of the creative energies in the area."

Laughter.

"So, doing that takes plenty of energy to do, you know. And like any good battery, when it runs down, it needs to be recharged, right? We all know that."

Laughter.

"That's where I was, at the recharge station; which in my case was hiking for a whole glorious week in the George Washington and Jefferson National Forest in Virginia..."

Laughter and applause.

"... and those outdoorsmen and women in here today know how communing with nature is the best possible relaxation and recharging oneself that there is, am I right?"

Now she got a standing applause.

"Thanks for agreeing with me; it shows that you all know what's important in life. Not fame, or glory, or recognition of transient accomplishments. It's inner peace and harmony and appreciation for what we have in life. Provost Chakraborty, I believe I've finished and can shut up now."

The standing applause resumed and Emma shot Tamara a look of admiration.

"I'm totally gobsmacked about how you can do that, Tamara," she whispered.



## Chapter 79 - Family Thanksgiving

Dr Chakraborty spoke into his mic, trying to get the audience's attention. When he did, he said, "Thanks very much, Miss Alexandre, for that excellent introduction. Dr Clarke, would you like to add anything?"

Emma looked at Tamara and grinned. "You inspired me, so I'll give it a go," she whispered.

She picked up her mic. "I only have one point to make since Miss Alexandre was so eloquent in her comments. I wasn't as lucky as she was... she got three and I only scored one."

Laughter.

"Our research, as Miss Alexandre mentioned, was for improving battery technology. I had some general thoughts about electron storage in superconducting molecular matrices, where my calculations seemed to imply that electrons could be stored in a way that on the surface, appeared to violate one well known principle in physics. My maths showed that a true violation didn't occur when the matrix was designed in a particular way. But there's a big gap between showing something in a mathematical way and making a device to demonstrate the maths.

"When I gave Miss Alexandre her project, I had intended that it mainly serve her as a method to accustom her to formal scientific research, as she had recently joined my lab as an undergraduate student. In my experience, undergrads need careful mentoring to guide them in developing scientific discipline, but as it turned out, Miss Alexandre had already honed a considerable amount of discipline whilst a high-school student, working in a neuroscience lab at the University of Miami's Medical School. So she was well prepared for her project with me and, as history confirms, did a smashing job in completing her project.

"I don't have much more to add to the technical summary she gave, other than to say that the device she invented isn't a true battery; that is, electricity isn't created or stored through the mechanism of a chemical reaction, but that electrons are directly sequestered in an atomic or molecular matrix in such a way that they can be stored and extracted with virtually zero loss and very close to a hundred percent efficiency. Miss Alexandre's demonstration of the flow of electrons against a charge gradient is the principle behind that device, which we've called an accumulator. That's all for me, Dr Chakraborty."

There was applause.

"Thanks, Dr Clarke. Let's go to the questions already submitted and of course there's the one that every laureate at Johns Hopkins has been asked—and we're honored to actually have a significant number of laureates at our university—and that question is: 'What were you doing when you heard you had won the prize?'"

Tamara grinned and raised her hand. "My boyfriend told me when I returned from my retreat. It was a week after the announcement that I found out."

Laughter, and then Emma spoke, "At 5:50 in the morning? Please. Sleeping. Didn't get much sleep after that."

Question: "What was your reaction to hearing that you won a Nobel Prize?"

Emma responded, "So this was the second time for me and an early-morning phone call during the week that the Nobels are announced is typically a giveaway. But it occurred to me that I might be being pranked. Sometimes physicists can be quite childish in their pranks. Of course I was delighted, particularly for Miss Alexandre, because I was still celebrating her getting the Physiology or Medicine Prize the day before, and was amazed to hear that she had won the Physics Prize as well."

"Me?" Tamara asked. "You won't believe it when I tell you that I was totally speechless, would you? Me, speechless? Not possible."

Laughter.

“I was so excited by my retreat experience that I wouldn’t let my boyfriend say a word. He finally got to tell me, but that was only about a half hour after I got home. And finally stopped talking to take a breath.”

Laughter again.

“Yes, I couldn’t believe it. The news didn’t become real until I played the voice-mail message from Stockholm.”

Question: “Did you know that you had been nominated?”

Emma answered, “Nominations aren’t ever announced. But I had no reason to suspect that I, or Miss Alexandre, were candidates.”

“A Nobel Prize was never on my radar,” Tamara answered. “I was just having fun doing research and learning new stuff.”

Question for Dr Clarke: “You’re in an elite group, winners of two Nobels. How do you think your work compares to those other scientists?”

“That’s not something that can be answered easily. Not to be glib about it, but I don’t think there’s any comparison that can be drawn. The varied work that led to the Prizes was so different, even for the four scientists who got multiple Prizes, that there’s nothing useful to compare.”

Question for Miss Alexandre: “You’re being proclaimed by many as this generation’s Einstein. How do you feel about that?”

“Unhappy and unworthy. Einstein was a true genius. His ideas about space-time and the connection between mass and energy, although they were based on current thought in the physics of that period, were simply stunning. And the predictions made by his theories, by and large, have withstood the test of time for over a hundred years. The public just knows his accomplishments because of his proof of the matter-energy equivalence, an equation that almost everyone can quote. My own work was nowhere at that level of creativity.”

Question for Miss Alexandre: “As a physicist, how did you get into neuroscience and brain anatomy research?”

“Actually it was the other way around. In my opening remarks, I mentioned that I became interested in magnetic resonance imaging, or MRI, early on. I’ve always had an affinity for electronics; even as a child, I read and understood college electrical engineering texts. That affinity allowed me to become knowledgeable about radio frequency energies and the circuits needed to generate them. MRI devices employ RF together with large magnets to allow them to work. So I was studying, at first, electrical engineering topics as applied to a medical diagnostic device. My objective was to make the device see better so the doctors could get better results.

“With the higher resolutions I was able to obtain, it became possible to image structures in the brain that had never been described before. That became interesting to me, so I set out to see what those structures did. The brain is essentially a collection of nerve cells organized in a particular way and simplistically, each region performs a specific task. The nerve cells connect to each other in ways that closely resemble electronic circuits and remember, I said I had an affinity for electronics. So it was a logical step to learn how those new brain structures worked.”

The questions continued for the next hour and covered a wide range of topics, including questions about Tamara’s education, her knighthood, Draper Prize, Medal of Freedom, and her Harry Potter skit in Cambridge. She was asked about being a Clarke scholar and for her recommendations to high-school students for their own success. Several reporters had uncovered information about her development plans in Haiti and asked questions

about that.

Emma was quite happy that most of the questions were directed to Tamara; plenty of information about her was available while information about Tamara was about as plentiful as chickens' teeth, as one questioner mentioned. After an hour and a half, the provost declared the conference to be ended. He asked that members of the media who wanted their additional or followup questions to be addressed, to send them to the University Relations Department and they would receive appropriate attention. Tamara would not give any personal interviews; her student and research schedule would not permit it.

"Thank you all for coming today," he finished. "We hope you found the conference productive and you will allow us at Hopkins to return to our quiet academic life. I do believe that at one point, we had more media people on our campus than students. Farewell, and any further contacts, remember, it's University Relations."

Some press people tried to hang back to speak to Emma or Tamara, but security quickly ushered them out. As the hall emptied, Chakraborty came over to Emma and Tamara.

"Thank you for your outstanding presentations, both of you," he said. "Emma, you were spot on in your prediction that Ms Alexandre..."

"Please, sir. I prefer 'Tamara.'"

"Tamara it is, then. My goodness, you had them eating out of your hand at the end there. And the way you showcased Hopkins while essentially minimizing your work... and your gentle self-deprecation was completely endearing—it was a stunning achievement. Just like your own research, I hasten to add."

A campus officer came over to them when the provost finished speaking.

"Professor? And Ma'am? If you can follow me, we'll drive you over to the JH Club now. Your companions, Miss Alexandre, have been told to meet you there."

They left the hall using the stage entrance and Tamara saw that the need for the media van was gone; very few people were nearby and none were taking any notice of her. At the JH Club, though, she was certainly noticed as she was swarmed by her physics friends, faculty, staff, and students. When she saw Terence, she ran to him and hugged him.

"Damn, girl," he said when she released him, "y'all don't ever do stuff small. Ah'm definitely proud to know y'all and can't wait t'see what y'all do for an encore."

Tamara brought Winnie over to meet Terence.

"Winnie, Terence is one of the family too. He's Barbara's boyfriend—Peter's sister—and a fellow Clarke scholar in Emma's lab. Terence, Winnie is a new member of our extended family; I just became her guardian after she had a series of unfortunate incidents. I'll tell you more when we have time, okay?"

While Tamara was being greeted by her colleagues, Winnie was hanging on her arm, whispering intently in her ear.

"Your conference back there was wicked awesome, Tamara," she gushed. "The people were hanging on every word you said. It was so quiet I could almost hear people breathing. And the emotions in the audience were so positive, it almost made me cry; I've never felt a large group of people feel so good all together like that."

Peter had been listening and chimed in. "She's spot on, honey. I felt it too; you won the hearts of an awful lot of people there. So I'd expect that they'll say lots of good things about you now. We'll have to see what they say on the news shows later."

While they were circulating, Emma found Tamara and gave her the latest tidbit.

“Chet got some phone calls from several talk-show producers. It’s like it was in Cambridge; they want fodder for their viewers,” Emma told her.

Tamara groaned. “Okay, Emma, are there any gimmicks?”

Emma shook her head. “Straight interviews, mostly. But naturally, they’re out of town. Two are taped in New York—Manhattan actually: *The Late Show* and *The Tonight Show*. And the last one, *Real Time*, is taped in LA.”

“When we got that offer to appear in England, the host wanted us for entertainment, not for any news value,” Tamara reasoned. “What kind of interview could we possibly do about our work—my work too—that a lay audience would care to listen to? Oh, here’s a thought. Has a Nobel laureate ever appeared on a talk show?”

“Good point. Something to check, innit.”

On investigation later, Tamara discovered that no science Nobel laureate had appeared on a talk show and she and Emma responded with their regrets.

The dinner that evening with Tamara and her collaborators was a happy affair. When the TV news came on, Tamara and a group of her colleagues watched the program and the coverage of her joint press conference was positive and upbeat.

Tamara spent most of the following day receiving congratulatory phone calls from Barbara and the rest of Peter’s family. Denise called and they spoke for a while and then she heard from Cindy. Abi called and even stopped by Tamara’s apartment in the afternoon, since she lived fairly close by.

Winnie had been using the Khan Academy website and spent the day on line reviewing the topics for which she felt less secure.

Later in the day, Tamara received an email message from the University Relations Department. They had been getting numerous interview requests and wanted to know if Tamara would be willing to be interviewed. Tamara wasn’t too thrilled about giving interviews because once you open that door, whom do you allow and whom do you deny? So she decided to prepare a briefing document containing a short biography and a general description of her research. University Relations would provide the document to those journalists who requested an interview, telling them that her student schedule couldn’t accommodate the time for a face-to-face interview.

~~~~~

On Thursday afternoon, Winnie took her high-school entrance exam and learned on Friday that she did well enough to be admitted. The documents from her West Virginia schools hadn’t arrived yet but she was told that she could start going to classes on Monday. And Tamara’s having Marks as her security proved to be a good choice because, on two occasions, Marks almost had to forcibly restrain an overzealous journalist who confronted Tamara, demanding time for an interview, and when she declined, threatened to become aggressive.

When the weekend arrived, Tamara visited her mother and told her in detail about her *kouche* experience.

“It was totally awesome, Mom. In a way it felt like the *lwa* when I sense their presence. But Mom, when I tried following the filaments of force in the air—I think I was sensing electron flow, actually, it was like being inside the MRI images. And the voice in my head was indescribable. It wasn’t a voice, really, but I’m sure that my mind interpreted it that way to separate those thoughts from my own thoughts.”

“This is really amazing, darling. Did you detect any trace of the kinds of personalities that the various *lwa* possess?”

“In some ways, yes. But that experience answers a number of questions I’ve always had about my abilities. If that energy structure has an organization anything like a brain—and the patterns I sensed seem to have structure—then the energy matrix could indeed somehow contain the combined memories of people. I got a whole philosophical lecture,” she giggled, “with references to Plato and Augustine. And a lot of Descartes. The entity in my head communed with me for what seemed to be hours, but Descartes’ first principle, ‘*Cogito, ergo sum*,’ summarizes that whole session. The entity is definitely pure thought and, as Descartes maintains in his writings, thus the entity exists.”

“What an incredible experience, Tamara. So the entity has the life forces of the people of the world?”

“That would explain some of what I’ve experienced. He—for the purpose of discussion, I’ll say ‘he’—explained that the *gwo-bôn-nanj* of people, what others would call the ‘soul,’ is an indestructible energy construct; it’s basically the person’s immortal aspect. This must be how *Granmanman* came to me and left her memories and how I can translate languages. Somehow my brain knows how to access the energies of the *gwo-bôn-nanj*.”

“Tamara... can you do this at will?” Nadine wondered.

“No... I was in a deep meditative state when I ... um ... connected. It all seemed very dreamlike. It could have been a hallucination, but one doesn’t hallucinate knowledge that one didn’t know previously. I had to look up Descartes’ writings to confirm what I learned in that encounter. I also can’t simply call up someone else’s memory. There has to be an affinity, I learned. But about my language ability, I’m sure that it comes from some kind of access to a communications exchange in that energy construct—an affinity with a being I associate with languages. Since I associated that ability with *Papa Legba*, that created a special affinity, and the entity in my head agreed that this was one way of thinking of the ability.”

“Does this mean that our *lwa* aren’t real?” Nadine asked trepidatiously.

“Oh, no, the opposite is actually true, Mom. The energy of the person’s *gwo-bôn-nanj* interacts with the energy of the entity I communed with and creates a construction that takes on the identity of a *lwa*, or in other belief systems, with the spirit that those people venerate. Vodou is not the only faith that venerates an entity in a spiritual way.”

Nadine was relieved by Tamara’s reassurance and then their conversation turned to the Haiti projects.

“We have a commitment in principle from the Benin and Togo governments to send a cadre of peace officers to Haiti to train the local police and evaluate the overall situation. Gerston worked out the arrangement and the State Department will be keeping tabs on the situation through the embassy,” Nadine told Tamara.

“Will there be enough people?” Tamara asked.

“For now, they’re concentrating in the cities. That’s where the worst situations have developed. Some policing experts have confirmed that the major cause of the problem is a lack of ‘boots on the ground,’ although there’s also evidence of a player behind the scenes. There’s an effort underway now to identify such a person and my Haiti contacts tell me that there’s progress. The key was getting the bad apples out of the ministry supervising the police and that was your doing. It’s working, sweetie, slowly, but it is.”

“And the micro-loan and education plans?”

“Moving along well enough,” Nadine replied. “About as good as we can expect. Life is hard there and doing things beyond basic survival takes a committed effort.”

“So my own part is still several years off,” Tamara said. “The technical course for the two-year degree will begin in January so I’ll need to have a small manufacturing operation ready in two years. The engineering programs are still being developed but they have some undergrads who have the basic preparation going into

their sophomore years. We're more than a year away for a plant here in Maryland but the candidate sites are being vetted by our consultant."

~~~~~

"So how's school? Fitting in okay?" Tamara asked Winnie on Monday, after her first day there.

"I like it a whole lot, Tamara. The kids are all motivated and there's such a nice vibe there. I like my classes too and the teachers seem good. But I have a huge amount of work to catch up," she groaned. "A whole month's worth. But they're letting me do just the important assignments to turn in, not the homework from each day, thankfully."

Several days later, Winnie told Tamara that she needed new sports shoes.

"Tamara, I got those nice running shoes but I need to get ones for the gym. The shoes that were recommended for me to get are the Asics Sky Elite FF 2. Could we please get them?"

"Why those, in particular? Let me look them up," Tamara told her. She typed a bit on her laptop. "Huh. Volleyball shoes? Something you're not telling me?"

"I thought I'd surprise you, Tamara. I was gonna wait for a good time, but I guess now's a good time too. I tried out for the school's volleyball team and they put me on the JV team."

Tamara looked at her with surprise and Winnie went on, "I heard how good a player you are so I wanted to try it out too. The coach says I'll be a good player and it's wicked fun."

"Awesome... when are the games scheduled?"

"We're doing the basic drills now and learning the offenses. We scrimmage against the varsity too. The team is already playing games but I'm not quite ready yet. I'll start playing games in November."

"Let me know when you have your games; I'll make sure to be there. Do you know your position yet?"

"Coach thinks outside hitter and middle blocker are my strongest. And he said that so far, I have the best serve on the JV team."

### ***Early November***

During the next several weeks, Tamara was quite busy since she had to work on her research project and get Winnie set up in a routine. News from West Virginia continued to arrive slowly. The group home had been closed and its operator had been charged with eight counts of endangerment of a minor, collusion, theft by false pretenses, and unlawful operation of an unlicensed group home facility. Mason told her that the state AG also suspected the involvement of a particular local judge and a county social worker in sending girls to that group home, had begun an investigation, and would be assembling a grand jury for the case review.

Tamara had received the packet of information from the Nobel organizers giving the details about the ceremony and associated events. In the information, the requirement for the laureate to present a lecture on the subject for which the award was given. When she saw Emma, she asked about that.

"The lectures are generally given beginning several days before the award ceremony," Emma told her. "I gave mine the day before, it was on December 9. That year the first one was on December 6."

"You realize that I need to give three?"

"Blimey! That's right; I didn't think of that," Emma responded. She laughed. "Perhaps you should contact the Nobel events organizers. They obviously never faced this situation."

Tamara called the Stockholm number from the telephone notification message and asked how she was to handle the lectures. The line was silent for about thirty seconds.

“Hello? Still there?” Tamara asked.

“Oh, yes, sorry... this is a difficult issue, I see. I was reviewing when the lectures were to be scheduled but the individual event schedules are not planned quite yet. We will need to contact you when we have an answer.”

It took ten days for an answer and it came by email. The organizers realized the burden of preparing three lectures and offered several options. One was to deliver a single lecture with the second and third to be delivered within six months, whereupon the prize money would be released. Those lectures were to be given in Stockholm. A second was to give two, and the third at a later date. Of course, the option for three lectures still existed.

Tamara sent back a counteroffer. She would give both the Medicine and Chemistry lectures several days before the award ceremony and do a joint lecture with Emma for the Physics one. As she pointed out, since they were close collaborators in that work, the material in their respective individual lectures would overlap significantly. So she proposed that each of them would prepare a maximum of a fifteen-minute long presentation. Since the instructions from the Nobel Academy requested that lectures be focused and concise and most laureates' talks typically lasted only twenty to thirty minutes, her proposal actually met all of the lecture requirements.

Emma would present the theoretical framework for electron storage and Tamara would cover the engineering physics that allowed the physical device to operate. As Tamara pointed out to Emma, they already had a solid framework for their lectures; it would cover the same ground as their presentations for the Draper Prize.

After a bit of negotiation, the Nobel Academy planners accepted Tamara's proposal. After all, everything else about her multiple Prizes was unprecedented. Her lectures were duly scheduled for December 6, 8, and 9, with the Physics one to be delivered last.

### ***Late November***

For the long Thanksgiving weekend, Tamara and Peter decided to do something special for the new people in their lives—Kevin and his friends, and Winnie.

“Sweetie,” she asked Peter, “I was thinking about family and how lucky we are to have such wonderful families ourselves. Thanksgiving is only a few weeks away and typically we get several families together but we can't fit more than maybe fifteen into anyone's house. And then I thought of Denise and Kevin; they have nowhere to go—Amelia and Jeremy... well, family Thanksgiving isn't in Amelia's tradition, and for Jeremy, unless the U.S. embassies celebrate it with their employees ... anyway. Also Cindy and Tom. I'm sure that they have nowhere to go.”

“I'm seeing a common thread, dear,” Peter grinned. “You have a plan. Winnie, did you celebrate Thanksgiving? Seems to me that would be awkward for Native Americans.”

“Papa and I did nothing special. Without school, I could help him put the vegetable gardens to sleep for the winter and do some canning.”

“But you're okay with us celebrating it? It's turned into a family celebration time rather than the original colonizers' celebration of a successful harvest.”

“Sure, that's fine. Tamara, Peter said you had a plan?”

“Yep. I thought of inviting our new friends and whoever of our family can come so we can celebrate together.”

“Come to where? Nobody has a house large enough,” Peter asked.

“Actually Denise does, remember her palace? But I won’t impose on them. How about the clubhouse at the resort? That’s open all year and the restaurant could be used for seating. We wouldn’t cook there; I could have the whole meal catered.”

“Interesting idea. But maybe we should check with Ron. Things like grounds fees and other issues might be involved. Let me call him.”

A short time later, Ron Allerman called back. Yes, they could use the clubhouse and bring in a catered meal. No, there won’t be a charge to guests, just a token facility charge to cover the clubhouse rental. He pointed out that the resort’s nudity requirement actually didn’t apply to the clubhouse and restaurant.

“But it can get chilly then, anyhow,” he pointed out. “Folks can wear clothes. But if they use the spa, no clothes allowed out there.”

While Peter began calling his sister, parents, and grandparents to tell them of their plans, Tamara called Denise to invite her.

“And Amelia and Jeremy too. Could you call Cindy and see if they can come?”

“Tamara, that’s so thoughtful. We had already made tentative plans to have dinner with Cindy so I’m sure that they’ll be delighted to come and meet everyone. Then you can tell us all about your experience in hearing about your Nobel prizes. I’m so, so happy for you.”

Eventually the guest list was finalized. It included Tamara’s parents, Peter’s immediate family, and the Frederick and Wilmington families. Tamara asked Emma, but she had other plans. The event would begin at 11 a.m. on Thanksgiving Day and light snacks would be provided. Dinner would start at 3:30.

### ***Arundel Nature Society, Anne Arundel County: Thanksgiving***

The affair was a great success. Everyone loved Winnie and fussed over her all afternoon. But when Denise met her, sparks flew. When Winnie touched Denise’s hand, she broke out in tears.

“You’re of my people!” she cried. “Denise... you have the blood of my kin.”

Denise was flabbergasted.

“Winnie, yes, I see it too. You’re Cherokee, I feel it in your spirit,” Denise said as she hugged Winnie.

“Denise, where’s your family from?” Winnie asked.

“Western North Carolina. My father’s grandparents were of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and my great-grandfather was a medicine man. I’m one-quarter Cherokee. And you?”

“Both my parents were of the Buffalo Ridge Cherokee, Anisahoni clan. They were the only family I had, them and my papa. They had siblings but they died before I was born; Papa told me they died from diabetes and heart disease,” Winnie replied.

“Tamara told me about you but she didn’t mention details. She said that you were orphaned when your grandfather passed. You have a spirit in you, I felt it when we touched.” Denise remarked. “I was surprised. I’ve only felt that from a few people.”

“Papa taught me the old ways and he was very spiritual. My two-greats grandfather, four generations ago, was a medicine man and the secrets of our family were passed down to me. I wonder how close a kin we are.”

Denise shook her head. “I’m afraid that I never knew anything about our clan. But how we recognized the spirituality in each other is awesome, Winnie.”



Their conversation was witnessed by a number of their friends in addition to Peter and Kevin. Barbara saw the knot of people gathered around Winnie and noticed that Peter was radiating excitement, so she went to him to see what was happening. She had met Winnie previously, at a dinner with her and Peter's family.

"This is such a special group and it keeps getting more special," Barbara declared after hearing about Denise's and Winnie's discovery. "There must be a reason that all these unlikely things keeps happening."

"I'd say that somebody must have really good karma to find others who resonate so strongly with them," Kevin said, grinning. "Probably it's all of us. I wonder if there's such a thing as collective karma."

Meanwhile, Cindy had come over and she took Tamara, Barbara, Denise, Amelia and Winnie aside.

"Excuse us for a bit," Cindy broke in. "We gals need to talk about our spiritual backgrounds. Tamara says that Denise and I have shamans among our ancestors and it appears that Winnie does, too."

"Don't forget Barbara," Tamara said. "And possibly Amelia."

Amelia looked surprised. "Me?" she squeaked.

"Sure," Tamara said, smiling at her. "Greta thinks it's possible. The Muslims who emigrated to Indonesia had shamanistic practitioners among them."

It turned out that Cindy wasn't only interested in Winnie's sensitivity to Denise and to herself—she had also felt something when she took Winnie's hand, a feeling similar to what she had felt when she first met Tamara. She wanted to ask the other girls about their own sensitivity. Also, as a psychiatrist in training, she had sensed a deep sorrow in Winnie and attributed it to the changes in her life after her grandfather died. Cindy knew how compassionate Denise was and felt the same level of caring in Amelia and Barbara. Of course, Tamara had shown her own compassion.

"Winnie, we know you lost your family," Cindy told at one point. "But you have a whole new family now with Tamara and Peter and their families. But please, you should think of us here as your sisters too; we'll always be here for you when you need a sympathetic ear or old memories are bothersome. Okay?"

The others concurred with Cindy and made some encouraging comments.

Winnie nodded, her eyes filling with tears as she went to hug each of them.

When Tamara and the others rejoined the rest of the party, she had to give a command performance; everyone demanded full details of where she had been when the Nobels were announced and what it felt like when she learned about it.

"How come, do you think, the Nobel people gave you the prizes so quickly?" Dave Gibson asked. "The awards only come after years have passed for almost everyone, right?"

Tamara agreed. "I asked Emma about that since her first award came within two years. She knew of a few other cases where the prizes were awarded very soon after the work was done. She told me that the committees are very conservative and wait until there's general consensus in the scientific community that the work is important and is a major contribution to science. The things I did apparently had an immediate and major impact on two fields, 'cause my work spawned a virtual *ton* of papers expanding on and extending my work, although I'm still mystified about the Chemistry prize. Maybe it's 'cause the chemists seem to love the technique I invented—requests to get a copy of the G-force analytic device keep pouring in."

The Thanksgiving meal itself was a great hit, especially since no one had to do the food preparation and cleanup. Some grumbling was heard from the males in the group about not having any leftovers to graze on for the rest of the weekend, but then the caterer came out of the kitchen with bags of leftovers in to-go containers.

That was a real hit—especially for the men.

After dessert, a few of the guests decided to do a soak in the spa and Winnie was amazed how easily people shed their clothes, took a quick shower, ran outside in the cold air, and hopped in. She knew that this was a nudist resort and that her new family and friends were nudists, but that was an “academic” knowledge. To see it in the “flesh,” so to speak, was still jarring for her.

As Tamara and Peter undressed to join the others, Tamara told her, “Don’t feel that you need to force yourself, honey. Some people need to ease into the idea of getting naked with other folks. You can come sit near the spa and talk, or stay and talk with some of the other cousins. Not everyone decided to take a dip.”

Winnie stayed with the other cousins. A little later, people began leaving; the Delaware group had an hour-and-a-half trip home. By eight o’clock, the caterer had finished cleaning up and Tamara and the others began leaving for their homes too.

Tomorrow was Black Friday and Tamara had some plans....

## Chapter 80 - Honoring a Scientist

### *Stockholm, Sweden: a week later*

Tamara and Peter took Winnie with them to Stockholm, arriving on December 4. Winnie had a week's worth of high-school assignments with her; Dr Borges, her principal, had agreed that her attending the events would be a unique educational experience, but she still needed to keep up with her classes. Emma was already en route to Stockholm via Cambridge; she wanted to see first-hand how her company's energy farm was performing, and would arrive on December 6. Tamara's parents would be arriving the day before the awards ceremony; they planned to watch Tamara's first two lectures on the Nobel website where the video of the lectures would be streamed.

Winnie was vibrating with excitement when Tamara told her that she'd be going. Tamara wondered, however, whether it was because Winnie was excited by going to Stockholm or, more likely, by the prospect of a shopping trip to look for some formal and party dresses.

For her two solo Nobel lectures, Tamara decided to de-emphasize the technical aspects of the research where possible and discuss how her discoveries fit the general knowledge of the field. In her Physiology or Medicine talk, she covered the background behind MRI technology and then described how the brain's thinking process could be visualized by using functional MRI techniques. She tried to keep this presentation light-hearted and did get a number of laughs.

"So," she told the audience, "after our MRI had been calibrated to work with my high-resolution head coil by scanning a brain phantom—that's an artificial imaging model designed to duplicate the organ's structure and density—the technician needed a live brain for fine tuning.

"So of course I volunteered. It's not very often that one gets to see inside your own head; I always wondered what was inside there and now I'd get to see it in high definition."

Laughter.

"So the tech ran a few calibration scans while I sat there listening to the chirps, clanks, bangs, taps, clicks, and all of the other racket a MRI machine makes, and suddenly I had a wonderful insight into a problem that had been plaguing me. Three seconds later, the MRI went into an emergency shutdown. The tech shouted from the control room ... I won't quote him, but sailors could learn some new ways to curse."

More laughter.

"So I went to the control room to see what had happened. It seems that my increased brain activity resulting from my mental insight had completely overloaded the data acquisition routines and the overload made the computer shut the MRI down. When we looked at the imaging scans that had been acquired just before the shutdown; we saw that the scans showed a massive streak of white—indicating strong blood flow—spreading out from my prefrontal cortex and fanning out all over my cerebrum. Of course, this obviously must have happened because the detector's imaging sensitivity was set too high. That's my story and I'm sticking to it."

Laughter

"But this was a brand-new discovery of sorts. I was told later that this event was the first time in history that a true brainstorm had ever been recorded."

Laughter, then applause.

"It was during that MRI scanning session where we first got to see in detail the brain's fine structures and the electrical activity of the neurons which connected them. I'll explain a bit now about how electrical impulses travel through neurons and you can see from this slide how the neuronal filaments trace a pathway between the

brain's specialized regions. The structure here is ..."

And Tamara continued, showing how the different structures in the limbic system lit up while a subject was being trained to distinguish between and to memorize scents. Soon she came to her lecture's end.

"... In summarizing this lecture now, neurologists and neuroscientists are now able to localize how and where sensory information travels in the brain and we can even follow how the neuronal impulses travel between the brain's specialized structures. This ability is opening up entirely new areas of research in neurophysiology and neuroanatomy and has the potential for us to learn how to target pharmaceuticals to treat diseases such as depression and bipolar disorder. Thank you for coming and thank you to the Nobel Academy for their recognition of my contributions to medicine."

*Wow, a standing ovation from this staid, formal group,* Tamara thought as she looked out at the audience. She waved her hand in thanks and acknowledgment and then walked to the wings.

Soon after her lecture, the Karolinska Institute hosted a press conference with Tamara and the institute's Nobel committee. This was a formal affair and the members of the press were very polite and respectful. Many were also technically knowledgeable and more than a few had actually read some of Tamara's scientific articles.

The days between the various formal Nobel events were busy, but Tamara, Peter, and Winnie still found time to sightsee. The evenings had formal dinners where Tamara got to meet many of the members of the Nobel Academy. Her first formal dinner was hosted by the Karolinska Institute on the evening of her Medicine lecture.

Her Chemistry lecture was next and for this talk, she had to get more technical. In it, she explained that the theory behind her invention was about a hundred years old and it involved the stimulation of atomic bonding in molecules by increasing the system's energy. One of the theories she relied on had shown that the electronic motion and the nuclear motion in molecules can be separated, both mathematically and also physically. The mathematical separation allows for the calculation of the different molecular wave functions, and gives a result in terms of nuclear positions and electron position probabilities. By using the energy of her G-force coil invention tuned to the proper frequencies, she could manipulate the delocalized  $\pi$  electrons in the aromatic ring structure to force the synthesis to produce the desired optical isomer.

Twenty-five minutes later, she was done and breathed a sigh of relief.

*I feel like an imposter,* she mused. *I'm an engineering physicist, and here I'm getting a Chemistry Nobel. Well, what I discovered makes good use of the Schrödinger equation, so at least that's physics.*

The Swedish Academy of Sciences had their own press conference organized after Tamara's Chemistry lecture and far fewer journalists covered it. Almost all were from scientific and technical publications. The most significant question that was asked concerned applications for her invention.

"Clearly the major one is in pharmaceuticals. It allows the synthesis of complex molecules without the problem of having both enantiomers present. Techniques do currently exist, like chiral preparative high-performance liquid chromatography, but the process I developed is much more efficient. And this invention is especially significant for pharmaceuticals, since the human body is very chiral selective; it can react dramatically differently for each enantiomer of a drug. Case in point: Thalidomide. One enantiomer is effective against morning sickness but the other is teratogenic and causes major birth defects."

And the other question of note was how she got into chemistry.

"That was through my MRI work. In my working with the subjects who we were training to distinguish between similar scents, I noticed how strongly the olfactory tract mobilized the rest of the limbic system. There long had been a belief that humans secrete pheromones but no well-controlled studies have ever been published showing

that human pheromones exist. I thought that looking at brain responses to chemicals which are supposed to behave like putative pheromones might be a cool way to test the MRI high-resolution coil. So I took a little time to look into that question. We got that line of research started and I've now passed it off to others better able to do that work. I keep informed about its progress, though, and have several collaborations with real chemists and endocrinologists who are pursuing that work."

Finally, on the ninth of the month, Tamara and Emma gave their joint lecture. Emma discussed the theory of how molecular lattice structures could be developed using superconducting materials and showed the computations which supported her theory that electrons could be densely packed into such structures. Then Tamara showed how she physically accomplished this; through the use of the superconducting single electron transistor. Emma's theory was confirmed when Tamara discovered a method to force electrons to move against a charge gradient. Using the SET circuits that she had developed, when energized, the circuits created an attractive non-electrostatic force—a force which she hadn't identified at the time but later theorized that it was related to dark energy—on the free electrons which was about two orders of magnitude greater than the normal repulsive electrostatic force, and pulled the electrons into the lattice.

Then came another press conference and again, most of the journalists were technical writers and many were interested in the energy-storage device that EEC Energy had developed.

"Indeed," Emma told one questioner, "the device employs the design that Miss Alexandre developed. It's analogous to the large-scale lithium-ion battery cells used in current energy storage systems but our accumulator is far smaller, lighter, more efficient, and of course, safer. We've developed a large-scale energy farm in Cambridge that's on line now; we're on the verge of introducing power cells for use in electric vehicles; and soon small consumer-sized accumulators will soon be available in the standard battery sizes."

Later in the afternoon, Tamara and the other laureates gathered in the Nobel Academy offices to learn the choreography of the ceremony; how they would enter the stage, move to their seats, how they were to receive their honor from the king, who would present their diploma and medal, and finally to bow slightly to the king, to the Academy members, and then the audience. They would have a final walk-through at the concert hall site before the ceremony.

And then it was December 10<sup>th</sup>, the day of the awards.

The formal ceremony, a prestigious and impressive event, was held in the Stockholm Concert Hall, and was attended by the Swedish royal family. The king personally presented the Nobel diploma and medal to each laureate. In addition to the members of the Nobel Academy, many dignitaries were present as were, of course, the families of the laureates and various other guests.

In the evening following the award ceremony, a formal banquet in honor of the laureates took place. A sumptuous dinner was served; there were a few speeches and some entertainment; and in addition to the Swedish royal family, various dignitaries and family guests were present.

Through the whole week, Tamara was impressed by how grand of an event the entire Nobel Week was. Winnie was thrilled with the whole experience, too, and greatly enjoyed going to the events that were open to the family members. She also enjoyed being fussed over by several of the other prize winners who told her to study hard and let Tamara be a role model and in a few years, she'd be back here accepting her own prize.

Two days later they were back home.

### ***Anne Arundel County, Maryland: Christmas***

The Winsberg clan—those who lived within an hour or two driving distance—and Tamara's parents, all gathered at Werner's and Greta's house, which could just about accommodate the crowd. Cindy and Tom had

taken a week to be with Cindy's family in North Carolina and had taken Kevin's little group with them. They would be returning after the new year.

Of course everyone wanted the details about Tamara's Stockholm trip and the events of Nobel Week. Even though everyone had watched the streamed Nobel Week lectures and award ceremony, they wanted lots more details, especially about the social events. Peter had photos on his phone of her Nobel diplomas, each one unique and beautifully calligraphed, and photos of the medals.

"Is that gold?" Janice asked.

"It is," Tamara affirmed. "Eighteen carat. The medals came with a little booklet describing their history and the artists who designed them."

"Looks big," Janice commented.

"Yeah, a bit larger than 2½ inches. Weighs just over six ounces," Tamara told her.

"Cool. That's worth a bundle, right?" Mike asked.

"I was curious, so I looked up gold prices," Peter said. "The gold value in each is about 9,000 dollars now. But she's not selling them. They're in a safe deposit box now."

People were huddled over Peter's phone, trying to read the inscriptions and figure out what the images represented.

"Okay, guys," Tamara told the group when they asked about the designs. "Yes, one of the medal's different than the other two. That one's for Physiology or Medicine and the image on the back represents the Karolinska Institute, which awards that Prize. It shows a healer—perhaps a goddess—getting water for the girl standing beside her. The booklet says the image represents the healing of the ill."

"So the other two are the Chemistry and Physics ones? They look the same," Janice remarked.

"Right. Both of those prizes are awarded by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, so they have the same design," Tamara continued. "The taller figure represents Nature, she's surrounded by clouds. The figure holding up Nature's veil represents Science, uncovering the secrets of nature. And before you ask, the inscription is the same on all three; it's in Latin, from Virgil's *Aeneid*. A direct translation doesn't work well, and the translation that the Nobel Academy gives is more flowing than the Latin but it's more of a paraphrase. I don't recall their translation, but mine is closer to the original Latin: 'It's worthwhile to improve life by cultivating the arts.'

"Did you learn anything about your being on the Prize fast track?" Peter's Uncle Dave asked.

"In fact, I did," Tamara smiled. "I had a kind of private meeting with the Chemistry Nobel Committee before our news conference. All the committees are quite secretive about the nominators; they don't divulge the identities of nominees or those who submit nominations and discourage nominators from revealing information about their nomination. But a committee member did tell me that they had received an unusually large number of nominations for me and many were, as she told me, from very highly regarded scientists.

"I asked if the Physics Committee knew what the Chemistry Committee was doing and if both committees were aware that I was a nominee for both. They don't share that information between committees. Apparently they keep their proceedings strictly secret—some years ago, a committee member was kicked off the committee for leaking the names of the leading nominees and those names became public. At least that's how I heard it told."

"What are you gonna do with all that money?" Ernie asked. "Over two-and-a-half million?"

"Emma used part of her first Prize to set up the Clarke Scholars program," Tamara replied. "I might do

something similar, but maybe to support education in Haiti.”

Winnie got to share her experiences with everyone too and Tamara was delighted overhear her telling a group of the cousins, “The Nobel committees put on a real show—there were displays and exhibits about the work that Tamara and Emma did that were geared for non-scientists, so their work could be understood. And Tamara’s lectures were so interesting to watch, especially being right in the theater with her where I could feel the audience’s reaction.

“Seeing how easily she spoke about her research was inspiring to me. And I vowed that if a poor immigrant girl like her could come to this country and become a world-famous scientist, then I need to work my ass off to make her proud of me.”

On their way home that evening, Winnie was talking about how wonderful a family Peter had; she thought all of his cousins were great people and she had a wonderful time.

“And they all want to do something in business or science, too. Janice is in an MBA program. Mike wants to study environmental engineering—I didn’t even know there was such a thing. Audrey and Eddie—what a hoot those two are—she’s going into an oceanography program and he wants to study neuroscience. I need to think about what I want to do, myself.”

“You have time, honey,” Peter told her. “Get your basics in and look at any electives you might be interested in for your sophomore year. You did really well on the math, science, and English parts of your entrance exam; your social studies part was not as strong, but still good. You’ll be an excellent student in high school and your school has a good reputation. Lots of kids go on to top colleges from there, including Hopkins.”

~~~~~

Emma called Tamara the next day.

“Hey there. I know that this is short notice, but Andrew and I decided to have a party on Saturday and I’d like to invite you lot. I asked Terence and Barbara too; they can come and so will my sisters-in-law and their blokes.”

“Um, sure, Emma, that would be nice. What time and can we bring anything?” Tamara responded.

“Come at 11. We’ll have lunch at 1 p.m. and dinner at 7. As well, a green dinner salad for a dozen would be ace.”

“I’ll bring a dessert too.”

“Thank you. Now then, you recall that our pool deck has an all-season dome for the cold weather? The pool’s heated and the spa is running too,” Emma told her.

“Yep, I remember. It’s ‘Emma’s Resort.’”

Emma laughed. “Precisely.”

Tamara disconnected and called Winnie, who came out of her room carrying an eBook reader.

“What’cha reading, sweetie?” Tamara asked.

“I’m reading ahead. I’ll be doing a book report on *The Catcher in the Rye*. I picked it from the list my teacher gave us. Also, I just finished another book a few days ago—I saw it on her suggested books list and the title caught my eye. You know that there’s a book titled *Emma*? By Jane Austen? I saw that and thought it’d be rad to read it and do a report on it too.”

Tamara laughed. “Oh, sweetie, this is funny; Emma, when she was in high school, also read that book and did a

report on it. And I read it and wrote an essay for my Clarke Scholars exam where I used examples from it. I'll bet that Emma'd love to share her thoughts about the book with you. We'll see her on Saturday; we've been invited to go to her house for a 'just because' party."

"Nice. Peter's told me what a great house she has; there's a pool too."

"The pool deck has a big dome cover over it... oh yeah, Emma has a rule, no suits in the pool. She relaxed it just once for my first visit there. Anyway, the pool and the deck are both heated so we can swim if we want. You didn't go in the spa last month; so I assumed that you're shy about being nude. I was very shy too, for my first times. Let me tell you about that, okay?"

Winnie nodded and Tamara told her about how she and Terence managed to overcome their initial reluctance and got naked, first in the privacy of Emma's yard, and then at the resort, as Tamara and Terence got used to not being dressed.

"Let me tell you, Winnie, that I was undecided and reluctant that very first day when I discovered that Emma's home doubled as a 'nudist facility,'" she laughed, making finger quotes. "Emma's husband Andrew told me that my initial hesitancy was common and he and Emma certainly understood how I felt.

"Then Emma told me about her own first-time experience with nudism, She told me that most people who are hesitant to be undressed in a 'public' setting are concerned about personal body image issues and that's the chief stumbling block that most first-timers encounter. But on her first visit to the nudist club, when her clothes were off, Emma saw that nobody even gave her a glance. She was reassured about that and felt that she fit in and looked just like everyone else.

"For myself, after I got used to being without clothes, I became a real convert. And that took all of about a half-hour, too. I've found that when I'm nude outside, both the warmth of the sun and the breezes on my bare skin feel glorious and the sensation of the pool's water gliding on my body unimpeded by a soggy suit is indescribable. I found that the pleasure of being without clothes is so strong that I want to share that enjoyment with others who are also enjoying themselves.

"People are social beings, so we can get increased pleasure by sharing our enjoyment with others of a like mind. That's the appeal of social nudism, where you're nude in the company of others and simply enjoying nature. So for my very first time, I went ahead and shed my clothes—I did that privately, just with Peter, Barbara, and Terence in the room—and after about only a half hour walking around outside, I had mostly forgotten that I wasn't wearing anything."

Winnie was smiling at Tamara's passion and she remarked, "You sound like a commercial for a nudist resort, Tamara. But I was taught, and you must have been taught too, that our bodies are private. What about people who may have issues about how they look and how their bodies aren't like other people's?"

"That's the amazing thing about social nudism, sweetie. Most nudists accept that people's bodies are all different and know that no one has a quote, perfect, unquote body. We all have flaws; some are more visible than others. So nudists tend to have a positive body image, both about themselves and others too. But shaking your body-image issues doesn't come easily, you know; you might still get shy at times—look at what happened with me. Even though I thought that when I became a nudist, I had left my body-image issues behind. But this summer at the resort, when I saw Denise, Cindy, and Amelia nude for the first time, I suddenly felt inadequate. They looked so spectacular that I felt that I'd never be in their class. They had to hit me upside the head for me to see that I shouldn't be so uptight. I saw that they were right.

"And at resorts, where everyone is nude, this body-positive setting helps first-timers immensely in getting used to being without clothes. At a resort, no one looks at other people critically, thinking that they don't meet some



undefined standard of beauty. When you visit a nudist facility, you'll see that all people are beautiful, and even more so when you've taken the time to talk with the new acquaintances you make and get to know them better."

"I need to think about that some more, Tamara. You know, after we were at the Thanksgiving dinner and I saw you guys getting ready to go in the spa, I began to think about my going to the nudist place with you guys. Thinking about if I could do that myself, I mean. I've just about decided that when the warm weather comes and you go to the resort, I'd go too—if you can do it, then I can too. It's just that I didn't expect that making this decision would happen so quickly."

"So you think that you'd be ready to try it out now?"

Winnie nodded, "Uh huh. I'll try."

Tamara embraced her. "You'll enjoy it lots, sweetie."

~~~~~

When Tamara arrived at Emma's, Emma greeted them wearing a coverup.

Emma whispered to Tamara, "Will Winnie be okay with the nudity? I had forgotten that she's not been here before."

"I think so, but she needs to ease into it," Tamara whispered back.

"Okay, you lot, let's go on back," Emma said. "Thanks for bringing the salad."

Sam and Abi were already outside at the pool with their men and they were all nude. Tamara watched Winnie as she took in the scene and saw her blush and look away.

But then Sam noticed Winnie and rushed over to her and hugged her.

"Winnie! Great to see you again! Welcome to Emma's Resort."

Abi came over and greeted her too, and said, "Let's introduce you, Winnie. The bloke on the left is my friend Ryan Doyle; he's also in med school but the 'other one,' Maryland. And on the right, it's Jay Larson, Sam's fiancé, and heaven help us, another lawyer. Oi, Sam told me that many of your legal issues are almost resolved."

"Yeah, Sam's been fantastic..."

"Excuse me," Emma said, "it's the door. Must be Terence and Barbara."

While Emma was gone, Ryan asked, "What kind of problems, if that's not prying?"

"We had to get a guardian for Winnie," Sam said. "Remember, she had been in a group home scam—the home's operator had been paid off by a guy who took Winnie away with him; that's legally both being kidnapped and human trafficking. She got away from him and Tamara found her. Tamara's been appointed as her guardian and most of the issues with her grandfather's estate should be settled during the next few months."

Barbara and Terence had come in while Sam was speaking and greeted everyone.

Winnie smiled at Sam, saying, "Thanks to you for doing all that, Sam." To the others, she said, "Those corrupt rats in the county were trying to sell Papa's homestead and keep the money. He had savings too that they were trying to get and Sam's people found that. They found his will, too, and they found that I should get Social Security survivor's benefits and dependent survivor's benefits from his pension. It was a good thing that Papa used a bank in the next county 'cause the corrupt county people were having trouble getting access across county lines."

“That’s right; the bank officials had become suspicious since the corrupt officials were trying to bypass regular procedure,” Sam agreed.

“Enough of the sad stuff,” Barbara proclaimed. “Winnie’s away from all that now and has a much better life to look forward to. You okay now, Winnie?”

“Uh huh. This sure is a whole new life now,” Winnie agreed.

“Hey, you lot, I’m up for a swim; you blokes want to join?” Abi asked.

Jay had been watching Winnie, whose eyes were darting everywhere, looking at people and then looking away with a faint blush.

“One sec,” he said. “As the astronauts are quoted, ‘Houston, we have a problem,’ so let me hold off a tad, Abi. You guys go ahead; I want to tell Winnie something. Winnie, you look really uncertain and I’m guessing this is all new to you.”

“It is,” she squeaked. “I don’t know where to look, either. You all look, well, awesome, just super.”

Tamara, who had been talking to Barbara, moved to come over to Winnie, but Jay waved her off.

“Winnie, I heard your story. You’re one brave girl, that’s for sure, and you had to adapt to many situations beyond your control. But right here, you’re in control now. Let me tell you that I was in the same boat as you are now when I learned that Sam and her whole family were nudists. I had body-image issues, myself, and it was my male endowment that caused my self-image problem. In high school I was regarded as a freak.”

Winnie’s eyes flashed down to his groin and she blushed again.

“It .. um ... *is* kinda big,” she murmured.

“Above average, I know, but that’s not the point. The point is that my high-school experience, when kids teased me about my size, it made me body-shy. So on my first visit here, when I knew that I should strip, I was petrified. Would these people think of me as a freak too? Sam had reassured me that no one would care what I looked like—and she was right. The jerks in high school were just that—jerks. Being a nudist now, I accept my body as it is and everyone else pays me no apparent attention. So if you’re concerned that we’ll be critical of how you look, well, don’t be, okay?”

Winnie nodded to him and said, “I know. I’m just being foolish. I guess that I shouldn’t have anything to hide; it’s just my years of always being dressed and a lot of teasing I got from the girls about how I looked too. Anyway, I vowed that I’d take the plunge today and...”

Emma and Tamara came over to Winnie.

“Winnie, Tamara and Peter are going to our guest room to undress, if you want to go with them,” Emma told her gently.

“I brought a coverup for you to wear, Winnie, if you want it,” Tamara said. “You can take it off before you hop in the pool.”

Winnie gulped and nodded. She thanked Jay and went off with Tamara. Peter was talking to Andrew in the house, saw them coming in, and excused himself.

“Gonna go with the gals,” he told Andrew.

When the three went into the guest room, Winnie noticed the three Program boxes lined up innocently along the far wall.

“What’s those boxes? Strange furnishings for a room,” she commented.

Peter chuckled, “I agree. Do you know about the Naked in School Program in high schools; it ended maybe about five years ago?”

“Peter, five years ago I was like ten years old. And I didn’t know anyone who went to high school. Naked in *school*? Like *really* naked there? How could they...”

Tamara interrupted her.

“We’ll tell you more later, but yeah, that stuff did happen, and those boxes are from that time. Sam can explain about them. So Winnie, are you ready to do it? Gonna give it a shot?”

“I’ll get ready first and let you gals undress in private,” Peter offered.

“Um, Peter?” Winnie said quietly. “Tamara said that her first time undressing was with you and Terence also being in the room and I want’ta do it like her.”

Tamara smiled at her and said, “What we did then was to help each other, taking off one thing at a time. We can each take one item off together now. Want to do it like that, sweetie? Like tops off first?”

“Okay... taking turns?”

“I was thinking doing it all together,” Tamara said.

When Winnie nodded, Tamara began pulling her top off and Peter followed suit. Winnie looked at them and pulled her own top off. Their bras came next and Tamara smiled and winked at Winnie whose blush threatened to raise the room temperature several degrees.

Then the rest of their clothes came off and Winnie looked around the room distractedly, not knowing what to do with her hands.

*She’s a pretty girl, Tamara thought. Slim and wiry like a boy, jeez, look, she’s got six-pack abs! But she’s definitely shaped like a girl; nice boobies, they fit her body well.*

Tamara saw a look of distress begin to appear on Winnie’s face and went to hug her.

“It’s okay, Winnie; jeez, you’re trembling. What’s wrong, sweetie?”

“My ... my body looks like a boy’s, doesn’t it? Look, Peter’s staring at me. I’m skinny and have no shape,” Winnie began.

Peter came over and took her hand, interrupting her.

“Winnie, you look wicked awesome!” he exclaimed. “You have a spectacular figure—and you’re ripped too! How did you ever develop such awesome muscles? And how do you keep them?”

“You think so?” Winnie sniffled. “The girls at the home made fun of me...”

“They’re fools,” Tamara replied. “You’re a B-cup like me but narrower around the shoulders and chest. No one could possibly mistake you for a boy. Peter’s right, you have amazing muscle definition. In your arms, legs, and torso too. And you have a runner’s butt; it’s to die for. Wow, you really look awesome, sweetie.”

“How did you get that way?” Peter asked. “I worked my ass off to get in shape and need to keep at it to keep my own muscles.”

Winnie looked at him, up and down, and smiled. “Peter, you have a warrior’s body—built for fighting and speed, um, like I do, I suppose. Papa worked with me to teach me how to tone my body to make it strong, like a

warrior's. He said I should keep our traditions. Our people were known for their physical abilities and stamina and he taught me the old ways. Of course, the farm work helped lots. But he showed me how to do something called isometrics; he told me that doing that helped my posture and endurance because it stabilized the muscles and made them a little stronger too. But to really develop strength, he said, needed resistance, and lifting, carrying, and digging in the gardens helped with that."

"But how did you keep it up after you didn't have the farm anymore?" Tamara asked.

"Oh, yeah, Papa got me a set of rubber tubes—resistance bands, he called them. They fit into a little pouch. I would use them during the winter and when we didn't have a lot of physical work. And I was able to hang onto them even when I got sent to the group home, but when I escaped that guy, I lost them," she sighed. "But they let me use the resistance machines in my high school now, so it's good."

"Hey, if you want, we can..." Peter began.

Emma's voice came from outside the room, "You lot coming out? Terence and Barbara want to change now."

Winnie looked at Tamara and Peter and shyly asked, "You sure I look okay? I think I can face the others now; you both really helped reassure me."

Tamara held out the coverup and Winnie shook her head.

"I need to just do it," she told them. "Wearing that will just drag things out."

And with an expression of resolve set in her face, a nude Winnie walked to the door, jerked it open, and strode out.

## Chapter 81 - Holiday Festivities

Winnie, her jaw set firmly, marched down the hallway, walking so quickly that the others had to hurry to catch up with her and, as they passed Terence and Barbara in the hallway, Barbara shot a questioning look at Tamara.

“Later,” Tamara grinned back as she hurried after Winnie.

As Winnie burst out of the door onto the deck, sliding the screen door open with a slam, the others turned to look at the noisy interruption. And most of them did a double-take, really staring at her, open-mouthed.

Jay was the first to speak. “Holy shit, Winnie. What the hell were you concerned about? You’re ripped, gal. You must be on your school’s swim or track team, right? You must; you’ve got that kind of body and it shows it.”

Winnie blushed, pulling up short. She hadn’t thought past just getting her naked reveal over with.

“Um, no, Jay, it’s just me. I exercise to keep fit, is all.”

“No way... you do more than ‘just keeping fit’; getting that awesome muscle development like you have takes lots of dedication.” Jay insisted. “Tell me what you do to stay in such great shape.”

“Yeah, Winnie, I’d like to know too,” Peter said as he walked up to them. “You mentioned doing isometrics and using resistance bands; how did you use them?”

“Ah, that explains why her muscles are sleek like that and not bulky,” Jay commented, and then Terence came out of the house with Barbara.

Terence took one look at Winnie and whistled softly. “Day-umn, Winnie, Ah didn’t know y’all were an athlete too... Y’all’s super ripped. Y’all zipped past me in the hall inside so quick, all Ah saw was a blur,” he chuckled.

Winnie giggled, and blushing, began telling them about how she did her isometric and resistance exercises.

Tamara grabbed Barbara and steered her away, saying, “Winnie was awfully shy about stripping in the bedroom; that’s what took us so long in there. But look at her now; she’s glowing at the admiration she’s getting from the guys. She’s telling them about her exercise regimen and they’re just soaking it up.”

“Her body looks awesome,” Barbara agreed. “When we met, she told me that she’s never played sports. That body’s not from sports? She reminds me of some elite track stars I’ve seen photos of.”

“She just recently started playing volleyball. I’ve got to see if she wants to run with me,” Tamara said. “She told me that she used to run when she had the chance but couldn’t do it regularly while she was living in the group home. That’s when she ran at her middle school during P.E.—she told me her P.E. teacher let her run ‘cause the teacher could see that she needed the cardio more than muscle development or playing games with the other kids. She said that she ran around inside the athletic field fence or around the gym when it was cold. Hey, let me rescue her; the guys are starting to throw suggestions at her and she doesn’t look comfortable now.”

Tamara pulled Winnie away from the guys, saying, “You jocks are hogging this gal. She needs to talk to some of the others, okay?”

“Thanks for rescuing me, Tamara. The guys were telling me about the sports I should go out for and suggesting training regimens but I like the way I exercise now. But did you see how they were looking at me! And the emotions I felt coming from them were so positive! They weren’t making fun of me; they thought I look good!”

“I saw how they were looking, sweetie. Like me, they think you look gorgeous. Let’s hop in the pool and chat with the gals there. Hey, talk to Emma about *Emma*. The novel.”

Winnie giggled as she slid into the pool and gasped. “Oh, Tamara, this feels unbelievable! The water on my skin

feels silky, like it's caressing me."

"I won't say I told you so, but I told you that you'd like it, didn't I?"

Winnie turned and shot her the stink-eye.

They swam over to where Emma, Sam, and Abi were floating on some noodles wrapped under their armpits.

Abi pointed to the pool side, "Grab a noodle and join us."

Tamara got two and returned and she and Winnie copied how the others were using the toys.

"Emma, thanks for inviting us," Winnie said. "I was kinda nervous at first but I'm okay now. The water feels wicked awesome; this is so rad."

Emma smiled and nodded as Winnie continued, "Hey, I wanted to tell you this—I just finished reading Jane Austen's *Emma* a few weeks ago and did a report on it and Tamara said that you did a book report on it in high school too."

Emma chuckled. "Indeed I did. After reading the story, I so identified with Emma Woodhouse that I wrote how I had become like her. Remember how she organized her acquaintances to try to push them into what she considered to be suitable matches? How she tried so hard to be a proper matchmaker? I was the same way in high school, but not for that romantic rot. I organized people to try to make study groups so stronger pupils would help weaker ones. I do say that I was somewhat more adept at doing that than Emma was at making romantic matches."

The others laughed at Emma's description, and then Tamara told Winnie about how she had used *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* in her Clarke Scholar essay.

"Oh, I have a question, Emma, about those yellow boxes in your guest room..."

"Sam can tell you, it's her story to tell, innit," Emma laughed.

Sam described what the boxes were for and how she had gotten them, and the story kept Winnie giggling at Sam's madcap explanation.

"You did all that and got away with it too?" she asked, incredulously, when Sam finally stopped.

Abi and Emma looked at each other, nodded to each other, and said together, "She did."

"But I can't believe that kids were forced to be naked like that back then. How did the kids stand to do it?" Winnie asked.

"That's a long, long story, sweetie. Later, Peter and I can tell you more about that time, so hold off those questions, okay?" Tamara told her.

"Winnie, I'm curious about something from the time I lived in Alaska," Emma said. "In my high school, there was a fairly large number of First Nation people. I recall specifically about a dozen Athabascan families and several Inupiaqs families too. I remember those First Nations' names because after I left Fairbanks, I endowed a community foundation to give four scholarships for needy First Nation pupils to go to the University of Alaska. But whilst in high school, I saw that those children were taunted for their shabby clothing and also how their families experienced discrimination in the community, particularly in getting jobs. Did you face any discrimination whilst you were in school?"

"Emma, where I lived, everyone was kinda poor; we all scratched out a living. I think Papa was about the best off 'cause he had a state job that he retired from. Most of the kids in my grade school came from the nearby

hollers and no one had fancy clothes. I wasn't picked on and I'm pretty sure that I was the only Native American in my grade. All of us kids had to work hard to help our families. The middle school was larger and there were townie kids in it, but I was in the system then and had other problems to worry about."

"Hollers'?" Abi asked.

"Ah, I guess you don't use that word here. Okay, if you go on back roads in West Virginia, you'll pass by lots of hollers—they're roads that go into all the steep, narrow valleys there and the houses are jammed between the road and mountainside. Those are the hollers, those narrow valleys, and most roads in them are usually dead-end."

"You poor thing," Abi started to say as she hugged Winnie.

"Oh, don't feel bad for me," Winnie said. "I had a good childhood. Yeah, I worked hard—all the kids did, but Papa was very loving and taught me lots. And there were two girls living down the lick from us, only a half-mile away, so I got to play with them when we weren't working."

"Is 'lick' another West Virginia term like 'holler'?" Emma asked, smiling.

Winnie stopped to think. "Um ... it's, well, just a word? Oh, maybe it's another local word in West Virginia. When I rode here with Tamara, I couldn't believe how *flat* the land is here. Flat everywhere. Back home ... oh, sorry; this is home now ... the mountains go up and down and the roads have to wind between them. The roads that go through the valleys follow the runs, um, streams. Little streams are called 'licks,' and the roads along them sometimes have 'lick' in their name. I lived on Beech Lick Road. So maybe a lick is where the holler opens up enough so you can have a little farm like we did."

By now, everyone was in the pool and a few pool games were organized. The pool had a net stretched across it so a spirited water volleyball game began. Tamara's and Barbara's volleyball prowess was somewhat diminished in the water, which didn't allow for quick moves or flashy plays. Jay's and Terence's heights and strengths were great equalizers. And Winnie, while her 5-foot 6-inch height wasn't especially tall, she had very powerful legs and could leap surprisingly high. Her long arms helped her reach well above the net when she attacked the ball and her serves were so powerful that they were difficult to return. They played several games before people began tiring.

Emma had set the air temperature in the dome at a comfortable 78 degrees and the pool water was at 82 degrees, so when they got out of the pool, most people decided to remain nude to talk and relax on the lounge chairs set under a few propane umbrella-style infra-red heaters set around the deck.

Tamara pulled up a chair next to Winnie, who had stretched out on a lounge and was apparently working the muscles in her legs.

"Hey, looks like you're doing just great, sweetie," Tamara said. "Are those stretches you're doing isometrics?"

"Huh... oh ... oh yeah. After exercising, like the volleyball we just did, you need to stretch the muscles so they stay limber and don't clamp down. It keeps the blood flowing and flushes the lactic acid out. Actually I do them several times during the day and it helps me keep my muscles strong."

"I see that. Your body looks awesome and I think those girls who were ragging you were just totally jealous."

"I guess. Tamara? I see the other girls here must... um... shave their pubic hair? Emma's looks so neat; just a little triangle. The others are totally smooth but you and Barbara have a little patch right above..."

Tamara chuckled, "That's called a 'landing strip,' actually. Yeah, you are a bit unkempt down there, but since your hair is mostly straight and silky, it doesn't grow into a dense bush like mine would. See how curly my head

hair is? Think of that growing down there.”

“Should I shave it, do you think?”

“I think it looks really cute like that—maybe trim it shorter. With your ab muscle definition and hip shape, that straight, jet black hair looks kinda sexy—it draws the eye there, and that’s a good thing. Even though nudists say that they don’t think about sexual attractiveness, don’t believe that for an instant. They do think about it and appreciate pretty bodies, both boys and girls do. But in my experience, their appreciation stops at just enjoying seeing a nice figure. Otherwise they’re just creeps. And you’ll quickly be able to pick the creeps and pervs out.”

“Do you get creeps at the resort?” Winnie asked.

“One time Peter caught one and clobbered him when the perv tried to sucker-punch him. Last summer, they kicked one guy out who was making suggestive comments. And I was at a nude beach once and saw a few men—and a woman too—who wouldn’t stop staring. But they’re kinda rare, especially at the resort. If you go, there isn’t anything to be concerned about. And I’d wait on trimming or shaving off that pretty hair, sweetie. Maybe do a bikini trim on it. When you see the cousins, talk to them. Also, watch to see how the girls at school do their grooming.”

Winnie got up and stretched, then pointed to the refreshments table.

“Gonna get a water bottle, want one?” she asked.

“I’ll come with. I need to stretch my legs too. Winnie, I was thinking about getting back to running in the mornings again. I had stopped doing it when the fuss over the Nobels began and Janice told me I’d be safer not running. But now that the awards are old news, Janice told me that I could start running again. It’d be great to have someone to run with; Peter runs with me sometimes but he prefers getting his cardio in the pool. Would you like to start running with me?”

“Um, maybe. When would we get time to do it?”

“I begin my runs at 6:15 and do three miles, sometimes I go for five. I aim for 20 to 30 minutes and I take a winding route through campus and...”

“Um, you can do five miles in 30 minutes? Really?”

“I wish... well, getting there. I can do five in maybe 33 minutes.”

Winnie stared at her. “Papa loved to run and taught me. I remember him saying that five miles in under 35 minutes was an elite runner’s time. I can run that fast, but it’s a tough pace.”

“It sure is and that’s why I only do it once a week—my leg day, I call it. So if we run on early mornings like I said, you start school at 8 a.m., so you’d have time to shower and eat breakfast. Your trip to school is a half hour?”

“Yeah. A bit less. Sure, let’s try it. But remember, I need to leave for the bus stop at 7:20 to be sure I’m on time, like if the bus is slow. Say, when’d you talk to Janice? I miss seeing her.”

“Oh, just a few days ago. She’s reconnected with Cindy now and with Cindy’s dad. My dad too; she’s called him a few times to talk. And I’m gonna contract with her firm to staff my security department when our facility is built. I’m also hiring them to design the manufacturing facility security systems and Janice will be in charge of our account, so she’ll be around a lot more.”

They were standing at the table where some finger foods were set out and Winnie was making a plate with some veggies and dip for herself.



Winnie looked at Tamara. “Your facility will need security?”

“Oh sure. I saw what can happen when I was in Cambridge with Emma and those Russian thugs came visiting.”

“Yeah, you told me about what happened there, that’s right,” Winnie said.

With a twinkle in her eye, Tamara asked, “You’ve been nude for more than an hour now—how’s it feel?”

Winnie looked down at herself and blushed. “You know? I don’t feel any modesty now, so strange. The air feels good on my skin too. This must be what you meant, right?”

“Yep. I’m so glad you’re enjoying it, Winnie. Oh, I can definitely see how your JV volleyball play is helping your water volleyball play—even though most of the skills don’t translate. All of the water volleyball passing is just like setting is in land volleyball, right?”

Winnie nodded, grinning. “Yeah. With the water level at mid-chest, bump-passing is impossible, so it’s all just setting.”

“I saw you make some really good plays. You surprised a lot of people here,” Tamara told her.

She caught Barbara’s eye and motioned her over.

“You saw how Winnie was in our games?” she asked.

“Totally. Winnie, you’re good. That’s quite a wicked serve you’ve got,” Barbara agreed.

“I mentioned to you earlier that Winnie’s on her school’s JV team. She played in about ten games during their season in the fall.”

“Sweet, Winnie, good job,” Barbara smiled at her. “Hey, maybe at next year’s Superbowl, she could come and play.”

“There’s a thought,” Tamara grinned.

### ***Two weeks later: mid-January***

Tamara returned a phone call from Sam.

“Hi there, Tamara. Some news about Winnie,” Sam told her when she answered.

“Hope it’s good,” Tamara replied.

“It’s good; first, there’s not much there, but the police no longer need to keep Winnie’s items from the kidnapper’s car. She probably will want to get that property back. And her grandfather’s will has been probated, so as the executors of his estate, my firm now has title to their real property and we can access his bank account. Not much there, only about five thousand. But the state stopped her grandfather’s pension payments when they got notice of his death because there was no survivorship application. We got that started up and there’ll be back payments made. Our Charleston agent checked out the property. The house had been boarded up. He found out that the neighbors did that to keep vandals out. The folk who live around there watch out for their neighbors, apparently.”

“What’s the house’s condition?” Tamara asked.

“He didn’t go in, but from the outside, it looks reasonable. I’ll send you the neighbors’ contact info since Winnie might want to go to the house to see it and decide what she wants to do with it, and see if there’s anything she wants from there. The neighbors told our investigator that nobody’s touched any belongings in it. Oh, the taxes were in arrears so we cleared that with the county. Probate’s done, as I said, so now Winnie has access to her grandfather’s estate, such as it is.”

“How can Winnie get her stuff that the cops released?”

“It’s being held at the prosecuting attorney’s office in Franklin pending what we do. That’s the county seat and where the kidnapper’s car was taken. The prosecutor determined that her possessions had no real continuing evidence value except for her school ID card and they transferred that to the FBI. I could have one of our people get her stuff and send it on to her, or if you go to visit the house, you can pick it up yourself on the way.”

“Okay, thanks a bunch, Sam. I’ll talk to Winnie and see what she wants to do.”

At home later, Tamara told Winnie the news.

“So how do you want to handle this, sweetie?” she asked.

Winnie was both happy and sad at the same time, and answered, “Ooh, I’d love to see the house again, but it’ll be sad going there. And I’m really happy that I can get back my little poke too; I really miss the few things I was able to keep,”

“Um, ‘poke’? What’s that?” Tamara asked.

“Oh, that must be another West Virginia word,” Winnie smiled. “People call it a ‘bag’ here. My little bag of things I had in the group home. It’s all I had. Can we go? I’d like to see some of the folk in the holler again and let them know that I’m okay.”

Tamara arranged to take off on a Thursday afternoon and she, Peter, and Winnie would make the trip. It would take about four hours to get to the prosecutor’s office in the county seat and the house was about another hour further away. They stayed overnight in the same hotel in Harrisonburg where Tamara and Winnie had stayed, and on the following morning, stopped at the prosecutor’s office. Winnie got her bag of belongings and was very happy; one of the items was a little photo album with pictures of her parents and grandparents.

She hugged Tamara when she found the picture album. “I thought my poke was gone forever. Now I have my pictures again.”

They went on to Winnie’s house and as they approached, Winnie began pointing out some landmarks, including the elementary school she had attended. Sam’s Charleston contact had gotten the contact information for Winnie’s former closest neighbors, and Winnie had called to tell them that she was coming. When she arrived, several of the neighbors had already gathered and two men were taking the plywood boarding off the front door of the house.

Winnie jumped out of the car when they stopped and ran over to one of the men and hugged him.

“Tamara, Peter, this is Ben Parsons, the daddy of my girlfriends when I lived here,” she told them after bringing Parsons over to meet them.

“Mr Parsons, thanks for seeing that the house was looked after,” Peter told him.

“It’s Ben, and nice meeting y’all. Hell, on the lick here, we’s all like family. I knew in my heart that Nita would be back so’s we watched the place fer her. After the county took her, they didn’t come back fer anythin’ so’s we figured we should board it up till we heard som’tin’.”

The plywood was off now and Peter looked at the door. “Winnie, do you have a way in?” he asked.

Winnie took out her little purse. “I have a key here. I kept it hidden away ‘cause I thought I might have a chance to sneak away and come back home. But I never got the chance. There should also be a key in a fake rock on the side of the house.”

Inside the house, Winnie found a number of things that she wanted to keep. Several items were her

grandfather's, including a box of old diaries. Apparently her grandfather, and even her father, kept diaries. Winnie didn't know this and was overjoyed at the discovery. She had kept a diary herself and found it where she had hidden it in her room.

"Papa taught me to keep a diary. I didn't know that he did it too. Now I can keep all my diary stuff together," she told Tamara.

"You kept up with writing a diary?"

Winnie smiled and took a spiral-bound school notebook out of her "poke" and showed it to Tamara.

"I thought this was lost too," she said. "I kept it secret like this in a school notebook 'cause I didn't want to have the girls find it. They thought it was my schoolwork."

After a thorough search in the house, Winnie said she had everything that she wanted, and had decided that the house could be sold.

"I had good memories from here, but I have a new life now," she told the others. "Mr Ben, you know if anyone's in the market for a house on the lick?" To the others, she added, "Mr Ben's a part-owner in the auto shop out on 35-2 and hears the area gossip."

"Actually I do, Nita, but he cain't afford much. My son Ben Junior got hitched back this past summer; he 'n his gal live with us. He's got a decent job in the shop but money's real tight."

Tamara caught Winnie's eye and an unspoken message flashed between them.

"Yeah, Tamara, I know what you want to say and I'm fine with that," Winnie told her. "Tell him."

"Ben, I've become Nita's guardian and we call her 'Winnie' now, like her papa did," Tamara said. "Winnie will never again want for things that money can buy. She doesn't need the money from selling her old place and you and your family have been great friends for her while she was growing up. She's also told us about how the folk on your lick look after each other. You've watched over her old home like it was your own, too. I think that Winnie would like to ask you something, right, Winnie?"

"Yeah, Tamara. You talked so nicely about how all our neighbors care about each other. Anyway, Mr Ben, would you allow me to make your son a wedding gift of this property?"

Parsons looked pole-axed; he stared at Winnie and Tamara open-mouthed. "Y'all would do that, really? That's way too much—we can pay som'thin'; just not the amount this place is..."

Winnie went to him and took his hand. "Mr Ben, you and Missus Sally were so good to me when I lived here and Bennie was like a big brother. I would love to have him own my old place. But he'll need to get those vegetable gardens all weeded out and back working again!"

Parsons nodded, grinned, and they hugged each other.

"So do you think that Bennie will accept the gift?" Winnie asked.

"Fer sure he will," Parsons replied.

Tamara thought for a few seconds and then commented, "I think that all we'd need would be a quit-claim deed. Bennie would be responsible for things like taxes, transfer fees, title search, whatever."

"No problem, he c'n handle that," Parsons said. "I gotta call him and git him down here."

Tamara took out her phone and called her Charleston contact and spoke to him about transferring the property. As the estate's executors, they would handle the transfer, so Tamara told him to go ahead with the necessary

paperwork.

Bennie Parsons and his bride were a very happy and thankful couple as they greeted Winnie a half-hour later.

On their trip home the following day, Winnie was still on an adrenalin high.

“That was just an awesome time,” she gushed. “Bennie couldn’t stop thanking me and seeing his sisters, my friends Jill and Linda, was so nice. And everyone is so grown up too.”

“It’s been what? About four years since you saw them last, right?” Peter asked. “You’ve grown too, dear.”

“So they’ll get to have new lives, just like me,” Winnie sighed. “I love doing things for others, just like you, Tamara.”

“I won’t say I told you so, but didn’t I tell you that having money is most useful for helping others who are in need?” Tamara grinned at her.

“You might have said that a time or twenty,” Winnie smirked.

“I might have.”

~~~~~

About a week later, Tamara got a phone call from Werner. After they greeted each other, Werner had some news for her.

“We heard that starting in a month or so, large sections of US50 and some connecting roads between Annapolis and D.C. are to be replaced. Usually the old pavement is recycled by crushing concrete and grinding up the asphalt and reusing what they can. But the capacity of the current recycling equipment can’t handle everything that will be removed, mainly areas affecting the road sections where asphalt was used over the original concrete. The pavement is very old and separating the old material by grinding the asphalt off and recycling everything isn’t cost-effective. So they need a site to dispose the removed material and since we’re not charging a dump fee, we’ve been picked as the disposal site. We’re negotiating with the contractor now that if they send in crushed pavement—the maximum chunk size will be specified—and provide the necessary equipment to do the compaction and grading of the lifts, they can use the old quarry. Oh, a ‘lift’ is a layer of fill before needing compaction.”

“That sounds good—how much fill will they have?”

“The estimate is 600,000 cubic yards. With what we’ve filled already, that will get us to over 90 percent of where we’ll need to be, and the balance of the needed fill is already been contracted for—from other demo projects. The time frame for this fill dumping will end about a year from April and we’ll just about be filled.”

“That sounds excellent. And so does the progress you’re making on the properties nearby.”

“Yes. Three large parcels are non-producing agricultural, one is a sod farm, and two are soybean farms. We now have purchase options on all six.”

“Looks like my plans are starting to come together,” Tamara mused. “Perhaps in five years, that’s my hope.”

### ***Three months later: May and June***

Tamara had completed her research project in the middle of April and her committee arranged for a quick dissertation defense. She had completed the experiments that showed that her theory about dark energy was not only supported by the mathematics, but also showed that certain predictions made by the math could be confirmed by physical evidence. She was graduating with a PhD in physics in May’s commencement ceremony. She was preparing a paper based on her dissertation to be submitted to *Nature*, whose physics articles were

highly ranked in academic respect.

Terence was completing his first year in graduate school at Maryland; he had chosen the school so he could be close to Barbara, and because he was also able to secure a research internship with NASA-Goddard in nearby Greenbelt. And in June, Winnie finished her first year of high school with excellent grades.

And also in June, Tamara got a surprise from Denise. She told Tamara that yet another super-empath would be joining their group—actually this discovery was really Amelia's, who would explain what this was all about.

“So we'll be celebrating the end of the school year at our home; can you, Winnie, Peter, Barbara, and Terence come? Cindy and Tom can't be there but the rest of us will. Then Amelia will tell you her news.”

Tamara replied that they'd be delighted to come. Since Denise and Kevin's property was very private, they had declared their pool to be a nudist facility like Emma's.

So there was a nice-sized group present: Tamara with Peter and Winnie, Barbara and Terence, Amelia and Jeremy, and of course Denise and Kevin. A few minutes after Tamara and her group had arrived and changed into the recommended clothing, i.e., none, and came out to the deck to greet everyone, Denise asked Amelia to give her news.

Amelia laughed and commented, “This many empaths all in one area is gonna wreck the world's stability, you know.”

“I'm sure it will,” Denise laughed. “So don't keep them in suspense, dear; tell them.”

Amelia nodded. “Remember when we were back at the London embassy residence when we were talking about the Avery Program? Err, except Barbara and Terence weren't there. Or Winnie, of course. Anyway, that's when Denise told you how Jeremy and I helped change the curriculum to make it work better? Denise was gonna send a copy to your cousins' school, Peter and Barbara.”

“Yep, she did and the school got the new version and started it last year; Audrey and Eddie really loved it,” Barbara said.

Amelia laughed. “Actually they really got the new, new version, 'cuz of what happened just before Denise updated it for U.S. schools. So here's what happened. Beginning of the school year two years ago—this is a year before we came here—two kids in our London school couldn't do the Avery Program bonding exercises and ran out of the classroom at the beginning of the first session. The bloke, name's Tom, couldn't handle the emotional intensity of the bonding part, the rapport-building that's done at first. I got to meet Tom later that autumn when we began rehearsing a musical play and he was in it. Anyway, to skip over lots of incredible things that happened between Tom, his sister Lynette, Jeremy, me, and some other friends, he figured out something major about the Avery Program, a way to fix its biggest problem. [*Naked in School - Tom's Troubles*]

“Toward the end of that school year with Tom, we were brainstorming how to fix those problems 'cuz we weren't getting any help from the government powers that be. But Tom, with his negative experience and native empathy, had a whole different view of how he saw the Avery Program working with the pupils. He had an idea about it that he wanted to investigate, so he figured out a way to go through the bonding exercises with Lynette while hidden from the other pupils who were doing them at the same time. And he and Lynette went through the rest of the Avery Program, acting as if they were serving in a mentor's role. With his empathic senses, he learned things about the bonding sessions that everyone else had totally missed, too.

“What he finally worked out was something that turned the whole Avery Program completely around. All the parts are still there, but now they're done in a different order. Doing it Tom's way made teaching those classes a whole lot easier for the teachers and removed a significant problem about the participation of the reluctant kids;

he himself was one of those and figured out what was wrong. It turns out that he and his sister are emotion... I should say, empathy, dynamos. And they're coming here to study at Westphalia this autumn! Their names are Tom and Lynette Armstrong. They're such amazing people; I can't wait till they're here."

Denise broke in before anyone could speak. "I met them a year ago in the spring when the Brits brought me over there to consult on some issues that they were having in running the Avery Program. Amelia's right—Tom and Lynette are amazing people. Tom suggested the change—there were several of them—and they were excellent ones, actually. I presented his recommendations to their Department for Education and they accepted them. When the pilot school ran the program with his changes, they got outstanding results, not only for the pupils but also in their ability to train the teachers who were being introduced to it. And that latest version is the one that Audrey and Eddie's school used, Barbara."

"Um, this Avery Program thing?" Winnie said. "I heard that my school is looking into starting something like that in the fall."

Everyone turned to look at her.

"No shit!" Barbara exclaimed. "I'm gonna be in hog heaven if it does. If it's in a nearby school and all its developers are in the area too, I'm gonna have me a party working on a project to study it. Ah, a question. Tom's a Brit? Right? How come he decided to go to college over here? Jeez, there'll be two Toms here then, you know?"

Denise chuckled. "That's true. For names, we'll have to come up with something better than Tom 1 and Tom 2." The others laughed. "His family's Canadian, not British. Actually why Tom and Lynette are coming here is because of a couple of circumstances. Amelia's kept in touch with Tom and Lynette. What did he tell you, Amelia?"

Jeremy interrupted, "Yeah, before Amelia goes, she might not mention this, but you lot will think that this is bloody barmy: they're coming here straight from their honeymoon in Tenerife and..."

Now Barbara interrupted. "Wait, what? Honeymoon? You said they're brother and sister, I'm sure I heard. How could they get married?"

Amelia giggled. "Those two were married even before they took any vows. They were like a couple who were married fifty years, so cute. Actually, they weren't related until Tom's daddy married Lynette's mom when they were something like 10 or 11 years old. Lynette told me that she met Tom when their parents, who had been dating, became serious, and the two of them were strongly attracted to each other back even then. That developed into romantic love and when Jeremy and I met them, they considered themselves engaged."

"And their parents...?" Tamara began.

"...knew all about it," Amelia said. "In fact, their parents looked into any legal impediments to their getting married and arranged it after they graduated, as the two wanted. Since there was no blood relationship, it was okay, but to some people it might have been unseemly. But legal."

"Tell them the rest—why they're coming here, sweetie," Jeremy said.

"Yeah, the major reason is that Tom's daddy got a post in the U.S. He's a banking executive and an expert on international trade. He was recruited to be the executive vice president of the Inter-American Development Bank in D.C. Tom didn't want to remain in England if his parents weren't gonna be there, so he told me that he'd be looking at unis in the U.S. or Canada. He has a brother who just graduated from uni who'll be going to grad school in Canada. Tom's got top marks; so's his sister, so I told him to consider Westphalia and they even might offer financial aid 'cuz I heard that the uni wants to build up their international student presence. Both of

them are fluent in French and lived in Germany, so they know German too. So he applied here and the uni offered them scholarships and they're coming."

"What do they want to study?" Barbara asked.

"Tom's a maths ace," Amelia said. "He wants applied math, not research. And get this: Lynette wants to be a psychiatrist."

Kevin laughed. "I can see it now. Cindy, Barbara, and Lynette in a psych practice together. Look out, world." Everyone laughed.

## Chapter 82 - Planning for the Future

### *Anne Arundel County, Maryland: one year later: June*

It had been a year since Tamara graduated with her doctorate, and it had been a busy one. On the industrial front, she had selected her headquarters site where the manufacturing facility would be constructed. It was located west of Annapolis, fairly close to the resort, and had good connections to rail and highway services. There would be several buildings; one for offices; one for a research and development lab; and the plant facility itself. The engineering firm had completed the design and the construction would take about two years before occupancy.

Tamara now had a small staff of engineers and technicians working in a rented nearby warehouse she had converted into a small manufacturing facility. It was here where she planned to start fabricating small turbines, using a design which her engineers were developing for the Haiti facility to build when that facility came on line. When the sub-components needed for these turbines had been manufactured in Maryland, they would be shipped to Haiti where the final turbines would be manufactured for installation in Haiti. When the full factory capacity in Haiti had been reached, turbines would be manufactured to the specifications of Central and South American users and shipped from Haiti. Since Haiti was frequently hit by powerful hurricanes, Tamara's engineers were developing a "hardened" turbine facility to be installed in Haiti and on the other Caribbean islands; they were developing an installation design that would make the power generation facility as hurricane-resistant as possible.

During the late spring, Peter completed setting up a small engineering lab in the warehouse facility, and by June, he and Tom Emerson and two technicians had begun working with the contractile strands that Tamara and Dr Li Seang had developed. And the issue about the names of the two Toms was kind-of solved: when it was necessary to uniquely identify them, Tom Armstrong was called Tom-A and Tom Emerson, Tom-E, which soon became "Tomas" and "Tommy."

Tamara had set up two separate corporations in addition to her charitable foundation. One of them would function as a holding company and would handle the royalties and licensing agreements from Tamara's inventions, plus the contracts with the Defense Department, such as the versions of the maser she had developed. Other inventions they would license included the levitating coil to be used in transportation vehicles, such as in trains; plus her other devices like MRI coils, her chemical synthesis chamber, and the G-force bearings. It would also handle any pharmaceutical applications that her research would discover.

Her other company, AIWin Systems Corporation, was the research, development, and manufacturing arm for the electricity-generating G-force turbines, secure communications, and wireless power transmission, the latter joint with EEC Energy Systems. And she had added robotics and prosthetic aids, including the synthetic muscle fibers and miniature controls for robotics.

Winnie had completed her sophomore high-school year. Last year, as a freshman, she had competed with the high-school JV volleyball team where her usual position was outside hitter, a result of her speed, power, and quick reflexes. Last August she had spent the final three weeks at the nudist resort with the Winsberg clan and was now an enthusiastic and confirmed naturist. She had done very well in the resort's volleyball clinics, but since her high school classes began before the Volleyball Superbowl, she didn't attend the event, but neither did Barbara nor Tamara. In her sophomore year, Winnie had been promoted to the varsity team to replace its senior outside hitter, who had graduated.

Tamara had been working with Winnie over the past year and now Winnie had many of the same abilities in inducing emotion responses in others. She already possessed many of the basic abilities: for example, she already could "hide in plain sight" and also tell when people were not being truthful. And she and Tamara had learned from the investigation of the illegal group home that while Winnie was living there, her ability to affect



people's emotions had unknowingly had a major impact on the operator's ability to sell the orphans placed with her. That knowledge had come about six months earlier.

### *Six months earlier*

Tamara and Winnie learned from both Mason and Sam some things about what the investigators had gleaned from the group-home records. One very interesting fact was that before Winnie had arrived at the facility, most prior visits by a "client" had resulted in a girl being selected and leaving the home; this had happened at about a frequency of once per month. But while Winnie was living there, over a two-year period, only six girls had been selected, plus herself. When Tamara had learned this, she wondered whether Winnie had somehow influenced the selections.

"Now that I see that pattern," Winnie told her, "Maybe I did. When we had to appear for the 'inspections'..." she made finger quotes, "...I was sensing that those people were bad and in my mind, I was telling them to go away. But a few of those people, usually the couples, didn't have the really bad evil feeling that the others did. Those people did take a girl. But the one who took me—I guess I never had a chance to affect him 'cause he picked me from a photo. Did Sam tell you if they found any of the girls?"

"Actually I was coming to that," Tamara told her. "The six girls from while you were there—five were taken by couples and one by a single woman—have been located. They were made to serve essentially as domestic slaves for those couples and that woman; those people were all somewhat well-to-do. Before you came, though, the other girls from that home who had been bought just disappeared, and the investigators believe they were trafficked out of the area because there's no trace of the people who bought them."

"Does that judge or the caseworkers know who set that up?" Winnie asked.

"They won't say a single word, apparently, even when told that they could get a life sentence for kidnapping a minor. Even as an accessory to the crime, it's still a life sentence. Maybe they'll eventually talk before their trials."

Winnie thought for a bit. "When you were telling me about the Naked in School Program and how its national office was taken over by a sex ring, I'm wondering if these people were somehow part of that and didn't get caught..." she mused.

"Winnie, that's a really good thought!" Tamara exclaimed. "I'll mention that to Sam and she can let the investigators look at that possibility."

### *Present time*

Sam was on the phone with Winnie. "Winnie, your idea hit pay dirt about the criminals who were involved with the Naked in School scandal," Sam told her. "The investigators had run out of leads and your idea gave them a new direction to check. They found that there were a small number of people who had entered the U.S. legally who were thought to possibly be connected to that cartel, but no evidence against them could be developed. Then those people disappeared and had kept under the radar pretty well. But because of that scandal, the FBI began looking for the whereabouts of all foreign visitors from Europe and your suggestion got them to look closely at those who had traveled to West Virginia and the general vicinity of western Virginia. That's when they hit pay-dirt and got a break. About nine suspects are in custody now who have some kind of link to that group home. Also, several of the girls who were rescued from their domestic slavery situations have ID'd three of them as having visited the group home while they were living there. So good job, my dear; that was an awesome tip."

"So they didn't find any girls from before I came to that home?" Winnie asked.

"That's what I heard," Sam replied.

“So how about this? Did anyone think to show a picture of the lug who kidnapped me to the girls that they did find?”

“Oi, Winnie. Not that I heard, but again, that’s a great idea; possibly will give more leads. I’ll check. Gotta run, but I’ll see you guys at Emma’s this weekend.”

Tamara had been listening. “So you’re quite the detective, right?” she chuckled. “I agree with Sam. That was great thinking. Listen, we need to meet Peter at the dojo in 30 minutes. You ready?”

“Yep. Let’s go, then.”

About a year ago, Peter had convinced Tamara and Winnie to start judo lessons and Winnie, with the ‘warrior’ ethos her grandfather had instilled in her, had taken to it like it was second nature. Her promotion test for *nikyū*, the second-level *kyū* brown belt, was scheduled in two weeks; she had just one more level to pass before reaching black. Tamara was still working toward her blue belt but her sparring technique was driving her *senpai* crazy—in sparring, her lightning-quick reflexes and her ability to sense how her opponent would move allowed her to disengage quickly and thwart the attack. Her unconventional approach to break a full grapple and turn the attempt into a pulling match was not going to let her advance any further. She had to engage more, basically, and go through the *katas*.

As Tamara told her *senpai*, “I’m just keeping you from throwing me is all.”

“But what you do is a *shido*! Avoiding attempting a *waza*. Four *shido* in a row is a *hansoku-make*, a defeat. You must try for some kind of *waza* instead of dragging me all around the mat.”

Later, Peter told her what he had seen.

“Sweetie, you’re so effin’ quick, try this when you spar. Duck in under his guard, grab his left shoulder and right elbow, take a big step with your left leg to his right side, foot parallel with his, and lift his elbow as you move in. Then bring your right leg forward while pulling him hard against your hip using your grip on his shoulder, drag his right elbow down to unbalance him, and quickly hook his right leg with yours and pull it back hard. Bend down at your waist, keeping your right leg straight behind you while holding him firmly against your hip. He’ll go right down, won’t have a chance. That’s called *osoto gari* and it’s a basic foot technique. Here, let’s get into a grapple position and I’ll show you. Then try doing that with me.”

Tamara tried it and sure enough, it worked.

“Peter, you teach me better than Roy can, you know,” Tamara grumped.

“He’s teaching you the *katas* and techniques in the required order so you can learn them for being promoted. Judo is very formal and structured. Being a scientist, you should appreciate that.”

“You’re right. Okay. Next time I’ll engage him better. But I still hate being thrown down.”

“How far have you gone in the techniques?” Peter asked. “Has he covered all eight for your next level?”

“Um, yes... but I can only do maybe five of them reliably.”

“Sweetie, you’re actually making better progress than I did when I started. You started just a year ago. It took me two years to get to where you are.”

“Thinking back to what I saw that Amelia could do, it motivated me to learn,” Tamara said. “She told me that time in Cambridge wasn’t the only time she put down a jerk who attacked her.”

“No kidding?” Peter said. “Another time too?”

“Yep. The following spring, after school. She was at a pizza place waiting for Jeremy to get there and a guy tried grabbing her. She told me she didn’t damage that one permanently, though, like she did to that fake guard. She did a hip throw and that just got him knocked out.”

“She’s quite a fireball.” Peter agreed.

They got dressed and waited until Winnie was finished; then left for home.

~~~~~

That weekend, Emma had invited Kevin’s group, including Cindy, Tom (Tommy), Lynette, and her Tom (Tomas) to her home; Emma’s sisters-in-law and their guys were coming too. Tamara had arranged the day and she would be coming with Winnie, Barbara and the men. This was to be a special occasion—Tomas’ introduction to social nudism.

Several weeks earlier, Denise had called Tamara and suddenly became very hesitant to speak for some reason—this was completely unlike her. Then Amelia got on the line.

“Denise doesn’t like to talk about other people’s personal stuff and this is kinda personal, but I can do it, no problem, since we have permission,” Amelia laughed. “This is about Tomas; he wants to join in with everyone in all of our social activities, including the nudism ones, but he’s had a major problem with nudity since he was a youngster. And Tom’s experience with that Naked in School rot was kinda like Peter’s own Program experiences with it in some ways; although they both weren’t actually in it a week, they were both badly affected. Tom told me that he was deliberately chosen to participate, like Peter was specially picked too. But Tom had medical warnings in his school file about his panicking when being exposed to nudity. So when he got picked anyway and the teachers tried to strip him, he virtually destroyed the school’s office trying to escape them—you know how huge he is. He laughs about it now and calls himself ‘The Hulk.’ [*Naked in School - Tom’s Troubles*]

“As well, it turned out that he also panicked from just seeing others naked. And...”

“Whoa! Hold up there!” Tamara interrupted. “You’re going way too fast. You said maybe five or six sentences about Tom and now I have eight questions. And you haven’t even got to the reason you guys called!”

“I do rush into things, don’t I?” Amelia laughed. “Okay. When Tom was little, some big kids stripped him starkers and threw him into a pool where he almost drowned—he was hospitalized for a week. Apparently he got PTSD from that experience but it didn’t show up until a year or so later. He wouldn’t even take off his shirt at the pool or beach, no matter how hot it was. And nobody connected his excessive modesty to that drowning incident because, as Tom told me, he was able to go into swimming pools afterwards, even though he did refuse to learn to swim. The shrinks Tom saw to treat that modesty didn’t know that in Tom’s subconscious memories, nudity had become equated with death, or at least with drowning. And his simply seeing naked people had become a trigger too; it was a subconscious reminder of his near-death experience and he panicked every time he saw nudity. Does that answer one question?”

Tamara laughed. “Three, actually. So go on.”

“Hey, I’m on a roll. Now we come to his getting picked in the Program to strip off. Seeing the naked kids in school in the first week he was in school was turning him into a wreck, so his parents took him to a shrink who gave him some anxiety drugs. Well, turns out that a side effect of one of those drugs can be psychosis and that happened to him; he began getting dreadful visions and hallucinations when he saw those naked Program kids in his classes. Meanwhile, his getting picked wasn’t random; the head teacher had been told about how Tom reacted from just *seeing* nudity and he decided that Tom needed to be put in the Program to *cure* him of his fright over seeing naked kids.

“So the head put Tom in the Program the following Monday and Tom was called to the school office alone, after the other kids for the week had been called. The head thought that would help Tom, thinking that they’d ease him into stripping off because he could get starkers without the other kids around. There were two teachers in the office to make sure that Tom got stripped; that was done in some schools apparently. When the head sprung the news on him, that he was being put in the Program, and told him that he had to strip off, Tom froze in panic. So the teachers went to strip him and that’s when Tom lost the plot.

“Tom told me that he felt like he was fighting for his life against a deathly shadow that was coming for him and, while he was trying to escape from the two teachers, he trashed the head’s office. He told me that he threw chairs at them and pulled down a bookcase whilst trying to get out of that office. When he got out into the main office, he got trapped between a security guard coming in and the two teachers coming at him from the head’s office, so he couldn’t get to the main door. In his panic, he began throwing stuff at them—chairs, desks, file cabinets, computers, whatever he could pick up or push over, to try to bull his way out of there. He wound up throwing a chair through a window to climb out. He completely destroyed that office. How am I doing now?”

“All caught up, my dear. This is totally fascinating... did they expel him or punish him in some other way?”

“No—his folks had a solicitor meet with the head teacher and the school solicitor. His solicitor was great—he nailed the school officials to the wall, especially since the head had ignored Tom’s medical records which the school had on file. Doing what they did by selecting Tom, they ignored the medical warnings in his file, so the school and the staff were open to both a negligence lawsuit and as well, assault and battery charges ‘cause it’s illegal in England to force-strip anyone. Despite that barney Program law there. So Tom wasn’t punished and got exempted from being in the Program. But all of this info about Tom’s past is just background to the reason we called you. Tom’s almost fully recovered from his PTSD—when he learned why he reacted to nudity like he did, because of the near drowning, that allowed him to get some professional therapy directed at his PTSD. He’s almost normal now—still a bit shy about nudity, but that’s a normal reaction.

“Several times now Tom has hinted to us that he’d like to be more of a part of our social lives here and he’s mentioned our nudism. So, a couple days ago, Denise and I asked Tom directly if he really meant it and if he and Lynette really wanted to try out social nudism and he said that he did. So we’re gonna do it here at Denise’s place with the six of us, plus maybe Cindy and Tommy, but we thought that wouldn’t be much of an experience for him. Tomas needs to be with others he doesn’t know as well as us but who are quote, ‘safe people.’ That’s in quotes. That’s where you guys come in. We wanted to know if you guys would agree to come here and be with us for Tom’s unveiling.”

Denise broke in. “See, I knew that Amelia could do a much better job of explaining about Tom, right, Tamara?”

“Yep, she did good. I’m actually thinking that it seems to me that Amelia knows far more about Tom’s situation than a simple conversation with him about his experiences would explain,” Tamara said.

Amelia chuckled. “Wow. She nailed it. You’re awfully perceptive, Tamara. There actually is more to his story, but telling you that is up to Tom; that’s his decision. So what about your coming here to help us?”

“So I can do better than that,” Tamara told them. “Terence, Winnie, and I all got our feet wet—and the rest of our bodies too—at Emma’s Nudist Resort. Emma’s home is a haven for nudism outside of a full resort experience and I’m sure that she’d love to host you guys. She entertains nudist guests most every weekend in June and July. You know her sisters-in-law and their guys; they’ll probably come too. Would that be okay?”

“Err, I don’t see why not... You sure it would be okay with her?” Amelia asked.

“I’m pretty sure... I’ll find out and call you back.”

Tamara’s plan was okay with Emma; she was always delighted to host more converts to social nudism.

~~~~~

Tom and Lynette did just fine with their first nudist experience. Tom was a little shy at first, but when he saw that Terence and Jay, both being large physical specimens themselves, were nonchalantly chatting while standing around sans clothes, he vowed that he wouldn't be a chicken and went off to Emma's "changing room" and stripped. Lynette, concerned for him but vastly amused at seeing how he had suddenly become completely focused on getting himself undressed, followed suit. Or suitless, actually.

Later, Tom did tell Tamara about how it was Amelia who had found the key to his PTSD issues and started him on the road to recovery.

"I'm mostly normal now, thanks to her," Tom said. "She's an amazing person. The best time I ever had in high school was being on stage with her in that musical we did, too."

Then Jay came over and Tom and Jay began discussing Tom's cross-country racing season. Tom had tried out for Westphalia's team and became a member. He had reasonably fast times; his high-school best was 17:51, and in his college races, which were 8-K, he ran about 32:40.

Jay commented, "You know, guy, I'm still amazed at how you, as big as you are, can do so well in those long-distance races."

Tom chuckled, "I am too. But I've been cycling and running since I was 12 or 13. I started to get really big after that but I suppose my running muscles never got the message to slow down."

Jay laughed. "So you still cycle? There're quite a few cycling clubs in the area."

"Yeah, and Westphalia has a team too. Also, it's a club sport. I ride with the club when the X-C season's over."

"Hey—I'm being paged. Looks like Kevin wants me over there," Jay said. "Lynette's there too, so I guess that it's not private. Let's see what they want."

They walked over. Tamara was there talking to Kevin and Sam and Peter, Lynette, and Barbara were there too.

When Jay and Tom got to them, Kevin told them what they had been discussing.

"Both Tamara and I have had some vague plans to do something in basic primary education, possibly along the lines of how the Montessori movement developed. And Tamara has ideas that involve her brain research, looking at latent human capabilities regarding charisma and empathy. It also looks like ideas and techniques from the Avery project might become part of our plans, Tom, so your insights into the Avery Program and how it emotionally affected the kids could be very useful."

"I don't see how I could help, Kevin," Tom demurred, "but what do you have in mind?"

Tamara answered, "It looks like the vague ideas that Kevin and his posse had discussed with me back after the knighthood ceremony are coalescing now. I wanted to start a brain research foundation to investigate the brain's processing of emotional content and that idea's morphed into involving younger kids to learn how group dynamics help in forming empathy and charisma. In short, the question involves whether those characteristics are innate or are they acquired. So part of the plan is to establish a school, going from kindergarten through twelfth grades, where we can unobtrusively monitor kids' social development."

Kevin nodded, "The structure would follow the Montessori principles. But there's a real kicker of a difference—this would be a completely nudist school."

Apparently this was not a surprise for Sam, Peter, Lynette, and Barbara, who all nodded.

Tom looked thunderstruck while Jay laughed at his reaction. Tom was the first to recover.

He asked, “Why? What the hell, I thought that the naked in school idea was a big frikkin’ mistake!”

“Yeah, I gotta hear the reasoning here,” Jay commented, “but I see why you’re including me in on this. It’s my law firm’s connection to county governments and school districts, right?”

“You got it,” Sam answered. “Kevin, tell them what you told us.”

“Sure. To answer you, Tom, it’s that Cindy and Tommy, plus Cindy’s brother Roger, and Denise and I, have thought about what we’re seen in nudist resorts where families with young kids have been members. Also, Roger told Cindy that he and his wife Ayame have become close friends with a couple who grew up in a full-time nudist community and they went to a nudist school in that community. There are only two places in this country like that, where such a nudist school exists. From our personal observation, those of us who worked on the original Avery Program and who’ve kept in touch with us have seen how very well adjusted those kids are who’ve grown up in a nudist environment.

“We all know most of the talking points in favor of nudism. When people shed their clothing, their interpersonal interactions are more direct and intense, more open and friendly. We see that total strangers will greet each other openly and quickly can become fast friends. We’ve assumed that this happens because the wearing of clothing produces a psychological barrier—it’s the person’s armor against the hostile world. And the clothing people wear gives certain economic signals too. Designer outfits and dresses. Armani suits. Accessories too, like Rolex watches.

“The nudist experience raises a lot of questions about how people interact and there are no firm answers, just lots of educated guesses. The Naked in School Program was devised to make kids into well adjusted adults but it failed because nobody had any idea of the results of stripping away a person’s psychological armor without replacing it with a form of armor of equal strength. I believe that an equal-strength armor can be found in the openness of the freedom of a shared intense emotional experience. Shared experiences can forge psychological bonds between people and make them feel a certain responsibility for each other.

“Denise and I saw first-hand what happens when a person’s psychological armor is lost when we ourselves got thrust into the Program in high school. For myself, I reacted to the anguish I felt from the kids who got forced to strip; they reacted like they felt that they had become totally defenseless—and they did. Their psychological armor was gone. That’s when I got the idea that it might be able to replace their feeling of vulnerability caused by being naked with a kind of bonding by creating an emotional experience that would be shared with the other victims. The saying that unity gives strength came to mind. I thought that by turning the experience of making the kids get naked together into a shared and intense group experience, it could become a bonding experience, but only if a very strong shared emotional component was added.

“And somehow that worked—and it formed the armor that replaced the need for clothes. An intense shared emotional experience. It was enough to fortify the kids to be able to go into the school’s hall and be seen by everyone there. That’s what the Avery Program is all about too, helping people to learn how to develop interpersonal relationships through team-building and making emotional—that is, empathic—connections. A kind of social bonding.

“But true socialization really begins—this is when children start to become socialized—that happens when they begin school. And that’s the target time we want to start working with. And the nudism part is intended to remove the kids’ psychological armor which develops right about the same time as socialization begins—it’s a natural tendency, since it’s something material and tangible, rather than psychological, and much easier to just put on and then forget about. Does all of that verbal diarrhea make any sense?”

“Damn, Kevin, if you were in a courtroom arguing a case, the entire place would be frozen from that blizzard of snow you just spouted,” Jay grinned. “Sure, the general concept makes sense to me, even if I’m a recent convert

to the cause. Tom? What about you—you're the real newbie here."

"Kevin—you mentioned anguish in kids who had to strip and you turned that around with just bonding? How's that possible? I've seen the Avery bonding exercise in action and I wonder how it could be strong enough to overcome the fear and humiliation I felt in school with that naked program. When I was auditing the Avery Program from behind a screen, I felt ... ah ... discomfort and reluctance at some of the first bonding exercises but that mostly faded a little after the role-playing sessions and a cooperative attitude had developed in the group. But when I had to be in the classroom with naked kids in my first high-school week, I couldn't ... ah ... endure the emotional turmoil I felt from them, plus I had that reaction to seeing nudity itself."

"Sure, Tom. This will be a long explanation, though. Because of my insights and, I suppose, leadership about Program matters in my high school, the principal had asked Denise and me to be a kind of peer mentor for the Program group that was selected for the week following our own Program week. What Denise and I wound up doing was basically instinctual. She knew from her own experience and emotional sensitivity what those kids were feeling and myself, I could see how distressed a number of those kids were. We both immediately knew what we would have wanted under the same circumstances. Emotional support.

"It occurred to me that just about everyone in the whole school knew that I somehow had gotten an exemption from being naked—the reason for how doesn't matter right now—and I had spent my whole Program week clothed by wearing lycra tights and Denise in a swim suit—accommodations that I was able to force the school to give and the other kids couldn't figure out what was going on with Denise and me. We'll skip why we got the exemption; it's not germane. So if I showed those terrified kids that even I could sacrifice my exemption and get naked with them, it might help prove that there wasn't anything to fear. I sensed that by using my empathy for them and demonstrating my emotional support, it might alleviate some of their terror.

"In short, by becoming naked together with them, with Denise and I doing it voluntarily, it had formed a bond with the group, one of a shared experience. But it seemed to me that sharing the experience of simply undressing together would only form a weak bond that could be quickly lost after Denise and I were no longer with them. I realized that I needed to replace that weak bond with a bond having a very strong emotional content, and tie it to the others without my needing to be part of it. I already had half of the makings of such a bond—the kids' scary experience.

"You know how the rides at amusement parks are intended to get the adrenalin flowing? They're designed to give people an emotional high—from fright, usually—and a lot of people even get off sexually on those stimuli. Or think of haunted house attractions or horror movies. Well, the result of a teen getting naked with other teens makes for an awfully strong sexual situation, even if you're otherwise scared half out of your mind. I assumed that I could use that arousal, the scared kids' aroused emotional state, just like a scary roller coaster, and direct it toward the other kids in their group, the kids whom they would be intimately involved with during their Program week, and get them to form a group bond.

"So what I did—and Denise sensed what I was doing and copied me—was to show the reluctant kids that they were a unique group by inventing a special naked hug and using it with them. I told those kids, who were desperate for any emotional support they could get, that it was a special 'Program hug,' a unique naked Program greeting, and it should be used to support and encourage each other. We got everyone into practicing doing it with each other, and as a sign of how those kids accepted it—for the emotional support it gave—we even convinced the guys to hug each other!

"It had the desired effect; that sexualized hug created an instant bond among the group. It worked very much like the Avery bonding sessions but it happened very quickly in this case, since the kids were naked, frightened, vulnerable, desperate for emotional support, very suggestible, and emotionally aroused—they were now getting armor to replace their lost clothes. Their new armor came from an intense reliance on the support of the others

in their group and, as I was amazed to see, a kind of pride in how they had bonded with each other. It was almost scary to see how powerful—and dangerous—that messing with people’s sexuality like that can be, actually.

“So Tom, can you see how that could work to turn around someone’s anguish?”

“That’s some frikkin’ wild story, Kevin. But... um... I had a personal experience that worked almost the same way, so I think I can understand what you did. That was an amazing insight you had too. From what you said, then, I gather that the Program at your school wasn’t as bad as in others I’ve heard about.”

Kevin nodded. “It wasn’t as bad as in other schools, although there were some kids who didn’t get much help from that bonding. They were just too scared, or had other reasons, for that bonding exercise to help them any. A forced situation is always bad, no matter how much sugar-coating is applied. For some kids it was like a band-aid on a sword slash. That’s why I finally made up my mind to oppose the Program outright and worked to stop it in the schools.”

“Okay, then,” Tamara broke in. “Tom, Jay, you guys understand what we’re working toward here?”

Tom slowly nodded and Jay asked, “I suppose you want me involved because a number of my firm’s attorneys serve as the legal advisors for school districts in the nearby counties?”

Sam smiled at him. “Nailed it, dear. My firm isn’t into municipal and education law the way yours is. Anyway, Tamara found out something else this week to move this project along, right, Tamara?”

“I did. You guys know that my foundation bought this property, a former sand and gravel quarry that’s next to Peter’s nudist resort. They’ve been refilling the hole there for a few years, but I found out this week that it’s mostly filled now and with some additional preparation work, the site development can start whenever we want. I’ve had a consultant working on some plans. One is a school building complex to conform to the terrain we’ll be sculpting on the site—right now it’s mostly flat. The plan is for two single-story buildings with plenty of outside access. A lower school to grade 8 and a high school. And elsewhere on the site, a group of buildings to serve as a research facility for psychology and neuroscience. It’ll be physically and visually separate from the school. And the school will have an athletic area to be shared with the nudist resort.

“We’ve also acquired a sizeable amount of property in the vicinity around the old quarry site and resort and my plan is to build a gated community somewhat like the one in Columbia, Maryland. The difference is that this will be a nudist community and, of course, connected to the resort and school.”

“Yeah, Tamara always thinks big,” Peter winked at her. “This change to the area will be immense.”

“So how much land did you acquire?” Kevin asked.

“Just short of a thousand acres. We’re thinking of maybe fifty homes and a few common areas. Possibly a pool and clubhouse; it depends on how close a relationship we want to have with the resort, but the Allermans are receptive to a type of associate membership for the residents. If that happens, we’d help Ron expand, like make the clubhouse larger and possibly build a second pool. The high school would have a pool too. Indoor.”

“What kind of time frame are you considering for getting the school started?” Jay asked. “I’m assuming that the school would come before your research park.”

“That’s true; I’d start the research facility slowly and see what talent would want to work on the projects I have in mind. Then we could design a facility, rather than try to shoehorn research projects into an existing facility,” Tamara responded. “And I’d like to open the school a year from this coming fall. The permanent buildings won’t be ready but I have a plan to start before they are.”



“The next step, I suppose, is to put a prospectus together for the school project,” Kevin mused. “Our philosophy, description of the program, planned facilities, teaching and administrative staff, demographics, geographical drawing area—lots of things to cover. We’d give you the prospectus, Jay, and your firm’s lawyers can approach the state, county, and area school officials with our general plans. We have a tentative agreement with the Ed School at Westphalia as a chartering body and for a group of faculty to function as advisors and consultants. They view this as a very interesting project and want to involve advanced students in the school’s planning.”

The little group broke up soon after this gathering and went off to join the people playing in the pool. Tom and Lynette had a very good time for their first nudist excursion, and while he felt comfortable with the group at Emma’s, Tom told Amelia that he still was a little concerned about a full resort experience. So Amelia suggested that he do what Tamara and Terence had told her that they had done for their own first experience—start a day or two early and work up to his own public “exposure.”

So Tom went over to Peter to discuss his doing just that for when he and Lynette would be going to the resort.

Meanwhile, Winnie had gotten an idea she thought was awesome and found Tamara and Barbara to explain it.

“I want to invite my varsity volleyball teammates to come to the resort to play with the resort team!” she exclaimed when she got them both together. “Can we arrange that?”

## Chapter 83 - Mindspeak

Tamara looked at Winnie with a smile. “Just what brought on that idea, dear?”

“Well, I thought about how much fun I have at the resort and how much all the girls like v-ball,” Winnie said. “I thought that they’d like to have the experience too.”

Barbara laughed. “That’s a sweet thought, Winnie. But think about it for a second—they’d all need to be nude, right? How do you think they’d react to that?”

Winnie didn’t take more than a second to answer. “Well, we wear skin-tight uniforms when we play and they don’t hide much. Everyone strips off for showers afterwards. and no one seems to be modest...”

Tamara laughed. “Would they strip off for showering with boys around? Think of the showers at the resort pool, hello?”

“Well ... um ... maybe not,” Winnie giggled. “I’m so used to nudists now that I can’t believe that everyone doesn’t think like me. Still, maybe they’d want to do it. Knowing those gals, a few have no modesty. Maybe they’d think it would be a hoot to give it a try.”

Barbara grinned at her. “Okay, but there are some logistics to consider, assuming you get a few gals to try it out. They’ll all be under eighteen, so the biggie is getting parental permission. I can persuade Ron to extend a special rate to the girls and their parents too if they come. If a gal comes alone, the office needs a notarized document giving parental permission and designating a responsible adult. If they stay overnight, they’ll need a place—or at least a tent—to stay in. Still interested?”

“Oh sure. I think so. I have the cell numbers of the team. Coach too. I’m gonna call everyone and sound them out. Hey, is there a web page that they can look at to see what the resort looks like? I never thought to ask about that.”

Barbara gave her the web address and then mentioned the Superbowl and suggested that Winnie look up that site too and tell the girls about it.

Winnie couldn’t reach everyone immediately; including herself, there were ten girls on the varsity team. She decided to just contact the varsity members, not the JV members. Of the girls she reached, all were dubious but wanted more information; Winnie told them that she’d call them back on Sunday.

On Sunday morning, Winnie called her teammates back to invite them to her home to learn about the resort. It would be a tight fit, but Tamara had told her that anyone who wanted to come, could meet at their apartment. Tamara was surprised that just two of the team members had decided that they weren’t interested. Her coach had declined too, pointing out that if she attended, then the team’s participation could be construed as a high-school sanctioned activity, which could cause all sorts of problems. That meant eight girls were in the apartment, causing Peter to flee the place to maintain his own sanity.

Winnie had prepared well for the gathering—she had set up a video session with Barbara, Dawn Simpson, the Maryland v-ball team coach, and Naomi, one of the two college girls who had gone to the Superbowl with the resort team when Barbara and Tamara couldn’t. Winnie had her virtual guests tell the team members what they thought about nudism in general and what it was like playing the sport while nude. Their enthusiasm was evident and infectious and they answered a lot of the girls’ questions. After the video chat was done, Winnie and Tamara told the girls about their own experiences and Tamara spoke about her two appearances at the Superbowl.

Again there were many questions, but, as several of the girls there pointed out, their volleyball uniforms weren’t overly modest.

One of them laughed, “Yeah, wearing my bun-huggers feels like I have nothing on my bottom unless I twist a certain way. It doesn’t cover much.”

One of the other girls pointed out, “I think that athletes in general have far less modesty than other kids like the gals I see in the locker room at school. They huddle behind towels and rush to get dressed. I’m really intrigued at the idea of playing naked. Look at how they play beach volleyball—those suits cover almost nothing.”

Another girl mentioned the now-defunct ESPN *Body Issue*. “Remember how the female athletes posed for those pictures? Maybe that was just being exhibitionistic, but I think that they liked doing that.”

After a lot of discussion, and after what Tamara recognized as a lot of self-persuasion and possibly a bit of peer pressure, all of the girls agreed to do it.

Winnie was delighted and gushed about how much fun they’d all have. But, as she pointed out to them, the next step was to convince their parents. Winnie told the girls that, of course, their parents were invited to come too. That caused a bit of consternation for several girls.

“Uggh,” one moaned, “I don’t care if they see me naked, but I think seeing the ‘rents’ privates all hangin’ out there would wig me out.”

Most of the other girls were either amused or horrified at the thought of seeing their parents naked. Then the girls started discussing how to break the news to their parents. That’s when Tamara spoke up.

“Hey guys, I’ve met most of them at your games; they’ve been dedicated fans at your games all season and they know that you all have the potential of getting a college sports scholarship. So I think that they’d support you in any kind of off-season practice.

“Winnie, you’ll have to convince the parents that the resort is safe, you know,” Tamara told her.

“Ah, Tamara, since you’ve met most of our folks—could you talk to them?” one of the girls asked.

Tamara had each girl phone their parents and each explained about going to the resort. Then they turned the phone over to Tamara who spoke. It took about an hour, but finally the parents of five of the girls were satisfied with Tamara’s assurances of the resort’s safety—in fact, those five sets of parents actually said that they would go to the resort with their daughters. Five of the families had a younger child, three were boys and two were girls, ranging in age between 9 and 13. They were all going to come. Several girls had older siblings, but they chose not to go.

Two of the girls had parents who were more hesitant. Actually one was a single mom whose work as an LPN didn’t allow her to get to many games, so Tamara didn’t know her very well, and she didn’t know the other girl’s parents that well either. Tamara spoke to all three of those parents but they still seemed hesitant; they said that they needed time to decide. The meeting over, Winnie’s teammates left, and the final two teammates said that they’d work on their parents to get permission.

Several days later, Claire learned about Winnie’s volleyball plans and that there were a couple of holdout parents. Claire thought Winnie having her team come to the resort was a stellar idea, so she decided to call the three reluctant parents herself. She identified herself as the mom of Winnie’s guardian and told the parents that she was a part owner of the resort and a Navy officer, a professor at the Naval Academy, and could vouch for the safety of their daughters. She mentioned that four of the resort members were on the county police force too and that the resort was perhaps one of the safest places in the entire state.

The reluctant parents were persuaded by Claire’s comments and asked her if she could be the responsible adult for their daughters and she agreed. Winnie was in heaven; her idea was taking shape.

The first volleyball clinic would be on the second weekend of August and that was when the high-school team would be there. Tamara let the resort's volleyball team members know that they were going to have a big crowd. She needed to find accommodations for the team members, siblings, and parents so that everyone could stay for the full weekend and enjoy all of the resort's facilities.

The resort had three cabins available so Tamara reserved them. She decided that the rest of the beds would be in bunkhouse campers—using tents would be unwieldy and require too much additional camping equipment. The resort had a number of full-service camper-trailer sites available and Tamara reserved enough for the campers she'd need to rent. Since the Winsbergs were expecting a big family crowd and all of Tamara's friends would be there as well, the Winsbergs' lodge and cabins couldn't accommodate all of their family and guests too. However, their site had a space designed for a camper-trailer unit and, although it would be tight, two camper units could fit there.

### ***Beginning of July***

About a week later, Nadine called Tamara with news she had received from her Haitian contacts. The mystery person who was behind the organized gang violence had been identified and located. He was now in custody and the additional policing support from the Benin and Togo "advisors" was bearing fruit; the urban gangs were slowly being rooted out. Those in the rural areas were still causing problems, though, so the national police had begun to turn their attention to those problems. Haiti's police force was slowly getting rebuilt.

Back in Maryland, the construction of Tamara's permanent manufacturing facility was well underway with a projected completion date in the following summer; the headquarters building would take an additional six months because of the specialized laboratories that Tamara had specified to be included in its design. And the school site preparation work had begun; the rough grading of the landscape into gentle hills and dells had begun and topsoil was being trucked in to cover the exposed rubble fill. Soon landscapers would be able to bring in transplanted vegetation. The site design used a gentle hilly topography and a tree barrier to isolate the school building site from the research park area. For the social planning part of the project, the school, Jay had his law-firm colleagues contact the agencies that they worked for and they circulated the information about the proposed school project. A meeting of all of the interested parties was scheduled for mid-September.

~~~~~

All during the past year, Tamara had been working with Winnie to help her to develop her emotion-projection abilities. Now that the summer was here, Tamara had decided to use the weekends in July to try to see if Winnie could sense the world-energy entity that Tamara had found during her *kouche*. Since that experience, she had used her *pwen* skill in meditation to commune with the *lwa*, generally with *Ayizan*, but at times *Papa Legba* seemed to be the focus. But it seemed to her that after her *kouche* experience, her sensing the differences between the *lwa* had become blurred. It was as if she had developed an affinity for *all* of the *lwa*.

Now Tamara wanted to see if Winnie could also sense what she herself could, but it wasn't feasible to find a sufficiently remote place where they could tune out all of the emotional background noise of a highly populated area, so the best alternate to use would be the natural area adjoining the nudist resort. So every weekend in July, Tamara and Winnie spent the two days at the resort with Peter. On the second Saturday in July, for their morning run, Tamara and Winnie decided to take a trail which mostly paralleled the river for a distance but was rarely used because it was dead-ended at a marsh, but its end was further from the resort than any other trail. On the river bank close to the trail's end, the two runners came upon an open clearing with a large flat rock partially in the water. The area reminded Tamara somewhat of the waterfall glen near the cabin in the mountains. When they finished their run and were back at the cabin, Tamara told Winnie her idea.

"That big rock on the river bank?" Tamara asked. "Remember? That place reminded me of my retreat and a little waterfall and pool I found there. I told you how I connected with that world-energy being there. Want to try

doing one of our meditation sessions out there?”

“Sure... I felt something there as we passed by, Tamara. Something very old. Also, when I’m walking through the woods up there in the natural area, I sense ancestral spirits. So last week I looked up this area on the internet and learned that it was occupied for many hundreds of years before the white men came. For most of that time, the Patuxent tribe lived in this whole region and the nearby larger tribes included the Piscataway; they’re all part of the Algonquian peoples. That spot we passed must have been used for sacred rites. It had a special feeling to me.”

They showered and returned to the site. After they settled themselves on the flat rock there, Tamara asked Winnie if she still sensed anything like she had before.

“Just a feeling of peace ... And maybe welcoming too. I can sense the forest spirits when I’m in the deep woods; this is a feeling like that.”

“Let’s lay back and meditate then,” Tamara suggested. “Hold my hand; look at the clouds, and try to see the patterns that form in the air between you and the clouds. When I look in a special way, the patterns seem to start where the breezes move the leaves on the trees and spread out upwards.”

They spent a while doing that and then Tamara felt Winnie stiffen as suddenly she felt an unusual voice in her mind, a voice that sounded like Winnie’s.

“*What’s happening?*” it seemed to say.

Jeez, Tamara thought. *Is that Winnie?*

“Tamara?” Winnie asked aloud.

“Shhh, go back to where you were,” Tamara whispered.

A minute later, there was a definite *question* sense in Tamara’s mind so Tamara “poked” at that thought and responded, “*This is Tamara. Is it possible that you can sense this thought?*”

Winnie’s hand tightened again and a thought formed in Tamara’s mind, “*Papa told me legends of some medicine men and women doing this but the art was long lost. Have you really found it?*”

*Amazing*, Tamara thought and Winnie’s thought returned, “*It is amazing!*”

Tamara could even feel-sense Winnie’s emphasis. And suddenly, the energy not-voice she had heard during her *kouche* was in her head too.

“*Greetings, daughters,*” came the thought and Winnie jerked but didn’t let go of Tamara’s hand.

“*Yes, Awinita, I am real but not what the Algonquians regarded as the Great Spirit. The Patuxent, whose holy site you currently occupy, were closely related to the Algonquians. God, the Great Spirit, or the Bondye—that entity is as real as the entity now communicating with you and is a metaphysical construct which is made real by personal beliefs, so therefore also exists. We are pleased, Awinita, that you have achieved the needed sensitivity to connect with our energies.*”

A thought appeared in Tamara’s mind: “*Is this a dream?*”

She thought back, “*No: just listen—oops, wrong word. Attend.*”

Winnie “attended” and Tamara followed along while Winnie learned a few things about her ancestral forebears’ capabilities and Winnie even got a faint sense of a loving embrace that felt like her grandfather’s used to feel.

Soon, “*Now, daughters, it is time to return to your lives. Rapport will come easier in future need. Farewell.*”

And the “voice” was gone.

“*Is it over?*” came the thought in Tamara’s mind; Winnie had risen up to a seated position and was staring at her.

“It is,” Tamara said aloud, but in her thoughts, said, “*Can we now speak in our minds?*”

Winnie winced and then a big smile broke out on her face.

“Papa said this was something that only a few wise men and women could do but was lost countless generations ago. The voice told me that it was a secret tradition that came when they understood how to talk to the spirits. That must have been what we were doing, right?”

Tamara nodded and remarked, “I’m sure your version of what happened is better than mine, dear. When it first happened to me, I had no idea—but something like this is in your traditions, so obviously it’s real. And I feel something new; a feeling I never had before too...” she trailed off, thinking.

Winnie was alarmed. “What do you feel? Is it bad?”

“Um, no... very strange, though. It’s Peter; he’s worried and wondering where we are. Let me try to think at him...”

Tamara gathered her thoughts, focused on Peter’s image in her mind, and formed a thought: “*We’re near the river and returning. Twenty minutes.*”

Tamara felt a sense of “*Oh, good, thanks*” followed by a flood of confusion.

She giggled, “I sent a thought to him and I think he got it and now he thinks he’s gone crazy.”

Winnie laughed and they got up. Winnie did a complex motion with her hands over the stone, then got three twigs and three pebbles and placed them in a pattern at one end of the rock; then she stood up.

“I was thanking the spirits for the use of this place; let’s go,” she told Tamara.

On the way back, Tamara was lost in thought; one after another, they tumbled through her mind.

*This was intense... I was right; Winnie is very special... And she apparently has shaman training too... Jeez, I heard her—Peter too—in my mind...! Damn, I bet that’s how Barbara knew when Peter needed help—so Peter and Barbara must have the ability too... Wonder if it can be taught... Shit, that NSA guy was actually right; mind-to-mind communication is possible...*

The thoughts were tumbling over and over, each clamoring for a share of her attention.

*Does this mean I can read minds...? Can I speak in just anyone’s mind...? Is there a maximum distance...? Can I command someone in their mind—don’t go there, Tamara...! How does it work...?*

That last thought worried her. If she went off on that tangent, she’d never get to her list of priority projects.

*If Peter and Barbara can sense thoughts, I’ll bet that they inherited that from Greta... So she might have a latent ability... Maybe Peter’s a sender and Barbara a receiver...? No, Peter “heard” me and they both sense each other’s emotions... But I’ll bet that that’s just the tip of the iceberg...*

“Tamara? Tamara! Are you there?” Winnie was insistent.

“Oops, sorry, Winnie. I was lost in thought.”

Winnie giggled. “I could tell. Um, we need to keep secret what we do, right? Papa said...”

“Oh. Absolutely. My thoughts are all over the place and I’m trying to get them all straight. Jeez, Winnie, yes, I ‘heard’ that thought. ‘Papa said that knowledge like this could be dangerous.’ I ‘heard’ you send that. Listen, we’ll need to see if when we talk mentally, whether it’s a direct channel or if others can ‘hear’ too, right? Or, say, if there are others with the ability, can they listen in. So you’re right. Outside of those already adept, this needs to be top secret.”

“Tamara, can you tell what I’m thinking now?” Winnie asked tentatively.

“You asking if I can read your mind? No, I sense your close presence, but I don’t have any foreign thoughts. Can you sense my thoughts?”

“Uh unh, no, can’t. Maybe you need to focus and, ah, project it?” Winnie suggested.

“We need to do lots of testing, honey... ah, we’re here and Peter must have sensed us coming, ‘cause ... here he comes.”

They were still a few hundred feet away, coming up the trail and not yet in view of the cabin.

They watched as Peter came into view at the trailhead; he then ran up to them and hugged Tamara, then Winnie.

“You guys were taking longer than you said that you’d be, so I got worried. Then it got so crazy—you told me that you were returning and your voice was in my head!”

Tamara smiled at him. “That was real, darling. We had a mini-*kouche*, a version two-point-oh. I told you about the encounter with the energy voice—well, Winnie got her welcome now and maybe it’s related and maybe not, but we can speak to each other mentally too now. And speak to you that way too.”

“Damn, that’s so frikkin’ crazy, Tamara! How’s that possible?”

“Come sit down.”

They had reached the cabin’s porch and Tamara and Winnie, still holding hands, sat in the swing chair, while Peter pulled another chair closer.

“Darling, our mental talking is nothing new, you know. You and Barbara have been doing it all your lives,” Tamara said gently.

Peter shook his head. “That’s crazy; why do you say that?”

“It’s one of your own superpowers,” Tamara giggled. “Remember, we discussed that a few years ago? Think of how Barbara always seemed to come to you when you got in trouble, right? She *knew* you needed help. How? You *called* to her. Eventually she became so attuned to you that she showed up any time you were distressed—once even when you just had a cramp. Remember that? When she met Terence? Apparently there are bunches of people that can do that; they can call to others mentally. It probably has to be someone that they’ve made a bond with, I assume, but the ability is real. Hey, we want to try something. Go get a paper and pen, okay?”

Peter went into the cabin, muttering “crazy,” but fetched a pad and pen.

“Good... now write something weird on a page,” Tamara instructed him. “Maybe two sentences, but off the wall things. Nothing that I could guess.”

Peter scribbled for a bit as Tamara got up and walked off the porch a distance

Then she said, “Give the page to Winnie and let her read it to herself. Then, Winnie, think it to me.”

Peter handed the sheet to Winnie, who read it and giggled. Then she looked at Tamara and scrunched up her

face, concentrating.

Tamara laughed. “You didn’t have to make a face, Winnie. It came through loud and clear. Peter, you wrote, ‘Twas brillig and the walrus and the carpenter gyred with the slithy toves. Then the oysters gimbled on the wabe.’ Now that was *totally* weird. ... Peter, what are you doing?”

“Shit, Tamara, I’m looking for the hidden cameras. How did you guys do that?”

“She thunk it at me, is all,” Tamara grinned. “Say, could you ‘hear’ her doing that?”

“Hear her how? She didn’t say anything... Um... Damn, honey, was that you? What sounded like your voice suddenly said, ah, ‘The sun was shining on the sand, his boxes of clothes left on the strand. The loss of his clothes hardly mattered, ‘cause he’s a nudist, the Bellman nattered.’ That’s really funny—you came up with that on the fly... *shit!* That was in my head!”

Tamara clapped her hands. “It works! Peter, you can ‘hear’ me when I think something at you. Winnie and I can do that too. Now you try. Make a mental picture of me and think of something. And nothing dumb, like ‘Mr Watson, come here; I want you.’”

Peter laughed and screwed up his face trying; nothing happened.

Tamara told him not to try forcing anything. “Try it with a little emotional content; that might help. I think that the skill involves the limbic system, so emotions might help... *Giggle*... Oh, sweetie, that was so nice! I certainly will kiss you!”

And she did.

“So, Peter, you convinced?” Tamara asked after their kiss.

“It’s so crazy, but yeah, I am. This stuff is weirding me out. Hey, remember the NSA? If they get wind of this...”

Winnie laughed. “Peter, she already thought of that. This is top secret.”

“Tamara, what you did to twist Lewis Carroll ... Verses from *The Walrus and the Carpenter* mashed up with *The Hunting of the Snark*, making it rhyme, and damn, giving it a nudist twist too ... you’ve got one scary mind to do that on the fly,” Peter grinned at her.

“Hah, I needed to do something better to counter your own scrambling up of his *Jabberwocky* with *The Walrus and the Carpenter*.”

“Do you think that the people who you ‘powered up’ will be able to talk in their minds now?” Peter asked.

Tamara shrugged. “No idea. But Winnie told me that in her traditions, the wise ones—those who could speak to the spirits—had a similar ability.”

Winnie nodded. “This is so exciting—a lot of things that Papa told me were lost, but Tamara can still do them. So that means that my beliefs are all real,” she sniffled.

Tamara hugged her. “Sweetie, of course they’re real; all of your beliefs *make* them the reality. That’s why there’s no such thing as the ‘right religion’; *all* religions are ‘right.’ Just remember what you learned from the world-energy voice. And Peter, we can try the mind-speak with others but need to be extremely careful about keeping others from figuring out what we can do, or else the NSA *will* come sniffing around again. Say, Winnie, those twigs and pebbles you set out? What...?”

Winnie blushed. “When the spirits help, they must be thanked. The twig triangle is for ‘home’ and the pebble triangle represents ‘sky’ or ‘existence’ and can also stand for ‘spirit.’ My prayer was for thanks and the symbol I



made marked the place as a spirit home.”

Tamara nodded. “Our heritages have much in common, Winnie. My mom’s rites have many similarities.”

“Yes, Papa taught me a lot of the Cherokee beliefs and practices. Um, Tamara, Theresa’s family is supposed to be here now; I’m gonna go find her,” Winnie said.

She had met Theresa the previous summer and they had become friends. Mike was delighted that Winnie and Theresa had connected, because he liked Winnie too, while Winnie thought that Mike was fun to be with and she thought Mike and Theresa were so cute, acting like two lovebirds, always cooing together.

~~~~~

During late June and into July, Winnie was taking summer school classes, catching up from her missed year while she had been living in the group home. She had been doing a combination of on-line and in-person classes at her high school and after she completed her classes this summer, she’d have earned enough credits to be an incoming senior in the fall. She had also decided that she was intrigued by the parts of Tamara’s work which had extended into neuroscience. Winnie wasn’t interested in the physics that Tamara did; she wanted to concentrate more on brain structure and function—physiology.

Tamara and Peter were both busy on two fronts: Tamara on her APL dark energy research projects and on the manufacturing operations being developed by her engineers and Peter, on his doctoral control systems research and on the synthetic muscle project.

The projects in Haiti were slowly progressing, but Tamara had turned most of the development work over to a project manager in the country. Tamara’s consultants had identified a suitable factory site and her project manager had the contractors begun the site preparation work. The college engineering training programs were functioning now, and the country’s public safety and security were gradually improving. Nadine had used her windfall fortune to set up a charitable foundation which was getting ready to offer micro-loans to prospective entrepreneurs and her Haitian contacts were recruiting local Haitians to set up an office in Port-au-Prince to administer the program.

~~~~~

Late in July, Tamara and Winnie heard from Mason about the results of Winnie’s suggestion that her kidnapper’s photo be shown to the rescued girls.

“Hi, gals,” he greeted them when they both got on the phone. “I heard this from my Virginia contacts; a whole hornet’s nest got stirred up over there with that kidnapping situation and the FBI got onto this big-time when you guys caught that guy who took you, Winnie, out of the group home. He was indeed part of a human trafficking ring, this one wasn’t related to those foreigners, but the groups were aware of each other. Without going into a lot of detail, your kidnapper’s gotten some prison visitors. He’s had an attorney visit, working on the appeal of his prison sentence, plus two additional visitors who’ve been to see him several times. The FBI’s photoed them and some of the rescued girls ID’d their photos as having seen them visiting the group home.

“A lot of the details are still confidential, but it looks like the FBI’s got much of this case cracked. Looks like this second ring was paying some foster home operators for teen girls. They’d take only true orphans—not kids where a parent was incarcerated or judged incompetent, so there’d be no one to miss them—and paid off the social services workers, or sometimes judges or magistrates, to ‘lose’ the records or close the kids’ files on a false ‘adoption’ record. Or, in several cases, just claim that the missing kid was a runaway.

“The ring was working in rural areas, mostly in the Appalachias, and I heard that so far, several girls have been recovered. These had been trafficked to prostitution operations in several cities in Virginia, North Carolina,

Kentucky, and Tennessee. Obviously, you mustn't talk about this to anyone because the FBI operation is still going on, tying up loose ends now. I did get clearance to tell you both about it, since you were affected and provided the info that cracked that operation. I know that you will keep quiet about this news."

"Oh, that's really great news, Mason—thanks a lot!" Winnie exclaimed.

"Yeah," Tamara echoed. "It was really considerate of the powers that be to let you tell us about it. Do you think that if he should get an appeal hearing, would Winnie have to appear?"

Winnie looked alarmed at that.

"Very doubtful. Not with her minor status, first. And it wouldn't be in open court if she were needed. But the FBI has other evidence against that guy that wasn't used in his state trial. I wouldn't be concerned about that. Oh, and from West Virginia, the AG tells me that the involved people in that county were convicted of multiple counts of human trafficking, accessory to kidnapping, and endangering. All the remaining girls are in stable foster home situations now too."

"That's great news," Winnie told him. "Thanks so much, Mason."

"So I hear you've organized a big volleyball tournament at the resort," Mason said, and the humor was evident in his voice. "How'd you ever get a bunch of textile girls to agree?"

Winnie laughed. "I'm not really sure... Most were hesitant at first, um ... three of the girls were really excited about doing it and they helped persuade the others, I guess."

"Well, it should be a nice game, then. Good volleyball is fun to watch—almost like ballet, the way the women play. Graceful. The guys' play is mostly smash, slam, and bang, two, maybe three rallies, and point. Okay, nice talking to you; Angie and I will see you in two weeks."

They disconnected and Winnie hugged Tamara. "Thanks so much again for helping me. And those girls too; you got things going to help them too."

Tamara rubbed Winnie's back. "It was your own bravery and skills that got it started, dear. Now after what Mason said about your teammates—you sure you didn't 'help' them decide to come to the resort?" she asked, grinning.

Winnie frowned. "I wouldn't do that deliberately, Tamara. You know that. But maybe it was a 'side effect' of my desire? They were egging each other to do it, almost like dares. But both you and I wanted then to agree to do it, so maybe our positive attitude helped them decide. Hey—you told me once, when you started teaching me how to 'push' an emotion, that if it wasn't in someone's nature to do something, then they'd reject the suggestion. Didn't you say that?"

Tamara nodded. "You're exactly right. So that means that your teammates were predisposed to the idea, I'd guess. That's interesting. Well, as Mason said, that volleyball event should be fun."

## Chapter 84 - Gaining More Nudism Converts

### *Arundel Nature Society: mid-August*

Tamara, Peter, and Winnie had arrived at the resort on the Wednesday afternoon before their volleyball weekend for their two-week stay. Winnie's summer courses were mostly over; she could complete the remaining parts on line during the following week. They came a few days early because Tom and Lynette would be making their nudist resort debut and they planned to arrive later that day.

Tom had been "practicing" nudism at the pool at Kevin and Denise's home on a few July weekends, after he and Lynette had spent two weeks visiting their parents and brother. Tom had decided to go to Peter's resort early, as Tamara had suggested, as a way to ease into being nude with a larger group. And it would certainly be a larger group—Peter expected that most of his family would be there, plus Kevin, Denise, Amelia, Jeremy, Cindy, Tommy, and now Lynette and Tomas. And most of the varsity volleyball team and their parents and siblings. Tamara had needed to rent five bunkhouse camper-trailers to accommodate everyone; she had to contact three area dealerships to find enough.

Tamara had spent a lot of time organizing everything and not for the first time, had wondered if she should try to find an assistant, like a "gal/guy Friday."

*Emma gets by without one here, but she has her executives at Cambridge to run that operation, Marty runs everything for her at the APL, and the Physics Department secretary helps her at Hopkins, Tamara mused. I don't have everything in place yet with my companies and all my time is getting soaked up with all of this little stuff. I need advice. I need to talk to Werner.*

The only Winsberg family group that wasn't able to come this week were the Richardsons from Virginia. That meant that the combined Winsberg clan at the resort would consist of the four grandparents, eight aunts and uncles, and nine cousins, including Barbara and Peter.

Rounding out the crowd would be Tamara, Winnie, Terence, Kevin, Denise, Jeremy, Amelia, Cindy, Lynette, and both Toms. Between the house and the three cabins, there were twenty beds available but there were twenty-one Winsberg family members who'd be there. Not having enough beds for the family had also been a problem back before the three cabins had been built, too, so to accommodate everyone on the occasions that they all could be there at the same time, Peter's great-grandfather had installed a concrete pad and a service hookup which could accommodate a camper trailer on his site. Squeezing an additional unit in was possible, but it would be tight.

This week, counting all the guests, there would be 32 people on the site. That second camper pad was certainly needed this week so all of the extra people would have a place to sleep without having to use tents.

The high-school girls would need seven beds, five for their siblings, and ten beds were needed for their parents. Tamara had rented two large bunkhouse camper-trailers for the girls and their siblings, and she was able to reserve three resort cabins for three of the parent couples. Since the remaining two parent couples were close friends, they had told her that they'd be okay with sharing a two-bedroom, six-bed bunkhouse camper.

When Tom and Lynette arrived that afternoon, Peter met them at the office to help them check in because he figured that their lack of a permanent address would tweak Vicki—they had told him that they lived on campus at Westphalia. Besides, he wanted to tease her. And that's just what happened.

"But that's your college address," Vicki told them when she looked at their licenses. "Peter, why do you keep doing this to me?"

"Cause it's so much fun teasing you, Vicki," Peter grinned at her.

“Mrs Allerman, for now that’s our only legal address,” Lynette told her. “It’s the married student housing apartment at the uni; before coming to the U.S. we lived in the U.K., in London. We’re in process of moving off campus but we haven’t moved yet.”

“All right, let me finish setting up their records here then,” Vicki sighed. A few minutes later, “Okay, done. Here are your barcode tags. Peter, you’ll tell your guests about using these tags and go over our rules with them?”

“Sure. Say, you remember that Winnie’s high-school volleyball team and parents will be here Friday, right?”

Vicki nodded. “Yes, and that two minors without parents are in the group. Your mom’s already sent me the permissions for them so we’re all set there. At least you didn’t spring that one on me with no warning,” she laughed.

Peter led Tom and Lynette back out to their car.

“Okay, guys, here’s what we’ll do now. You remember that this is a *nudist* resort,” he emphasized the word, “and not clothing-optional. Nudity is required when conditions allow. But let’s get into your car and we’ll drive to our site; we’ll unload your stuff and you can strip there. Then I’ll need to bring your car back here ‘cause there’s no extra parking room at our site. Okay?”

As Tom drove to the site, Peter went over the major rules. Tamara met them when they pulled into the site. They greeted her and then she explained the complicated lodging arrangements to them as she showed them where they’d be staying.

“Peter gave you the quick rules rundown, right?” Tamara asked as they unloaded their car and carried their items into the camper.

“He did. This is an amazing place... so pretty,” Lynette said.

When they finished stowing their items, Tamara told them that it was time to get undressed.

“Get out the sunscreen and put it on; then grab your towels and come out,” she told them. “Don’t go anywhere without a towel. It’s to sit on, remember from Emma’s?”

Meanwhile Peter had taken their car back to the parking area near the clubhouse. In a few minutes, Tom and Lynette emerged from the camper.

“Say, where’s Winnie?” Lynette asked.

“Winnie’s off somewhere with her friend Theresa. That family lives in Frederick so they don’t get to see each other all that much—but she’s also keeping an eye out for the three bunkhouse units that her v-ball team and their families will be using. They’re delivering them later today. Okay, now I need to give you guys the tour of the resort. You got your sunscreen on?”

“We do,” Tom said, looking around uncertainly. “I guess I’m still not quite used to being starkers like this in public,” he chuckled. “I still have a wee sense of foreboding...”

Lynette looked at him with concern. “But it’s okay, right? No feeling of panic?”

“Oh, no, sweetheart,” he responded. “It’s like a memory of a bad dream and I can ignore it.”

Lynette relaxed and smiled at him. “I notice that you tend to use Britishisms sometimes, sweetie. It’s funny; it took you two years to start doing that in England but now we live here and it sounds odd.”

“I’m just slow, Linnie, what can I say,” Tom chuckled.

“Hey, don’t stop your British usage on my account,” Tamara laughed. “I like hearing it. Besides, remember how Emma sounds? I think you both sound classy when you talk.”

“You have a cool accent too, Tamara,” Lynette said. “It has a faint resemblance to Québécois—that’s French Canadian—and has a musical lilt too.”

“Yep. That’s the result of my speaking French and Haitian Kreyòl growing up. Here’s how Kreyòl sounds—you’ll hear the lilt. *Èske nou tout pare pou toune resort nan kounye a?*”

“Whoa—I hear some French usage in there,” Tom said. “Was that ‘Are you all ready for ... what? Oh, must be tour ... the resort something...’”

“Very good, Tom. Close. I asked, ‘Are you all ready for the resort tour now?’ The lilt is in a lot of Caribbean versions of English, especially in Jamaica. So let’s go.”

Tamara grabbed her towel from where it was draped on a nearby chair.

“While we walk, I’ll tell you about what I know, but if Peter gets back, he can do a better job.”

As they began leaving the site, Winnie came running up.

“Hi, Tom, Lynette!” she called. “Theresa says hello, Tamara. I was with her and her brother Toby and her cousin Marcia. Anyway, I came to put something on—the campers are being delivered in about fifteen minutes. Ron said I should wear something when I show them where to set them up so the drivers don’t get distracted and crash them somehow.”

Everyone laughed.

“So the drivers don’t have to get naked when they come in here?” Tom asked.

Tamara shook her head. “Contractors and repair people, government people like health department or police, they don’t. And when resort staff are working with them, they wear a cover-up or something so the visitor doesn’t get embarrassed.”

Winnie came out of a cabin wearing a colorful wrap and ran off. “See you guys later!” she called.

Tamara set off with the couple for their tour and saw Peter walking toward them, returning from parking the car. He joined them and they went around the grounds. Passing by the main part of The Meadow, they stopped to watch some pre-teens playing a spirited frisbee game and Lynette noticed Tom’s thoughtful expression.

“Brings back memories?” she asked him gently.

Tom nodded. “This is so frikkin’ different from back then...” and noticing Peter’s and Tamara’s curious expressions, he explained.

“Lynnie and I were thirteen when the family moved to Munich,” Tom continued. “Dad had been reassigned there by his bank. Lynnie and I liked to take bike rides—we still do—and we went to this park a few miles away from where we lived. I didn’t know then about the FKK areas that Germany’s parks had...”

At Peter’s puzzled look, Lynette said, “That’s the German—no, it’s actually the almost universal European term for ‘nudist’—stands for *Freikörperkultur* or ‘free body culture.’”

Tamara broke in, “Oh yeah, I’ve seen that term before. When they showed my high school the Naked in School orientation film, they had some quick scenes that the film’s narrator claimed showed how public nudity in the U.S. was becoming common. One of the scenes was a nude beach but when the camera panned, a sign that read ‘*FKK-Strandbereich*’ was visible for an instant. I realized then that the propaganda they were showing us was

fake.”

“That sign means ‘nudist beach area,’” Tom said. “The FKK term is used for nudism throughout central and eastern European countries and everyone in Europe knows it means ‘nudist.’ Except we didn’t then. Anyway, we were riding around this lake and saw a sign reading, ‘*FKK Bereich*’—I knew *bereich* meant ‘area’...”

He paused and looked at Lynette, who picked up the topic. “Tom still hates to talk about this,” she said. “We had biked into a FKK—a nudist area, and it looked just like this big lawn here filled with naked people lying out and playing sports. And it had a little beach down on the lake too. It was so pretty, just like this lawn, but Tom panicked when he saw all the naked people there. You heard about his reaction to seeing nudity when he was in school.”

“That’s right; I heard,” Tamara remarked. “Tom, so seeing The Meadow here and the kids playing on it, brought back that memory?”

She looked at Tom and he nodded at her.

“Yeah, but just the memory and not the panic I got, thank God. It’s so much better now. I feel a little self-conscious now, but nothing else.”

“How could you have survived in school then with the naked kids?” Peter asked. “For me, seeing the nudity wasn’t the real problem; it was sensing the kids’ emotional turmoil and terror, their humiliation and all that kind of crap. I suffered through that for over three years.”

“Peter, I hear ya,” Tom sighed. “In a way, I was lucky that the head teacher never bothered to look at my medical record and picked me for the Program at the beginning of the school year. I suffered for my first week but missed almost half of it, actually. I left school after I got sick at the Monday assembly and the next day, I only was there an hour. There was a naked kid in my first class. I went back on Wednesday all drugged up. But I had no idea what was taught for that week; it was a loss. Then the next week was when I got picked and, well, trashed the place. Because the head screwed up how I was selected, that let our solicitor essentially blackmail him and made the school exempt me—Lynnie too. He made the school officials forgive me for wrecking the office and forced them to remove our names from any future Program selection list because if they didn’t, he’d bring a negligence suit against the school and get the head and teachers charged with sexual assault and battery for attempting to strip me. And since that happened so early in the term, I didn’t have to suffer in classes with naked kids.”

“Cool,” Peter exclaimed. “Almost the same thing happened with me except that I didn’t wreck anything. Like you, I got out of it because of a legal threat to the principal; in my case, a state police official warned the principal that he and others too would be arrested if they forced me to stay in the Program. But tell me, how did you get out of going to classes?”

“Actually that was part of the blackmail deal. The head had to come up with a way for me to attend classes without me seeing nudity. My dad gave them the idea to set me up in the library and have the teachers send the class work to me, but the head teacher suggested something even better. The school had video cameras that they were planning to put in some classrooms for a pilot project to allow remote learning but they were still working out details. So I became the pilot project. They set up the cameras in my classes and let me try out doing the remote learning. It took a couple days for the cameras to be set up and then I watched my classes by video from the library.”

“So you didn’t have to see anyone naked then.”

“Right. The cameras were aimed at the whiteboards and I could only see the front of the classrooms—so I didn’t see the kids and didn’t see the daily nudity. I stayed in the library all day and ate lunch there too. For P.E. class, I

used the weight room with the teams so I could work out with a partner, or I'd run on the track outside—that led to me getting on the cross-country team. My brother suggested it so I asked the coach. He had seen me running and thought I did okay. So for that whole school year, I took all my classes from the library. So that's how I survived school there. For the next year, we switched schools and we met Amelia and Jeremy there."

"Did you have any problems when you switched schools to Amelia's school?" Peter asked.

"They didn't have the naked program in the new school," Tom replied. "Actually, they almost had it the year before we switched schools but Amelia and Jeremy and Amelia's guardians—Kevin and Denise—got it stopped. They brought the Avery Program to the school and it replaced the naked program."

Lynette laughed. "Sweetie, we did have that encounter with a kind-of naked program during the summer, though. Remember that cultural tour?"

"Yeah, right," Tom sighed. "In the summer before we started at our new school, we went on a cultural tour that kids at our new school who were finishing year ten could do. Mom saw the summer course description in the school's materials and knew that Linnie and I would want to do it. It was one of the summer programs that a lot of Brit schools offered for credit and a private company ran those programs. So we went. Our tour group traveled by train and bus and we visited ten European cities on the continent; we toured museums and art galleries; went to art fairs and concerts; and did a bunch of other cultural stuff. We then had to write essays about the attractions we visited, answering the topics that the leaders, who were our teachers for the course, set for us to write. That's how we got school credit for it, it was an elective class."

"Jeez, that sounds totally amazing," Tamara said. "I'm so jealous. You enjoyed the tour?"

Lynette nodded enthusiastically. "Oh, for sure. It was blindin' brilliant, Tamara. That is, until we got back to France toward the tour's end."

She looked at Tom and nodded to him.

He chuckled. "Linnie wants me to tell it. Yeah, we were on a train from Italy to southern France. Part of our tour was to be a hike in a national park area in the French Alps near Grenoble. It was scheduled to be for two full days and three overnights and the tour company provided the tents, food, and all the other hiking supplies. Linnie and I were kinda wondering how we would like it. We both love biking; hiking not so much. But just before we arrived at the Grenoble Eurostar station, Linnie and I learned that the kids in our tour group, back in the early spring when they had organized the tour schedule, those kids had all voted to do that hike naked."

Peter shot a look at him. "You're shittin' me... they could do that?"

Tom shrugged. "Could and did. Seems naked hiking is a popular thing in Europe; who knew? And the area in France where the hike was organized happened to be a popular naked hiking site. The kids going on the tour had heard from some of their mates about the fantastic time that they had while doing naked hiking with their families in Germany and Austria; they had seen the photos that their mates had taken during their naked hikes and they all got convinced that it was brilliant—so almost all of the kids voted to do the cultural tour hike naked too, and their parents were all okay with it as well. You know, public nudity in Europe is no big deal; there are naked areas on most beaches and in a lot of parks too. There even are hiking areas where it's actually expected that hikers will be naked. It even has a name: *Nacktwanderung*, and it's very popular throughout central Europe. Guess what that German word means. Oh, Tamara, I see that you know."

"Yep. Wow. Sure, it's naked hiking."

"Yeah. As I said, Linnie and I later found out that the park area in France where the cultural tour hike was scheduled is one of the most popular naturist hiking locations in France. Anyway, two of our tour group

members weren't very enthused about the nudity, but they were told that they could keep their kits on if they needed to. But just before our trip, they had apparently told the teachers that they would join the others and the whole group did the hike naked. Except Lynn timer and me. By the way, our friends on the tour told us afterwards that they had a smashing good time. I was just, 'Good for them.'

"So when I heard about the nudity, I freaked out. Lynn timer and I only found out that they were doing the hike naked when the teacher passed out the essay assignments. That was only an hour before we arrived at the train station and I saw that all the topics were about experiencing nature while naked ... yeah, Peter?"

"But didn't you know it was gonna be a naked hike?"

"Oh, right, I need to back up. Yeah, we didn't know about the naked hiking part. We weren't in the school when the tour sign-ups were done in January. We were accepted to the school in February and would start in the fall. Mom had asked about the tour but it was filled, so she got us on a waiting list. Lynn timer and I were added in April, two months after the deadline, because two slots had opened up. So we didn't know anything about the kids' voting to do the hike naked—we weren't going to that school then—and the teacher who was leading it didn't think to tell us that it would be a naked hike. Hell, they didn't even have our folks' permission for us to do it. So when I freaked when I heard about it, the teachers told me that I could keep my kit on if I needed to, but of course, with all that nudity of the other kids ... well, you know how that was."

"This is like a soap opera," Tamara chuckled. "Or a reality show—hey, 'Naked and Afraid.' Tossed out naked on a wilderness hike."

The others laughed.

"So what happened?" Tamara asked.

"Lynn timer came to the rescue with a perfect excuse for me to skive off doing that part of the tour without embarrassing me in front of the other kids. She went off to the side with the teachers and told them that both of us were very sensitive to the sun, so us being naked was not possible. And doing the hike clothed made little sense because the teachers had framed the entire experience around being naked in nature and all of the essay topics they had set for the class had to do with that, so if we were clothed, we couldn't write about it, of course. So even clothed, it wouldn't make sense to go with them. And that's what the teachers told the others."

"Very clever, Lynette," Peter said approvingly. "So what did they do about your missing that part, Tom?"

"They sent us on to Paris instead. That was to be our tour's last stop and the rest of our group would rejoin us there in three days. We were set up with two other similar tour groups that were arriving in Paris when we would; they were doing other kinds of cultural things there. The first group we joined, their cultural emphasis was on folk art, popular music, and the use of languages in songs and in common speech. When that group left Paris, we joined the second group, and toured some churches and cathedrals with them. We totally enjoyed being with those two groups, so we didn't lose anything by giving a miss to that naked hike."

"Quite a story," Peter said. "You think you could do a naked hike now?"

Tom looked at him and shrugged. "You know? I guess it wouldn't tear me up, but I don't think that I'd be interested in doing it. Clothed or naked. Why? Do you have something in mind?"

"So how about a naked 5K run?" Peter laughed.

Tom stared at him. "Crap, for real? When I started in cross-country at my first school—where the Program was running—I did ask my coach if there would be any naked Program runners. He told me that would never happen; the team members had told him that they wouldn't compete if they had to do it naked."



Tamara laughed. “Tom, he’s not joking and it is a real thing. Naked 5Ks are actually pretty popular now; there’s one scheduled here at the resort next weekend, on Sunday. Also, most of the cousins do a naked run every morning here; usually we go five miles, that’s 8K. The trails are great and running nude is wonderful—but I need to wear a sports bra. I have several basic ones, small but they’re perfect for the job. Winnie runs with me but she doesn’t need the support.”

“Really?” Lynette said. “She looks like she’s in a C-cup.”

“No, an upper B like me but her boobs are like rock solid. You saw how ripped she is. I’m not as tight.”

“Totally. She looks amazing, really. You too—your muscles have a nice definition to them,” Lynette said.

“Thanks. I’m following Winnie’s exercise regimen—been doing it over a year now, and we’re also taking judo. Helps my volleyball play.”

“Yeah, Lynnie and I are looking forward to seeing that game. You gonna play too?” Tom asked.

“Yep. Barbara and I will be on the resort’s team and we’ll play against Winnie’s team.”

By then they had passed the camping area, the pool and spa, and had reached the clubhouse. After a quick walkthrough there, Peter led them out and headed back to the family’s site. They were walking toward the sports area when they saw three large trailer units being towed toward the camping area. Winnie was walking ahead of them, pointing to where the campers should go. They briefly watched as the campers were moved into place and the drivers hopped out to level them and connect them to the utilities.

When they passed near the sports area, Peter pointed out the facilities there.

“Obviously the volleyball clinic and games will be here and you can see the tennis court over there. The two smaller courts where those people are playing are for the most popular sport by far here. You need to sign up for a time slot in advance to play—it’s called ‘pickleball’—ever hear about it?”

“No, that’s a funny name,” Lynette said. “Why’s it called that?”

“I heard the name came from crew racing,” Peter said. “What I heard is that the worst boat in a race is called a pickle boat and it’s crewed by people who no one wanted on their own boat. So its crew is those who got thrown together. A ‘pickle crew.’ Because this game has equipment and rules all thrown together from other racquet sports, like tennis, ping-pong, badminton, whatever, the people who invented the game thought of the pickle crews, the random crew collection, and that got turned into ‘pickleball’ for the game. That’s where I heard the name’s from.”

“Ha, that explanation is as funny as the name,” Tom remarked.

They were almost back at their site now as Winnie came jogging up, returning from the camping area.

“Hi, done with the tour?” she asked.

“Yep,” Tamara replied. “The campers all in place?”

“They are, but there’s a leaky shut-off water valve at one unit’s site. Ron’s fixing the valve right now. He told me that Barbara and Terence decided to come today and they’ll be here very soon.”

“Hey guys,” Peter told them, “about dinner. The resort restaurant is closed today, so if we want to order in dinner, we need to do it in the next fifteen minutes. The menus are back in the lodge. Let’s see what everyone wants. There’s a lot of choice—you can order from any of the three restaurants.”

They looked over the menu choices and Peter called the orders in. Then he called the office to tell Vicki that he

had placed their dinner orders directly and prepaid them using credit cards.

“I included the tips in the payments, Vicki, so just call me when the orders are delivered,” he told her.

Peter disconnected and looked at the others. “Okay, we’ve got three hours now before the food’s delivered. Want to go to the pool for a dip?”

They all agreed and while they were walking there, Barbara drove past them in her car. Peter called to her that they would be at the pool.

There were a few teens at the pool and a number of summer-resident adults, all who had cabins or campers at the resort. Peter made the introductions, and when Barbara and Terence arrived on the pool deck, they had enough players to organize a bat-the-ball-around water-volleyball session.

During a short break in the play, Peter told his sister, “I ordered dinners to be delivered at 6 p.m. ‘cause the restaurant’s closed today. I got meals for you and Terence—got Italian for you, your favorite, chicken Parmigiana. I wasn’t sure about Terence so I ordered him a porterhouse steak dinner.”

Barbara hugged him. “Perfect. Both for me and Terence. I brought sandwich fixings for us, but that’s so much better. So it looks like Tom and Lynette are doing fine, right? I want to talk to her about her college plans since she wants to go into psychiatry.”

“Yeah, they’re doing fine. Tom told Tamara and me the most incredible stories about their experiences, nudity-related. I’ll see if they want to share those stories with you guys and maybe others, but I’m sure that Kevin’s posse knows a lot about the two of them.”

Later, while they were eating dinner, Tamara mentioned to Peter that her premonition sense was tingling again.

“It’s like the feelings I was getting before we went to England that second time, sweetie. Like someone’s looking for me.”

Winnie leaned over to whisper, “Is that what I feel? It’s like when someone’s looking over my shoulder at what I’m reading. Very uncomfortable.”

“Peter, do you have any feeling like that?” Tamara asked.

“Not that strongly—but you know? The last two days, I’ve felt uneasy, like I forgot to do something but can’t recall what it is. Is that like what you feel?”

“My feeling is more creepy, like someone is looking for me,” Tamara said. “I’ve had this feeling a few times before, and it was always followed by a direct threat. Since Winnie and I both have it and it’s not as strong for you, I suspect that just Winnie and I are being threatened. And the most likely reason has gotta be related to that kidnapper. I hope he didn’t get out of prison, somehow, like on appeal. I’ll make some calls after dinner.”

Tamara called Sam first and told her about her concerns and Sam told her that she’d do some checking. Then she decided to call Agent Wilkins on her private mobile number.

“Hi. Mrs Wilkins; sorry if this is a bad time, but I’m concerned about something.”

“It’s okay, Tamara. If you’re worried about something enough to call me, then it must be important. Is everything okay otherwise?”

“It is. But you know how my family’s sensitive to problems that may affect us? Our, um, early warning system?”

“Yes, and it appears to be very efficient. Go on.”

“So the last few days, it feels like I’m being watched or someone’s trying to find me. My ward, Winnie, has the same feeling. She’s very sensitive that way, just like me—I think that’s how we found each other.”

“I’ve gotten the reports about how both of you have given the FBI enough information to take down two human-trafficking operations. Do you think that your feeling, unquote, is related to that?”

“That’s the only thing that makes sense. That kidnapper wasn’t let out, like on bail, or appeal, was he?”

“I’m certain he’s still incarcerated. He was charged under both state and federal law. He was convicted under state law and is still awaiting trial for the federal charges. I know that the investigation of that trafficking ring isn’t completed and it’s highly likely that everyone involved hasn’t been identified yet. Let me make some calls and I’ll find out more. I’ll call you when I learn something.”

“Good, that will help me feel better. I’m at my resort now for two weeks and won’t be near my phone; so when you call, use the resort’s number and they’ll give me the message.”

She gave Wilkins the resort’s phone number. After their farewells, Tamara went back to Peter and Winnie.

“Mrs Wilkins will find out what’s happening with the trafficking case. We’re very safe here, Winnie, and besides, this place is well under the radar as far as people knowing about it. Hey, where did the others go?”

“The Pavilion. Barbara heard that one of the resort members is running a karaoke session this evening,” Winnie said.

They went off to the Pavilion.

~~~~~

The following morning, Tamara and Winnie were beginning their stretches, getting ready for their run, when Tom and Lynette came out of their camper.

“We’ll join you guys,” Tom told them. “We both like to run. But doing it naked... that’s just weird, but I’ll give it a shot. Hey, I never thought about having to ask this,” he remarked, blushing, “but what do the guys do about... um...”

Tamara tried not to giggle. “The wedding tackle, right?”

Tom nodded, getting even redder.

“All the guys just run like that. Peter says it seems to just tuck itself in—he likes running free, as he calls it.”

“Where is Peter?” Tom asked.

“Oh. We have a tiny gym with free weights, resistance equipment, treadmills, and bike. He’s over there with Barbara and Terence.”

“Do you think I’ll be okay?” Lynette asked, cupping her breasts and pushing them in.

Tamara and Winnie looked at her and Winnie went over to her.

“We’re about the same cup size, Lynette. How firm are you? You’re really toned like me. Feel my boobs; they don’t move much when I run—compare how they feel to yours.”

Lynette pushed a bit on Winnie’s breasts.

“Damn—your pecs under them are like steel, Winnie,” she exclaimed. “Your boobs are firm, like mine, but my chest is much softer. I guess your pecs give you lots of good support.”

“That’s right, they do. Can I feel yours?”

Lynette nodded and Winnie cupped them and pushed up and down.

“You’ve got good muscles under there, so you’ll be okay,” Winnie told her. “No problem running today with your girls out, but longer term, if you want to keep running nude, you could consider wearing a bra like Tamara’s wearing. It’s small but has good support.”

Lynette glanced at Tom. “Okay, we’re good, swee... oh, you liked that, did you?” and she laughed.

Tamara and Lynette tried to conceal their smiles and Winnie breathed, “Ooo, so nice.”

Tom looked down. His penis was standing firmly and proudly at attention.

“Oh, shit! Sorry, I’m so sorry...”

He grabbed his towel from the chair where he had draped it and wrapped it around his waist.

Lynette grinned. “It is a blindin’ nice one, isn’t it? And he sure knows how to use it too.”

Tom’s face was scarlet now. “Lynnie, please. It’s so embarrassing...”

Tamara went over to Tom. “Look, Tom. You’re surrounded by gals and you’re still a newbie to being nude like this. That was a totally normal and expected reaction. I must say, though, you sure do have a nice one, but I will say that Peter’s peter is my absolute favorite.”

The others laughed.

She pulled off his towel. “Now let that big boy out; you can’t stretch while wrapped in a towel. Besides, it gives us something nice to look at.”

Tom groaned, but joined the girls as they began stretching, and soon his erection subsided.

When they finished their stretches, he asked Tamara, “Um... does that happen a lot? Uh, getting hard like that?”

Tamara shook her head. “You’ll find that after a day or maybe less, it just stops happening. Just before, you reacted to a sexual situation—two gals playing with each other’s boobs. That would get most guys going, I’d think. The younger teen boys here, now that’s different. They’ll get random erections all the time. So don’t worry about it. No one cares, as long as you don’t strut around showing it off. Okay, let’s go. Let me set a warmup pace first and then we’ll do a fast five-mile pace... you guys good for the five?”

They all told her five miles was fine.

“Okay, I’ll set an average of a 6:10 pace. When we hit the trail, if I’m too slow, let me know—we can try to go a little faster. But today I plan to set a fast pace; just warning you, 6:10 is fast. You’ll need to keep up ‘cause you don’t know the routes. Okay?”

When they returned from the run, Tom was winded and Lynette was dragging.

“Goddamn, Tamara, I thought we were in good shape,” Tom panted. “What was your starting pace, anyway?”

“Winnie and I do our fast-pace day running the first two at 6:00, then the next two at 6:15, and then push the last mile hard. I think we just ran 30:30. Winnie’s wearing a tracker. Winnie, what’s our time and pace?”

“That was a good run. It was 30:31.6 and a 6:06.3 pace.” She laughed, “I added the tenths to make it sound better.”

“Jesus...” Tom asked. “How accurate is that distance, anyway?”

Tamara answered, “Spot on. The resort had a race timing company out here to measure the courses when they began holding the 5-K race years ago, so the distances are accurate and our events are sanctioned.”

“Cool. Say, Winnie, do you have the three-mile split?” Tom asked.

“I have our 6-K time, the distance for NCAA women. It’s 3.7 miles. That’s 22:58 and 6:12,” Winnie reported. “Tamara’s pace is really consistent. Then she takes off and just flies on the last mile. Our final mile was at 5:46.”

Lynette gasped. “You mean I ran a 6K at almost a sub-six? I never pushed myself to see how fast I could actually run. Tom, does the women’s team have room for another runner?”

“There’s room, sweetie, especially with that time. In the women’s meets, the top runners are at 22:30 or thereabouts so you’d finish in the top three. That time in women’s is considered an elite runner.”

“That’s true, Tom,” Tamara remarked. “The resort’s 5-K event will be while you guys are here. Just to warn you, Peter’s cousin ran the resort’s 5K two years ago and ran 17:44. She was Pennsylvania’s X-C high-school state champion that year. She’ll be here and you guys can go head to head with her—she’d love the competition. When Winnie and I run 5K now, we’re usually under 18 minutes. Our best time is 17:49, so we’re doing really, really well, and I’m certain that Winnie’s much faster than me.”

“How did you feel on top while running, Lynette?” Winnie asked.

“I felt a little movement—not enough to be distracting. But running free like that, damn, that felt really awesome—no clothes chafing around the bottom and with the air rushing past, no sweating either. Tom, how was your package?”

“Huh. Tell the truth, I didn’t really notice. I agree about how that felt; I like running that way. Say, Winnie, Tamara, do you realize how fast you guys are? Winnie, you could be a track star with the times we just did. That time is an upper elite runners’.”

“I’ve been running all my life, Tom,” Winnie told him. “Papa said that running was in our genes.”

“And I started running when I was around eleven,” Tamara said. “First, it was therapy for a weak leg, but I found that I liked it, and I kept pushing myself to improve my stamina. Then when Winnie and I started running together, she showed me some things to help my form, and my times got lots better. We do know that our times are excellent.”

“Yeah, I could go out for cross-country but I like volleyball better,” Winnie said. “But the seasons overlap and I can’t do both.”

“Let’s get down to the pool area,” Tamara suggested. “We can shower off there and get breakfast in the restaurant. I think that the others will be there too; they usually spend an hour, sometimes more, on the machines.”

They met Peter, Barbara and Terence finishing up at the little gym and went in for breakfast. They were done with breakfast and Peter was showing Tom and Lynette around the clubhouse when Ron Allerman came out of the office and called Tamara.

“Thought I heard you out here. You have a phone call. Want to take it in the office?”

“Sure. I was waiting for that call. Thanks.”

Tamara took the receiver and answered, “This is Tamara.”

“Hello, dear. It’s Sarah Wilkins. I have some information and it appears that your incredible senses are working

just fine. The perp is still safely in his cell, but the Virginia AG's office has a serious problem. They've apparently got a mole in their office."

"Jeez. What happened?"

"They still have custody of your cell phone; holding it as evidence for a possible appeal hearing. But it's been tampered with now. Fortunately, you had a PIN to unlock the phone and the PIN was stored elsewhere. Someone got into the evidence safe and got the phone out and took it out of the sealed inner bag. They must have been interrupted, because it was found stuffed back into the outer bag; the sealed bag was empty, but the paper that contained your name and driver's licence number is gone."

"Jeez. How many people can get to the safe?" Tamara asked. "Isn't there a record of accesses?"

"Looks like they were sloppy. There's even a security camera in the area but it had been disabled and no one can tell how long it wasn't working. Everyone who had access to the whole area is being interviewed. But someone has your name and address now from your license number."

"Hmm, the address is my parents'. And their house has a gated driveway and it's fenced all around. But they might try to break in there to find me," Tamara told her. "A thought. Did the tampering compromise the evidence? And how many people know about this? If the kidnapper's lawyer knows and tries to challenge it as evidence, doesn't that show he has inside info?"

"All good thoughts, Tamara," Wilkins said. "Apart from you, hardly anyone was given the details of exactly what evidence was involved. And they did think of the connection to that lawyer. That's all I could find out, Tamara. You should let your folks know. Maybe they can get an alarm system."

"They have one. Maybe I'll get it enhanced."

"All right; take care, Tamara, and be safe."

"I'll try. Thanks. Mrs Wilkins."

*Damn. I think I'll call Janice Marks. Get her advice,* Tamara mused as she disconnected.

## Chapter 85 - Hunted

Tamara rejoined the others and Peter immediately noticed that she was upset.

“That was Mrs Wilkins. The FBI found out that the Virginia AG office was careless and now someone has my parents’ address, ‘cause that’s the address on my license,” she whispered to him. “This is top secret; you can’t mention it to anyone. They’re trying to use the info to trap whoever tried tampering with the kidnapping evidence.”

“Was the evidence compromised?” Peter asked.

“The guy was already convicted, so this might only affect the appeal. She said it was still okay. I’m going back to the cabin. I need to call Janice and get her advice.”

“Want me to come with you?” Peter asked.

“I’ll be okay. See, I thought that there was something wrong. I wonder why you didn’t feel it stronger.”

“Maybe it’s because ... um ... Shit. I have no idea, sweetie.”

When Tamara reached Marks by phone an hour later, she explained the situation.

“I don’t see this as evidence tampering. I think that there are two possibilities here,” Marks told her. “One is to find you for retaliation against you. The other might be to try to find Winnie to get her back. Or both, but the first seems more likely, since it’s your info that was taken. Or possibly to snatch Winnie to get to you. You still don’t have much of a public presence despite your fame, so an immediate concern is your parents—they could be a way to get to you. You need to call your folks to tell them what’s happening and ask Wilson to call me. I’ll arrange a time to go over there to evaluate their security. I recall that they have an alarm system—is it monitored?”

“I’m pretty sure the system’s monitored. I’d like to hire your outfit to watch over my folks, and Peter and Winnie until this crap is over.”

“I’ll have the office email you the paperwork. Let’s get this started as soon as you can. Now, do the three of you need protective services starting immediately?”

“I kinda doubt it; we’re at our resort for two weeks and someone who doesn’t belong here will stand out like a spotlight’s on him.”

Marks laughed. “Now that’s so true.”

They disconnected and Tamara called Wilson and explained what was going on.

“Okay; I’ll call Janice when we’re done talking and see if she can meet me at the house later today. And there’s no point in exposing your mother to danger—I’ll call her and ask if she can stay with the Winsbergs; Greta’s got the guest room and I’m sure she’ll help.”

“Dad, I’ve arranged for Cornelius security agents for you both too. You can take care of yourself, I know, so yours will be just shadowing you. Janice thinks that they might try to use you or Mom to get to me when they find out that I don’t live there.”

“She’s probably right. Okay, let me make some calls.”

Tamara planned to keep in touch with her dad during the next several days to be sure that his security arrangements were being made. Then she went out to find the rest of her group.

~~~~~

The following evening, Tamara called her father.

“Hi, Dad. Any news?”

“The security upgrades are happening. Janice came out yesterday and today, her crew was here beefing up our alarm system and putting in some cameras outside. And Mom is staying at Greta’s house for now; I’ll be checking our house daily but also staying with her.”

“That’s good. What’s with the cameras?”

“They set up motion-activated monitored cameras that will send an alert when triggered. They’re self-contained and wireless and transmit to a box in the house and that connects to the monitoring service. Since it’s all wireless, it went in fast. Janice also told me that our property has a good security profile. You know how the back of our lot borders on an active farm behind the woods there so no one can park back there and sneak in without being seen. Also, both sides of our property have no real place for an intruder to park, let alone hide, a vehicle. Someone would have to be dropped off and then they’d have to deal with the wetlands and woods and then that fence. Why the former owner needed a seven-foot fence with a barbed-wire topper escapes me, but that’s what’s there. The open areas around the house got those cameras.”

“She moved really fast getting that done,” Tamara said.

“Sure did. They also will have a roving patrol checking the property periodically while I’m at work.”

“That sounds good. So let me tell you what we’ve been doing here...”

Tamara gave him an update about her day and then called her mother and they spoke for a little while.

~~~~~

On midday Friday, Winnie’s team members began arriving. Scott and Claire had arrived earlier in the day and Claire was prepared to sign in the two team members whose parents weren’t coming. Winnie had asked that her people try to arrive between 2 p.m. and 2:15 p.m. so that she, Tamara, and Peter could give the whole group their orientation and tour together.

The girls began arriving at 2 p.m. and the parents got registered while Winnie spoke to the girls and their siblings. She asked the people who arrived first to wait in the clubhouse and pointed the girls and their siblings to the game room while she and Tamara spoke to their parents about the weekend’s activities. Soon everyone had arrived and Winnie led them all into the studio and Peter joined them.

“Okay, the fun part begins soon,” Winnie told them when everyone had settled down. “You can see from what I’m wearing what our dress code is here. This outfit is perfect for me. It’s always in style, waterproof, never shrinks or stains, I never outgrow it, doesn’t need laundering or dry cleaning, I can never misplace it, and it’s custom fitted. In short, it’s all mine!”

The tittering while she was speaking turned to laughter as everyone got her joke.

“And guess what? All of you have an outfit just like mine. Custom fit for you too.”

More laughing.

“Okay. Seriously. First, the resort has a bunch of rules that are designed to help make this an ultra-safe place for everyone. You all know Peter, one of our loudest fans at our games...”

The girls shouted “Yeah, Peter!” ... “Hi, Peter!” and similar greetings and he waved, grinning.

“So Peter, who’s one of the owners here, will tell you about the resort and the major rules,” Winnie finished.



Peter walked to the center of the group.

“How’s my favorite volleyball team?” he asked. “Ready to show the people here how v-ball should be played?”

The girls roared their approval and the parents smiled.

“Okay then, let’s get the serious stuff done and then we’ll take a tour. I saw Tamara going over the weekend schedule with a lot of you, so you know we have a good time planned for you. You all have the rules handout and each rule is as important as the next, but there are a few that I want to emphasize ‘cause they involve basic nudist etiquette and practice. Here we go... first, this is a *nudist* facility as opposed to a clothing-optional, or C-O, one. For nudist resorts, nudity is expected when possible. Our experience in C-O facilities is that they’re just like clothed, or textile, places, except that some people choose to be nude and some don’t. That can invite gawkers and that’s totally opposed to our nudist philosophy here.

“Second. Carry a towel everywhere and use it to sit on. No bare bottoms on any surface—except in the pool and spa. When you’re at the pool, we recommend having two towels, one to dry off and one to sit on. Third. Take a soap shower each and every time you go in the pool or spa. That washes off the lotions, bug sprays, and body oils and helps to keep our pool and spa water clean. Fourth. Absolutely no photography in the common areas, and no device capable of photography is permitted either. That includes cell phones. Keep them at your site or in the car. Fifth. Any smokers? No? Excellent. We do have some rules about that, so we’ll skip that one. Sixth. No glass containers are allowed on the pool deck, in the spa area, and in the Pavilion. Broken glass is a hazard for bare feet. And look at your copy of the rules for the rest of them. Questions?”

There were a few. One parent asked about photos of the girls playing.

“We can’t allow anyone to take photos,” Peter told him. “But one of our members is a pro and is our official photographer. He’s agreed to take some shots of the girls playing if you parents sign a release. The photos he’ll take won’t show frontal nudity—maybe some bottoms might show—and we’ll give you copies of them. Okay?”

That drew smiles from both the girls and their parents. One of the girls asked about wearing a sports bra while playing.

Tamara answered, “Hey gals. Check me out. I’m a large B-cup and I play without one. Yes, you can wear a sports bra, but take my advice—try it without first. I think you’ll like it.”

Peter spoke again. “If you have any other questions, ask them anytime. Now we’ll be going on the tour. We allow clothing in the clubhouse and in the parking area, but everywhere else, it’s all natural. So it’s time to change into your birthday suits now. We’ve got a little locker room at the other end of the clubhouse you can use or you can go out to your cars to change there. Go get undressed now and we’ll meet in front of the office in five minutes. Don’t forget a towel and grab sunscreen too—the sun’s hot today. Wear a hat if you want.”

They all left the studio and Tamara noticed that several of the girls and a few parents were hanging back, wearing uncertain expressions. She caught up to them and got their attention.

“Big step into the unknown, right?” she asked the little group and they all nodded.

“Well, you took the first two big steps already. The first was even considering coming out here, and the second, by actually coming. Those steps took enormous courage, you know. It’s totally normal to have some anxiety about being socially nude for the first time, like now. Getting nude and being with people you don’t know may seem like a scary experience, but those who try it are amazed at how fabulous the sun, breeze, and pool water feel on your totally bare body.

“The biggest concerns for first-timers are cultural—you’re not supposed to let others see you naked, and personal—body acceptance and self-image. Getting over the first concern can be tough, but you’ll find that

concern goes away really fast ‘cause you’ll be just like everyone else; nobody’ll even notice you. The other one? Everyone has a body; it only comes in two versions, after all, and it’s all yours—it’s where you live. So why should you feel ashamed of it? Positive body acceptance is a given among people who practice social nudism—for both their own bodies and those of others too. When you see how other people accept you for who you are, you’ll soon find any self-consciousness you may have will melt away after a very short time of being clothes-free.

“You’ve already taken the first two big steps. The next one is a much smaller one. I was scared my first time getting nude with other people too, but within a few minutes, I was just fine, and you guys will be too. And maybe in an hour, you’ll be wondering why you never tried nudism before—I almost guarantee that. Now let’s go; get ready, and you’ll have the most fun you’ve had in years. It’s time to shed the threads.”

“Without the dread, right?” one of the girls joked and they all laughed.

“Good one; gotta remember that,” Tamara laughed. “Now go.”

Much reassured after Tamara’s pep talk, the little group went off to get out of their clothes.

They all met a few minutes later and Tamara noticed that some of the other people—just a few parents now—looked uncomfortable. All the girls seemed mostly at ease, and their siblings were all raring to go.

“Okay, let’s do our little tour,” Tamara said when she rejoined them. “All you parents, I think that you guys are the best, coming here to support your girls. Girls, aren’t your folks simply awesome? Hey, just remember this time when you have a disagreement with them, okay?”

Everyone laughed.

“Some of us might still feel a bit strange,” Tamara went on. “But consider this: all your lives, clothing was your armor against the world and it defined your place in the world. But this is a whole brand new world, right here, and all the definitions have changed. Let your new armor become the friendships you’ll make with people who have embraced social nudism and your new place in this world will be defined by those friendships. So let’s go and meet your new friends. Peter will show us around.”

A number of the parents were nodding at what Tamara was saying and several went over to shake her hand, giving their thanks.

One of the fathers took Tamara’s hand and whispered to her, “This was really difficult for me but showing my daughter that I will do difficult things to support her is important to me. Thanks for giving me the emotional support I needed.”

“Seriously,” Peter picked it up with the group as he led them away, “if you feel uncomfortable or exposed, just watch how people greet you when we meet and that will tell you loads about their acceptance, okay?”

They walked around to the pool area and saw a bunch of pre-teens and a few young teens in the water. When the pool occupants saw the girls’ group entering the pool enclosure, they all came out of the pool to greet the newcomers—they especially wanted to meet the team members’ siblings—and some friendships began to be formed. Several of the younger kids wanted their new visiting friends to stay at the pool but were assured that they would be coming back after their tour. And the watching parents came over to greet everyone too.

One of the girls’ parents asked Winnie, “Is it always so welcoming here like that?”

“Oh sure. Peter tells me that among his parents’ age group, some lifetime friendships were formed when they were kids here themselves.”

While the adults were greeting the newcomers, a few older teens, who were just arriving at the pool, saw the

new girls and came over and soon there was a lot of laughing and happy conversation among that group. Very quickly, the team girls and their families were making a bunch of new friends. All of the group members were now smiling and relaxed as Peter finally got their attention, pried them away from their new friends, and led them off to continue their tour of the grounds.

Passing through The Meadow, Peter pointed out the cabins and camping areas and the units where they would be staying for the weekend. On their tour, they met a number of additional resort members. When they passed near the permanent sites, Peter pointed out the location of the Winsbergs' lodge and cabins, where Winnie would be staying, in case they needed her. Then Peter brought them past the sports area and mentioned their extensive trail network, showing them two of the four trail heads.

"The trail map is in your handouts and there are distance markers on these two trails, if you want to time your runs. We have a 5-K race here next weekend, on Sunday, and yes, it's a naked 5K. It's timed and sanctioned too, if you run and need the points. Okay, you've seen where everything's located. Dinner is in the restaurant from 5:30 to 7:30 and you can get sandwiches and snacks there till 10:30. Breakfast is from 6:45 to 9:30 a.m. but remember that the volleyball clinic starts at 9:30. You saw where you'll be staying and each cabin and camper has a space to park one car. So you can bring your cars to your sites now and set up your places as you want."

Tamara took over the instructions now.

"The two big bunkhouse campers can each sleep eight. So the gals on the team can take one and your sibs the other one. Or your parents might want to have one or more older girls stay with the younger people. The campers are right next to each other, so you parents might want to let the younger kids have a slumber party by themselves. It's really safe here, at night too. You can decide what you want to do."

Tamara and Peter left for their campsite while Winnie stayed with the girls from her team and, as Tamara walked off, she heard the girls excitedly saying how cool this place was and how much fun this weekend would be.

When they got back to their site, they found that just about the entire Winsberg family had arrived, only the Winsbergs from York were still on the road; they would arrive within the hour. Susan was coming alone this year but would be leaving Sunday, while JoAnne and Frank and their parents were staying through the following week, the 5-K weekend. Tamara wanted to actually race against JoAnne this year.

Winnie got back to the site just before the last Winsbergs arrived and got a very warm greeting from everyone. Then they all pitched in to put a dinner together.

After dinner, Tamara took Werner and Mason aside, and asked Peter to join them.

"Want to talk to both of you. You're my brain trust," she said and they laughed.

She first told them about her security problem, the threat to her parents and their home, and the protection agents she was putting under contract.

Werner responded, "Obviously your mom and dad told me about the problem and you do know that your parents are staying at our house now, until this gets settled. When your dad told me what was happening with you, I called Mason to let him know too. I also called Gary Lynch at the county police and they're doing frequent drive-bys now."

"So is our state police," Mason said. "They were contacted by the Virginia AG office to alert them of the privacy breach. I heard about that from the governor's chief of staff; the governor wants to be sure you're safe, but he can't formally give you a protection detail. So he's doing what he can. I'll let their office know about the private security you've arranged, Tamara."

Mason chuckled. “The Virginia people were open about what happened in the AG’s office—they want to avoid a lawsuit over exposing a source, probably. Tamara, that was a good idea to get the security company involved. Your dad told us about the cameras they were installing.”

“I can’t imagine why someone would take the paper with my license number on it unless they plan to come looking for me. I heard that whoever got into the evidence safe must have gotten rushed, so they grabbed the paper with my license number on it—they could have just copied it if they had the time,” Tamara commented.

“I agree with that thought,” Mason said. “So do the folks in the governor’s office. Peter, this reminds me of when you got put into that idiot naked fiasco in high school and how the governor back then reacted to what I told him that they had done to you and your friend. The current governor is well aware of your fame, Tamara, and is adamant that no harm comes to you. I told your dad to let the security agent who’s covering his property know that the state police want to be kept in the loop about what they learn.”

“I think that’s all we can do right now, especially since I’m here at the resort,” Tamara said. “But I hate to be a passive target, you know. I wish there was a way to be more aggressive and flush out whoever it is who’s looking for me.”

“I know the feeling,” Mason said. “And I can see why you feel that way. That’s your dad’s influence, right? Bring the battle to the enemy and the best defense is a good offense. That’s what a Marine would do.”

Tamara nodded. “Yep. Exactly. So to change the topic now, the other thing I needed your advice on is managing my time better. During the last nine months or so, I’ve been so busy managing details that it slows down the big stuff that needs to be done. I’ve got a manufacturing company being set up with a factory under construction; getting a holding company running; and managing a charitable trust. They all have partial management teams in place but somehow, people from each one need to call me every day for a decision or something. And email isn’t working well ‘cause I can’t keep checking it all the time.

“I also get a bunch of invitations every week to give a seminar at various universities and they need responses. I’m also still getting interview requests from media and press. My department gave me a physics course to teach last academic year and I was getting calls and emails from my students who weren’t able to get to see me during my office hours. And even doing my own personal jobs, like arranging to rent those camper trailers, has been taking time out of my day. I think that a personal assistant can help me by handling a lot of this stuff; all I’d need to do is tell him or her what I wanted and they’d get the job done. How do you find someone like that? That kind of job takes special skills.”

Mason smiled, nodding, as Werner answered, “You’re absolutely correct about it needing special skills. People like Mason and I have to network to find folks who’d be a good PA. Mason, do you have any potential candidates in your organization that don’t have a principal to work for? I have one person, an admin assistant, who could be a candidate, but I can’t use his skills; I have nowhere with more responsibility to put him.”

“There’s one gal, possibly two, in my analysis group. They both are looking for more responsibility and I fear that if I can’t give them a position like that, they’ll look elsewhere. But if one of them goes with Tamara, it wouldn’t be like I’d be losing them. Tamara, you mentioned a ‘partial management team.’ Where’s your organizational structure at right now?”

“The holding company has an executive director and an attorney on retainer. That’s all we need there right now. The foundation has a director and a board. Oh, they have secretaries, too. The manufacturing outfit, AlWin Systems Corporation, now has a board—I’m the chair and CEO, I have a COO and a gal who’s kind of an operations director who’s currently managing the construction contractors and equipment installation. She’ll be the director of manufacturing when we start operations. And before we’re ready to do that, I’ll need a HR staff and people to run the business office too. Oh yeah. I’ve contracted with Janice Marks’ company to staff the

security department.”

“When do you plan to start hiring?” Werner asked.

“Maybe three months. I think we’re six months away from any fabrication work,” Tamara said.

“Sounds to me like your manufacturing operation needs an on-site rep for the CEO, you,” Mason said and Werner nodded. “You won’t be there all the time, obviously and...”

Tamara interrupted, “Of course! That’s what Emma’s done in her energy company. Emma’s rep there is her executive assistant and she and the CEO handle the day-to-day operations.”

“I see the need for two PA-type people with you, at least, Tamara,” Mason said. “Who does your COO use for a staff assistant?”

“No one now; not enough work yet. He has a secretary to do the details.”

“Well, when things start moving, and especially when you start adding staff, you’ll quickly find out that you’ll need an executive assistant type person to handle the basic operational decisions. The COO will be involved in overall planning and management,” Werner pointed out. “And a second PA-type person would be yours for all your other detail work. You might find out that you’ll need a third executive assistant at one of the other organizations too.”

“I’m sure that within the next several weeks, your COO will be asking you to recruit an executive assistant, given what you told us about the frequent phone calls,” Mason said. “That person will be essential when you begin recruiting for managers, supervisors, and other factory personnel. I recall that you have a small engineering staff already at work in a rented space, right?”

“I do. I guess that I’m managing them too.”

“There you go... you’ve got too many things going on to keep effective track of everything. I do think that one of the admins in my organization would work well with you since I don’t have anything challenging for her abilities. I see her as a good personal executive assistant rather than as a management type.”

“And I mentioned that guy in one of my divisions whose talents are very underutilized,” Werner said. “He’s the division director’s assistant and in a coming reorganization as I transition the company, that job will disappear. I think he’d work well as an executive assistant in a manufacturing operation. Would you like to explore this further after our vacation, Tamara?”

“I would. I knew that you both could help me, so thanks. I’m so used to doing things myself that it’s hard to think about delegating tasks. I suppose that I’ll need to learn how to manage people now, the way I learned to manage my time.”

Peter broke in for the first time. “Honey, I’ve seen how you work with Betty, Saul, and the others at the APL and your company engineers too. They’re actually your employees, not just colleagues, even though that’s how you treat them, you know. You’ll do just fine with a PA person.”

“Say, we all done? Good, let’s go listen to the music at the Pavilion,” Mason said. “They’ve got a nice group in to play this evening.”

~~~~~

The following morning, When Tamara and Winnie went out to prepare for their run, virtually the whole girls’ team came out to run too. The previous day, Winnie had suggested to them that they join the cousins on their morning run. As the group began their stretches, Tom and Lynette, and then most of the cousins, began to

appear.

When they finished, JoAnne went over to Tamara.

“Barbara tells me that you and Winnie did an 8-K in 30:30 on Thursday. You do know that that’s a fantastic time?” JoAnne said.

“I do. And repeating that kind of run is off today’s menu. Winnie and I do our all-out runs every third day or thereabouts; we don’t want to kill ourselves with overtraining,” Tamara told her.

“Makes sense. Winnie, you could be a star in high school, you know, with those times.”

Winnie had come over and was grinning at JoAnne. “X-C interferes with volleyball, JoAnne, but yes, I know my running times are tops. Say, everyone’s stretched, so let’s go. Big crowd to run this morning.”

JoAnne asked Tamara, “Want to set the pace? I’m up for an easier run this morning too.”

“Sure. How’s 6:35 to 6:45 sound?”

“That would be, um, 33, maybe 34 minutes? Sounds good,” JoAnne replied.

Tom drifted over as they started to jog. “You’re not gonna set a killer pace today, right?”

Tamara grinned at him. “It’ll be like yesterday, we’ll do 6:35 again. We did 6:00 to start on Thursday.”

“Thank God,” Tom smiled. “That’s good.”

When they got back, it was the volleyball girls who were looking haggard.

“Shit, Winnie,” one complained, “we’re not training for a race, you know.”

“Pussycat... that’s my usual run, 33 to 34 minutes, but you should know, every three-four days or so, Tamara and I try to go for 30 minutes. Maintaining that level of conditioning is great to keep up your stamina for those long games. ... Hey, team—let’s jog off to the showers and then hit the breakfast bar. The v-ball clinic starts in an hour or so.”

There were a few groans and grumbles, but the group did jog off.

JoAnne turned to Tamara. “That kid is quite something; she’s damn impressive. A leader too.”

Tamara smiled proudly. “They voted her as team captain at the end of last season. Usually the setter gets picked but Winnie’s really a natural leader.”

An hour later, the volleyball clinic began and the members of both of the resort teams were there. They greeted the girls warmly and asked if they wanted to do the drills too. Of course they did. And most wound up coaching the less skilled players who were working on their passing, serving, and hitting. After the clinic, the demonstration games began, with the resort women’s team playing against Winnie’s high-school team. Everyone had seen Winnie playing last summer, but her improvement over the past year was striking. All of the girls were excellent players and the games were hard fought.

For the resort team, the front line of Tamara, Barbara, and Naomi, one of the college girls who had gone to the Superbowl in Tamara’s and Barbara’s place the last two years, was very strong. Naomi was 6 feet tall, very athletic, and Dawn Simpson, the Maryland assistant coach, had recruited her for her college team. With Simpson as one of the two setters, the resort team had a very powerful offense.

Winnie had gotten her coach to copy that two-setter offense for the high-school team, so the spectators were treated to a war of defenses, since both teams’ offenses were so strong. Eventually the high-school team came

out on top, but barely. The scores were 31-33, 37-35, and 32-30... they all had agreed to just keep playing until one side won, but despite their age, the younger team pulled it off since they had much more experience playing as a team. Their back-court players were battered and bruised from all the digs they had made. Playing on an asphalt surface was very different from the gyms' hardwood floors; Winnie had told her teammates to wear extra-thick knee and elbow pads and the pads helped because they got shredded during the games.

After the games, Simpson told the girls that she was very impressed at their play. She told them that they had played against a team with two AA, two A, and two BB players. And that's when the girls found out that their match had been scouted. Simpson and Ron Allerman had contacted a number of colleges in the region and told them about the planned match. Also about the nudity requirement. In addition to Maryland, which Simpson represented, five colleges had decided to scout it: Towson University, Howard University, University of Delaware, Morgan State University, and Loyola University, all NCAA Division 1 schools. The scouts, assistant coaches at those schools, had to follow the NCAA rules about direct recruiting contact with the girls, so they couldn't spend a lot of time talking to them about recruiting, but they promised to be in touch with Baltimore Tech's coach and would be attending their games in the coming fall season.

Lunchtime became a huge information-exchange session between the coaches and the girls' volleyball team members. They were all finishing sophomores and juniors, so when the visiting coaches discovered that fact, it changed the level of contact that was allowed since it was after June 15. The girls' parents were included in the conversations and a very happy group of people filled the restaurant. After lunch, all the coaches left, and the girls swarmed Winnie and then Tamara, thanking them. A few of the girls had learned that they might be offered a scholarship. Winnie had also learned that she had several colleges interested in her.

"Tamara, you know that Dawn Simpson wants to recruit me to play for her Maryland team, right?" Winnie asked when they were alone.

"She did sound me out about that, yeah," Tamara replied. "I saw a number of coaches talking to you and they seemed to be interested in you too."

"They were. I think that it'll be tough to decide," Winnie sighed. "But I think what I really want is to go to college at Hopkins. After the games, Joyce ... you know, she's the Hopkins assistant basketball coach, told me that I definitely could play at Hopkins but as a D3 school, they couldn't offer a scholarship."

"If Hopkins is your choice, sweetie, the cost isn't an issue at all. If you want to play v-ball there, then that can be your decision. You've got time to decide; don't rush it."

When everything had quieted down, Tamara went back to her cabin to call Nadine. She learned that everything at their home was still okay; although no intruders had been detected, the police had noticed a higher level of night-time traffic on the road in front of their house. They were attempting to get licence plate numbers but that was proving to be difficult, but they had told her that a night break-in was much less likely because the home could be occupied.

Saturday evening, the team girls were still on a high, and they had been adopted by members of the former vixen posse. Those youngsters were all freshmen and sophomores in high school now, and had watched the volleyball match. Some of them vowed to look into learning to play the sport better in their own high school P.E. classes. And the team girls had met a few teen guys too, so when the evening's entertainment began at the Pavilion—a DJ with karaoke—the younger set virtually took over the dance floor.

The volleyball group left on Sunday afternoon with all of them declaring that they were confirmed nudists now. They loved the resort and the activities and had made a number of good friends. Even the girls' parents were impressed at how much fun they had and how many people had befriended them. They all had met other couples and planned to see them socially out in the textile world when the weather got cooler; several parents even

planned to try to return to the resort for day visits later in August.

~~~~~

The following week was quiet until Thursday; that's when Tamara got a phone call in the late afternoon. Ron Allerman had to track her down to return her father's call. When she reached him, he had news.

"The security company called me at work around noon, sweetie," Wilson told her. "They nailed an intruder. He came in over the barbed wire fence on the east and got pretty chewed up by the barbs. Set off the cameras as he tried to get to the back of the house without being seen. He was trying to jimmy a window when the cavalry arrived. It was the third window he had tried—Janice's outfit had hardened our windows to make them resistant to being forced. I asked them to hold the guy so I could question him myself; you know my methods, to give lots of pain but leave no marks. The two security guys were a little hesitant to let me at him, so I told them to call Janice.

"I won't bore you with the details, but that shithead sang for me. In addition to him, he told me that there are just five more jerks left in that operation, and all but one are just the muscle, like Winnie's kidnapper was. One of those five is one of the remaining leaders. So the jerk I persuaded to talk ratted them all out, so we have their names."

"Great news, Dad. Hey, how did he get there? Was he dropped off like you thought would happen?"

"No... He left his car in the lot at that nursery about a mile east and hiked over. He got the job to find where you were living. As you suspected, they wanted to grab you in revenge for capturing one of them and exposing the ring. This guy had been one of the visitors to the kidnapper in jail, I found out. Apparently he had been casing our house to see if you were living there. He only saw me coming and going, so he figured that he'd break in to see if he could find any info about you. Apparently it hasn't occurred to them that you're that gal who got those Nobel prizes."

"Did he have a gun? And did he know who the mole in that AG office is?"

"Had a 9-mil pistol and nope on the mole. Or if he did know, he sure went through a lot of pain to keep mum. The state police have him now, together with his confession. He was claiming brutality but the security agents said that his problem was because he tangled with the barbed wire. Listen, unless they can find the rest of those shitheads, you still need to keep alert. They'll eventually figure out who you are. The detective told me that they have enough on this guy so that he won't be granted bail and they'll watch to see who he gets for a lawyer or if he gets visitors."

When Tamara disconnected, she was thinking, *I hate this waiting crap. There's gotta be a way to bring the action to that gang...*



## Chapter 86 - Ambush!

But Tamara knew she'd have to wait, at least for another week, before she could even think of how to bring any offense to bear against the people trying to find her. She'd be returning to the Real World following next weekend and would become buried in all of her projects and couldn't let a problem with no apparent solution distract her.

In addition to all of her ongoing projects, at the end of June, she had been appointed to a tenure-track position as an assistant professor in the Physics and Astronomy Department with a joint appointment in the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department. She had one course to teach this fall in each department and needed to organize her course materials as soon as she returned from the resort.

During the week that followed Winnie's team's visit, Tamara and Peter enjoyed the resort's relaxing daily pace. She ran every morning with Winnie and was accompanied most mornings by a crowd. JoAnne was there every day; so were many of the other cousins. Tom and Lynette ran most mornings and Denise and Kevin ran with them three times.

On Monday's run, while they were stretching, Tamara asked JoAnne if she wanted to set the run's pace or if she wanted to run ahead.

JoAnne chuckled, "I'm guessing that you want to try to race me next Sunday and you want to sandbag so I can't see my competition. Am I right?"

"Not sayin'," Tamara grinned at her. "But the one you need to watch out for is Winnie. I suspect when she runs with me, she's holding back. She really has a kick at the end of our 8Ks."

"Damn. Too bad v-ball and cross country are both fall sports in her school," JoAnne said. "She could for sure score a running scholarship. How do you want to run today?"

"Today's a leg day for us," she said. "This is when we do our hardest workout, once a week. I do a starting pace of 6:00 and we go for negative splits. Winnie and I ran an unofficial 5-K in 17:49 back in April when we first tried the negative splits. Doing that's a killer."

"Okay then, you do that and I'll follow your pace. So this'll be a 5K?" JoAnne asked.

"Yep. Warmup for Sunday."

As they were getting ready to begin the run, Tamara told the other runners of her plans for her pace.

"I'm starting at 6:00. That's a very fast pace. But we're doing negative splits this run which means that after mile one, the pace will be 5:40. On the last split, we're going all out; I'm aiming for 5:30. That would put us in at around 17:50. JoAnne's the only one here who's consistently run under that time. Okay, do your best—let's hit the trail."

The first runners back were JoAnne and Winnie; they were abreast of each other as they passed the 5-K marker at 17:17. Tamara's time was 17:48—her best. Two other regular runners came in immediately behind Tamara and the rest, about 19 to 20 minutes. All were excellent times for recreational runners.

JoAnne looked at Winnie after she did a quick cool-down stretch. "Winnie, gal, you were just pacing me, right? It felt like you still had more speed. I wasn't going all out, myself; this was just a training run."

Winnie nodded to her. "Yeah. I could go faster."

"You know you've got some serious wheels there, right, honey?" JoAnne asked.

"Yeah. Papa taught me to run and how to train for it. What's your 5-K time?" Winnie asked.

“My best 5000 meter track event time was 15:37 and for the 6-K X-C event, I average 19:55. My best 5-K was 16:58. My high-school times weren’t as fast but they still got me a track scholarship at Penn State; it’s a D1 school. Um, your papa was your grandfather, I heard. He taught you proper running form?”

“He did. And he could run for hours. He was a game warden for the state and he would cover miles by foot every day. Running is in our blood. ‘Running’ in Cherokee is *adatlisvi* and my language has six different ways to make verbs to mean things to do with running. Papa told me that the Cherokee, when called to go to war, would cover hundreds of miles in just a few days by foot.”

“Damn... are the Cherokee like the Kenyans and Ethiopians?” JoAnne asked. “They totally dominate the marathons.”

“Huh. No idea about that,” Winnie replied. “I don’t know any other Cherokee ... I take that back. Here’s Denise. She’s part Cherokee; ask her.”

“Ask me what, Winnie?” Denise asked as she walked up. “Shit, you two, you smoked the rest of us. What was your time?”

“Um, 17:17, Denise,” Winnie replied. “JoAnne asked if the Cherokee were like the Kenyans ... the east Africans, I guess ... in running. They dominate marathons, JoAnne says. I don’t know anything about that. Do you know any other Cherokee people?”

“Distant relatives. All my mom’s age or older and I don’t know if they ran at all,” Denise said. “Say, maybe it’s the geography of east Africa. I think I recall that it’s kinda mountainous there and the Great Rift Valley goes through that area. Maybe growing up running at higher altitudes helps.”

“So maybe that’s why I’m a good runner,” Winnie remarked. “And why the Cherokee are. Our peoples lived mostly in the mountains and ran everywhere. I ran with Papa on the mountain roads and trails in our area, growing up with him. Maybe that’s why, JoAnne.”

“Makes sense, I guess,” JoAnne replied. “How did you do, Denise?”

“I wasn’t keeping time, but I was just behind Tom and he was a bit back from Tamara. Damn, she’s quite a good runner too.”

Tamara came over to them.

“You were under 18, Denise, that’s a great time, and you were two seconds behind Tom,” Tamara said. “For a big guy, I’m impressed at how fast he can run.”

~~~~~

Saturday was the second volleyball clinic and games and Kevin’s group and all the cousins participated. Despite the hopeful comments from the resort’s women’s team members, Tamara’s and Barbara’s schedules didn’t allow their taking off a day or two at the end of Labor Day week to play at the Superbowl.

The resort’s Naked 5-K race was the following day. A number of regular members ran in it and so did the cousins and Tamara’s friends. About sixty outside people came in to race too.

Again, JoAnne was the top female finisher and second overall. The male winner was a track athlete from Maryland who posted a 16:52 time. JoAnne was second at 17:08 and Winnie was right on her heels at 17:09 and third overall. An outside guy was fourth and Tamara was fifth overall at 17:13.

The male winner went over to JoAnne and Winnie after a bit of cool-down.

“Great race, you guys. If this had been a 10-K NCAA X-C race, the way you were gaining on me at the end, you

would have beat me. I'm sure you must be on a college track team but I don't think I've seen you at meets. Oh, the name's Davis Stearns."

JoAnne grinned at him and introduced herself and Winnie. "I run for Penn State. We've run against Maryland; maybe you don't recognize me now 'cause I'm nude," she laughed. He blushed and she commented, "It's fine. People do look different when they're unclothed; that's just how it is. I didn't recognize you either but I pay more attention to the girl competition. But Winnie here's in high school."

He looked at her. "You're in high school? Damn, you must be like one of the state's top runners..."

Winnie shook her head. "I play volleyball, but thanks. Our team led our league last year and we won the state title in our division too. We should be good this year as well."

"Some damn fine women runners here today," he went on. "Three of the five top finishers were women ... and here's the third. Hi, my name's Davis. Great race, you were in around 17 too, right? Outstanding."

"Thanks. I'm Tamara. I think I was fifth?"

JoAnne nodded. "You sure were. Davis, this gal here is not only a top volleyball player but also a running star. But she wasted her college career by not going out for either sport," she laughed. "She's an academic star, actually."

Davis looked at her and smiled. "You look a bit older than the rest of us, Tamara. So you've graduated now?"

"Not boasting about it, but yeah. Got my doctorate a year ago and I'm teaching now," she told him.

"Hey, that's cool. But these two gals—damn, you two, are you gonna try out for the Olympics? Your times are good enough to become possible contenders for a slot in the U.S. team."

JoAnne laughed. "Not yet. I'm working on an NCAA championship first. I'm within striking distance of the times I need, so we'll see."

Davis looked at Winnie, "And you?"

Winnie shrugged. "I don't run to compete. I do it 'cause it's great fun. I don't want to make it into a chore or have it take up lots of time for training. So I'll see; I have time, I guess."

They chatted for a few more minutes while the officials tallied the race times and then the award presentations were made.

In the afternoon, all the remaining people from the Winsberg clan packed up to leave and soon Tamara was ready to go too. It was a week before Labor Day and she had a lot of work waiting.

~~~~~

The first job she tackled was the interviews for the executive assistant and then her PA, the positions which she had discussed with Mason and Werner. She liked the two candidates and her company's COO also did, so they had their law firm draw up an interim employment contract for each. A more permanent one would be done when the HR department was operating. They would be starting their jobs at the beginning of October.

Now that she was back at work, dividing her time between campus, where she would be doing her theoretical work, teaching, and office hours; the APL, where she was working on G-force applications; and her company, where she was directing her engineers and had planning meetings, she was very busy. She was also monitoring the Haitian project with weekly progress report phone calls. And Janice Marks was either accompanying her or escorting Winnie to and from school, with the protection duties shared with two other agents.

On the first Monday back after their vacation, Winnie had a scrimmage match in the evening and the team's regular varsity games would begin the following week. Tamara was really appreciating how she could contact Winnie in her mind, but the mental effort and concentration it required at a distance of just a few miles was immense. She could also reach Peter mentally but again, it took concentration and power. But when she attempted to concentrate on her parents to make contact, nothing happened.

Nadine was now back living in her home and a Cornelius agent stayed on site when she was there; the Alexandres had brought in a camper trailer for the agent to spend the nights. The security system was still in place, and just before Labor Day, agents found that someone had tried cutting a hole in one of the fences but the tool they had used wasn't enough to cut all of the fence links or they had been scared off. That's when they added several more cameras.

The date of the charter school planning meeting had been changed; it was now set for the first Monday in November. Faculty from Westphalia's School of Education would be there, and invitations had gone out to all of the school districts in the southern part of the county, nearby school districts in neighboring counties, and state education officials.

At the end of the second week of September, Tamara again began to get the feeling that she was being watched.

"This time it's very strong," she told Peter and Winnie that evening when she came home.

"Yeah, honey, Winnie told me that she started feeling it today too and so have I," Peter told her. "It's a really spooky feeling too. Very uncomfortable."

"Is there any place where it feels stronger?" Tamara wondered. "It doesn't seem directed at me."

The others told her that they felt it everywhere that they had been during the day.

"Winnie, sweetie, what are your plans this weekend?" Tamara asked. "You need to be careful where you go."

"We have an 8:30 a.m. practice tomorrow. I told you that a few days ago. Got an important game on Monday."

"You did. That's till noon, right?" Tamara asked.

"Yeah. On the way home before, Janice told me that she won't be driving me tomorrow; she's got one of her subs working. Like she did last weekend. God, I wish this crap with those friggin' morons was over. Can't go out without someone hovering over me."

"I feel exactly the same way, sweetie. Peter, you're not gonna try to give your agent the slip again, right?"

"C'mon honey, I wasn't thinking. I got a call from Walt in the Biomechanical Engineering building and I just popped over to see him."

"Without telling your agent. Please don't do that again."

"Yeah, she reamed me out when she called me."

Saturday morning, Winnie's primary substitute Cornelius agent, Lynn Garcia, picked her up and brought her to the high school. At a little after noon, while Tamara was working in her office at the Physics Department, an agitated and distressed "voice" popped into her head.

*"I'm okay but Lynn's hurt..."*

"Winnie? What's wrong?" Tamara formed the thought and concentrated on Winnie.

***Baltimore Tech High School: Thirty minutes earlier***

"Doing anything this afternoon?" one of Winnie's teammates asked after their practice session was over and

they were heading into the locker room for their showers.

“Not really,” she answered. “Got an English writing assignment to do is all.”

“Couple of us are going to the mall. Wanna go?”

“Damn. I gotta ask. I have a frikkin’ security shadow watching me. Someone bad is looking for Tamara and she thinks that they could come after me to get to her.”

“Wooo, that’s scary. Well, call me if you can. We’re meeting at the food court at 2.”

“Sure,” Winnie said as she got ready for a quick shower.

A few minutes later, she dressed and put her uniform, sneakers, and towels in her backpack and slung it over her shoulder.

“Call you if I can come,” she said as the other girls left the locker room.

She went out into the gym, met Garcia, and then the coach came over and asked Winnie if she could stop a minute to talk about two new plays that the team had practiced.

Ten minutes later, after they had finished discussing the plays, the coach told her, “Okay, those are good suggestions. I’m going to look at some videos of our opponents now. See the best time to call those plays.”

“Sure, Coach; catch you Monday,” Winnie told her.

Winnie and Garcia went out the gym door to the gym parking lot behind the school. Suddenly Winnie felt a tingle of extreme danger.

“Lynn! Trouble!” she warned, looking around, and saw two men rising from where they had been crouched between Lynn’s car and another parked next to it.

“Watch out!” Garcia called. “Tasers!”

They were within twenty feet away from the men but Winnie reacted instantly, swinging her backpack across the front of her body to shield herself as she heard a buzzing sound and felt a sharp sting in her shoulder. One dart had hit her there but the other had impacted her backpack. She sensed, rather than saw, Garcia go down, the Taser darts fired at her had hit her.

Furious, she dropped her backpack and charged at the closer man, who was stunned that the Taser didn’t work and had begun snapping a new cartridge onto his device. He never expected to be charged by her, so when he saw her coming at him, he had no chance to react. She slammed into him with a flying drop kick to his chest. It was a move she had learned from Marks, who had been working with her to teach her more than judo. Winnie had asked Marks to teach her some of MMA’s more devastating offensive moves, and Winnie had been diligently perfecting her execution of several. The force of her kick slammed the guy back against his vehicle and he slumped to the ground; she had hit him square in the chest and it had been hard enough to break ribs. Winnie’s drop kick follow-through left her just needing two recovery steps to regain her footing as she looked for what the other assailant was doing.

She saw him standing near Garcia, who seemed to be trying to get up; he was still pointing his Taser at her. Garcia collapsed again as he appeared to be pulling the weapon’s trigger repeatedly. Winnie saw her own opponent’s Taser lying on the pavement where he had dropped it and she picked it up and dashed around the car, closer to where Garcia lay.

Having no idea how the Taser worked, she shouted at the other man, pointing the device at his face, “Back away from her and drop that thing or I’ll shoot this at your face. I’ll bet I can hit your eyes too. Now move it!”

As Winnie was shouting, her first opponent painfully pulled himself up, staggered to the car behind him, and opened its door, shouting to the other man standing near Garcia, “Fuck it—just get out of here now. I think she broke some ribs—you need to drive—we need to get the fuck out now!”

Winnie took a step closer to Garcia’s assailant, making a threatening gesture, and he balked. Lowering his Taser—its wires were still connected to the darts in Garcia, he dropped it on the ground, and ran for the car.

Winnie glanced down at her device, pointed it at the running man, and pulled its trigger; nothing happened. He reached the car, jumped in, started it and raced off. Winnie tried to read the car’s license plate but the numbers had been obscured somehow. She ran over to Garcia, feeling the dart in her shoulder move as its wire was dragging the Taser cartridge behind her. Winnie sent an urgent thought to Tamara.

*“I’m okay but Lynn’s hurt...”*

### ***Back to present***

*“Winnie? What’s wrong?”* came the responding thought.

*“I’m okay now but Lynn’s down. Two goons tried to grab us, used Tasers. One got Lynn, I blocked the dart things they shot at me ... oh, one hit my shoulder. Lynn needs help.”* Winnie relayed as she looked at the dropped Taser.

She saw where the wires connected to the dropped Taser and pulled them off the device, then carefully pulled the darts out of Garcia’s chest.

*“Anyone nearby? Did you call 911?”* Tamara thought back.

*“I’ll do that. Oh, she’s coming around. Two darts hit her in the chest and they were still connected to the Taser gun. Maybe they were still shocking her,”* Winnie sent.

“Lynn, they’re gone. I’m calling 911 now,” Winnie told Garcia as she tried to sit up. “Stay down. Need water? I have some,” she said as she made the 911 call and dragged her backpack over.

Opening it, she handed a bottle to Garcia as she reported what had happened and gave their location.

“Damned good job of protecting you I did,” Garcia snorted painfully. “What the hell happened? I’ve been tased before but not like that.”

“One hit you right over your heart and the other on the opposite side,” Winnie told her. “He kept pulling the trigger when you tried to get up. I think you went into shock. They need to check you out, so keep still.”

“How did you get to know so much, anyway?” Garcia asked.

“The Red Cross gave a CPR and AED course at the resort I go to, so I took that class. My papa died of a heart attack and I wanted to be able to help someone else if that happened.”

A minute later, a police car pulled in, followed by a fire truck. Two firefighters jumped out and ran over, carrying bags.

“We’re EMTs. The ambulance will be here in maybe five minutes but we were closer. What happened?” one asked.

Winnie told them, showing the Taser she had grabbed, the dropped Taser, and the darts and wires.

“I tried to stop them but they got away,” she finished.

The officer looked at her. “Two men with Tasers and you tried to stop them?”

“Yeah. I got hit in the shoulder but I used my backpack as a shield and the other one hit that.”

She showed it with the dart still embedded in it.

“I pulled one out of my shoulder and now it’s starting to hurt a little,” she said. “I don’t want an infection; I have a big game on Monday.”

One of the EMTs left Garcia and came over. “Let me see that,” he said and she bared her shoulder. “Where’s the dart you took out... okay, I see it. Good, the barbs are intact. You tore a little skin when you pulled it out is all, and it bled a little. I see that you weren’t shocked?”

“Blocked the other one. It hit my backpack. I saw him aiming the Taser and tried to shield myself.”

“Quick thinking. Okay, this local antibiotic and dressing should do the trick. Watch the area for infection—if it turns pink or red, or you get a fever, or it starts to drain, go to a doctor right away. For pain, use Tylenol or Motrin, not aspirin. Do you know if your tetanus shot is up to date?”

“It is.”

“Change the dressing if it gets wet or soiled. It should heal pretty fast, I’d say.”

“How’s Lynn? The darts were close to her heart and I think the shock went longer with her. The jerk who shot her was standing there and kept pulling the trigger.”

“The wounds got pretty cauterized, actually, but her heart seems strong. We should get an ECG to be sure, though. She said that she passed out and that meant she got a severe shock.”

The ambulance had pulled in meanwhile, and the first EMT went to talk with them. They put Garcia on a gurney, rolled her into the ambulance, and got an ECG started. A few minutes later, they had the result: no detectable damage.

Every few minutes, Winnie relayed a quick summary to Tamara, but by the time the paramedics were finished with her, Winnie was wiped out from the mental strain. Tamara, meanwhile, had called the Cornelius agency to let them know that their agent had been injured and while the Baltimore officer was completing his questioning, a car arrived with two more security agents. They came over and introduced themselves to the officer and then went to check on Garcia. Soon one came back.

“Lynn says thanks for how well you handled this, Miss Nelsey. She told me how quickly you reacted when attacked. Hey, if you ever need a job in security, look our agency up. I’m Curt Shorder and I’m taking over for Lynn now. They decided she doesn’t need the ER but recommend bed rest for a day or so. They said all of her vitals are strong and the burns should heal up without any further special treatment. She should be good to go in two days. When my boss called me out for this, he told me that he wants to get you folks protective vests to wear when you’re out and about. They’re not fully ballistic vests but will stop Taser darts that hit your torso. Of course, hits on an extremity can still incapacitate but the torso is the preferred target. Ready to go?”

“Let me say goodbye to her first, okay? This whole thing’s got me completely wiped out so I’d love to just get home. Oh, the parking garage remote’s in Lynn’s car, so you’ll need to get that.”

“Sure. Let’s go see her.”

After a quick exchange of reassuring words, Winnie gave Garcia a little hug and left the ambulance and then was driven back home. She was met there by Tamara and Peter.

Shorder introduced himself, telling them that he was on call for Winnie for the weekend. Then he left.

“Jeez, you look totally wiped out, sweetie,” Tamara told Winnie.

“Oooh yeah, that mental talking totally did me in,” she sighed. “How come it didn’t affect you as bad?”

“It did at first for me, too. I got used to using my ability since I began doing it in middle school. I still get tired, but it doesn’t wipe me out like that anymore. Lots of practice helps your body, just like in running and stuff. Shit, I wonder how they found you. I didn’t think that you’d be easier to find than me. Now tell us the details of what happened.”

Winnie told them about the encounter.

“So they used Tasers. Yeah, they want us undamaged, it looks like. I need to let Mrs Wilkins know about this,” Tamara said as she called the FBI agent.

When Wilkins answered, Tamara apologized for the after-hours call.

“But you need to know that somehow those traffickers found Winnie. They tried to ambush her at her school. The question is how they located her and knew she’d be there today.”

They spoke for a few minutes and Tamara disconnected.

“She’s gonna do some checking and...”

Her phone rang; it was Marks.

“This is Tamara. Hi, Janice.”

After another brief conversation, she disconnected.

“Janice is so sorry about what happened, Winnie. She said that Lynn is really very good and this was unexpected, but their job is to prepare for the unexpected. She’s also looking into how they found you.”

Winnie didn’t go to meet her friends at the mall that day; she spent it resting.

~~~~~

On Monday morning, Tamara was out at the APL looking at the work her team, which now consisted of three engineers and two technicians, were doing on G-force applications, the main one being trying to “look” into the area between or inside the coil array to try to make sense of the physical conditions there. This was proving difficult because when the power was on, nothing could get close to the array’s center, even from its opposite side. They were collecting plenty of measurements but so far, nothing had occurred to Tamara about the strange interface between what she thought of as the “hadronic world,” the real world where ordinary matter exists, and the non-baryonic matter which appeared to make up whatever was “behind” the G-coils in her G-force devices.

Tamara was currently working with a recently proposed model of baryonic atoms to see if this model could suggest anything about the matter “inside” the G-coil arrays. She was investigating the properties of theoretical singly-heavy baryons whose structure comprised one heavy valence quark (in quantum terms, a *charm*/*bottom* one) and two light valence quarks (these would be *up/down/strange* ones). In such a system, the light quarks and associated gluons would orbit the nearly static heavy quark, and would behave as a quantum-chromodynamic analog of a normal-matter baryonic atom, which is bound by the standard electromagnetic interaction found in baryonic atoms. She had an idea that such a system could exist in the universe of dark matter and that dark energy was carried by the dark-energy gluon analogs, what she had termed the “cofons.” Tamara was hoping that studying such a system might give her insight into a theoretical particle which mediated the gravitational force, the graviton.

To do this work, she had thought of a new application of her G-force coils where she might be able to use a coil assembly design in a unique way to create and detect super-massive particles. She gave her engineering team



some sketches for a prototype device to be built to test her idea.

Another of her major APL projects was in energy transmission through the G-coil “portal” and achieving the level of scale-up to allow the quantity of energy transmitted to be commercially useful. On this project, she and her group were making good progress; they were at the point of working to improve energy-conversion efficiencies.

The final major project was working on the ground-effect repulsion force, both at large and small scales; large-scale for transportation and materials-handling applications and small-scale for various shaft-bearing applications. When her company’s manufacturing facility was completed, she would be moving these last two projects there.

It was that afternoon when Tamara found out how the traffickers had located Winnie. Wilkins called Tamara as she was returning to Baltimore, traveling in her Cornelius agent’s car.

“Basically it was a sleuthing job done by the mole in the Virginia AG’s office,” Wilkins told her.

“Oh—did they find that person?” Tamara asked.

“No, they still don’t know who it is, but we figured out how they must have located Winnie. We tried reconstructing how that was done. We asked the question, who would know where Winnie was? The most likely answer was that it would probably be someone from her old school in West Virginia—her new school would have requested that her records be forwarded. And a school wouldn’t release that info to the public, but a LEO—that’s law enforcement officer—could get it.”

“That was excellent thinking. So that mole got the school’s info?”

“Indirectly. The mole got the Virginia AG’s office to request that the West Virginia state police find out the name of her new school, ostensibly in preparation for a human-trafficking prosecution. That will be the federal case and it’s been delayed over and over again with postponements requested by the defense. Anyway, now knowing her current school, the perps must have gone on the school’s website and found Winnie’s name on her volleyball team. We found it on there, so they must have too. And the v-ball schedule was posted on line with Saturday morning’s practice session listed. Remember, they also had her photo, so they could watch for her. So I think that if they found her, there’s a fairly good chance that they know the general area where you must live. I’ll call Janice Marks and let her know about this development. We’ve also let the Maryland State Police know in case that Virginia mole tries anything involving the government here.”

“Damn. This isn’t good news,” Tamara said. “Any idea who the jerks who ambushed her were?”

“The prints lifted from the Tasers got no hits. We’re working on where they were sold and who bought them.”

“So they’re still out there. Crap. We need to get Winnie protection at the school now. Currently we’re just doing it for her traveling there and returning home.”

“Right. Let the principal know—she can tell the school security officers to be extra careful too.”

After she disconnected, Tamara asked her escort to detour to Winnie’s school so she could speak to Dr Borges.

After their greetings, Borges apologized. “I spoke to Winnie this morning after the police told me what happened in our parking lot on Saturday,” she told Tamara. “I was planning to call you too, after school was out.”

“I can’t see how you’d be responsible,” Tamara responded. “And Winnie told me that there usually are people around the school around noon on Saturdays. She did say that she took longer than usual getting out of the building; she had been talking with her coach.”

“After hearing what happened, I told the team coaches that if they run a practice outside school hours, then they need to stay and watch until the last team member is gone,” Borges told her.

“That may be a good idea as general practice, but in our case, there was a specific situation involved. Recall that when I first came here, I asked about personal privacy? Bad people are trying to find me—the reason doesn’t matter—but this is one of the reasons why I don’t want my address given out. So someone might try to contact your staff to get it. If they do, then the FBI agent handling my case would be interested in knowing that. And I’m sure you’re being careful about strangers in the building.”

“I certainly respect your privacy needs, Miss Alexandre, and will remind the staff about student privacy. And yes, I’m sure that you saw the visitor screening we have in place to enter the building.”

“No one can slip in when the kids enter the school for the day?” Tamara asked.

“They all enter through the main doors and display their student ID to the teachers on duty there. It’s unlikely that an adult could impersonate a student then.”

“What about security at the other doors leading out of the building?” Tamara asked.

“We have a security employee in addition to the assigned Baltimore school resource officer here. They both frequently check all the exterior doors; the custodial staff members know to do that as well. And the emergency doors are alarmed. Unescorted visitors aren’t permitted in the hallways except in the admin area outside this office. I hope you understand that our procedures are designed to emphasize the safety of our students.”

“What you described seems good to me. Thanks for listening to my concerns. Will I see you at this evening’s game?” Tamara asked.

Borges smiled. “Absolutely. I hope that the team repeats at State this year. Winnie’s quite an exciting player to watch.”

“She is. Thanks; I’ll see you later.”

Winnie’s team won the match that evening, 3-0, and were 3-0 for the season so far. And Tamara saw several college scouts watching the match, too, several of whom she recognized from the match at the resort.

She’d have to think about looking into colleges for Winnie now. It was time.

## Chapter 87 - Cleaning Up

That evening after the volleyball match, Tamara asked Winnie if she had given any thought to choosing potential colleges.

“Well, I did decide that the Clarke Scholarship was kinda beyond reach,” Winnie chuckled. “I get the physics, but the math is a bit much for me. A lot of that isn’t taught until college!”

“Yep, I know,” Tamara agreed. “Emma’s plan was to look for seriously advanced students. Super-nerds, you might say. But I was amazed to see that most of the Clarke Scholars are fairly well-rounded. Look at Peter, for example. You’d never think of him being a nerd. Or Terence.”

Winnie laughed. “I sure agree. I’d never take either of them for a brainiac. Or you either. Or Emma, even. I’m so, so lucky you found me and made me part of your amazing family...”

“Hey. How did we get off of the college topic?” Tamara smiled.

“Yeah. I’ve been thinking about athletics and college a lot now. I know that Dawn would just love to recruit me for Maryland and my guidance counselor says that’s a great school. You saw that our matches are being scouted by some D1 colleges too and several girls on the team have coaches interested in them and from good schools too.”

“Yep, and besides Dawn, you’ve still got people from those other schools who want to talk to you and me,” Tamara said. “Your stats are tops for kills and blocking percentage, but even better, your play is both explosive and exciting to watch.”

“Yeah, I know. I love the game, I love competing, I love winning. Even so, it’s just a game; it’s not the world. But when I speak to most of the D1 coaches, I feel something different from them. Winning is *everything* at those schools and their goal is a national championship. I don’t mind pressure but I don’t like it when it’ll be that kind of forced pressure.”

Tamara nodded. “So you’re leaning away from a D1 school, then.”

“Yeah. But you know, there are lots of D1 schools with super academics too. When I looked at them, though, it seemed like the athletes tend to be kept apart, somehow, and I don’t care for that. Athletics is a great part of college, though, but it should just be a *part*—not the emphasis. I love my sport but I want college to be all about studies, not sports. I suppose I could go for a scholarship in either volleyball or track and cross-country, but the feeling I get about sports in D1 schools is that for the kids on scholarship, the sports are the priority. I don’t care for that.”

“So if you could go anywhere you wanted, what school, or even part of the country, would you want to consider?” Tamara asked.

“Um, definitely my top choice would be right here, Tamara. Hopkins. I’m sure I could get on their volleyball team and you’ve told me that the tuition and other costs shouldn’t influence my choice. So that would be my top choice. Second would be Westphalia; they’re a D2 school but have a great rep for their emphasis on academics over sports, kinda like I understand D3 schools do. And truthfully, having family close by means more to me than living a distance away.”

She went over to Tamara and hugged her. “I want to be where I can see you every day, Tamara. Moving away for college has no appeal.”

“I love that you consider us family, sweetie,” Tamara told her.

“Well, you are. You’re like both a sister and a mom to me and Peter is like a big brother. I can’t see him like a

dad to me,” she giggled, “but your own dad feels like a real dad to me. And your mom is just awesome, so loving. You’re all family. Even on Peter’s side.”

That resulted in another hug.

Then Peter came in and looked at them. “What did I miss? You both look teary-eyed. Is everything okay?”

Winnie giggled and went to him and hugged him too. “I was just telling Tamara how much of a family all of you are for me.”

“Of course you are, Winnie. Remember, we’re always here for you,” Peter said.

“Sweetheart, Winnie and I were talking about colleges she’s interested in and she’s picked Hopkins as her top choice,” Tamara remarked.

Peter smiled. “Shows that she’s got good taste. Top grades and she’s athletic too; if she wants Hopkins, she’ll be accepted, no problem.”

“Peter, do you think she should go for early decision?” Tamara asked.

“Um, that’s something we’d need to think about. Probably we all should visit the admissions office for advice. If I recall, there’s a November deadline.”

Then the three of them got out Winnie’s computer and looked at the college website.

~~~~~

The next two weeks passed quietly. Tamara and Winnie continued with their routine of morning runs and Peter frequently joined them. As she had been doing since Winnie’s school started in the fall, Marks would arrive at Tamara’s apartment at 6 a.m. to join her and Winnie for their morning run at 6:15. And when Peter ran with them, another Cornelius agent would join Marks to shadow them, ever watchful for their safety.

Beginning in the last week of September, Peter had a eight-day trip scheduled to go to Caltech; it was for the research project collaboration on nanomechanical and nanoelectronic systems that he had arranged two years earlier. But for the past several days before Peter was to leave, both Tamara and Winnie again began sensing a discomforting feeling, another premonition of danger, but again, Peter wasn’t as strongly affected.

“I hate to leave you,” Peter told them a day before his trip. “I think that since you’re getting that premonition and I’m not, it means that something’s gonna happen to you.”

“I think so too, but you need to get this done to complete this phase of your work. The Japanese group that’s cooperating will only be there this week, right?” Tamara asked.

“Yeah. But still...”

“We’ll be okay. Janice drives Winnie back and forth to school and I have an agent with me, even when I’m on campus and at the APL. We’re not going anywhere in the evenings or nights except for Winnie’s games and we’ve got Janice plus another agent with us then. We’ll be fine.”

They were fine until the first Wednesday in October. As usual, Marks arrived for their three-mile run on the campus route which Tamara had been running for years. In their usual routine, after their run, a quick shower, and breakfast, Marks would drive Winnie to school and either return to escort Tamara during her days at Hopkins or another agent would bring her to the APL. Depending on schedules, Marks or another agent would pick up Winnie and bring her home. This week, with Peter away, just Marks would accompany the two women for their morning runs.

That morning, after some quick stretches, the three left for their run. When they reached the building's lobby, Marks pushed open the door and, informed by her security training and procedures, scanned the area.

Tamara called to her, "Wait, Janice, look. Look over there near that corner, to the south of the building. There's someone there."

Marks let the door go and came back into the lobby. "Yeah, saw him. He was hanging around the building when I got here earlier."

"So when I saw him, I got my flash of premonition and a feeling of evil..."

Winnie interrupted, "I felt it too, Janice."

"Okay, want to scrap today's run and I'll try to check out that guy?" Marks asked.

Tamara shook her head. "Hell no. I'm damned tired of this sneaking around and hiding like a scared mouse, afraid of the lurking cat. I wanna be the wolf that catches the effin' cat. This may be a good chance to go on the offense for once."

Marks grinned. "You're so much like your dad it's amazing; you'd make an awesome Marine, Tamara. Against my better judgment, let's try this. Since they didn't use firearms at Winnie's school, they just used Tasers, I don't expect that they'd use deadly force against you. Let's go back upstairs and get your vests on—I'm wearing mine—and then we'll go out. Remember, that vest will stop handgun bullets and short out Taser darts but won't protect much against knives. But if something happens, let me handle it, okay? I'm only doing this because Winnie's good at self-defense—what she did back at her school shows that—and I've watched you and her working out at the dojo. You both can handle yourselves defensively. But no heroics, right?"

They agreed and went and got their vests. When they left the building, that man was still there, trying to look innocent, but Tamara stiffened as she felt his eyes on her.

Winnie shot her a thought, "*Evil man. But I can't sense much more.*"

"*I feel it too,*" Tamara responded.

"Janice, something's about to happen," Tamara warned as they jogged to the crosswalk on the main street, leading onto the campus proper. "My sense just went into high alert."

"Can't believe they'd try something during a workday in the open," Marks replied. "Even if sunrise isn't till 7 a.m., there are still a fair number of people about."

After crossing the main street onto campus, they began running along the well-lit sidewalk paralleling the entrance road, when they heard the sound of a vehicle approaching. A panel truck pulled up to the curb in front of them, stopped, its side door slid open, and three men wearing ski masks jumped out.

*Shit, just like the Russians in Cambridge,* Tamara thought. *No guns visible though. Or Tasers. They want to do a snatch.*

She shot a thought to Winnie, "*You gonna be okay?*" and got a "*Sure*" back.

Then she tried "pushing" confusion and fear at the men coming toward them, but in the darkness, couldn't see their eyes very well. But something took because she did see them hesitate just a second.

As the men came toward them, they each moved toward the closest woman. Suddenly Marks went into action, turning into a whirling dervish, and with one quick movement, did a spinning hook kick at the man in front of her, connecting with his jaw; he dropped like a rock. Moving out of the kick and still in rapid motion, she was facing toward the man approaching Tamara. He had been moving warily; being closest to her "push," he was

still slightly confused, and now a little concerned at seeing her assume a defensive posture. Marks' motion as she recovered from her first kick allowed her two quick steps toward him and, coiling her body, lashed out at him, whipping her leg around in the high arc of an axe kick. Her heel caught the man at the junction of his head and neck, dropping him instantly.

While Marks was busy with her opponents, Winnie had engaged the third man, who had rushed at her, intending to grab her. She took him down with a basic hip throw and then dropped onto his prone body, put him into a hammerlock, and while holding his elbow against his back with her knee, applied a choke hold.

Movement behind her caught Tamara's attention and she turned to see a man rushing at her. It was the person who had been watching her apartment building entrance. As he reached for her shoulders, she let him grab her and then leaned back; that pulled him off balance. Gripping his jacket collar with one hand and his opposite sleeve with the other, she executed the *osoto gari* leg sweep that she had practiced at almost every dojo session. But now she was extremely annoyed and, instead of just letting her opponent drop in front of her, she pushed him down hard, and the back of his head hitting the concrete sidewalk knocked him out. As she took him down, an echo of her father's words appeared in her thoughts: *if someone interferes with your passage, then end the threat. And never look back.*

It was all over in about twenty seconds and, before the van's driver, who wasn't in direct view of the action, could react to what had happened, Marks had leaped inside the van and subdued him. There weren't many passers-by in the immediate area this early but there were several who saw the fighting; they had called 911, and within several minutes, while Marks was zip-tying the last of the five assailants' wrists together, the first campus police car pulled up.

Tamara ran over to the police car.

"The jerks tied up on the ground tried to snatch the three of us," she called as two officers jumped out of their vehicle.

"I'll call for backup," one of them told the other.

"Get an ambulance too," Tamara called. "Three with head or shoulder injuries."

"Just you three gals here? Are you all okay?" one officer asked, looking around. "You took out four men?"

"Plus one in the van," Tamara told him. "We're all fine. The woman over there is a private security agent and a martial arts expert."

The officer looked at her and said, "Well, damn. Stay here; we'll need to get your statements."

Winnie ran over to Tamara, coming around from the driver's side of the van.

"I saw you do that takedown, Tamara," she said. "That was a cool move. I did what you taught me with the jerk that I threw—I gave him a compulsion to tell whatever he knows. Then I clipped him to knock him out—Janice showed me how that's done. I ran over to help Janice but she was already tying up the driver's wrists. So I did the compulsion thing on him too. I hope that this is the end of that bunch of losers."

"Fantastic. Quick thinking, sweetie. I hope this ends it too."

"Why do you think five of them came after us, anyway?" Winnie asked. "Janice thought that there'd just be two, max."

"I'm guessing that when you got away from two of them at your school, it made them more cautious. But they didn't expect that we'd have anyone with us who had the kind of training that Janice has. You probably didn't see her do it, but in maybe ten seconds she had put two of them down hard. The first probably has a broken jaw

and the second, I'm guessing a broken collarbone. I heard a crack when she connected. Maybe also a broken..."

She was interrupted by an officer.

"Either of you gals injured? Do you need a paramedic to check you out when they get here?" the officer asked.

Both Winnie and Tamara told him that they were okay.

"Okay, Miss, we're getting your friend's statement now," he asked Tamara. "I'll need you to tell me what happened here in your own words. I understand that this young woman," he indicated Winnie, "is a minor and you're her guardian."

"That's correct. But she can add what she did when her assailant tried to grab her, right?"

"She can. So what happened here?"

Tamara described how she had heard that she had become a target of a human-trafficking ring after she had rescued Winnie. She mentioned the attempted break-in at her parents' home and what she had learned about the ring's plans. Then she described the current encounter with the men in the van. Winnie added her own description of what had happened at her school and her handling the man who had tried to grab her.

"I took him down with a hip throw; he wasn't expecting that all three of us know martial arts," she chuckled.

The officer shook his head. "Yeah, I guess you all surprised them—five guys, and just three of you gals. Your security person though—damn, she's damn scary."

While they were talking, an ambulance pulled up, and a minute later, a second one.

Tamara and Winnie went over to Marks, who was finishing up talking to a detective.

"Okay, Tamara and Winnie. Great job, you two," she said. "Tamara, I see that the time you've spent at the dojo's paid off. I knew Winnie could go one-on-one—but I could have never handled all five of them by myself. I was really surprised that they had so many perps here for this attempt ... anyway, this is Lt Hevery from the state police. He's the person I've been coordinating with on your protection detail. Lieutenant, these are Tamara Alexandre and Winnie Nelsey."

"Hello, Misses Alexandre and Nelsey. Col Marks was describing how you subdued those perps; excellent job there. The governor will be very pleased to hear that you're safe after their attack."

"Do we really know if that's the entire lot?" Tamara asked.

Hevery had a slight smile as he answered, "I don't really know what's going on and don't want to know—I was told not to ask—but two of those perps are spilling their guts about what they know, even after they got their Miranda notice. They're the last members of that Virginia ring, and one of them's even fingered the mole that's been passing them info from the Virginia troopers and AG's office. So it looks like you should be safe now."

"What were their injuries?" Tamara asked. "I'm afraid that I was kinda rough when I took that jerk down with a leg sweep, but I was really pissed off at having to hide from them for six to eight weeks. I planted him on the pavement really hard."

"That must be the one with the concussion. He's also got quite a laceration on the back of his head; he'll survive though. Another perp has some significant abrasions on his face and hands and can't move his right arm, probably a rotator cuff injury, like maybe he was put in an extreme hammerlock after he went down?"

Winnie smiled faintly. "Not saying."

Hevery grinned. "The colonel did the most damage. One with a broken collarbone and a probable neck fracture

and the other with a smashed jaw. The van's driver's only injury was a wounded pride—but his torso was all taped up. He apparently has a few busted ribs. He gave up when he saw the pistol she had pointed at him.”

“Damn, Janice, I didn't know you were carrying,” Tamara grinned at her.

“They didn't produce firearms, so immediately escalating the situation wasn't wise,” Marks said as Hevery nodded, smiling. “Random shots and ricochets also can cause collateral damage.”

Winnie grinned mirthlessly. “That driver's the jerk I took down at the school. I kicked him in the chest then. I'm surprised that he can still move—I hit him really hard.”

While Winnie was speaking, a Baltimore officer had come over and waited until she was done and then Tamara saw a car pull up, stop, and then red and blue lights began flashing in its grille. Its occupant didn't immediately emerge.

“Are you finished here, Lieutenant?” the Baltimore officer asked. “We're just about done. Do you think that the state police wants to be involved in the booking?”

“The State Police Department got involved at the governor's direction to coordinate with Miss Alexandre's security person, not to make an arrest if the chance came up. My information is that any prosecutions are to occur in the relevant jurisdictions. The state's attorney for Baltimore City should handle this case.”

While he was speaking, the vehicle occupant emerged and Tamara saw that it was Wilkins. The Baltimore officer left Tamara's group as she came over to them.

“Good morning, Lt Hevery,” Wilkins said. “And hello, Tamara and Winnie. Janice, good to see you; thanks for taking care of these fine people.”

Marks chuckled. “They did a damned fine job of taking care of themselves, Sarah.”

Wilkins grinned. “You don't say. I was headed into work and this incident came over the radio. From the location, I figured that Tamara was involved. So five perps are in custody?”

Hevery answered, “They are. And your office is getting involved now—one of the perps is really singing; I heard that he was fingering another trafficking operation in North Carolina and Tennessee.”

“Got that message as I arrived, John. I've assigned an agent to this case and we'll need to contact our offices in Asheville and Knoxville to get them started on that new ring. Tamara, when we met, I told you to leave your excitement back in Miami, didn't I?”

“You did, but admit it—aren't the cases I bring here way more interesting than what you usually get?” Tamara grinned at her.

Wilkins and Hevery laughed. “Gotta say you're right, Tamara,” Wilkins grinned back.

The three of them didn't get to do their run that morning, but Winnie did get to school on time.

When Tamara was alone, and with Marks' assistance and that of her agency sincerely thanked, she called Nadine and then connected Wilson into a three-way conference call. It was still too early to call Peter on the west coast.

“Hey, maybe you heard about it already, but the traffickers' gang is now locked up,” she told them.

Wilson was the first to respond. “Great news. Don't tell me, though. You and Winnie were in on the takedown.”

Tamara chuckled. “You know me so well, Dad. But it was Janice's show. I've never seen anyone move so fast. I thought that after seeing Kevin in action in Cambridge, no one could move faster, but I was wrong—Janice was



a blur and took out two men inside ten seconds. And she wasn't even breathing hard."

"I wonder why they went after you like they did," Wilson mused. "They could have just lay low and rebuilt the operation instead of risking being exposed."

"Maybe they felt that their mole in Virginia could give them cover," Tamara responded. "Gave a false sense of security about not being caught."

"Good thought..."

Nadine managed to break in, "You're both okay then? No one hurt or anything? After Winnie was hit by that Taser, I've worried about you both."

"We're great, Mom, and Winnie's in school now. She's bubbling with excitement now that this crap isn't hanging over us. She can do stuff with her friends again. Oh, I haven't told you that she's decided that she wants to go to Hopkins. She's passing on schools with big athletic programs. She can still do volleyball here, and with her athletic ability, she'll be a star. I'm really happy for her."

"You have an instant sister in her," Nadine commented. "She really adores you. Peter too."

Tamara laughed. "You know what she told me? I'm like a sister and a mom to her. And she thinks of you and Dad as her mom and dad too. She calls us her family."

"That's so sweet," Wilson said. "And you and Peter taking her in like you did—that was such a generous thing to do."

"And I'm so glad that I had the ability to do it, Dad. She was so beaten down but I could see the spark of an awesome person in her. Listen, I need to call Peter now. He should be getting ready for the day about now."

"Send our love." ... "Bye, sweetie and take care."

Tamara decided to try a mental call to Peter next but couldn't tell if he had sensed her contact, so she called his cell phone.

"Hi, darling, good morning," Peter answered. "I had the strangest feeling that you wanted me just before—is everything all right there?"

"Actually I did try to contact you by mind-speak to see if it could work so far away," she answered. "I couldn't tell if you 'heard' me. So you felt something?"

"Yeah, I did. It was like a question popped in but then it was gone."

"Well, that's kinda cool," she mused. "Maybe there's a way to make contacts stronger... anyway, enough of that. Good news; the trafficking gang is no more. I mean, they're locked up now."

"No shit? Fantastic! What happened?"

Tamara told him about their morning encounter and how everyone in the gang was now accounted for.

"And I haven't seen Winnie so happy for months. This was really wearing on her; I suspect that she was worried about getting into the clutches of that gang."

"Yeah—I felt that from her too," Peter remarked. "And I sensed that she missed being able to socialize with her friends."

"She did mention that to me when she left for school after we finished with the cops here," Tamara told him. "Finally we can get back to a normal life. Well, what passes for normal with us."

“Yeah, right. Hey, I’ll be able to return two days early. We got a lot done, way more than I expected, and the Caltech part of the project is just about finished. And the Osaka University group is leaving tomorrow; they’ll continue the collaboration with us. We’re on the verge of being able to build autonomous robots for manufacturing now.”

“Excellent. Is that something you think we could add to our manufacturing portfolio?” Tamara asked.

“Possibly. We’re using the same control systems as the ones I designed for the prosthetics. Our research use here was cleared with the attorneys, you’ll recall.”

“Oh, right. Of course. Damn, I almost forgot—Lisa Farrell, my new PA, just started work two days ago and I need to meet with her. I put her off till today, so I need to get going to see her. Bye sweetie, travel safe, and see you Friday, right?”

“Yep. Love you, honey. Bye.”

Tamara went off to her factory location to see Farrell. It felt strange driving herself once again.

~~~~~

The rest of October was a busy time. The Nobel Prizes for the year had been announced and Tamara couldn’t stop herself from thinking, “Been there, done that, have the ...” and instead of “tee-shirt,” she thought, chuckling to herself, “medals.” The factory building was completed and equipment was being installed. Much of the specialized equipment wouldn’t be received until December and the big hiring push would commence in January. It was in mid-October when her management team had planned to begin recruiting their human relations department personnel. That time had come, and now Cooper McKinnon, the new executive assistant just hired at her manufacturing and research plant, the Alwin Systems Corporation, with the rest of the management, would begin that task and Farrell’s primary job at this point was to assist in the recruiting and screening of candidates.

October was also the busiest volleyball month; most of the regular-season matches occurred now, and between Tamara and Peter, they attended every game. Through the month, Winnie’s team led the regional division with all wins and only one non-divisional match loss. They had qualified for the regional matches.

The preliminary site work on the old quarry property was essentially complete now, and preparation work had begun on the research park area of the property. The site’s terrain had been sculpted and landscaped so that the research buildings could not be seen from the school site. The meeting to introduce the nudist school concept to state officials and educators in the region was set for the first Thursday in November.

The school site work would begin in late November with the finish grading, soil sampling and boring to ensure that the fill compaction was properly completed, and marking the construction perimeters. Footing construction would occur as weather permitted. Once the actual construction began, building completion was expected in 18 months.

~~~~~

The informational meeting for the charter school was about to start. Before the formal presentations, an hour meet-and-greet session with light snacks had been planned and Tamara was going over some last-minute items with Kevin and Barbara, who would also be speaking.

“So I hear from Barbara that you added a section that’ll be a bit controversial?” Kevin asked Tamara.

“Sure. You know about Jay hearing comments from several school board members who insist that nudism is immoral because of what it says in the Bible. So I want to address that issue head on. I figure five to six minutes

and I'll also ask that questions and comments be deferred to the end. That will give them time to cool..."

Tamara was interrupted by Denise, who came over to them.

"Everyone's here now so let's go next door and start," she told them.

Tamara went up to the front of the room and looked around.

"Welcome to our presentation. I'm Tamara Alexandre and the chair of TNA Foundation, one of the groups that's funding this school project. It's so nice to have such a large group of people interested in our venture, which many of you are considering revolutionary."

There were many agreeing nods and a few derisive snorts.

"I don't have to tell you what this is about; you've all received a copy of our prospectus. This meeting is to allow us to go into detail and after our three presentations, we'll open the floor for discussion. Now, everyone here has a strong interest in primary and secondary education, whether as a professor of education, a school teacher or administrator, a school board member, or a political figure with a progressive education interest.

"So those in my group here, our names and expertise are covered in our prospectus, have a first-hand experience with primary and secondary education, obviously, but we've all had certain experiences, and some of us even formal training, that convince us that we have an idea that can help children better reach their full potential through making certain changes in their primary and secondary education curricula. Many of you are concerned by our plans because you've focused on a single element of it: nudism. But nudism isn't the objective of our plan; it's simply an element of it. The entire country had no difficulty accepting, or at least tolerating, the discredited Naked in School Program. There, the nudity *was* the objective—the only one, and that's a major reason why it failed. Something much better was created in its place. Now we believe that our project can take the things we've learned from the failure of that naked Program to move educational psychology even further ahead.

"But first, we need to deal with the issue of nudism. You all know, I believe, that public nudity in virtually all of Europe is no big deal. There are plenty of beaches there that have nude sections and many European countries' public parks allow nudity too. Simple nudity in public isn't prohibited in most places either. There are plenty of organized activities which can be done nude, such as bike rides, foot races, and naked hiking. But in the U.S., whose colonies were in large part originally settled by the Puritan sect, public nudity is a venal sin. Why is that? Why has the viewpoint of a very small minority of people come to dominate our country's culture? I have no answer for that.

"Originally, as anthropologists tell us, clothing served two purposes: protection and status. It protected people from adverse environmental conditions and also could serve as an outward sign of a person's position in society. Eventually, nobles came to wear rich garments while slaves were mostly naked. When armies conquered a nation, the captives were generally stripped and paraded as a sign of their defeat—a loss of cultural status. Any status they had was removed with their garments; this was meant as a symbolic measure of defeat as well as a humiliation—a loss of personal status. Moving ahead to modern times, we don't do the naked captives much anymore but we still use clothing as a status symbol. Wealthy people announce their wealth by wearing the garments that show it. We're really no different from those hominids from 100,000 years ago who began to use animal skins to cover themselves.

"So the lack of garments, that is, nudity, as ancient times ended, eventually came to represent a number of related things: poverty, slavery or servitude, or humiliation as in a captive of war. In short, vulnerability. But nudity also represented innocence—after all, children in ancient times were almost always nude, even the children of nobles. And that brings us back to the Puritans. They, along with some other Christian groups, point

to one story in the Bible which, they claim, shows that nudity is a sin and is against God's wishes. Since they believe that the Bible says this, they want public nudity to be made illegal by secular laws too. Their reasoning is both incorrect and misinformed as well, and here's why.

"The Bible has a passage at the end of the second chapter which says that in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were naked and 'felt no shame,' I quote. Think about that quote for second. Supposedly they were the only humans around; because the Bible doesn't tell that any humans lived in the next county over."

Laughter.

"So what was it that Adam and Eve could possibly have been ashamed about? Shame isn't an internal emotion... it's a reaction to the disapproval by others of one's behavior which is outside the cultural or societal norm. There was no culture or society in existence to tell Adam and Eve that there was a norm that they had violated. So the meaning of 'shame' used here by the story's author must be closer to 'modesty.' And since there is no other person in Eden to be modest for or about, the wording used in that passage is clearly directed to the audience; that is, the listener, since these stories were originally intended to be transmitted orally.

"So it could be inferred by the listener to this story that Adam and Eve were modest because they were like innocent children and therefore, they were subject to being duped. The story here is, in essence, portraying the couple as being innocent children, using the nudity imagery, because in ancient times, children were virtually always naked—even the children of nobles. So their nudity—that is, their having nothing to hide—tells the listener that Adam and Eve were childishly naive and their nudity serves as a metaphor for their innocence. That line's a setup in the story for what happens next: meeting the snake.

"Childish innocence makes the person vulnerable to being deceived. One of the first lessons a parent gives his child about being in public with no parent is to be wary of strangers, right? Of course, right. But Adam and Eve had no parent to give them that warning. And in Eden, after all, who would deceive them? If you read the snake's part of the Eden story carefully, it never tempts the couple nor does it even offer them the fruit. The snake simply asks Eve a question, and then when she gives her answer, the snake responds with a completely truthful reply. There were no lies, no coercion, no temptation in that reply. And if we accept that God is omnipotent and all-knowing, as the Puritans believed, then God should have warned them not to take candy from strangers; that is, take apples from snakes."

More chuckles.

"But they did, didn't they? Or else we wouldn't have a story with a moral message. This biblical tale was a story about a moral lesson about innocence, not nudity.

"Going on from there, the Bible now tells us that when Adam and Eve saw that they were naked, they sought to clothe themselves and hide. The Puritans, and many other Christians, point to that passage, their hiding and covering up, as proof that they were ashamed and afraid, and therefore nudity is shameful. But most observant Christians believe that God is all-knowing and that must mean that God was totally aware of how the couple would get to eat that fruit. If God didn't want them to do it, God had many ways to prevent it. He didn't have to arrange an obedience test; he already knew the outcome anyway. That's what being omniscient means. So the belief that the couple covered themselves with leaves because they were ashamed of their nudity shows a complete misunderstanding of what this part of the story is meant to illustrate.

"The author's real intent was to show that—given the societal attitude toward public nudity of that ancient time, where nudity could imply captivity, loss, vulnerability, or, most importantly, innocence—the couple's covering-up and hiding was *not* a sign of shame; it was a physical demonstration of their no longer being innocent and naive. It was a sign that the couple was no longer bound by the captivity of their innocence; after all, the fruit

gave them the ability to see good and evil. That's a merism, by the way, that's a rhetorical term which, in this case, stands for 'all moral knowledge.'

"So the author of this story intended that the listener would see that the story's 'moral' was not that nudity was evil; the intent was to show that in order for the creation of humankind to proceed, humans would need to learn about morality—good and evil. So Adam and Eve's covering up their bodies demonstrated that the knowledge which they had gained from eating the fruit was the knowledge of morality, until then an unneeded knowledge, since they were living in the perfection of Eden. But when they discovered morality, they had to leave Eden, the garden of innocence. And leaving Eden was an essential step for humankind's maturation; it was part of God's plan—this whole section of the Bible is a creation story, after all, intended to describe the creation of humankind.

"So this is why some early influential people in the Christian religions soon came to view public nudity as immodest or even shameful. Those theologians found in the biblical Eden story a reason to believe that God condemned nudity—after all, he clothed Adam and Eve with skins and kicked them out of Eden. But they were wrong—they weren't banished because they disobeyed and ate that fruit, according to the story's original author; they got booted because they jumped the gun, so to speak, and got their morality knowledge ahead of God's schedule. So there was no reason for them to remain in the shelter of innocence any longer. They were now prepared to face the Real World. I said that with capital letters.

"In order to understand the true meaning of this Bible story, plus most of its other stories with moral messages, you really need to understand two things. First, about the Bible's original language—not the highly flawed translations made some 2500 years after it was written by translators who used their current understanding of the Hebrew language, that is, the version which developed during the first millennium CE. But the Eden story was written more than a thousand years before that time—think about how much a language can change in a thousand years, even to the meaning of individual words.

"Second, the stories in the Bible didn't arise in a vacuum. Using the snake as an example, when the Eden story was written, the snake symbolized royalty and protection in Egypt. In Mesopotamia, the snake variously represented life and healing—the caduceus staff comes from that symbology—or wisdom, or craftiness, or protection, depending on the culture. A snake protecting a sacred tree is a widespread mythological symbol from many cultures. The association of Satan with Eden's snake is a Christian invention and came 1500 years after the Eden story was written, and that interpretation allowed the church to alter the story's original moral message. Since church bishops had no understanding of the cultures that existed when those biblical stories were written, they interpreted the snake's role according to their own beliefs.

"It's difficult to really know how these very early stories should be interpreted. After all, effective communication has three components: author, message, and audience. In reading the Bible now, we no longer have access to the author and audience—all of their cultural referents are gone, so we are left with a communication that effectively lacks more than two-thirds of its context. So now you know why in Sunday school, children are taught that the Bible says nudity is sinful. And now you know that it says no such thing.

"I'll leave you with one final thought. The Bible itself says that God is a nudist. Where? Read Psalm 104, verses 1 and 2. A literal translation of the original Hebrew reads, 'Bless my soul, God; God Lord, you are very great, with honor and majesty you are clothed; who covers yourself with light as with a garment...' Unquote. Clothed in light. Sky-clad. That's how nudists define themselves. Okay, that's all I have and the next presenter is..."

There was a mixed response; a lot of people applauded; some sat on their hands, scowling. Some jumped up or raised a hand to comment.

“Please, everyone. Hold the comments for the end or else we’ll never get to the third presenter,” Tamara requested. “Be courteous and we’ll get to you in a bit. The next presentation is from Barbara Winsberg; she’s a doctoral candidate in psychology at Maryland and is doing a study of the Avery-Denison Program in U.S. schools. Barbara? All yours.”

## Chapter 88 - Nudity in School

“Thanks, Tamara. Let’s change topics now to one that should be less troublesome; that is, if your sensibilities were disturbed by Tamara’s look at the biblical Eden story. But you should know that her presentation completely agrees with the interpretations of many highly respected biblical scholars and theologians from various denominations. So we’ll move on now to my field, psychology. Even though I plan to specialize in clinical psychology, my studies have covered educational psychology too because many children’s problems come from difficulties in school caused by emotional and socialization issues, different rates of maturing, and even clinical pathologies which may appear. In our own school-planning group here, we don’t believe we have the solution for all children’s problems in school, but we think that our approach can be useful in educational practice.

“Our prospectus shows that we’re creating a nudist school. Why do we want to create a nudist school? There are several major reasons which we’ll discuss now, and all are based on proven psychological research and observations. Some reasons fall into the academic or scholastic realm and others, into the physical education and somatic development realm.

“Let’s deal with both of those reasons together because they’re almost inseparable when dealing with younger children’s education. Our school will be closely associated with the nudist resort next door and part of the school’s physical education and science programs in the lower grades will take advantage of that association. There are dozens of educational and psychological studies which demonstrate the positive effects of exploring nature on child development. When a child is given the opportunity to explore and to play in nature, it’s simply an affirmation that humans are, in essence, a part of the natural world, and children will always gravitate to activities which allow them to explore their surroundings. This is not only a physical need, it’s an emotional, intellectual, sensory, and cognitive need as well.

“Every adult has seen children playing at the beach, in water, like a stream—even in rain puddles, or in the woods. It seems that there’s a genetic imperative for them to play in nature, spending interminable amounts of time using objects which they find to build things. They’ll use branches and broken tree limbs to make a fortress. A large carton—or an opening under a bush—can provide hours of play like that. Rocks and stones can dam water flow in a stream—or puddle—any kind of water. And because this kind of play always soils or soaks clothing, or both, with cooperative weather and where social taboos don’t exist, children’s playing nude will invariably result. Our school will provide a safe place to allow that kind of exploratory play.

“What does educational psychology tell us about letting children explore nature through their play? Plenty of studies exist which clearly show that such children benefit by developing more robust cognitive, social, and emotional skills than those who are deprived of such play. Even better, children’s educational development is improved by spending time in nature. A dramatic example of psychological improvement can be seen when working with kids who have been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. When they are allowed to play in nature, such children exhibit significant improvement in their ability to focus. Our plan is to incorporate the natural world and children’s zeal for exploration into an elementary education program.

“For the older children and teens, a different kind of play becomes important, and we’ve seen just how significant this is very recently as more schools begin to adopt the Avery-Denison Program into their curriculum. It’s set up to be part of the P.E. program but it’s much more than just physical education. The emphasis of the Avery Program is directed toward mutual respect, interpersonal cooperation, and team building through cooperative puzzle-solving. It gives teens experience, in a structured setting, to learn to set personal boundaries, to cooperate with others to achieve goals, and to learn respect for others; also, it provides a way for the participants to become much more intimate with their classmates than any other activity has accomplished. By intimate, we mean socially, not sexually; the children appear to bond like siblings, not like boy- and

girlfriend. From reports from all of the schools which have adopted it, the program has been hugely successful. Kevin will speak more about the Avery Program in a few minutes.

“What I want to cover is the current state of education in dealing with the social and emotional maturing of children. Sad to say, there *is* no current state. One of the most fraught issues among pre-teens and teens is body image. This is especially true among girls, but boys are certainly not immune from feeling that they don’t measure up to some imaginary ideal. Body image plays an enormous role in a teen’s self-esteem. During the pre-teen and teen years, their bodies undergo immense changes and so do their minds. Physical development occurs, growth spurts happen, hormones rule behavior and thinking. And all this activity has a different timetable for each individual. Teens see others ‘ahead’ of them in body development and feel inadequate. A body part is too small, too big, looks wrong, is too different. Self-image is destroyed by obsessing over an imagined departure from a nonexistent ideal.

“The media fills children’s minds with advertising, movies, social posts, and other propaganda which idealizes a particular human form. And their peers add to those issues by affirming how important it is to emulate that imagery. Here are some disturbing statistics which I’ve accumulated for teen girls, simply because far more psychological research has been done on teen girls than boys. Even before girls get to age 13, as much as 25 percent of them will become clinically depressed, exhibiting symptoms like self-harm, eating disorders, anxiety, irritation and temper outbursts, lack of motivation, and other similar symptoms. Virtually every single teen girl—close to 100 percent—admits to experiencing immense peer pressure to look a certain way, to the point that more than two-thirds of them feel that they’re deficient in some way, particularly in their appearance. And by age 17, close to 80 percent of girls report that they’re unhappy with their bodies. The intense modesty that society has taught our children—I’m speaking of our schools here too, as well as parents—provide no alternative imagery to the idealized examples which our media provide as a comparison for our teens consider as alternates.

“As educators, I’m sure that you’ve personally noticed these problems with teens in your studies or even in your own contact with students. But all is not lost; those statistics I mentioned cover our country’s general demographic but it doesn’t include girls—boys too—who were fortunate enough to be raised in a nudist or naturist home. For the purpose of this discussion, let’s just say that any distinction between them is immaterial.

“Anyone who experiences social nudism finds that being nude with others in a social setting feels a certain empowerment, and the lack of clothing is actually an equalizing experience. Without clothes, no markers of social status exist. For teens, that removes one major source of issues over self-image. Parents of young children raised as nudists notice in their children a certain self-confidence that is unmatched among non-nudist children. At nudist clubs and resorts, we typically see that our children interact with the other nude children far more openly than when they are in what we call a ‘textile’ environment—textile referring to those who are wearing garments.

“At our clubs and resorts, we also see that age barriers between children seem to break down; that is, children seem to play together based on mutual interests and not physical age. Without the social barrier of clothes, children act naturally, and the older ones seem to enjoy mentoring the younger ones.

“And we’ll finally address the body-image problem. Hiding behind clothes makes the human body a mystery. A child, especially a teen, wonders how he or she stacks up against others. So they try using the internet to find out, and wind up on pornographic sites where they get the worst possible exposure: to disrespectful human interactions, deviant sexuality, and poor body image. At nudist resorts and clubs, even nude beaches, our teens very quickly see that their own body looks virtually the same as everyone else’s body. There’s no mystery and no shame either. People whose bodies may be less than the media’s idea of ideal don’t really care about that imaginary ideal. And our children learn how the body’s appearance changes as people grow from childhood to



old age.

“This is why I said that children of nudist homes have few of the social and emotional problems that textile children experience. Our school will be the site of a passive study of nudist child development and will allow our teachers, who will be participants in the study, to see if what we learned informally from observing children’s development in our resorts also occurs in a more structured school environment.

“Our final presentation will be from Kevin Coris, who’s had the distinction of being the educational product of a number of countries around the world—seven of them, I believe. Nine if you include the three U.S. states where he attended schools. Kevin insists that his experiences in those different states were almost like he was living in different countries.”

Laughter.

“Even though he’s a doctoral candidate in political science, he has a master’s in educational psychology and was one of the developers of the Avery-Denison Program. Kevin, what pearls of wisdom can you share with us?”

Kevin walked over to the podium.

“Golly, you two will be hard acts to follow,” he remarked. “Let’s see how I’ll do. Tamara mentioned how nudity—not nudism—was the objective of the Naked in School Program. It failed terribly, as you no doubt recall. That program certainly was a major disaster to education over the eight years or so that it was running, and the negative effects on society that resulted from how teens were treated in that program are still reverberating.”

Most of the listeners nodded at that.

“And I believe that you’re all familiar with the alternate program, the Avery-Denison Program, which was introduced as a university class project as a direct response to the NiS program,” Kevin went on. “The Avery Program’s been very successful where it’s been introduced. And although most school districts or states have been slow to adopt it, mostly as a backlash from a reluctance to get involved with yet another social engineering project running in schools, the early results from schools which have adopted it look really favorable. You are familiar with that program, right?”

When the listeners indicated that they were familiar with the Avery Program, he continued.

“Because so few schools have adopted the Avery Program, educational and psychological studies of it have been slow to begin, even more so because of limited financial government resources. Politicians are gun-shy now about doing anything to support social programs in schools. But some small studies have been done and they seem to show that when the groups who participate in the Avery Program do so as high-school freshmen, the social results appear to be far better than when the students are seniors—in other words, the younger they do it, the better.

“What I want to propose here is to bring a similar innovative educational project to an earlier period in childhood education. But before that, I want to point out that despite the total failure of the Naked in School Program, nudity per se in schools is not harmful to the students. In fact, reports from schools in naturist communities have shown very favorable educational results in both children’s performance and behavior too. True, this is based on very tiny samples—just two schools.”

There was some background chatter from the group but most seemed to be interested in hearing more.

“Barbara told you some details from psychological studies of teens and children, so I won’t repeat what she covered about the vital connection to nature that children need to experience for their well-being. But to review the idea underlying the Avery Program philosophy, it’s about learning respect and developing empathy for

others and that program teaches methods to break down social barriers between people so that they can connect at a deeper, more empathic level. But as it's currently designed, the Avery Program starts after a child has gone through puberty and we know that some of the exercises that the Avery Program include tend to promote a sexual attraction among participants. Although this hasn't been a problem, since the program provides for appropriate supervision and teaches respect among the students, my group here believes that some of the things taught by the Avery Program can mask some fundamental issues in a child's psycho-sexual maturation.

"Let me engage in a little existentialist philosophy now, because it has a bearing on what I will be proposing—and I like to show off a bit too."

Laughter.

"The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas wrote extensively about the development of interpersonal relationships. He believes that relationships are abstractions. In one of his works, *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas suggests that people see each other not as individuals or physical entities, but as abstractions of thought. People don't do this consciously, of course. But he believes that, in a face-to-face encounter, one person senses the other person as an exterior abstraction of a personality construct. In a way, then, this abstraction may be sensed as being vulnerable or even defenseless. We might think of this in concrete terms if we consider a real-world example. In bald terms, physical nudity itself can be seen as the embodiment of vulnerability and defenselessness, but in personal interactions, this vulnerability is concealed by the cloaking of normal propriety—civil behavior and respectful discourse. Social convention demands this.

"Levinas believes that in interpersonal encounters, the people involved acquire, in some way, a form of responsibility for one another. It's the responsibility of effective communication, among other things. When this connection has been achieved, Levinas believes, the barriers which divide the two interacting people tend to drop and a kind of bonding occurs. Those barriers that fall can be viewed as the uncloaked essence, the nakedness, of those who interact. It's the metaphorical nakedness that results from the exposure of one's essential being to that of another person by sharing their interactions.

"Moving to a practical viewpoint, because trying to connect existentialist philosophy to the real world is sort of difficult..." there were chuckles "...but in a nudist resort, we can see the effect Levinas describes first-hand. With their clothing shed, the interactions of people are more direct and intense, more open and friendly. Total strangers greet each other as friends and communication is open and thoughts are freely shared. Why this is so, may have many reasons. Does clothing produce a psychological barrier or armor? Probably. Does it give economic signals? Definitely. Is it the openness an expression of the freedom of a shared experience? Possibly. These issues might be part of the answer, but I believe the essential reason is the one proposed by Levinas. And those ideas really begin when children start to become socialized—that's when they begin school.

"I, and most other nudists, believe that social nudity doesn't sexualize people. What sexualizes people is the suggestive, revealing fashion designs and commercial and entertainment marketing practices which are designed to be titillating, enticing, and alluring. Naturists believe that the whole idea of social nudism is that if you conceal your male and female parts from everyone, of course nudity will develop unwanted attention and sexual connotations. But we believe that hiding one's body is unnecessary and psychologically unhealthy. If people are accustomed to seeing others nude and being nude in their presence, then people will obsess about sex less, not more.

"Children come to nudism very easily, as I'm sure most of you know. What you may not know is that, raised in a social nudism environment, teenagers who see each other naked are much less obsessed and anxious about their body image than other teens who grew up in a textile environment, and many of those textile teens seem to obsess about trying to see the other sex naked. Barbara spoke about that at length.

“Sorry for being so long-winded, but those points I mentioned are very important concepts to understand. What our charter school group plans to do is to create a naturist school based on using the Montessori principles, from kindergarten to grade twelve, on property one of our foundations owns and is adjacent to a nudist resort. Our idea is to take the social aspects of social nudism and apply it to the socializing part of a formal education program, including the principles of respect and consideration of others that’s the basis of the Avery Program, to enhance the socialization process. We plan to enroll children from nudist-naturist families primarily, but will also accept children from non-naturist families after an evaluation of their motives and home life. I know this is a lot to digest, but I’ve already met with some of you privately to work out some technical details, so those folks here know something about this project. This is the basis of our plan. Thanks for your attention. Anyway, it’s time for your questions; are there any?”

Lots of hands went up.

“I found Miss Alexandre’s discussion of the Eden story most offensive. How could you have invented such rot?”

Answer, Tamara: “I’m sorry that you’ve been so badly misinformed about this story and probably other moralistic biblical stories, sir. There’s a large difference between ‘fact’ and ‘belief’ and there’s little I can say to close that gap. In my presentation, I used the analyses of several highly regarded religious scholars, and their interpretations are based on modern developments in linguistic studies and research into the cultural anthropology of that period. Please, this is not the place to debate issues of religious belief. You are entitled to your beliefs and opinions, but you’re not entitled to present them as facts in attempts to influence others. If you’d like to talk to me further about your concerns—if anyone else does too—please come see me after our presentation here.”

“Are you planning to seek accreditation? If so, with what organization?”

Answer, Kevin: “Absolutely. We’re in touch with the American Montessori Society and also are seeking accreditation from the Association of Independent Maryland Schools.”

“Are you going to be a public charter school or a private school?”

Answer, Barbara: “That answer is complicated. We’ll be functioning as a charter in one way, since our programs and curriculum will be managed by a team from the education faculty at Westphalia University. We’ll also serve as a lab school for them—an unusual one, to be sure. But we won’t be receiving any public funding. We found out that if we organized as a public charter school, we couldn’t follow our naturist model without making unacceptable changes.”

“Do you plan to employ only certified teachers and administrators?”

Answer, Barbara: “We do. Actually, there are several members of the two local nudist resorts who are either active or retired certified teachers. One, no two of them even have administrator certificates in the state. They’ve expressed interest in positions. And before you ask, yes, the teachers and staff will be nude.”

“You mentioned something about home-life evaluations for non-nudist families. Exactly what did you mean by that?”

Answer, Kevin: “We want people to enroll their children for the right reasons—those in keeping with the philosophy I mentioned earlier. An evaluation would be done by a licensed social worker.”

“What’s your time frame for this? I’m aware that you just began construction of some kind of facility in Davidsonville.”

Answer, Tamara: “The school building won’t be finished for maybe eighteen months, possibly less. But we plan

to have the first pupils begin in the fall.”

“Where will you have classes then?”

Answer, Barbara: “Next door at the Arundel resort facility. Their clubhouse isn’t used much during the weekdays following Labor Day. And we’ll be getting two classroom trailers for the upper grades.”

“How many pupils do you anticipate enrolling to start?”

Answer, Barbara: “So far we know of interest from about nineteen families in the K to sixth grades, a total of 26 children. Seventh grade and up, another fifteen families and 29 children.”

“And longer-term enrollment? What are your projections?”

Answer, Barbara: “We had a preliminary marketing and demographic study done. It said that we’d draw mainly from Anne Arundel, central and south, and St. George’s counties and a little from Calvert county. We can project an ongoing sustainable enrollment of 110 to 125 children.”

“I know of a university that’s for nudists but wasn’t aware of any nudist schools that are operating elsewhere like you mentioned. Can you elaborate?”

Answer, Kevin: “For the university, you said it’s for nudists but that’s not entirely accurate. A member of our team who knows about that university is here and can discuss that. She’s the leader of the team that developed the Avery-Denison Program, so let me introduce Dr Cynthia Denison. Cindy?”

Answer, Cindy: “Hi, folks. I know a bit about the university question. I went to high school in southern California and know about two colleges said to be nudist-friendly—one’s called Blanke Schande and its location wasn’t that far from where I lived. But that one’s definitely not a nudist college and here’s why. All the females at the college must be naked at all times—all female staff and faculty included, and they are afforded no privacy at all, whatsoever, including their requiring the female students to use open toilet and shower facilities. Plus they must pose sexually when they are requested to do so. And the men must be clothed at all times on campus, except, obviously, in their own quarters or places like athletic locker rooms. The purpose of the female nudity, according to the college’s publicity materials, conditions its female students to be proud of themselves and results in graduates who have developed confidence and character to become successful in the careers they choose. And the college claims that its male graduates acquire a greater respect for women. It’s difficult to validate those claims, however. But it’s a female exhibitionist institution and definitely not a nudist or naturist college.

“But there’s another college, located in LA, the Arts Institute of California, that has a very permissive attitude toward student nudity. The wearing of clothing is optional everywhere on campus except, I think, in the dining hall. I had two friends from high school go there and they loved the school and its nudist option. As far as Blanke Schande is concerned, I’ve heard that the girls who attend there really like it and enjoy the exhibitionism—but that’s not nudism at all. Barbara, you have the info on the naturist schools, right?”

Answer, Barbara: “There were two that I found. One near LA in California and one outside Orlando in Florida. Both were part of a nudist/naturist planned and gated community and were K-to-12 schools. They followed the Montessori model and all the high-school grads have gotten accepted into college. But these were small schools, up to fifty kids, I recall. The schools are considered very successful, though, and our school will use the same principles those schools use. Does this answer the question?”

The questioner responded, “Very much so; thanks.”

After the meeting, two people came up to talk with Tamara about her Eden analysis. She was prepared for objections like the one expressed and had a list of references to the analyses she had used.

After they left, Kevin came over to her.

“At least they both took a copy of the list with them,” Tamara said. “Maybe they’ll even look up the articles instead of tossing the paper I gave them.”

“Not everyone is tolerant of challenges to their beliefs,” he replied. “You and Barbara did a great job.”

“You did too. So is Jay filing the rest of the materials to make us official?”

“He is. Everything is ready. This meeting serves as the community notice since there aren’t any residences within the required notification distance. Hey, I see that the others are getting ready to leave... we’ll see you all at Thanksgiving at our place; let us know the final number of people coming.”

“Sure. Bye.”

~~~~~

The state volleyball championship finals were held the week before Thanksgiving and to nobody’s surprise, the Baltimore Tech girls’ volleyball squad won the state’s class 3A title for the second year. Winnie had been coaching several promising girls on the JV team and the graduating seniors had a number of good offensive prospects to replace them for the following year’s varsity team.

The Thanksgiving holiday was a happy affair this year; Kevin and his little group had been incorporated into the Winsberg clan through their friendship with Tamara and Kevin’s and Amelia’s work with Greta at the Columbia Institute. This year, the more distant families didn’t come, only those who lived locally were able to be there. The major topic of discussion was the new school being set up and the planning for the first phase of the housing community to be built on the recently acquired property nearby.

Then in mid-December, Tamara burst into Emma’s office, clearly excited.

Emma, chuckling at her excitement, said, “You do know, dear, that I’m not your advisor any longer now, am I. But what do you want to tell me that has you all buzzing?”

“I found something new, Emma. I wasn’t sure this would work, but a thought came to me...”

Emma began laughing. “My goodness, another revolution in physics is about to happen. What astounding idea are you about to unleash on us poor mortals?”

“Yeah, yeah. Having fun at my expense,” Tamara grinned at her. “Okay. So look at these photos. At the right side is the exit port of a small electron beam generator. We cobbled up a little electron gun like one on an old CRT—you know, a heated filament in a vacuum tube to make free electrons and electromagnets to accelerate and focus them. The electron beam is focused on the entry portal of the G-coil array in the picture’s center.

“At the left, two feet away, is a matched G-coil set up as a receiver. At its outlet port is a glass carboy containing water. The photo’s taken in a darkened lab. What do you notice?”

Tamara was giggling with excitement now and Emma shook her head in amusement.

“Erm, the water has this intense blue light, it’s strongest close to the coil and spreading out from there... It reminds me of... bloody hell, Tamara, is that really Cherenkov radiation? Because...”

A knock at the door interrupted her. It was a student.

“Sorry to interrupt, Dr Clarke. I’m Dana Buckley and I have an appointment?”

“Right. Certainly. This is Dr Alexandre, Mr Buckley. Tamara, this is one of our new crop of Clarke Scholars and he’s decided that he wants to switch his major to physics. He needs an advisor so I invited him to chat. Will

your reveal take long?"

Tamara smiled. "Not long. Dana, nice to meet you; you can stay. This won't be long. I found something interesting here and was showing it to Dr Clarke."

She pointed to the photos and he looked down at them.

"Are you the Dr Alexandre who won all those Nobels?" he asked in awe.

"I am."

"Oh, wow... do you work on nuclear reactors too? 'Cause isn't that Cherenkov radiation in the pictures?"

"That was my question too, Mr Buckley. You know about Cherenkov radiation?"

"A little. I know that it happens when charged atomic particles, like electrons or protons, are traveling faster than light would travel in that medium. When it's a clear medium like water, the atomic particles interact with the medium's molecules and that intense blue Cherenkov light results."

"That's correct," Tamara said. "But in this case, there's some glass in the way before the water so that attenuates the electron beam slightly, but this really is Cherenkov radiation, But here is a photo of the water vessel with the electron beam hitting it without first going through the coils. No Cherenkov radiation. We're seeing G-force amplification. Think about what that means."

The light dawned for Emma. "Bloody damn, excuse me. Tamara, we need to talk after I meet with Mr Buckley and get him sorted. Will you be in your office in a half hour?"

"Yep. Just come. I have the rest of the materials to show you there."

She left as Emma began talking to Buckley.

Emma came to Tamara's office 45 minutes later.

"Took a wee bit longer. Buckley first thought he wanted double-E but his advisor there thought he'd do better with the theoretical background of a straight physics degree. He's got the same level of maths abilities that I do, it seems, so I believe that he'll do better in physics than engineering. Anyway, I'm gagging to see the new idea you have. I'm sure you've developed it into a device already, haven't you?"

"You know me too well, Emma," Tamara grinned. "That effect I showed you? Here are the numbers. The electron gun in the primitive CRT we built develops an electron-beam energy between 18 to 20 KeV. But the electron beam that emerges from the secondary coil has energies from 400 to 700 MeV. The minimum energy of an electron beam to produce Cherenkov radiation in water is roughly 0.51 MeV. But to produce the radiation intensities in that photo, it needs electrons having kinetic energies of about two orders of magnitude greater, about 50 MeV. So by passing through, ah, wherever things go when they're traveling between the coils, is somehow amplifying their kinetic energies. By a huge amount too. So this suggested an application that can have a real impact on physics research."

Emma was looking over the pages of computations Tamara had done.

"Again, you're breaking new ground here, Tamara. These calcs are for multiple coil sets. What have you come up with?"

"So first, we ran into a safety problem in operating that CRT electron gun 'cause you know what an x-ray tube is, right?"

"Goodness, yes..."

“Fortunately I worked in a hospital electronics shop and learned about x-ray tubes. They’re essentially electron guns shooting a beam of electrons at a metal target. The electrons’ impact with the metal makes x-rays. Well, I had prepared shielding to stop any x-rays in my setup but neglected the bremsstrahlung effect. I didn’t think that there would be significant bremsstrahlung radiation from the electron gun, but from my hospital experience, I recalled that phosphorous-32, which is used as a tracer and a chemotherapy agent in certain cancers, emits a beta particle, or electron, with an energy of 1.71 MeV and produces significant bremsstrahlung...”

“Refresh my memory... that’s German for ‘braking radiation.’”

“Yep. Even electrons of energies of about one MeV, when passing through high atomic weight matter like dense metals, produce dangerous x-rays—that’s bremsstrahlung. With electrons of hundreds of MeV, very hard x-ray radiation is produced. And ordinary lead shielding can’t stop it from happening—it actually makes it worse. That radiation’s caused by the fast slowing down or deflection of the electrons as they pass the heavy nuclei of the material that they’re transiting.”

“I do recall that now. It’s been a while. What happened in your setup?”

“When we fired the electrons at the G-force coils, it was a tenth-second pulse at first. I had radiation detectors set up ‘cause I wasn’t sure if something radioactive would emerge from the G-coil exit, so I had surrounded the target with a lead shield. The detectors went crazy anyway and that’s when I realized that the only possible cause was bremsstrahlung. The lead nuclei were contributing to the hard x-ray production. It was good I remembered that from my hospital work in the radiology department.”

“So you used low-molecular weight shielding material.”

“Yep. Lucite blocks work just fine. So now, getting back to those calcs that involve a serial array of coils. Recall what John van der Bellen said? The cosmologist who was a member of our physics review group two years ago in January? He calculated that to get to the energies we needed to find particles of the mass of monopoles, and maybe even dark matter particles, we needed an accelerator with a circumference of roughly 2.1 trillion kilometers. He mentioned that’s the size of the Oort Cloud. So by using the G-coils in the configuration I used in those calcs, there would be no limit to the energies we could achieve with an accelerator we could build, and it wouldn’t take millions of miles of space. We could make one having the effective diameter of the Milky Way Galaxy, even.”

“Blimey, Tamara...”

“Wait, there’s more. Betty and Saul built a tiny one—it’s a G-force cyclotron, essentially. They got the welding shop to make a stainless steel toroid with ion injection and target arms and the vacuum pump specialists helped them set up the diffusion pumping system; here’s a photo. The proton generator part is bigger than the whole ring, actually. It’s got six small coils inside, the thing’s about a meter in circumference, and we used it to accelerate protons to 0.578 GeV.”

“Can I say that I’m staggered once again?” Emma replied as she dropped into a chair as she looked at the photos.

“Do you want to hear even more? The Fermilab proton booster ring near Chicago is maybe 460 meters circumference and gets protons up to 8 GeV. Look at page 3. That’s where I calculated an eight-coil apparatus with the configuration shown. It’s a four-meter ring and can achieve 12.9 GeV. By using larger assemblies with more coils, I’m sure we can achieve energies that were only present at the Big Bang, in fact. Before we did that, though, I’m sure people would want a safety profile done,” she chuckled.

“How did you get the proton beam?” Emma asked.

“That was the most complicated and expensive part.” Tamara told her. “We copied what they did at CERN but made ours a lot smaller. The welding shop made it from a stainless steel bottle with an electrical grid inside. We put a little hydrogen gas in it and the electrified grid ionized the gas to make the free protons. Accelerating them was the hardest part. We did that electrostatically with an RF generator; there wasn’t much focusing and the whole thing was kinda rough and sloppy, but we got enough protons out of it to test the coils.”

“This is all corkin’ brilliant. You realize that this will be a game-changer for the entire field of physics? It’ll allow doing experiments which have only been a dream. Huh, you’ve already gotten one physics Nobel Prize. This discovery will surely earn another, won’t it. And not to mention, your theory about dark matter and energy is getting more and more acceptance as its predictions get confirmed. That work is surely worthy of a Nobel as well. Tamara, you’re simply an amazing scientist; I’m in awe of what you’ve accomplished. What’s your plan for publishing this, then?”

“So we own the patents for the G-coils already. I’ve checked with the lawyers about amending the patent claims to include this application. That means that I can finish up the paper and submit it. There are a few journals that are specialized for particle accelerators. But this discovery has wider implications, I think. What journal do you think I should use? I was considering *Nature Reviews Materials*. I would cover mainly the mathematical principles of how it works and how the protons are accelerated in the phase ‘between’ the entry and exit coils. What’s really interesting is besides the beam energy increase while transiting the coils, the beams appear to stay collimated. I’m certain that we’ll need to add magnetic and electrostatic focusing between coils but we won’t need to worry about boosting charge sequencing. The coils provide that.”

“I agree with the *Nature* choice. As well, you implied another paper. An engineering one?”

“Right. It was cool to see how simple a design this accelerator can be. It means that if people want to work in high-energy or particle physics, it won’t require enormous amounts of funding and rationing experiment time because only a few large devices in the world can reach high energies. Now it can be done with a device that only took five weeks to build. So the other paper would cover the device’s design and construction. And of course, it opens another market to me to sell some specialized G-coils,” Tamara chuckled.

“And I suppose that you’re planning on building your own super-high-energy accelerator now,” Emma grinned.

“Yep. I’d like to site it at the APL if there’s room there—and Zucker approves. That way Hopkins will get to be in the high-energy accelerator business like University of Washington, Cornell, University of California Davis, Texas A&M, Stanford, and more. And we’d have the most powerful one in the world too.”

“Would you go for energies of the particle mass you calculated two years ago?” Emma asked.

“I’m going all out. The last page of the calcs is the design for an accelerator to reach  $10^{14}$  TeV/c<sup>2</sup>. I estimate two years to build it. You do realize that the accelerator doesn’t need to be circular? The way the coils work, the beams can be turned 180 degrees so the accelerator beam path can be folded back and forth on itself. So there’s no need for a massive building or a big tunnel. But the most complex part of a high-energy collider will be the detector and analyzer, since we’ll be looking for extremely massive, very short-lived particles.”

“I wasn’t aware that you were paying that much attention to particle physics,” Emma said, grinning.

“I was kinda reading papers on the topic ever since I calculated the possible monopole mass, Emma,” she responded. “But now that I’ve theorized what we’re seeing is dark matter and not monopoles, I’ve altered my focus a bit. I think that the higher accelerator energies are the key to discovering Kaluza-Klein gravitons. In my theory of dark energy, I proposed that the G-coils are a kind of ‘portal’ to some kind of dimension or realm where gravitation is the extra-dimensional projection of a force, perhaps mediated by Kaluza-Klein gravitons, into our three-dimensional universe. So even though gravitons are assumed to be massless like photons, the



Kaluza-Klein gravitons are postulated to have a tiny mass at atomic scales. If massive gravitons like this exist, a very high energy accelerator might be able to detect their expected decay products. And if we find evidence of monopoles too, so much the better. Could you look over the math and tell me if you see anything I missed?”

Tamara and Emma spent the next hour looking over her work and Emma pronounced it correct.

Tamara sighed. “The only drawback from this discovery is that there’ll be another huge media fuss.”

“Well, better get used to it, dear. Soon your name will be a household word, won’t it,” Emma grinned.

## Chapter 89 - Media Interview

The winter holiday break had arrived. Virtually everything would be shut down for ten days and all work would stop, including the recruiting at the factory and Tamara's engineering teams' work at both her temporary commercial facility and the APL. In mid-December, Tamara had submitted to the APL leadership her request for approval to build the accelerator she had designed. She hoped for rapid approval so that she'd be able to begin planning its construction soon. This would be a large project and would involve several subprojects. Tamara assumed that she could get federal funding for a portion of it, so she had begun preparing research grant applications to be sent to the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Department of Energy. She would fund the preliminary planning work with a grant from her own foundation.

A major subproject would involve the design and construction of a particle detector and analyzer and she had determined that the best place for doing that work would be at CERN, where their engineers had plenty of experience with detectors. One of her physics "review panel" members from several years ago was a CERN physicist. She had consulted him for advice and he had recommended that she contact CERN's Knowledge Transfer Group. That department could arrange the terms for a collaboration with Tamara's engineers on the design of a detector. Tamara also knew that she needed to build a much more efficient proton generator.

So before construction could actually begin on the accelerator device itself, there was plenty of additional advance preparation work to be done, including the search for a location to house the device. She needed advice about whether a new building was required or if an existing building could be repurposed.

~~~~~

Many of the Winsberg family traditionally gathered on Christmas Eve day for an early dinner; those who lived within a ninety-minute drive of the Winsberg Seniors' home generally came, and an exchange of humorous gifts typically occurred then, too. There was a major difference in those attending this year. Barbara wasn't there; she had gone to Texas with Terence to spend Christmas with his family. That was one expected difference for the people who were gathered this year. But something unexpected by everyone occurred.

After the family had finished exchanging their "gag" gifts and everyone was still laughing at the humor of some of them, Peter came over to Tamara, who had been quite creative in selecting some amusing gifts for other family members.

He went to Tamara and took her hand and she looked at him in amazement as he said, "There's something more I'd like to do, now, and this time it's not a gag. A lot of my family is here today and so are Tamara's parents, who've become part of our family too. So I want to make it official."

*How was he able to keep this a secret from me?* she wondered.

Peter went on, "Tamara, your coming into my life was the best thing that ever happened to me and you've made me a complete person. I'd like us to spend the rest of our lives together..."

Several family members gasped; after the gag gifts, Peter's proposal was completely unexpected.

"... so will you accept this ring to symbolize my proposal for our marriage and can I say it's a yes?" Peter asked as he showed her the ring he had palmed.

Tamara looked at him with tears in her eyes.

"Absolutely, darling," she said, standing to embrace him as Winnie squealed in delight.

Peter slipped the ring on her finger as everyone applauded and then the couple was mobbed by the family in congratulation. And to check out the ring. It passed the critical inspection of all the women present.

“When will the wedding be?” Winnie asked, hopping with excitement.

Tamara laughed. “Sweetie, he just asked me. Peter, it’s okay to have the wedding after the spring term is over, right?”

“Sure. And you’re still not wanting a huge wedding, I guess.”

“That’s right; we discussed not planning anything big or elaborate. But how were you able to hide your plans from me, sweetheart? Usually I can feel your emotions and know something’s up.”

Peter chuckled. “When we first did that mind-speak thing, I learned a little about how to keep from broadcasting my emotions. But it’s hard to do with you ‘cause we’re so attuned to each other.”

Tamara was waiting for a quiet time to speak to Greta, and after the hubbub over the engagement had subsided, she got the opportunity. After discovering that she, Peter, and Winnie could speak mind-to-mind—but not always and many times imperfectly—Tamara had tried to teach the ability to her parents with no success. When she tried it with Greta, she got a slight response. So she had tried to come up with a possible theory about how that ability worked and wanted to see what Greta thought of it.

When they were alone, Tamara asked her, “Have you been able to get anywhere with the mind-speak ability?”

“Not really, dear. I get hints of it with Werner and more with you, but I can’t initiate anything; I just seem to be able to, ah, ‘receive,’ I guess you’d say.”

“I’d like to tell you my thoughts about how that ability may work. It must be rooted in nature somehow since there’s no magic involved. I believe that the ability is related to how memory works. Can I go into lecture mode? When I do, it helps me solidify my thoughts.”

“You can, provided you let me stop you for questions,” Greta grinned at her.

“Sure. So first, I did some digging into current neuroscience work on memory and that led me to some recent work on artificial intelligence. A recent theory is that memory is stored as a matrix, kind of like a mosaic. The old idea that particular parts of the brain stores each memory can’t be correct; each memory must be stored in many different parts of the brain. Brain cells die and are replaced all the time and if one or several of them die, the memory would be gone, and that doesn’t happen.

“The work I saw postulates that memory is stored as a matrix, like a hologram. Think of a mosaic with colored tiles. Let’s say you have one, and then you remove all the light blue tiles. You still can see the mosaic’s picture. So there’s this idea that memories are stored in a similar way to how holograms are stored. Holograms are three dimensional pictures of whole objects and in the way they are constructed, every part of the hologram contains the entire image. This is different from normal image storage, where the image is made up from an assembly of a pixel-by-pixel sequence. If you knock out a few pixels, the rest are no longer in registration, so that can destroy the image. Holograms are very different—cut one in half and the whole image is still there. It’s a little blurry, but it’s complete. Memory is most likely similar; each particular memory involves brain cells from different parts of the brain.

“This idea is very important for mind-speak, I think. The message isn’t composed of a stream of words like a phone or email. It’s received kind of like a holographic matrix and is stored in the brain and retrieved just like a memory. And that’s exactly how it feels too—like a memory appears but it isn’t your memory, so you *know* it’s external. And transmitting like that ensures that the whole thought is received; there are no partial transfers. It’s all there. Am I making sense?”

“Except for the incredible idea that some people have that ability, that makes a lot of sense,” Greta agreed. “But how is that ability possible?”

“Yep, that was my next problem. When I communed, and Winnie and I did together, with the energy being or whatever it was—oh, and I had some additional recent contacts too—I got this idea that I’ve been mulling over. You know the way my paired G-force coils work? How they seem to be coupled?”

“I do. You told me that it’s some kind of entanglement. You said it’s something that quantum mechanics predicts.”

“Yeah. I still don’t know exactly how that works on such a large, macro scale, but it’s simple to see with elementary particles, like electrons. And you know that matter and energy can’t be destroyed, but can be converted back and forth between them.”

“Yes. So you think that mind-speak is a kind of entanglement? How would that work?”

“I knew you were smart, Greta, you picked right up on that. Yep, I think that the energy that motivates everyone’s soul is part of the energy of the universe and is never destroyed. And remember, every atom of every person was a part of the world going back to when this planet formed. And before that, every atom was part of a star. My idea is that many of the fermions—the fundamental particles of matter—have become entangled over the billions of years they’ve existed, and like the energy being, these entangled particles also can assemble into collections of information, seemingly stored in a way like holographic information’s stored. In this way, all of the memories of our ancestors must still exist. But those memories are generic, that is, there’s no individuality attached to a memory.

“How mind-speak works, I think, is because between certain people, they contain enough of these entangled particles which are connected to each other. I’ve begun to believe that true ‘soul-mates’ are people who share enough entangled fermions that it allows the holographic memory from one person to be detected by another. And how the information is shared has to do with the brain structures that my MRI helped discover. So true and effective mind-speak requires a critical mass of shared entangled fermions plus an active limbic system.

“But just think of the myriads of people who have a partial ability—those people who sense that a loved one is in trouble or needs them. Or people who claim that they have the memories of a person who died a hundred years earlier.” Tamara laughed. “So that’s what I’ve figured out. I hope it makes sense. Now I need to figure out how premonition works. I have a feeling that won’t be easy to do.”

“I suppose that your reasoning makes sense. What’s difficult is your initial assumption, but I’ve accepted the proof that what you do is possible. And I certainly agree that keeping that ability secret is essential. The world’s governments aren’t ready to accept people who can communicate mind-to-mind, even if it’s such a limited ability. That’s about all I can think about now; wrapping my head around those ideas is giving me a headache. So to completely change the topic, where’s your new school planning at now?”

“We’ve got the state certificate of approval process under way. The accreditation will come when we begin to get a structure together—things like curricula, staff, school facilities and administration. We have a mailing list of possible student parents drawn from the resort’s mailing list and we’ve encouraged word of mouth publicity too. We can fill the administrator positions with two resort members who have the certifications and we have half of the teachers. We think that we’ll be okay there since the Westphalia Ed School is circulating the job descriptions for the open slots. So far we’re on target to open next fall, using the resort clubhouse and some trailers.”

“That’s good; enough of the serious stuff. Let’s join the others and catch up on the gossip.”

~~~~~

And at another family gathering the following week on New Year’s Eve, Terence proposed to Barbara. The two couples quickly got together and decided that they wanted to have a double wedding and they’d do it at the

nudist resort. To Winnie's delight, both Tamara and Barbara asked her to be their maid of honor.

Then Claire and Greta pulled all of the women aside, and they went off to the family room. Nadine, Angela, Shelly, and Janice joined Tamara, Barbara, and Winnie there.

"You sure you both want a nude wedding? And a double one?" Claire asked and Nadine nodded.

Tamara thought about it for a second. "Oops. Nudist resort. Mom and Dad aren't into that, right. Mom?"

Nadine nodded as Claire continued, "There are others in the family who aren't nudists either; you know that, Barbara."

Barbara responded with an unhappy nod.

"Let me tell you a bit of history," Greta broke into the conversation. "It's true that the resort is nudity-mandatory, but there have been occasional weddings at the resort, you know. We have ways to deal with the photography issue and the management relaxes the rule for wedding guests; I suppose you didn't know that. Of course, the clothed guests would be mingling with the nude folk, so that could be an issue for them."

"For Wilson and me, that wouldn't be a problem," Nadine said. "The two of us are simply too set in our ways and conservative to be naturists ourselves. But we don't mind if others have their own customs."

"Mom?" Barbara asked. "You know that neither Tamara nor I want to have a ton of wedding guests. With a double wedding, that automatically almost doubles the guest list..."

"Barbara, my family is just us," Tamara interrupted. "And we have mostly the same friends too. I don't know about Terence's family, though."

"He's got three younger sisters and the youngest is now starting as a college freshman. There's one aunt and uncle on each side, plus his parents and grandparents. And they're members of this enormous Baptist church; it's got over 10,000 members. That church organized pickets around all the high schools in the city when they were running the Naked in School Programs there, so the church is violently anti-nudity and so are Terence's family members. Except his sisters; they're cool with nudism. So Terence's parents will sure be pissed. I asked him just after he popped the question about having a nude wedding, before I mentioned it to Tamara, and he's all for doing it.

"When we visited for Christmas and I met his family, that's when he came out and told them that he goes to a nudist resort. They almost threw us out of their house then. So he told them to ditch the past; it's not returning, and start living in the twenty-first century. It got very tense after that so we returned to Maryland two days early. So I'm certain that his family will boycott the wedding. His sisters will definitely come, though. But his parents and grandparents? No way. And I'm sure that not having a Baptist minister do the wedding would be a further insult to them."

"My family is nominally Catholic," Tamara said. "Most Haitians are. And many weddings there are in private homes, but the ceremony is also done in the churches. Mom, I remember you doing a few Vodou weddings too."

"Yes, and we've discussed what you wanted to do at your own wedding," Nadine said. "Now that it's a joint wedding, do you still want to have some of those traditional Haitian elements?"

"I need to talk to Barbara about that," Tamara replied. "I like the processional dance, the ribbon ritual, and the broom-jumping ritual."

The other women wanted to know what those were, while Barbara told her, "I haven't thought much at all what I wanted in my wedding. I assumed that we'd just do the vows and have a civil rather than a religious ceremony. I wouldn't mind having Haitian parts in the ceremony—except no animal sacrifices," she chuckled.

Nadine shook her head. “No Vodou sacrifices. Those are only to invoke the spirits. But Tamara and I were thinking about incorporating the customs she mentioned. We like to dance down the aisle in the bridal party entrance. Usually the bride and bridesmaids come up with a unique walking choreography, a dance-step walk to the music and the wedding party winds up forming a corridor for the bride to walk through as everyone sways to the music. It marks the joyful occasion and we Haitians love to dance.”

Barbara was smiling broadly. “I just love that idea! What else do you do?”

The other women were smiling too.

“I mentioned the ribbon ritual,” Tamara said. “I always loved watching that. Just before the vows are recited, the maid of honor and best man use a ribbon to bind the couple’s hands together to symbolize their being joined together and their promise to support each other throughout their marriage. And there’s a Haitian folk custom called ‘Jumping the Broom.’ After their vows are exchanged, the couple jumps over a broom. That’s meant to represent their commitment to overcoming any obstacles they face in marriage and to work together to build their new life as a couple. I asked Peter about us doing those rituals and he wants to do them.”

Everyone was excited by Tamara’s description of those rituals and then their discussion turned to how it would work with two couples involved.

While they were discussing how to adapt the wedding elements into a joint plan, Tamara laughed. “You know, it looks like I just can’t get away from Jane Austen’s literary influence. In her novel *Pride and Prejudice*, she arranged a double wedding for two of her characters—the Bennett sisters, Jane and Elizabeth. It’s really funny.”

Barbara chuckled. “You know they made that into a zombie movie? In it the Elizabeth character is also a martial arts expert...”

“Barbara? Really?” Tamara asked, laughing. “You’re a fan of that ... um ... I won’t say garbage, but...”

“Hey. Not a fan. I saw it with some friends when I was, um, 13 years old at a sleep-over party when I was in middle school,” Barbara replied. “It wasn’t so good, as I recall. A chick-flick. Some dumb, campy humor. But I thought that the Elizabeth character was way cool so when Peter asked to take martial arts after his awful Program experience, I was all for doing it with him.”

“You didn’t mention that you also wanted to make sure that Peter didn’t get hurt,” Claire grinned at her.

Barbara nodded, “Yeah, that too.”

“While you’re talking about famous double weddings, do you know who also had a joint wedding?” Angie chuckled. “Just because I know about this. Famous advice columnists. The creators of the ‘Dear Abby’ and ‘Ask Ann Landers’ columns were actually twin sisters, and they had a double wedding. My mom loved those columns and got me to start reading them.”

Barbara and Tamara had plenty of questions to ask about the preparations for the wedding and were happy for all the information and advice that they received.

### ***Applied Physics Laboratory, Laurel, Maryland: two months later***

In mid-February, a number of important things happened, very close together. First, the APL management had given the approval to begin planning work on the G-force collider and had selected an area on their property to build a structure to house it. The building wouldn’t need to be elaborate; just a weatherproof steel-frame skeleton with metal curtain walls would suffice; interior offices and labs could be built as free-standing structures inside the outer building.

Second, Tamara learned that her paper to *Nature* had been fast-tracked and would be published before the end

of the month and her engineering paper was getting similar treatment. And third, she had gotten favorable news from both federal granting agencies that her proposal had been advanced in the review process and that both agencies' review panels wanted to schedule a local site visit to determine whether the device was feasible to build. They also wanted to confirm that her proof-of-concept cyclotron device could perform as her grant application had claimed.

And finally, she was negotiating a working agreement with CERN to help design a detector; after a lot of thought, she had decided that rather than re-inventing something which already existed, the CERN people could help build a proton beam generator too. That way, she could have her engineers concentrate on the accelerator design and fabrication itself. Assembling and pairing the coils of the size needed would be a complex and time-consuming process, but it could be done while the building construction proceeded. This would be a perfect shake-down manufacturing job for the Alwin Systems Corporation facility to work on; her engineers' group from the temporary facility had moved into the permanent building and a manufacturing technical team was being recruited. There were a lot of similarities between the coils needed for the larger shaft bearings and those needed for the particle accelerator, so the cost savings warranted using the same facility for manufacturing both.

When the scientific papers were released at the end of February—they were published both electronically and in hard copy on the same day—there was a sensation in both the physics community and in the media. While her invention could allow any research facility to become a player in cutting-edge high-energy and particle physics, the G-force accelerator still wasn't a cheap device; for collision energies of greater than 50 GeV, the total cost of the collider device and its ancillary equipment and housing structure would still be more than three million dollars. But that small fact didn't keep scientists from being interested in looking into an accelerator for their facility.

As Tamara had told Emma back in December, "I looked into conventional accelerator costs. In 2000, Fermilab was considering building a large ring, over 30 kilometers in diameter. They got cost estimates, and just for the tunneling costs, it was about \$4100 per meter. Here's a copy of that estimate. It's about \$167 million. Then you'd need to add in the accelerator equipment—the magnets, tube, vacuum pumps, RF generators, computers. Hell, CERN's LHC construction cost is said to be around \$4.75 billion. That's about 3.6 million bucks per GeV. I did some off-the-cuff calcs and I think my device could be built for around 60 thousand per GeV. That's like, ah, 6000 percent down."

Emma, again, was speechless at that.

~~~~~

Since the costs of a device whose energies matched or exceeded those of the largest ones in the world would be only a tiny fraction of the larger colliders' costs, scientists from dozens of institutions were now trying to contact Tamara. She was very glad that she now had a PA to deal with the excited callers.

Dealing with the news media people was a different matter and, by the end of March, Tamara had decided that she was neither an entertainment celebrity nor a politician who needed all the publicity that they could get. She could control who got access to her and decided not to have a huge news-conference-cum-media-circus like the one for her Nobel Prizes had been. When the requests for interviews began coming in, she told Lisa Farrell, her PA, to contact the major news organizations and among themselves, they could organize an interview to be attended by a maximum of five journalists who could represent all organizations that wanted an interview. Tamara would do an interview with those chosen media representatives, and no video would be permitted.

She had decided on this hard-line approach after she had learned from Mason in mid-March that her connection to the nudist-school project by some of its opponents had been brought to the attention of some very conservative members of the Maryland legislature.

~~~~~

“Hi, Tamara,” Mason had greeted her in that phone call. “I heard from our watchers in the state capitol that some opposition to your school project has cropped up.”

“Really? Will that cause a problem?” she asked.

“Very unlikely. Here’s what I heard happened. Some of the people who were at your meeting about the project back in November are opposed to it—on religious grounds, apparently. They’ve taken their grievance to a few state representatives. They brought that issue to the House Education Committee where they had begun to write a bill to remove state funding for your school...”

“Wait, it’s not using public funds...” Tamara objected.

Mason chuckled. “Yeah, they quickly found that out. So they called a hearing with the state Ed Department superintendent. The committee wanted to know if and how the state approved the school. He answered that it had been approved in January, so they asked him to revoke the approval. He told them that the application met the requirements of all state laws and regulations and the department had no grounds for revocation of the approval. Next, the committee tried looking into writing a law to make the school illegal, but their legal staff told them that such a narrowly-targeted law would be problematic and wouldn’t stand a court challenge. That’s when they began looking into its funding sources and identified your foundation as one source. That brought the committee to a dead stop; no one in House leadership wanted to mess with you, it seems. Your successes, commercial and scientific, have put Maryland on the international map almost like Silicon Valley did for California.”

“Damn, that’s really interesting, Mason. So the school’s still okay?”

“It is. But its opponents now realize that since they can’t get the state government to stop it, they’re going to try other things. My sources tell me that one way is to try to discredit you personally. Since you’re a public figure now, in a limited way, you’d have fewer ways to pursue a libel or slander suit against critical opinions about you. Under U.S. laws in every state, public figures or officials are required to prove actual malice for any defamatory statement. And who is a ‘public figure’ is a difficult concept. Public officials are. Media celebrities also are and so are others who hold power in society.

“But there’s another category of a public figure, known as ‘limited-purpose’ public figures. It comes from a famous Supreme Court case, the Gertz case. Limited public figures, according to that decision, are those otherwise private people who’ve brought attention to themselves through their public support of controversial issues in order to influence their being accepted. So it would seem that you’d be in that class and you couldn’t sue about any defamatory statement about you that involves your work in physics, or any controversial issue you advocate for publically. However, if the defamatory statement made about you concerns something else, like your private life, then you’d have far easier legal options for redress. So I’d advise that any public statements that you make stick strictly to your work and that you mention nothing else.”

“Jeez, Mason. I’m getting bunches of requests for interviews. You know how I love to talk and how opinionated I am about social issues.”

“My point exactly, dear. With your public stature now, as soon as you speak publically about any issue, you’ll automatically become a public figure for that issue and you can open your private life to public scrutiny that way.”

“Okay. I’m gonna think very hard about how to do any interviews. You mentioned the opponents doing other things, plural. What else do I need to watch out for?”



“My sources reported that they heard of some talk about picketing the school construction site. Supposedly a few churches will be involved in providing picketers.”

“But they can’t enter private property, right?” Tamara asked.

“Only if the property owner permits it,” Mason answered. “I see your point. Your organization’s bought up just about the entire area around the resort and the new school site. Any picketers would have to be quite a distance away from the construction site.”

“Yeah. And you know how the roads leading into that area are narrow. There’s no place to park and they could be kept from blocking the road too. I’m not frightened by picketing. When the resort’s closed for the season, and with the quarry not operating, virtually nobody’s driving on that road anyway. Just the construction people and a few locals. Does Ron know about this?”

“I only learned about it earlier today. I’ll call him and tell him to phone you if he sees anybody like a protester near the construction site.”

~~~~~

So with Mason’s advice, Tamara planned to tightly control a very limited interview session. She decided to have the interview take place in a conference room at her law firm and have Bernice Tompkins, her lead attorney, Lisa Farrell, her PA, and a Cornelius security agent attend. After a week of contentious wrangling, the various news organizations had realized that Tamara wasn’t budging from her position and it was up to them to agree to share a group of interviewers or have no story to report at all. The local TV stations and their national organizations were particularly miffed at not being allowed to tape the interview. Despite this, TV crews did arrive at the building for the early April meeting, hoping for an impromptu shot of Tamara’s arrival and possibly even a sound bite.

Tamara chose the law offices for a reason: they had a private garage under the building and she entered that way, bypassing the TV crews. She waited until everyone was in the conference room and then entered with Farrell. Questions immediately began flying. She went to an open seat at the table as Farrell took the next chair and Tamara waited quietly until everyone stopped talking.

“May I speak?” she enquired, looking around at everyone with her “speak and you die” glare.

Her glare caused instant silence. Everyone answered with various forms of assent.

“Good,” she went on. “I chose this way of communicating with the press and media because even though I’ve achieved a measure of fame, I’m still a very private person and intend to stay that way. I also intend that this interview be polite and civil. I’ll say a few things as an introduction and then you may ask questions of me—and they must all be related to my research, or to my related commercial activities. If the questions get rowdy or inappropriate, we will terminate the interview at that point. Now, my people have detected that two of you are wearing hidden body cameras; also you two, plus an additional person, have transmitters capable of sending audio and video outside this room. Your transmitters won’t work since this room is shielded. I will leave the room now and will return when your body cameras are disabled. Also, as your instructions said, all electronics are to be off, phones included. We have detecting equipment operating and if you have an active device when I return, you will be asked to leave. You’ll have five minutes.”

She got up and walked out; three minutes later, the Cornelius agent, a signal specialist who was monitoring the room, gave her the all-clear.

When Tamara re-entered the room, everyone was quiet and waiting expectantly. She returned to her seat and fixed everyone with her glare. No one would meet her eyes now.

*Good*, she thought. *Domination established.*

“So I’ve mentioned my ground rules. Don’t think I won’t invoke them if I must. Because of some humanitarian activities in which I’ve been involved, I’ve been exposed to multiple instances of personal danger, including deadly danger, and that is why I’m being so careful. I will not respond to any questions related to that matter, however. This interview will cover only my physics research.

“Yes, I’ve been greatly honored by my peers through their recommendations to the Nobel organizations that I be awarded the prize... multiple prizes. I’ve also made major contributions to our understanding of the physical universe. I’m a very curious person with a creative imagination and I’m incredibly fortunate to be working in an environment which supports and rewards my kind of creativity. Getting to my latest work, I noticed how the device that my engineers and I developed can amplify or boost the energy that transits between two linked G-force devices. We noticed that happening with electromagnetic radiation, that is, photons. They have zero rest mass. At that time, I let the matter rest because we had other pressing projects underway.

“Recently I was doing some calculations involving possible dark-matter structural compositions when I noticed that my calcs seemed to support the dimension of dark matter—or whatever reality dark matter occupies—imparting a repulsive force on any interacting baryonic matter. That’s Real World matter, the stuff we’re made of. Protons and neutrons. Add a few electrons to the recipe and you come up with the universe we can all see. The finding of an unknown repulsive force implied that we might be able to somehow harvest that energy in a useful way. It’s actually the energy that’s causing the expansion of the universe. My levitating coils are already tapping some of that energy and it looks like the power transmission beams we’re working on will not only allow wireless power transmission, the energy we transmit will also get a power boost.

“But my calcs showed something fascinating. The math seemed to show that interesting things would happen if I tried passing Real World matter through a paired coil assembly. At the macro scale, the coils repel real matter; that’s how the levitating coils and G-force bearings work. What about matter at the atomic scale? I tried sending an electron beam through the coils and the result was dramatic; the kinetic energy gain was huge. Okay, that was an amazing result and it validated some of the math. But what about protons? Would they behave the same way? They’re 1837 times more massive. So we built a device to try that and had a similar result. And that’s what this new particle accelerator which I describe in my papers is all about. It uses virtually the same technology as the levitating coils or the shaft bearings that you’ve been hearing about. It’s just another use of the same technology. That’s my intro. It’s your turn for questions now and please be polite; I’ll answer any proper question so there’s no need to shout.”

Tamara was amazed; they were raising their hands. She pointed to the first person with her hand up.

“Thanks, Dr Alexandre. I’m Cory Harner of the *New York Times*, but it seems I represent maybe fifty other organizations too.”

There were chuckles and nods around the table.

“That was a very complete and informative intro, but those of us who struggled with physics in college, let alone high school, wonder what kind of world it is where that dark energy and matter exist. We can’t see it yet it influences our universe. Where and what is it, exactly?”

“An excellent question, Miss Harner, and one for which we have no answer quite yet that would be comprehensible in Real World terms. The mathematics can describe the properties of such a universe but there aren’t any words in any language that can translate the math. Listen: do any of you know about a book published in the 1880s by an English guy named Edwin Abbott called *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*? Many folks know it just as *Flatland*.”

Everyone shook their heads in the negative.

“Okay. It’s basically a satire of the social hierarchies of the culture in the Victorian era and the world he wrote about is two-dimensional. People there were shaped as polygons and one’s social status was determined by how many sides your body had. The more sides, the higher your status. So in his story, the main character is visited by a sphere, a three-dimensional figure, and Abbott describes how a being who is only able to see two dimensions struggles to perceive a three-dimensional object—one that he can only sense as a circle whose diameter can change at will. It’s an enormously fascinating read and very accessible to even those who hated math in school.”

People around the table chuckled.

“I suggest you all find a copy and read it; I bet it’s freely available on the internet. We’re three-dimensional beings who are faced with evidence that additional dimensions exist; the mathematics prove that they do. But we struggle to understand how we can perceive those additional dimensions from only a three-dimensional perspective. Also, for those of you who studied philosophy, think of Plato’s Cave and how Plato describes how its inhabitants struggled to perceive the outside world just by watching shadows on the cave wall. I hope my non-answer answers your question, Miss Harner.”

Several people laughed; Harner nodded, and Tamara pointed to the next questioner.

“Thanks. I also represent a large number of organizations; I’m Clarence Sweeny from *Fox*. All your inventions appear to be based on this thing you call a ‘coil,’ but what is it, exactly, and how can it do so much?”

“I’d turn that question around, Mr Sweeny, because it’ll make more sense approaching it that way. It’s an electronic device that does one single thing, but we’ve found that we can use it in a myriad of ways. Like look at the invention of a wheel. It’s one single invention, but think of all the things that can be done using the wheel’s properties. You can look up the G-force coil’s patent on the government’s website, but essentially it’s an application of a circuit which employs superconducting single electron transistors in a novel way. I originally designed the coil to try to improve the spatial resolution in MRI scans, but I was lucky and when one design failed to behave in a predictable way, I tried to figure out why. It turns out that most major advances in science come about in just that fashion. Something doesn’t work as expected. Learning why opens new doors to understanding more.

“And what does the coil do? We know what it apparently does, but not how it actually works to do it. Somehow it allows our Real World access to a different plane of existence—matter and energy—that doesn’t exist in our reality. It uses that interaction between the two realities to allow us to do incredible things. Like energy storage, transmission, levitation, virtually eliminating friction in some applications... the list keeps growing. I hope that answer was a positive one.”

Sweeny nodded, “That it was. Thanks.”

The questions continued. Then one person asked about the nudist school and the controversy about it at the Annapolis capitol.

Tamara replied, “I’m so sorry but that is not a matter that I know much about and at my counsel’s advice, I can’t answer questions where I have no competency.”

The questioner retorted, “But you’re a nudist and you should be competent to answer questions about that topic!”

## Chapter 90 - Into the Future

“Excuse me sir,” Tamara said coldly, “we are now just one step away from terminating the interview. I said at the outset of this session that I would not entertain any questions that didn’t pertain to my physics research. I tried to explain in a civil manner why I wouldn’t take that question. The question is out of line. Are we completely clear about that?”

He shrugged as the others glared at him, and the next few questions by others were asked tentatively, making sure they wouldn’t upset her.

Question: “Can you answer questions about your manufacturing facility in Anne Arundel County? Yes? Thank you. It adds to the area’s reputation as a high-tech region, especially considering that many of the government’s research facilities are in the area too. What products are you planning to produce there, if that’s not confidential?”

Tamara: “Sure. That’s an important question. I went into science to help people in the world and, of course as the proverbs say, the best help comes from people helping themselves. Give them better education and freedom from tyrants—the human kind and the economic kind. The major product we’re producing will be used for creating cheap energy and we hope to be able to develop manufacturing processes here that can be used in third-world countries to allow them to establish their own manufacturing and industrial base. So that’s one product: electrical generators. Another is related to robotics. Robotic intelligence for control and handling systems for manufacturing. Another is prosthetics, which uses our robotics developments and adapts them for designing human limb replacements. I’ve mentioned frictionless bearings. And we recently added the coil assemblies for particle accelerators. Those will be by custom order and we’ve had a lot of interest for such a product. Others are either under development or are currently confidential.”

Question: “You were the inventor of the energy storage systems now being set up in parts of England and in the new electric vehicle battery. Are you still involved with those projects?”

Tamara: “I am. Some of my engineers are in Cambridge right now and we have a few engineers from there working on my projects here. Most of our inventions are cross-licensed.”

Question: “I hope this one isn’t out of line but there’s a widespread feeling in the public that you’re this century’s Einstein. You had dismissed that idea at several prior press conferences at Hopkins but how do you feel about it now?”

Tamara: “Yes, that is a personal question but I suppose I need to address it. I can’t change how the public perceives me or my work. If they could be in my shoes, um, they’d need to have small feet... *Laughter* ... they’d realize how greatly I’ve benefitted from my predecessors in physics and engineering. All of my accomplishments have come from my simply taking their work one step further; that’s how science works, after all. Einstein, like Newton, made absolutely *giant* steps in advancing scientific knowledge at the time and there’s no way I should be compared to them. I still strongly feel that way.”

Question: “When are you going to tackle gravitation? Isn’t that physics’ holy grail, the unification of relativity theory and quantum physics?”

Tamara: “Wow. Ask me another simple question. *Laughter*. Seriously, I was actually working on a closely related problem when I got the idea that resulted in the accelerator design. Check back with me on that in, um, maybe ten years? *Laughter*. No, I mean it. I think that the new accelerator design has the potential for making discoveries in that realm of particle physics, but from the time that an accelerator is conceived to when its detector has captured enough events to be statistically meaningful, a ten-year time frame is very optimistic.”

Question: “There’s an Alexandre Foundation operating in Haiti, according to our international desk. Is that one

of your projects?”

Tamara: “No, that’s my mother’s project. She’s an anthropologist at Westphalia and the Columbia Institute of Economics. That foundation is assisting in funding micro-finance research in third-world countries, one of the Columbia Institute’s target priorities.”

Question: “Now that your manufacturing operation is running, will you leave Hopkins and the APL to do commercial research?”

Tamara: “Not at all. I have a highly competent management team at the facility now and they can run things without my meddling. I’m not the type to micro-manage. I prefer to work with people who don’t need me to tell them how to do their jobs.”

There were a lot more questions asked that covered many parts of Tamara’s research and commercial operations, but no one strayed very deeply into her personal beliefs; she stopped several questioners before they had completed the question, when she saw where the person was going with it. After ninety minutes, Tamara closed the session.

“So you know my ground rules now and you can tell them to the organizations you’re representing here. I won’t appear for a video interview. I’ll be happy to answer any followup questions you or your organizations may have; they must be written questions and can be sent to my company’s PR department or to the Hopkins University Relations department. Thanks for coming and especially thanks for your thoughtful and knowledgeable questions too. Have a great rest of the week.”

She got up and walked out, Lisa Farrell following her. Tompkins followed them both out and she told them to follow her to her office.

“Goodness, Tamara,” Tompkins said as she closed the door. “You completely dominated that crowd—you just took over and shut them right down. Just before you came in at first, from their whispered conversations, I thought that they planned to roll right over you and control the interview...”

“Bernie, you don’t know about the rep that Tamara has as a professor, I guess,” Farrell interrupted. “I’ve heard some stories.”

“Yeah, and that I eat cheaters for dinner,” Tamara joked. “I don’t like people who take advantage.”

“Seriously, that stare you have gave me chills and I wasn’t the target,” Tompkins told her. “Every move, gesture, and glance you did asserted your authority in there. Can you teach that? It would be an awesome skill to have when cross-examining a witness.”

“I guess I’ve been told that I can be scary at times,” Tamara admitted. “I have a visceral reaction to people who attempt to bully others and I sensed that feeling in the group when I entered the room. And I was annoyed when my security person told me that some of them defied my instructions about audio and video. So I took the hard-ball approach. Teach it? I think that it’s just self-confidence. If you believe fully in yourself, other people will sense that. But that’s easily said and hard to do, ‘cause even a tiny amount of self-doubt can interfere. But you can’t come off as cocky either. That makes you look like you’re arrogant and people push back at that. It’s a tricky balance.”

“Hmm. Good advice,” Tompkins said. “So you’ll note that I didn’t need to interrupt you at all about saying anything about your personal life, Tamara, except when you were asked that Einstein question. Your answer was just fine; it was humble without being dismissive. You got excellent advice from Mr Richardson about your public versus private persona. The guy who asked the nudist question, we had vetted him, and he’s from Clearsound Radio—they operate over a thousand religious radio stations nationally—and in his being here, he

represented a large number of conservative religious blogs too. It appeared that he was trying to get you to say something that could be used against you, but you stopped that question firmly.”

Tamara nodded, “Thanks. Mason... um, Mr Richardson did alert me to a possible attack on my reputation, I told you that. But how do you think that guy knew about my personal life?”

“I’m sure that was a loaded question tactic,” Tompkins replied. “Your foundation bought the school site; it’s to be a nudist school and next to a nudist resort; therefore you’re a nudist, the rationale would go. He was hoping to provoke a denial or some kind of prevarication. Instead of giving any answer, you shut down the topic completely, showing no reaction, even by body language, that the question affected you in any way. Masking your reactions like that is a good skill.

“Well, that’s all I have on this topic. I did want to update you on your Haitian factory project. I’m very impressed by your Haitian law firm on how well they’ve been handling both the contractors and some bad government actors. They just stopped a kickback scheme and got one of the subcontractors fired for trying it. And last month, you’ll recall that they reported some attempted extortion by a lower-level official in the National Land Registry Office who claimed that he’d reverse some permits unless he got paid off.”

“Yep. I actually got a phone call on that one. From Pelex Leblanc, the law firm partner who’s managing my affairs locally. Damn, politics there sure are ugly—one of the options he offered about that code-office guy was to ‘eliminate’ the problem. I suggested that the person would be a better fit in a different job where he’d have no contact with the public. Leblanc told me that he would make that happen.

“I also have several private info channels there,” Tamara went on. “My dad’s distant cousin, Henri Benoit, is a kind of factotum for me on arranging for the right materials and people as the project goes on. I appointed him as the troubleshooter for the general contractor because Henri has great contacts all over the country. Also, a number of *manbos*, who my mom’s organized into a little intelligence group to keep her up to date on social matters, also provide info on how well my project is going—from how the locals perceive it. It’s a great perspective to have, ‘cause the locals are very sensitive to knowing when something’s going off the rails.”

“That’s quite true,” Tompkins agreed. “You’ve got a good intelligence network; that should help protect your investments.”

They spent the next few minutes on the new manufacturing facility and then Tamara left with Farrell. On the way back to the Alwin facility, Tamara told Farrell how to respond to further media contacts.

#### ***Four weeks later***

Tamara heard about the start of a campaign to discredit her at the beginning of May. Several weeks prior, some attempted picketing had been tried near the school construction site but because of its remote location, narrow access roads, and private property, the picketing that could be done was completely ineffective. Even the local media ignored the demonstration. So her opponents changed their tactics to mount an attack to discredit her. Tamara heard about the start of a smear attempt from one of her physics students during her office hours.

“Hi Dr Alexandre,” the student said as she entered the office. “This isn’t about classes. Last night my folks called me and asked if you were a professor for one of my classes. I had mentioned your name to them once, I guess. Anyway, they said that their church pastor did a sermon denouncing child sex trafficking and said that it was happening right here in Baltimore and that you yourself were keeping a child as a slave. The pastor puts his sermons on line; it’s a big church with maybe six thousand members. I looked for the sermon and found it... it’s awful. I thought you should know. Here’s the web address.”

She passed over a note and Tamara thanked her.

Tamara checked the URL and indeed, there was the sermon and it was filled with fabrications about her.

Somehow the pastor had found out that she had been involved in the takedown of the human trafficking rings and he had painted her as a participant. He had learned about Winnie's guardianship and had turned that into her slavery. He even claimed that the Nobel Prizes were obtained fraudulently and that other people had actually done the work. Tamara called Sam for advice and left a message; Sam was in court.

Sam called back that evening; she had reviewed the sermon. Tamara had emailed her the link when she had made her original call.

"Hello Sam, it's Tamara."

"So I got your message and watched that prig doing the sermon," Sam told her. "He's not only a prig, he's plain evil. That rot he spouted shows definite malice. First thing I did was to call him; he refused to speak to me and referred me to his lawyer. That whole law firm is dodgy; they cater to the less wholesome clients. I spoke to the lawyer twit—don't know how he ever passed the bar—and he said it was protected religious speech..."

"One sec... Winnie just came in and she's upset," Tamara said.

"Yeah I am," Winnie growled. "There's this asshole making false claims about you and he named me too, saying I'm your slave!"

"I'm talking to Sam about that right now, sweetie. Let me turn on the speaker. You heard Winnie, Sam?"

"I did. Yeah, Winnie's still a minor too, right? That's what I told the twit. I told him that the sermon was a straight defamation case, that you were not a public figure and certainly Winnie wasn't. I told him that each day the sermon was on line was a separate infraction. I told him that he'd better get his client to take it down because we would be preparing a major lawsuit. He just laughed and told me to have fun wasting my time. I did file a cease and desist petition with the district court to shut down the site, but that could take a week to be acted on, maybe more."

"How do we get it shut down faster?" Tamara asked.

"Legal stuff tends to move slowly," Sam told her. "Things like this don't get handled very fast."

"We'll see about that crap," Winnie grumbled. "One of the kids in school told me about that shit. She asked if I really was a sex slave. And the garbage he said about you, Tamara! He's dead meat."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked.

"One of my teammates has an older brother. He knows how to crack into websites. I'm gonna see if he can crash this one. And I'm thinking of other stuff too."

"Don't do anything illegal, now," Sam cautioned.

"Won't get caught," Winnie growled and stalked into her room.

"I need your go-ahead to get a case started," Sam told Tamara.

"Sure. Go for the kill, too. Try to go for all his assets," Tamara replied.

They disconnected and Tamara went to talk to Winnie. She didn't want to discuss the defamation and told Tamara that she'd think some more about what to do.

Two days later, Tamara was in her Hopkins office after a class and saw a message on her phone. It was Winnie's school reporting that as of the first period, she hadn't been in classes. She called Winnie and the call went to voice mail so she called the school. It was almost noon now. The office person told Tamara that they'd contact her when Winnie showed up; then Tamara recalled the phone's location app on Winnie's phone so she

activated her own copy. The app showed Winnie traveling and it appeared that she was approaching her school. Fifteen minutes later, Tamara's phone rang. It was Winnie.

"Sweetie, you scared me," Tamara admonished her when she answered. "Why did you skip school this morning?"

"Doing my civic duty; getting rid of the garbage," Winnie chuckled. "I gotta check in at the office now but I'll see you after school. There's no problem and everything will be fine now," she said cryptically.

Tamara was waiting when Winnie got home.

"Well? Tell me what this is all about." Tamara demanded.

"I took care of the pastor and the sermon problem," Winnie told her. "I'll bet that there's a story on the local news later. The pastor was calling the TV station as I was leaving him."

"Okay, so that means that he's not dead or I assume, too badly disabled," Tamara replied grimly.

"No, I wanted to kill him, but this is better. Yesterday I made an appointment to see him for this morning. I had told him that I had heard his sermon and had some additional info about Tamara that he really would like to have, juicy stuff. That hooked him like a big, fat, evil fish. When I got to his office—shit, it was decorated like a palace—and he saw me, I sensed that he thought he could seduce me. Ugh, what an ugly soul he has. I guess he figured that I was no threat to him so he sent this guy who was there with him away; I think it was his personal security. That was perfect.

"I'll skip to what I did. First, I made him tell me about all the illegal and immoral stuff he's done. Then I made him put all of that in his own handwriting and confess that he maliciously made up everything about you and me in order to discredit you. When I asked about where he got his info about us, he told me that he got it from this one state representative so I had him write that too. That representative had gotten access to confidential family court files and state police records through his official committee membership and gave that info to the pastor. And, you know, he told me about several scams that the two of them are working too.

"He also confessed his infidelity—he's got several mistresses on the side. He also wrote that he's been embezzling church funds for at least eight years. And finally, he regularly abuses the kids in his youth congregation. I got him to write all of that stuff down and then get in front of his web camera and deliver what he wrote as his confession, making it like a sermon. Then I had him do the same thing about retracting his first sermon, saying that they were all made-up lies. I watched him as he uploaded the two videos and take down the lying one. Last, I changed the password to the site and he no longer has access to it. Before I left, I gave him a compulsion to call the local TV station to tell them that he has to make an important statement to them about a major problem he discovered in his church. I thought of your stories too, what you did to annoying people, so he'll also get nausea whenever he hears or thinks of your name.

"Oh yeah. I had him make photocopies of his confessions and he signed them. I had him address some envelopes to a few TV stations and the newspaper, stick the copies in, and seal them. And here's his original copy. You think what I did will help your slander case?"

Tamara had been looking at her, speechless, as Winnie revealed what she had done.

Then she recovered and responded to Winnie's direct question. "Damn, sweetie, you *did* kill him. He's a dead man walking. Help the lawsuit? Listen, Winnie, if there's any sign of coercion or even that you had any contact with him, his lawyers can get the confession tossed. If..."

"Um, wait, thought of that stuff, Tamara. I didn't tell you any of the details. First, I used one of your burner phones to make the appointment. Next, when I got to the church, I noticed cameras in the halls. I asked him



about them and he told me they were motion-activated so I got him to erase the parts that show me. I also made the bodyguard forget that I was there before he left the room. I got the pastor to delete my appointment from his calendar—I used a fake name anyway. And in his video confession, he says that he postal-mailed copies of his written confessions to the press and to you. There’s actually a copy coming by mail—I put all those envelopes in a drop box next to the church so you’ll have a postmarked envelope to show how you came to have it. You have a perfect alibi; you were teaching classes all morning. They’ll never think to look at my whereabouts, but if they do, my phone will show that I spent the morning wandering around the zoo. I hired a Uber driver to take my phone there and use it to take some photos there and then meet me at 11:55 at the zoo entrance to bring me to school. I told him I was playing a trick on my boyfriend.”

“You planned this like a military campaign, sounds like. Right down to the smallest detail,” Tamara said, admiringly. “The local news is at six. What station did he call?”

Winnie told her and then Tamara called Sam and left a voice mail.

“Hey Sam. On the lawsuit front, earlier today I heard a rumor from someone who knows about a probable TV interview today of a certain pastor. I plan to watch; I wonder what that jerk’s gonna say about me now.”

Tamara told her the station to watch.

The station covered the pastor’s confession and also had video of the police leading the handcuffed pastor to a patrol car; then they mentioned the retraction and confession videos on the church’s website. As she expected, Tamara’s phone rang after the coverage ended.

“Blimey, Tamara, did you know... meh. Dumb question. Of course you knew...”

“Hello, Sam,” Tamara interrupted. “What do you say I knew?”

“People like that don’t just come out and spill their guts, girl. Don’t you know coercing someone spoils their confession?”

“Hey. I was teaching just about all morning, you know. I coerced no one,” Tamara replied.

“What about Winnie? She said something about making the pastor dead meat. Was she in school?”

“Actually she said it was a nice day, so she decided to play hooky at the zoo. She showed me some cute animal shots from there,” Tamara said.

“Huh. Well, if the defense can’t show coercion, we’ve got an ironclad case. I saw the video retraction too. He said he mailed something written?”

“If he mailed it today, I won’t get it for a day or two, I guess.”

~~~~~

Several days later, Sam called again.

“Just got off the phone with the twit lawyer. He’s offering five grand if we don’t file. If we do, he says, he’ll prove coercion. I asked him for evidence that coercion was used and he said that it was obvious; nobody would ever destroy themselves like that. I laughed and reminded him that this was a man of religion and must have been overcome by his conscience. He obviously had a ‘come to Jesus’ moment and saw that unless he confessed, he was destined for hell. I suggested a settlement of \$40 million but if it went to a suit, we’d ask for \$200 million in damages and punitive penalties. That’s almost the church’s net worth. The church is also responsible because their media was used for the defamation and the pastor, as the head of the church corporation, officially knew about the malicious intent of the sermon.”

[About a year later, the case came to trial. The defense subpoenaed Tamara's and Winnie's phone records which showed nothing to help their case. They did get phone location data for the phones which showed that neither came anywhere near the church. The defense could not show that any coercion occurred. The defense tried to argue that Tamara was a public figure but the judge rejected that assertion; besides, there was actual intentional malice admitted to by the defendant. The church corporation was held partially responsible. The verdict and penalty voted by the jury was \$125 million because of the egregiousness and deliberate intent of the defamation. The pastor was also awaiting trials for his criminal activities, which included embezzlement, tax fraud, misappropriation of funds, and criminal sexual activity with minors. The state representative was arrested and charged with improper use of confidential information and tax fraud. He was expelled from the state legislature.

[Tamara used all of the lawsuit proceeds to have that church reorganized under a mainstream religious movement instead of the independent one that the pastor had created and she helped its new directors recruit a respected minister for its religious leadership. Then she donated the remainder back to the church. For her work in doing that, she became beloved by the entire region's religious community.]

### ***Beginning of June***

The double wedding day was here and the couples had kept their guest lists limited; they had also figured that the idea that it was a nudist ceremony would discourage a certain number of people from attending and that proved to be the case. It was true especially for Terence's family. Except for his siblings, none of his family came. His sisters even agreed to be in the bridal party, having become great friends with Barbara. The fact that the bridesmaids' attire was limited to an ivory sheer lace cape, forearm-length lace gloves, and floral headpiece, was no deterrent. Denise, Amelia, and Lynette also agreed to be bridesmaids and Peter's cousins Janice, JoAnne, and Audrey finished the complement.

Kevin, Jeremy, and Tomas served as groomsmen together with cousins Mike, Frank, and Ernie. Peter had become fast friends with Tommy in their joint project, so he became one; Cindy was fine just watching. And Terence had two close postdoctoral friends from the University of Maryland's Department of Astronomy whom he chose to round out the group. They would wear a fancy collar with a black bow-tie, white cuffs, and white gloves.

~~~~~

Although Winnie was the choice for both brides as the maid of honor, Peter and Terence had a difficult time deciding on their choices for best man. Back when they were first planning their wedding, they had been discussing their choices.

"It should be someone I respect, who's supported me when I've needed it," Peter told Terence. "You'd be my choice if this weren't a double wedding."

"And Ah'd pick y'all for mine, buddy," Terence agreed. "Ah've got no one here who's been like that for me—at my home too—except y'all's pappas. Ah wish my pappas were like them..."

"You know? Hey, let's ask Gramps and Grandpa. I'm sure that they'd be delighted."

Terence agreed and the two men were indeed delighted, although they thought the choice was completely unconventional.

Werner asked Peter, "You're sure there's no one closer to your age?"

"No one who I respect and admire more, Gramps," Peter responded.

"And y'all have been there for me when Ah needed reliable advice," Terence assured them.

~~~~~

The bridesmaids were enamored with the idea of a dance-step processional and liked the choreography of the march when Tamara sent a video of her demonstrating the steps to them; the men, not so much, but they did admit that it looked very cool indeed. At the rehearsal, Kevin even added to the romance of the march by suggesting that at its end, each man would twirl his partner in a waltz loop spin as she moved into her station, lined up along the center aisle. Then he had to demonstrate it with Denise and everyone loved it. They rehearsed the processional several times until everyone felt secure that they could do it.

Tamara and Barbara had a special role for Emma, since they knew that Terence's parents wouldn't come. Emma and Andrew were asked to act in their stead and Emma was touched by the request; she had become very fond of Terence. The two grooms, Peter's parents, and Emma and Andrew, would use a modified version of the dance step as they came down the aisle, three abreast, groom in the center. Then Tamara's parents would enter with Winnie between them. The best men and officiant, a retired judge who was a resort member, would be waiting under a large floral arch where the wedding party would gather, when the processional began.

At the end of every other row of chairs along the center aisle, a floral stand was placed. Each bridesmaid and groomsman would station themselves next to that stand when they were lined up at the sides of the aisle. Each floral stand held a six-foot-long slightly curved pole festooned with vines and flowers. When all the bridal party members were in place, the music would change and they would take their floral pole out of its holder stand and hold it up toward their partner opposite them to make a row of floral arches. As they did this, the brides would exit the little tent where they had been waiting out of view and, side by side, would use the dance-step march to travel down the aisle, passing under the arches.

During the final rehearsal, the few miscues got cleared up and when the ceremony began, the spectacle of the choreography looked impressive and the audience gasped when the row of arches appeared. The other Haitian elements of the ceremony were also appreciated by the viewers. The resort's photographer was very discreet in his photographs; the resort had designated a seating area for people who didn't want to be in a photo and for those who didn't want to be in photos were given colored wristbands to show their desire not to be photographed. There was a videographer too and she was careful to shoot only the processional and the ceremony itself.

At the following reception, all the talk was about was the ceremony and how unique and creative it was. The "dancing" processional was particularly commented on, and when told that some form of dance processional like that was a Haitian custom, people were intrigued.

So Tamara and Peter were wed, as were Barbara and Terence.

### ***In the following years***

Soon after the wedding, Winnie graduated high school with top marks and was honored as the classes' valedictorian. She went on to college at Johns Hopkins and joined their volleyball team.

In the fall, the nudist school opened with 63 children and classes were held at the resort until the school building itself was completed, which occurred during the following spring. Also that spring, ground was broken for the planned nudist community and the first twenty-five houses to get under contract were being built.

In the commercial area, the Alwin Systems Corporation began producing the component parts for free-standing power generators in four capacity sizes for sale to small to medium-sized communities. Those parts were shipped to Haiti, where a pilot manufacturing facility was now operating. The Universite GOC was graduating technicians now and there was meaningful work for them to do. Nadine's several projects, the micro-finance and the *manbo*-managed early education programs, had begun and early reports were favorable. Nadine had worked with a core of trusted *manbos* and taught them about using the truth sense; she had also convinced a number of government officials that having counseling sessions with clerical ministers like *manbos* would help

morale and improve office procedures. Of course, that helped in locating any dishonest workers, who could be watched and dealt with if any problems arose.

Gerston, no longer U.S. president but now president of the Columbia Institute, frequently entertained the Alexandres as dinner guests; both he and Tamara jointly agreed that their challenge had been met by both sides, since the changes Gerston had made in the State Department about aid to foreign countries had been maintained by his successor in office, and the change was paying off in the political areas of a number of countries.

In science, Tamara was still being productive in developing her mathematics that described the dark matter and energy domain of the universe. That is what she decided to call it: not a dimension but a domain. Mathematically it behaved like a dimension but was entangled with the three-dimensional world through gravitation; therefore this intersection made it seem closer than a dimensional designation seemed to be. Work on the particle accelerator was progressing well and the work at CERN would provide the needed assemblies at the proper time. In her engineering-physicist role, she had gotten the insight that the G-force affected hydrogen molecules—H<sub>2</sub> gas molecules—differently from protons and was working on a way to use the G-coils in a tokamak-like design array to confine the hydrogen gas and use the coils' high repulsive forces to contain and compress the molecules tightly enough to initiate a fusion reaction.

Peter's and Tommy's work on prosthetic muscles had developed to the point where they were ready for clinical trials but they were unhappy with the training methods being used by the related direct-nerve implantation techniques. Peter was discussing this problem with Tamara at dinner one evening when Winnie, who was now studying nervous system physiology as part of her neuroscience program, suggested that perhaps the Haitian *manbos*, with their latent empathic abilities, could be taught to be trainers for prosthetic nerve activation in people who would receive the artificial limbs. Tamara thought that was an outstanding suggestion and soon Nadine had another project for her *manbo* cadre. Eventually this was to develop into a major industry for Haiti, a training site for people to learn to use their new artificial limbs.

In Tamara's spiritual life, she found that she no longer needed to commune with the *lwa*; it seemed to her now that they had become part of her psyche. Whenever she needed an attribute that was ascribed to one of them, she seemed to acquire that ability or sense, in a limited and very human way. She couldn't do anything supernatural, of course. And Peter was acquiring many of the same abilities. But he never got the knack of languages, which irritated him greatly.

They never got their mind-speak abilities to work better than it had when they first discovered the ability and Tamara was still testing the ability to see if it could be taught. She was considering going back to the fMRI lab to see her brain in action when she was doing it, but was too busy to take the time to go off on that tangent.

Two years later, Tamara received the Nobel Prize in Physics for her work in discovering the nature of dark matter and energy, and the following year, received it again for her invention of the G-force particle accelerator. And a decade later, she was honored again for developing a device to produce energy by using fusion.

Emma had been correct. Tamara was in fact revolutionizing science.

The End

## Abbreviations, Glossary, and the *Lwa* of Vodou

### *Abbreviations*

**AG** - attorney general; both state and federal chief law enforcement officer

**CBP** - Customs and Border Patrol, Department of Homeland Security

**CERN** - Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire, Geneva, Switzerland; the European laboratory for particle physics and site of the Large Hadron Collider

**CIA** - Central Intelligence Agency

**CPO** - chief petty officer, a Navy and Coast Guard non-commissioned officer

**CPS** - Child Protective Services, a division of most states' Health and Human Resources Departments or their equivalent

**CRT** - cathode ray tube; the picture tube in the original television

**DARPA** - Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, Department of Defense

**DoD** - Department of Defense

**DSS** - Diplomatic Security Service, unit of Department of State, provides security for U.S. embassy officials plus other related duties

**E-5, E-6** - sergeant and staff sergeant in Army and Marine Corps; non-commissioned officer pay grades. These pay grades have different rank names in the other military services

**EE** - electrical engineering, “double-E”

**EMF** - electromagnetic frequency

**eV** - electron volt; the energy an electron gains when accelerated by one volt of electricity. K prefix - thousand; M prefix - million. G prefix - billion. See TeV below

**FBO** - Fixed base operator, airport general aviation office

**fMRI** - functional MRI, MRI application to visualize oxygenated blood flow in the brain to detect neural activity

**HCMC** - master chief hospital corpsman, U.S. Navy.

**IC** - integrated circuit. Miniature electronic device (“chip”) consisting of tiny transistors, resistors, capacitors, and other circuit components to perform a discrete task

**ITF** - International Taekwondo Federation

**LED** - light-emitting diode

**LHC** - Large Hadron Collider, Geneva, Switzerland. World’s largest and most powerful particle accelerator.

**LT** - lieutenant, first or second, in shorthand speech (Marines or Army). Pronounced “ell-tee”

**MMA** - mixed martial arts

**MP** - member of U.K. Parliament; also military police

**MPS** - Metropolitan Police Service, Greater London’s police force, informally “Scotland Yard”

**MRI** - magnetic resonance imaging, the machine or the process, which excites protons using RF to image anatomical structures inside the body

**NCO** - non-commissioned officer

**NDA** - non-disclosure agreement. Contract to restrict a party from sharing confidential information of another party.

**NSA** - National Security Agency, Department of Defense

**OAS** - Organization of American States

**RF** - radio-frequency electromagnetic radiation

**RFID** - radio-frequency identification

**SAT/PSAT** - Scholastic Aptitude Test, achievement screening exam used for college admissions. “P” is for preliminary, a kind of practice exam

**SI** - International System of units, for example, gram for weight and meter for length

**STEM** - science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; educational program

**TA** - teaching assistant in university

**TDY** - temporary duty

**TeV** - tera (trillion) electron volts, an amount of energy equivalent to  $1.602176634 \times 10^{-16}$  joules

**TeV/c<sup>2</sup>** - eV mass equivalent at atomic scale.  $1 \text{ TeV}/c^2 = 1.78266192 \times 10^{-24}$  kilograms

**TSA** - Transportation Security Administration, Department of Homeland Security

**UHF** - ultra high frequency

**VA** - Department of Veteran's Affairs

**XO** - executive officer

## ***Terms***

*(Most Haitian Creole (Kreyòl) terms have several different spellings)*

**Adja** - language and people of the Adja-Tado Gbe group of the Atlantic-Congo family, primarily of south-western Benin, south-eastern Togo, and south-eastern Ghana

**alamyet** - Kreyòl, Vodou service held without drums

**álfr** - Old Icelandic, Norse spirit, “elf,” associated with light and beauty, plural, *álfar*

**anvizib** - Kreyòl, “invisibles”

**asson** - from Fon, rattle made of a gourd, symbol of Vodou priest's/priestess' position

**baka** - from Fon, evil spirits

**bòkò** - from Fon, *bokono*, “sorcerer”; those who serve *baka*.

**Bondye** - Kreyòl, from French, *bon Dieu*. The Supreme Being, God. Also, *Gran Mèt*.

**bonswa** - Kreyòl, “hello” (said after 12 p.m.), from French, *bon soir*, “good evening”

**chérie** - French, “darling”

**caplata** - Kreyòl, “witch”

**choché** - from French (?), magician or sorcerer, lit., “hot”

**chwal** - Kreyòl, “horse,” from French, *cheval*

**dís** - Old Norse, Norse guardian (tutelary) spirit for a person, group, or site, plural, *dísir*

**djévò** - Kreyòl, room in *ounfò* where initiate is sequestered for the duration of the *kouche*

**femèl chen** - Kreyòl, “bitch,” from French, “female dog”

**Ewe** - language and people descended from the Adja; primarily of Benin, but also of Togo, Nigeria, and eastern Ghana

**Fon** - language and people descended from the Adja; primarily of Benin

**Ginen** - the “African heaven”

**gris-gris** - from French, “amulet”; originally referred to a type of fetish or amulet.

**gwo-bôn-nanj** - Kreyòl, “big good angel,” from French, *grand bon ange*. In Vodou theology, immortal aspect of the human spirit, the soul

***in camera*** - Latin, “in chambers.” Legal term meaning “in private”

***kanzo*** - Fon, “initiate.” Vodou clergy initiation rite, or the initiate to become an *oungan* or *manbo*

***konesans*** - Kreyòl, Vodou initiate studies, from French, *connaissance*, “knowledge”

***kouche*** - Kreyòl, “to lie down;” final part of *kanzo* rite, the seclusion. From Old French, *couchier*

***Kreyòl*** - Haitian Creole language

***lav tèt*** - Kreyòl, “head washing,” from French, *laver tête*. Part of *kanzo* initiation

***lwa*** - Kreyòl, “spirit,” possibly derived from “law,” thought to have been combined with the Tswana term meaning “to bewitch”

***lwa acheté*** - Kreyòl, evil *lwa*, lit., “bought *lwa*” from French, *acheté*, “bought” or “purchased”

***maman*** - French, “mother, mom”

***manbo*** - Kreyòl, Vodou priestess, from Fon, *nanbo*, “mother of magic.” Also *mambo*

***manman*** - Kreyòl, “mother”

***mèd*** - Kreyòl, from French, *merde*, “shit”

***Médecins Sans Frontières*** - Doctors Without Borders, humanitarian organization

***merde*** - French, “shit”

***mezanmi*** - Kreyòl, interjection: “Oh goodness! Damn! Wow!”

***modi*** - Kreyòl, “damn,” from French, *maudire*, “to put a curse on”

***mystè*** - Kreyòl, “mysteries,” referring to the *lwa*, from French

***nanchon*** - Kreyòl, “nation,” from French, *nation*

***Nihongo*** - Japanese language

***oui*** - French, Kreyòl, “yes”

***ounfò*** - Fon, Vodou temple

***oungan*** - Fon and Ewe, Vodou priest, leader of rituals and ceremonies. *Hounnongan* means chief priest in Fon. Also spelled *houngan*.

***ounsi*** - Kreyòl; worship leaders, from Fon, “spouse of the *lwa*”

***ountògi*** - Fon, ritual drummers

***pakèt kongo, pakèt*** - Kreyòl, “packet” or “bundle.” *Kongo*, from Kikongo, a Bantu language of central Africa, Talismans made of wrapped bundles of twigs

***peristil*** - Kreyòl, “peristyle,” the main ceremonial room and the sacred space in an *ounfò*

***Petwo*** - *nanchon* forged in the blood of the Haitian colonial era. It reflects the rage, violence and courage that threw off the shackles of slavery.

***pititt-caye*** - Kreyòl, Vodou worshipers, from French, “children of the house”

***pòte ou byen*** - Kreyòl, “farewell,” from French, *porte tu bien*, “carry yourself well”

***pwen*** - Kreyòl, “point,” an object or person of spiritual or magical focus

***Rada*** - *nanchon* that represents the emotional stability and warmth of Africa. The *Rada* rite is derived almost directly from the Dahomean traditions and is highly religious in nature.

***renmen anpil*** - Kreyòl, “dear,” lit., “very much love”

***seid*** - Old Norse, *seiðr*. Norse ritual of altered consciousness practiced by a *völva*

***sert des deux mains*** - French, one who does evil magic, lit., “serves with both hands”

***serviteurs*** - French, devotees or adherents of *lwa*

***sèvi lwa*** - Kreyòl, “serve the *lwa*”

***sosyete*** - Kreyòl, “society,” congregation, from French, *société*

***ti-bôn-nanj*** - Kreyòl, “little good angel,” from French, *petit bon ange*. In Vodou theology, the personality, character and willpower of the human spirit

***travaillant des deux mains*** - French, one who does evil magic, lit., “works with both hands”

***travay*** - Kreyòl, folk talismans, from French, *travailler*, “to work”

***vevé*** - Kreyòl, ceremonial symbolic drawing representing a *lwa*

***vodou*** - Fon, “spirit, deity”

***vodouisant*** - French, practitioner of Vodou

***völva*** - Old Norse, Norse seeress, plural, *völur*

***wanga*** - from Bantu; as used in Haitian Vodou, a charm which causes bad luck and sickness

***ye gaga*** - Adja name for the immortal aspect of the human spirit: soul, lit. “long shadow”

***zanj, lezanj, anj*** - Bantu (?), “angels”; often used as a form of greeting to show respect and honor to the *lwa*.

***zanmi*** - Kreyòl, “buddy”

***zonbi*** - Fon, reanimated deceased spirit, zombie, Kikongo, *zumbi*, “fetish”

### ***Lwa (Spirits) of Vodou***

This list is only of those entities mentioned in the story. All *lwa* have many aspects and not all of their aspects are included here. Many *lwa* are known by multiple names, depending on the African region their adherents originated from, or other factors, such as the Vodou tradition which the worshiper follows.

***Agwe Tawoyo*** - Sovereign of the sea. Ruler of all the flora and fauna of the sea and all ships which sail on the sea.

***Anansi, Nambo-Nansi*** - Spider trickster spirit, patron of those who cause or get into mischief or trouble.

***Ayida Wedo*** - The mother figure, the “Rainbow Serpent,” she is the *lwa* of fertility, rainbows, wind, water, fire, wealth, thunder, and snakes, and one of the unitary forces of human sexuality. Her consort is *Damballah*. Like Atlas, her job, together with *Damballah*, is to hold up the earth.

***Ayizan Velekete*** - Papa Legba’s consort. Protector of the markets, public places, doors, and barriers; scholar of the spirit world. Defender of the young, the poor, the weak, and the disadvantaged.



***Azaka Mede*** - Spirit of agriculture. Controller of the fields and is very watchful of detail.

***Baron Samedi, Papa Ghede*** - Dual spirit; controller of the eternal crossroads which every person must someday traverse. The spirit of death and the power behind the magic that kills. The *Ghede* aspect is the spirit of eroticism, a clown, and the keeper of history.

***Damballah Wedo*** - The serpent spirit, very popular; the creator spirit and father figure. He is benevolent, innocent, and a loving father.

***Erzulie Fréda*** - Rada aspect of *Erzulie*, the spirit of love, beauty, jewelry, dancing, luxury, and flowers. She wears three wedding rings, one for each husband: *Damballah*, *Agwe* and *Ogorin*.

***Erzulie Mansur*** - Spirit of maternal love and protector of children from harm.

***Lord Kalfou*** - Controller of the evil forces of the spirit world. Allows bad luck, deliberate destruction, misfortune, and injustice to enter the world. Controller of the in-between points of the crossroads, the off-center points, which represent wrongness.

***Granne Erzulie*** - Spirit of wisdom granted by experience and maturity and that of grandmotherly kindness and love.

***Manman Brigitte*** - Female death spirit, consort of Baron Samedi. Protector of women's graves in cemeteries.

***Marinette-Bwa-Chèch*** - The most dreaded spirit; a she-devil; the sworn servant of evil. Dual aspects, she either frees persons from or commits persons to bondage.

***Ogorin, Ogou Feray*** - Spirit of the warrior, mighty, powerful, and triumphant. Spirit of blacksmithy and craftsmanship, Also, the crafty and powerful political leader and diplomat.

***Papa Legba, Atibon Legba*** - Guardian of the spiritual crossroads; the spirit of the origin of life. Controller of the crossroads from one world to the other and the contact between the mundane and spirit worlds. The speaker of all human languages.

## Cast of Characters

This list contains the names of the principal and supporting characters. Note that if you read through this list before reading the story, some characters and the groups they appear in could become major spoilers. Some named characters appear only briefly. A few characters are listed whose names are only mentioned by others but are important to the story.

### Principals Cast

**Jonas Bernard** - Fabienne's father, mechanic, Lafiteau, Haiti  
**Wilson Alexandre** - Tamara's father, mechanic, Miami  
**Cassandra (David) Bernard** - Fabienne's mother, priestess, Aubry, Haiti  
**Tamara David** - Cassandra's mother (mentioned)  
**Nadine Alexandre** - Tamara's mother, nurse's aide, Miami  
**Fabienne Bernard** - daughter  
**Tamara Alexandre** - daughter

### Haiti Cast

**Vanessa** - Vodou witch  
**Helene** - Vanessa's chief disciple  
**Malory Leger, Vincent Sanon** - Vanessa's muscle  
**Henri Benoit** - auto shop owner, Jonas' employer, Lafiteau, Haiti  
**Julianna Benoit** - Henri's wife  
**Emanuel Benoit** - Henri's son  
**Rafael Benoit** - Henri's son  
**Richard LeFontaine** - Cassandra's congregation member (mentioned)  
**Pelex Leblanc** - Haitian attorney, Cabinet Toussaint, Leblanc and Baptiste

### Hospital Ship/Haiti Embassy Cast

**Dr Douglas Haskins** - surgeon, USNS *Comfort*  
**HMCN Gilbert Bronson** - master chief hospital corpsman, USNS *Comfort*  
**LtCdr Jayne Sterling** - community relations officer, USNS *Comfort*  
**Charles Devlin** - consular affairs officer, U.S. embassy, Haiti  
**Roger Grant** - political attache, U.S. embassy, Haiti  
**Janice Richman** - cultural attache, U.S. embassy, Haiti  
**William Cowley** - special agent, Diplomatic Security Service, U.S. embassy, Haiti  
**Sergeant Severopolis** - Marine detail NCO, U.S. embassy, Haiti  
**Ambassador Molina** - U.S. ambassador, U.S. embassy, Haiti

### Washington Cast

**Robert O'Rourke** - under secretary of the Navy (initially); under secretary of defense, Research and Engineering  
**Evan Masters** - assistant secretary of state for administration (initially); under secretary for Political Affairs, State Department  
**Arthur Benson** - assistant secretary, State Department  
**Sarah Wilkins** - special agent, FBI, DC (initially); special agent in charge, Baltimore/DC  
**Ahido Inyoue** - president, U.S.  
**Eric Carlson** - senator, Maine

**Jim Emery** - Marine Corps platoon member  
**Carter Thompson** - Marine Corps platoon member  
**Dr Helene Tarmson** - project manager, DARPA  
**Foster Simpson** - evidence technician, FBI  
**Dr Harry Gerston** - president, U.S.; future president, Columbia Institute of Economics  
**Rita Gerston** - Gerston's wife  
**Randall Carter** - Medal of Honor recipient  
**Lieutenant Jennings** - Medal of Honor recipient  
**General Connelley** - commandant, Marine Corps  
**MGySgt Harris** - staff NCO, commandant's office, Marine Corps  
**Logan Ames** - assistant director, National Security Agency (NSA)  
**Mel Bearton** - NSA agent  
**Seth Parker** - NSA agent  
**Nathan Gondon** - NSA agent  
**Warren Kruse** - NSA agent  
**Ralph Gross** - under secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security  
**Dr Janine Carlson** - director of national intelligence  
**General Ezra Visson** - director, NSA  
**Mark Gray** - associate deputy director, FBI  
**Jose Estrada** - U.S. ambassador to the OAS

## Miami Cast

**Dr Walter Beauford** - neurosurgeon, neuroscientist, University of Miami Medical School  
**Susan Gilson** - retired electrical engineer  
**Dr David Gilson** - medical doctor, husband  
**Roger Gordon** - MRI engineer, contractor  
**Tim Saunders** - electronics engineer, University of Miami Medical School  
**Dr Michael Steward** - radiologist, University of Miami Medical School  
**John Norris** - special agent, Miami FBI  
**Andrew Johnson** - special agent, FBI, D.C.  
**Wilbur Zane** - Central Intelligence Agency, D.C.  
**Marjory Jones** - charge nurse, Miami VA Hospital  
**Ray Wilky** - Wilson's shop partner, motor pool, Miami-Dade County  
**Leon Domingue** - shop mechanic, motor pool, Miami-Dade County  
**Sergeant Gutierrez** - detective, Miami Police Department  
**Claudia Gebbers** - school district attorney, Miami-Dade County  
**Sergeant Jessert** - detective, Miami-Dade Police Department  
**Mrs Bennett** - 'Stripped in Florida' supervisor, Miami-Dade County  
**Mr Monters** - 'Stripped in Florida' manager, State of Florida  
**John Russo** - patent attorney, Miami

## *Tamara's Miami Schools*

**Grace Lombard** - principal, Horace Mann Middle School  
**Dr Patricia Barelllo** - principal, Miami Edison High School  
**Maria Leonard** - assistant principal, Miami Edison High School  
**Bill Jones** - technology teacher, Miami Edison High School  
**Jill Moore** - counselor, Miami Edison High School

**Laslo Kovacs** - federal official, Office of Social Awareness, Miami Edison High School  
**Jude Laguerre** - P.E. teacher, program coordinator, Miami Edison High School  
**Tina Pierce** - P.E. teacher, Miami Edison High School  
**Claire Wojinsky** - secretary, Miami Edison High School  
**Ms Lowell** - teacher, Miami Edison High School  
**Hector Rojas** - audio-video technician, Miami Edison High School  
**Claire Towner** - nurse, Miami Edison High School  
**Mr Garcia** - head custodian, Miami Edison High School  
**Maureen Peary** - chairperson, performing arts department, Miami Edison High School  
**Jose Rodríguez** - assistant superintendent, Miami-Dade School District  
**Roman Nueves** - aide, Miami-Dade School District  
**Bob Ayers** - technician, Miami-Dade School District  
**Joyce Winters** - doctoral student, English department, University of Miami  
**Julie, Sylvia, Sondra** - students, Horace Mann Middle School  
**Louise, Jamie, Kathy, Maddie, Carlos Augustin** - students and friends, Miami Edison High School  
**Linda** - Tamara's BFF, Miami Edison High School  
**Jerome Augustin** - student, Cushman High School  
**Norman Javits, Olivia, Hugh** - students that Tamara tutors, Miami Edison High School  
**Tyler, Martin, Diego** - students, Miami Edison High School  
**Rosa, Gerry** - Jerome's classmates, Cushman High School

### Hopkins and APL Cast

**Dr Emma Clarke** - Tamara's advisor, professor of physics, Johns Hopkins University  
**Dr Chester Montern ("Chet")** - chair, Physics and Astronomy, Johns Hopkins University  
**Dr Nora Silverberg** - chair, Physics, University of Maryland  
**Dr Wilfred Zucker** - director, Applied Physics Laboratory (APL), Johns Hopkins University  
**Dr Stephanie Burger** - undergraduate advisor, Physics/Astronomy, Johns Hopkins University  
**Dr Sheila Swarzman** - chair, Electrical and Computer Engineering, Johns Hopkins University  
**Dr Clifford McIntyre** - undergraduate advisor, Electrical and Computer Engineering, Johns Hopkins University  
**Dr Karasitos** - chair, Neuroscience, Johns Hopkins University  
**Davy Foster** - MRI technician, APL  
**Martin Fox ("Marty")** - Emma's electrical engineer, APL  
**John Wolbers** - Emma's mechanical engineer, APL  
**John van der Bellen** - cosmologist  
**Betty Miskin** - Tamara's electrical engineer, APL  
**Saul Freeberg** - Tamara's engineering technician, APL  
**Dr Joyce Darner** - postdoctoral fellow, Biochemistry, Johns Hopkins University  
**Dr Jose Marcos** - radiologist, Johns Hopkins University Medical School  
**Dr John Oglebie** - endocrinologist, Johns Hopkins University Medical School  
**Dr Li Seang (Sonny Li)** - materials scientist, Johns Hopkins University  
**Dr Janardan Chakraborty** - provost, Johns Hopkins University  
**Gary Chambers** - facilities department manager, APL  
**Charlene Russo** - Clarke Scholar finalist, mechanical engineering major  
**Nancy Janvers** - Clarke Scholar, junior, college tour guide  
**Jill Benavides** - Clarke Scholar, junior, math major

## Tamara's Friends

**Terence Dryer** - Clarke Scholar, physics/astrophysics major  
**Peter Winsberg** - Clarke Scholar, electrical engineering major  
**Barbara Winsberg** - Peter's sister, psychology major  
**Dr Stuart Marshall** - Emma's father-in-law, political science professor, Westphalia University  
**Gerry Marshall** - Emma's mother-in-law, middle-school teacher  
**Dr Andrew Marshall** - Emma's husband, econometrician  
**Abigail Marshall ("Abi")** - Emma's sister-in-law, medical school student, Johns Hopkins University  
**Ryan Doyle** - Abi's resort friend, medical school student, University of Maryland  
**Samantha Marshall ("Sam")** - Emma's sister-in-law, attorney  
**Jay Larson** - Sam's fiancé, attorney  
**Awinita Nelsey ("Winnie")** - Cherokee orphan

## London/Cambridge Cast

**HRH Elizabeth Mary Windsor, Queen Elizabeth III** - U.K. monarch  
**Sir George Marshall** - U.K. ambassador to U.S., retired  
**Dame Isabella Marshall** - Marshall's wife  
**RtHon Bruce Harning** - secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, U.K.  
**RtHon Eleanor Grayson** - prime minister, U.K.  
**Kevin Coris** - knighthood honoree, U.S. citizen  
**Denise Roberts** - knighthood honoree, U.S. citizen  
**Dame Amelia Hadad** - knighthood honoree, year 12 pupil  
**Sir Jeremy Porter** - knighthood honoree, year 12 pupil  
**Hon Charles Wixom** - U.S. ambassador to U.K.  
**Marjory Wixom** - Wixom's wife  
**Warren Porter** - minister-counselor, deputy chief of U.S. mission  
**Barbara Porter** - Porter's wife  
**Henry Simms** - Clarke Scholar, physics major, Cambridge University  
**Charlotte Davies** - Clarke Scholar, mathematics major, Cambridge University  
**Sarah** - Clarke Scholar, mechanical engineering major, Cambridge University  
**Dr Henry Stafford** - president and CEO, EEC Energy Systems  
**Dr Nils Thomassan** - chief technology officer, EEC Energy Systems  
**Dr Beverly Norris** - director of research, EEC Energy Systems  
**Wilma Carter** - chief financial officer, EEC Energy Systems  
**Sir Gregory Hodges** - vice chair, EEC Energy Systems  
**Constable Bixby** - MI5 officer  
**Constable McDougal** - MI5 officer  
**Janet Hadad** - Amelia's stepmother, CEO, Coris Foundation (mentioned)  
**Elliot Hadad** - Amelia's father, CFO, Coris Foundation (mentioned)

## Peter's Relatives

**Scott Winsberg** - Peter's father, APL mechanical engineer  
**Dr Claire (Richardson) Winsberg** - Peter's mother, professor, U.S. Naval Academy  
**Werner Winsberg** - Peter's paternal grandfather, real estate company owner  
**Dr Greta Winsberg** - professor, Westphalia University  
**Mason Richardson** - Peter's maternal grandfather, politician

**Angela Richardson** - Peter's maternal grandmother, charity fundraiser  
**Bruce Richardson** - Claire's brother, Richmond, Virginia  
**Robin Richardson** - Claire's sister-in-law  
**Madeline Richardson** - cousin, twin, high-school senior at first appearance  
**Melodie Richardson** - cousin, twin, high-school senior at first appearance  
**Dr Dave Gibson** - Peter's uncle, USAMRIID staff, Frederick, Maryland  
**Shelly (Winsberg) Gibson** - Peter's aunt  
**Mike Gibson** - cousin, high-school junior at first appearance  
**Janice Gibson** - cousin, college senior at first appearance  
**Larry Winsberg** - Peter's uncle, York PA  
**Wendy Winsberg** - Peter's aunt  
**Susan Winsberg** - cousin, senior, Pennsylvania State University at first appearance  
**JoAnne Winsberg** - cousin, high-school senior at first appearance  
**Frank Winsberg** - cousin, high-school sophomore at first appearance  
**David Carter** - Susan's boyfriend, graduate student, Pennsylvania State University  
**Mark Winsberg** - Peter's uncle, Wilmington, Delaware  
**Jo Winsberg** - Peter's aunt  
**Ernie Winsberg** - cousin, twin, high-school junior at first appearance  
**Audrey Winsberg** - cousin, twin, high-school junior at first appearance

### **Arundel Nature Society Resort Cast**

**Ron Allerman** - resort majority owner  
**Vicki Allerman** - wife  
**Michelle Allerman** - Ron's daughter  
**Marcia** - D.C. schools, eighth grade student at first appearance  
**Jack** - Marcia's brother, high-school freshman at first appearance  
**Dr Martin** - USAMRIID staff, Frederick, Maryland (mentioned)  
**Theresa Martin** - Martin's daughter, high-school junior at first appearance  
**Toby/Curtis Martin** - Theresa's brother, high-school freshman at first appearance  
**Gary, Herb** - Peter's club friends  
**Renee, Richard** - massage session leaders  
**Joe, Grace, Nora, Nate, Nick** - high-school students, Georgia  
**William Henderson** - resort visitor  
**Sergeant Gary Lynch** - detective, Anne Arundel county police  
**Steffie, Marie, Wilma, Melodie, Cindy, Rachel** - the vixen posse, the "rugrats"  
**Jamie** - vixen posse's teen chaperone  
**Tim** - adult pool bystander  
**Roy, Jill Garfield** - resort entertainers  
**Dawn Simpson** - assistant women's volleyball coach, University of Maryland  
**Joyce Boyers** - assistant basketball coach, Johns Hopkins University  
**Rick** - captain, resort men's volleyball team  
**JB** - resort men's volleyball team  
**Stacy** - captain and setter, resort women's volleyball team  
**Robin** - libero, resort women's volleyball team  
**Anne** - resort women's volleyball team  
**Judy** - resort women's volleyball team

**Rosa** - resort women's volleyball team  
**Carla** - resort women's volleyball team  
**Naomi** - resort women's volleyball team  
**Rodney Sommers** - drone owner  
**Davis Stearns** - 5-K race participant  
**Nancy Givins** - attorney, resort member (mentioned)

### **Maryland Cast**

**Cynthia Denison (Cindy)** - medical student, Georgetown University and Avery-Denison Program developer  
**Tom (Tommy) Emerson** - Cynthia's husband, industrial engineering graduate student, Georgetown University  
**Tom (Tomas) Armstrong** - student, Westphalia University  
**Lynette Armstrong** - Tom's spouse, student, Westphalia University  
**Lieutenant Davis** - detective, Baltimore police  
**Janice Marks** - personal security agent, Cornelius Executive Protection Services  
**Dr Claire Borges** - principal, Baltimore Tech High School  
**Stacey Circeo** - family attorney  
**John Hevery** - detective lieutenant, Maryland State Police  
**Curt Shorder** - personal security agent, Cornelius Executive Protection Services  
**Lynn Garcia** - personal security agent, Cornelius Executive Protection Services  
**Lisa Farrell** - Tamara's personal assistant  
**Bernice Tompkins** - corporate attorney  
**Cooper McKinnon** - executive assistant, AlWin Systems Corporation

### **Others**

**Seth and Wilma** - Black's Beach acquaintances  
**Amy Pierson** - Peter's childhood friend (mentioned)  
**Dr Sean Pomeroy** - physics professor, California Institute of Technology  
**Dr Carter** - electrical engineering professor, California Institute of Technology  
**Jamie** - cabin crew, British Airways  
**Oliver** - air marshal, U.K. Department for Transport  
**Malik and Saja Hadad** - Amelia's grandparents, African Union employees (mentioned)  
**Don Davies** - Virginia cabin owner  
**Bobby Davies** - Davies' son  
**Hank Laringer** - state trooper, Virginia  
**Mark Wymers** - sheriff's deputy, Rockingham County, Virginia  
**Daniel Jean-Baptiste** - Wilson's uncle, British Royal Marines (mentioned)  
**Ben, Bennie, and Sally Parsons** - Winnie's neighbors

