Benign neglect - this expression described the life that Lucas was born into. Wealth and easy access to anything, so long as he didn't need a parent present to help, especially emotionally. Fortunately for him, mentors were found who helped give him the tools and opportunities to survive a life of abandonment and being cast away. The adults in his life had only themselves to blame. When he began to help other children with exceptional talents and qualities, constituting his own family and society around himself, again the adults sneered and yelled and blamed but life would tell who was right in the end. For Lucas through blood and tears would have Justice rendered unto those that earned it.

Ia! Ia! Lucas Fhtagn! Adeste Humanitas; Krachenathen verus in fedelis vita venit!
The author wishes to express thanks to anyone who may read his story and encourages them to leave reviews, comments or even flame it hard. As with any who try their hand at publicly expressing an idea or story concept, all feedback is important and welcome.

Disclaimer: I do not own SeaQuest, Star Wars, nor any other sci-fi or fantasy series, movies, comics, cartoons or news items used in this fiction as they belong to the creators or broadcasters or publishers who put them out for consumption by the public.

Created; February 2016

Revised on; August 2019

Author's notes about the story and development

The story is rated "M" not for smut or porn despite the sex scenes that may happen at some point but because of life events that happen in spite of our best intentions. Kids swear, smoke, drink alcohol and take drugs because the adults around them are like that. Violence permeates families, schools, churches and the streets we walk. Police brutality and corruption is rife and cheap to buy. Politicians have no care beyond the next election or big contribution to their hidden retirement stash. The Earth is raped, maimed and murdered every day but nobody cares unless they are paid to care or a person they love becomes sick and dies. Medicine saves us but do we want to see and feel the blood and guts being worked into, or share the pain and humiliation of the person getting cut up like cattle on the butcher's block?

The story is rated "M" because life is not for the faint of heart. Survival takes guts and passion and rage and a dose of killer instinct. Unlike the empty promises of religion, I can guarantee that the meek, the weak and the poor will not inherit the Earth at the End Times; they will all be dead or enslaved in the armies that fight for control over the scraps, but they will not inherit anything.

This tale started out as something and then wound up as another thing and then I realized that my final goal was in fact different than the initial parts and process I had begun. So I took the drawing board and rewrote the logic and underpinnings of the story to include formally what I had wanted all along.

The story will be a multi-crossover with other TV series as well as cartoons & comics series that match the tone and objectives of the tale that I want told. Because of the marine and naval basis of the SeaQuest series and its canonic inclusions of ghost ships, giant primordials, aliens from millions of years ago, the GUELFs and grafting gills on people, I feel comfortable systematically adding a Cthulhu Mythos slant and undercurrent to the baseline tale. Besides, the ship is shaped like a squid and has biological hull armoring with water tubes criss-crossing its gut; who doesn't think about the Dreaded Great Old Ones having influenced the design percolating in Bridger's head when he was drunk or stoned in his youth? Perhaps prophetic dreams? Visitations by aliens like Gene Roddenberry said to have received? Hummm…

While I do imagine the merged product quite well, it is better for the readers to imagine the whole thing as played out like a TV series by live actors rather than animated drawings. Normally, I visualize the original actors from live productions and think about which would best suit the
animation character and it works well to transit from picture to live-action. In the beginning of a chapter, I will explain which series are crossed into the weave of the tale along with critical informations about the characters.

You should keep Wikipedia at hand for some basic information on each series; it will help since a lot of these are from the 80's, 90's and early 2000's. I am in my mid forties and I'm past caring about hiding it; I started saying "back in my day…" around last year and then decided I'd better just come out and live with the fact I'm an old crud. It's more honest that way.

About the music and date stamps: this is a way of setting the story flow that I saw several other authors do plus its SQ canon and I liked both the principle and execution of it. Please note that since I don't know every piece of music by heart like the "Star Wars symphony" I will simply say which part of the movies the music plays in to situate the reader with the theme melody and the emotions implied.

Full summary of story:

Benign neglect - this expression described the life that Lucas was born into. Wealth and easy access to anything, so long as he didn't need a parent present to help, especially emotionally. Fortunately for him, mentors were found who helped give him the tools and opportunities to survive a life of abandonment and being cast away. The adults in his life had only themselves to blame. When he began to help other children with exceptional talents and qualities, constituting his own family and society around himself, again the adults sneered and yelled and blamed but life would tell who was right in the end. For Lucas through blood and tears would have Justice rendered unto those that earned it.

Ia! Ia! Lucas Fhtagn! Adeste Humanitas; Krachenathen verus in fedelis vita venit!

First chapter: Childhood, not so much

Early childhood, primary and secondary schooling

(SeaQuest theme – season 1 opening)

December 24th of 2004
Danbury, Connecticut (USA)

Lucas Andrew Cadmus Holt Wolenczak was born like a lovable little Christmas gift on 24th December 2004 on a mild Friday night, in Danbury – Connecticut (USA) during a peaceful little snowfall that blanketed the small town like an offering of good wishes for the season.

Born to parents that were both greatly intelligent people, ambitious and driven but physically unassuming in their appearance, Lucas was announced as a great boon to the family. His porcelain pale skin, flint blue eyes and easy smile made him an instant favorite with the hospital staff.
The first few years of life were unremarkable except a few things.

His language skills astounded as he learned basic speech at 7 months, writing at 10 months and then more complex English and other languages which he never stopped accumulating. His hand-eye coordination and full body reflexes were phenomenal. He was rapidly determined to have eidetic memory with 85 to 90% recall. He had an almost perfect ear for music and harmonies coupled with an abnormal sensitivity in the skin and the nerves that allowed him to hear certain sound frequencies and vibrations even with his ears plugged. He learned to swim faster than he learned walking and running but became good at all three in short order. This declared to the world what potential he could achieve if properly motivated and supported.

Most of his early childhood was passed quite peaceably in Danbury, until the age of 3 when the family moved to Buffalo in New York State. His grand-parents on his father's side were not that old and offered to take care of him by keeping him to live with them during the week days for home schooling instead of hiring nannies. He would be at his parent's house only from Saturday morning to Sunday evening until the age of 8 when both grand-parents died together. For the actual subjects, some specific tutors were brought into the grand parent's home, especially a linguistics instructor who taught him English and its sister tongues Latin, Italian, French and Spanish as well as sign language and Braille before the age of 5. His grand parents taught him the family's history from the early 1800s through the World Wars, migration to the USA and up to his birth. They were not religious people but taught him anyways the old traditions of the Judaika, the Torah and Talmudic Laws as they had learned from their parents. He learned Hebrew and Yiddish as his most durable memories from it all. Little else was of use in his daily life or the highly technical studies that would follow in his later life.

Lucas showed prowess in so many areas of science and technology, but also in the humanities and artistic abilities that when he completed the entire International version of the primary school cursus by age 5, they evaluated that he was what is known in some circles as a multi-genial super-prodigy. This made-up tag basically means that there is no area of human knowledge or activity which was barred to him if he desired to make an effort to learn and practice. His parents thus began to push him and constrict his time usage to get the perfect little worker but forgot he was still a growing child, so small and young to not even be called a boy yet.

When he finished the International version of high school cursus in the top 1/10,000th percentile with all extra credits accounted by the age of 8, his family was on the way to tearing itself apart around him without his knowledge of why or how.

Marking a child's soul #1 - Cynthia's gift

(Star Wars symphony – Naboo Lake Varykino)

January of 2012
Buffalo, New York (USA)
Holt residence

His mother's parents were dead before he was born. His father's parents died in a house fire at night during one of the few overnight stays that he had at his actual home with both parents. Since the two family lines had survived World War II by the skin of a few younglings' teeth to migrate to America, Lawrence and Cynthia were all that was left on each side. Lucas had no one else and when his parents turned on each other and separated their lives, he fell into a void that was filled
only by hired staff or expensive day camps of the highly focused educational variety.

Deprived of such healthy pursuits as baseball with granddad or doing some light skateboarding in the driveway while grandma knitted or read beside him on the old covered porch, he became morose and withdrawn until his mother gave him something that changed his life.

Cynthia Holt is not an evil person or a bad mother per say, but she had problems managing the schedule between family, work and the mundanities required by the law firm she worked at. And as a mid-level attorney with some complementary credentials in fiscality and import-export laws, she was on the fast track to become senior partner before the age of 40. She would succeed or burn out while trying; her son would help out by accident, and then by design.

Eight year old Lucas was, to put it mildly, in a good and proper tetch. And a tetchy whiny eight year old in the house when it rains like a monsoon outside is no fun for anyone, even the kid. So it was normal that when Lucas, who was normally among the 1% of the best behaved kids that all his nannies, tutors and hired staff ever saw, threw a tantrum including swearing in multiple tongues and throwing stuff, his mother was perplexed.

Lawrence was gone to the Pentagon in another effort to obtain financing and defensive array permissions for his Power Plant project, as he tended to do 20 odd days of every month for the last three years. The staff had the day off as it was Sunday and just her and what was usually a living, self propelled megawatt of denim-clad happiness remained in the house.

Cynthia, seeing her son lose all control in less than 60 seconds flat, felt her arms drop from her shoulders in panic. He had never done that with anyone before! What was going on? Was he sick? Did he get hurt in the kitchen while cooking? He was very autonomous and helped out her mother-in-law with cooking 5 meals out of 6 for the last 2 years. Had he had an accident?

She was about to call 911 when the reality hit her when her precious little baby boy lit up the air with a bracing row of pig Latin that Cynthia's law education rendered able to understand and the proverbial lantern illuminated inside her mind. Just in time to see said denim-clad lesser devil grab her briefcase full of painstakingly organized files and throw it down the basement staircase. Being a helpful child, he had opened it and shook the contents out beforehand, of course.

She promptly grabbed him by the upper arm and sitting on the nearest flat furniture, the staircase up to the first floor, brought the squirming and swearing out loud little hooligan to rest face down across her lap where she held him while working down his loose fitting jeans and boxers.

With a firm hand splayed out on his tense little bare bottom she offered the now silent and stiffly immobile boy the choice that would make his personality and direct his education and philosophy for life. She gave him a simple choice of getting a good spanking of eight firm smacks and then he could help her clean up and organize the mess he made to prove he really was sorry to have hurt her with his actions or he could go directly to his room. He would stay in silent isolation for the rest of the afternoon, no spanking or extra restrictions, just stay in his room and do whatever he wanted that was silent. In reality, she really hoped he would go quietly to his room without a fight so she could do the cleanup faster as she calmed herself alone.

Cynthia's gift to her child was as profound as it was simple; she gave him the freedom of choice and self determination, the validity of his voice and the self-awareness that he could and should take responsibility for himself and his acts instead of laying out the blame and consequences on others. But above anything else, she showed him that if you want attention from a person in a positive way, lending a helping hand is much better and far less sorrowful for everyone involved.

She also showed him the value of tempering your reactions in an emotional situation and offering
mercy and a way out even when you're the one being hurt so that the other person feels that there is hope for reconciliation and cooperation at the end of the tunnel. More importantly she gave him the choice to be by her side or not, instead of sending him away or locking him in a room, somewhere out of sight and touch, as if she were ashamed or afraid of him.

Lucas stunned his mother by speaking in a thin reedy voice, already crying hard and shaking with sobs, stuttering out that he would accept the spanking she wanted to give him if she could forgive him enough to let him help and prove he had not realized he was hurting her. He managed, between harsh, uneven breaths, to explain that he was in pain, angry like he never felt before, and lost himself to the feelings inside. Quite simply, he was grieving the loss of his grand parents, and remaining family to boot, but no one paid attention or helped him through the emotional process. This choice he made bespoke more about his sorrow and guilt than the fact he just lay there on her lap, waiting for the hand of judgment to quite literally fall on him.

The poor woman had never in his eight years of life hit her son and neither had her husband, especially since he was always gone. She remembered her mother in law's advice about disciplining Lucas differently from the average boys or teens showed in magazines and talk shows.

He was very empathic and highly intelligent which meant that a much lighter and shorter punishment would work better. The old woman impressed on her that she should prefer gentle correction accompanied by verbal guidance and support over heavy-handed outright punitiveness, especially when a physical punishment happened. She also completely disavowed groundings and isolation in a closed room because of his dire need for contact with people. Lucas would learn better without the fear of shameful exile to a boxed-in setting hanging over his head, and work based sanctions had yielded miracles for her in the few instances that she had needed to set him back on the proper track.

Her father-in-law had echoed the sentiment, even though he had a more traditional yet much more functional view of corporal punishment. He had many times reminded her of the saying about educating children and adults alike: patience, repetition and consistency in the repetitions, never rage or escalation. His view was that isolation based punishments were to be avoided as they gave the child a message that they were worthless, too dangerous to keep around so they were locked up to prevent them from injuring others. He advocated the use of short, measured punishment for a few hours of 1 to 3 specific restrictions that still allowed movement around the household, or a brief tightly controlled spanking given by an adult demonstrating good self-restraint. These methods would have better effects because afterwards the child was allowed to stay with the rest of the group and be rehabilitated by actively participating in the activities. This meant he could be comforted for not only his pain, but also his efforts at atonement, by all members in the house.

Cynthia told her son that she would give him a chance because it was his first real offense of such gravity. If he helped her during the day with cleaning and organizing her files and then helped with the cooking and dishes without complaint or whining, she would grace out the spanking part of the correction. At the slightest tetching or disobedience in her presence, back over her lap he would go and she would spank him a bright vivid red to keep him squirming all the way to a much earlier bedtime than usual.

Lucas showed her that day that her patience and trust were precious to him and re-earned them both in spades. He helped to clean and reorganize all her briefcase, then the files on the kitchen table awaiting processing. After that he showed off his bureautics and secretarial skills by serving as her intern all day, past a nice meal of call-in Chinese and well past even his usual bedtime at 21h00pm. At around 23h30 they both laid down on the living room couch, exhausted emotionally more then physically, and after a minute or two of stupor, fell asleep with Cynthia on her side, backed against the backrest of the couch, with Lucas tightly held in her arms facing her. This day, though trying
their patience and filial bond, had forged between them the sort of connection that people are rarely capable of finding. Genuine forgiveness led to solid appreciation of skills, and then a comfortable loving union of parent and child.

The morning after, when they woke up, she held him against her heart, gently explaining that she had not punished him because she finally understood why he had acted out so badly. She explained the pain inside of him, the concepts of loss, grief, sorrow and mourning for the departed. She explained that as the adults in charge of his life had failed in helping and healing his grief, she could not in good conscience punish him for what he was ignorant of, or could not control. He listened raptly to her soft voice speaking words of honest, forgiving wisdom, never guessing that this moment would be one of the few very emotional and tender situations ever to happen between them.

Because of her son's high speed typing, scanning & e-mailing service, she managed to go through enough of her accumulated files to clear out every evening from then to next Friday. Lucas was not only helping with the actual workload, his soft, gentle presence calmed and centered her. This event insured that from then on, Cynthia would ask her son to help often with office work; they would split the tasks, then order-in food to alleviate the household chores. He learned so much on those evenings and weekends, as if he were an apprentice to practice law and accounting with her, but it would not last.

Still, he would never forget how, during those short two years at home, she taught him to evaluate and defend properly his self-worth, his dignity, his integrity and his honesty. He was schooled in the value of his given word, the innate wrongness of making promises he could not or did not want to uphold, and the vital skillset for tending his public façade and reputation as if it were money in a transaction. She was a lawyer, relationist and lobbyist among the best her firm had, therefore she was incredibly happy to use this privileged time to teach her son these fundamentals of her trade and career. She did after all have hope of enticing him to study law to eventually join besides her at the firm.

She painstakingly explained the value of helping and comforting a person that is hurt, especially if it were his actions, their effects or their consequences that caused that hurt to occur. She showed him how to apologize truthfully and offer just compensation to correct the damage done because this is an important skillset to learn to have good interpersonal relations and a sterling reputation at all times. People will trust you more if they know that you readily admit your errors and correct them without prompting or threats of lawsuits and aggravation.

He mastered these concepts and skills with great gravitas for his age and never failed to use them to defend his body and soul, or when he caused wrong upon someone. He became a very moral, thoughtful and philosophical person by the tender age of 10, just before his health forced him into a year of medical oversight while living with Lawrence at another home since the divorce would then be fully realized.

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**Basic training part 1 – Izuku Shu, wounded warrior**

*(Star Wars symphony – Jedi younglings training in the temple)*

January of 2012
Buffalo, New York (USA)
All over town
From age 8 to 10 he stayed home with a nanny and valet who alternated the tasks of cleaning, shopping and driving according to the needs of the situation or persons in the house. These two persons actually had so little interaction with him that they were like ghosts on the periphery of his conscience, never really registering nor ever teaching him anything of value.

Lucas spent those two years in intense communion with his mother, but only when she was actually home with him. He often helped her out with filing or even arguing current cases in the evenings and weekends. She was a lawyer specializing in fiscality, taxation, incorporation and import-export permits with their assorted taxes, and she had made colossal efforts all her life to achieve those qualifications. In many ways, she was still working against the system and the other lawyers in her own firm to truly establish her name and reputation at large. Her influence upon her son and the great closeness they shared would imprint on his mindset and philosophy a truly great respect for women in the workplace. He was now aware of the efforts they had to make to progress through what was, and still is very much, the protected hunting grounds of a select group of old men.

During these years he complemented his high school education despite that it had already been officially diplomated by a reputed private secondary school in Massachusetts whose web-access and home-school classes were envied worldwide. This was done by means of having a personal, specialized phys-ed slash life-coach, recommended by then Captain William Noyce at US Naval Intel, to give him gymnastics, calisthenics and basic self-defense training. Noyce's entry into the family's circle of acquaintances was due to his working closely with Lawrence, as the Pentagon's new official attaché to World Power Project. This position was made necessary because the US federal government had lobbied the UEO cabinet to grant the WPP 'military installation' status so they could have structural weapons mounted to the buildings to fight off pirates.

The trainer was a young Chinese-American male named Izuku Shu, thirty years old and former US marines' gunnery sergeant. He was discharged honorably due to PTSD from serving two tours in war-torn Africa as body guard for an ambassador's wife and three kids. He was next to the car, holding the door open so the lady and kids could put the shopping bags inside when an RPG hit the driver's side. He was projected 20 feet away through a store's bay window. The 17 months in hospital, surgeries and therapy cured 93% of physical ailments but mentally he was done for. As he was the sole survivor of the blast, he lost his protectees, his three marine buddies, then survivor's guilt and depression took out his self respect. He needed a change of life quick before he fell to alcohol or drugs like so many other injured survivors had. Teaching survival, self-defense and street smarts to kids while replacing their uncaring or abusive parents was, he felt, the best match to his qualifications, and a morally satisfying choice too.

He taught Lucas many things that had not been foreseen in the plans of his parents like basic fighting with a knife, rod or staff, hatchet, and the most basic firearms safety & usage with an old Beretta 9mm. Even though he abhorred violence in all forms, the child excelled because he knew that he had to resist bullies that would want to mooch him for his family's influence and money. Also, the safety / security aspect caught his eye because if he found a weapon but didn't know what to do, he could get hurt or be unable to use it to save someone in need against a thug.

Lucas learned from Izuku the basics of sensing danger, identifying a human or item as ally or threat, and how to move or retreat unseen with as few traces as he could manage. Izuku showed Lucas the old infantry, navy, marine corps training manuals and law codes that he had learned with. He allowed the boy scan them to digital so he could secretly keep them for later discrete review when his life got harder than civilians, especially kids, should deal with.

Along with militaristic skills, he passed on his family's Chinese dialect, history, vision of nature, the elements and Confucean philosophy. He gifted him only two material objects to set him for life: a highly illustrated paper version (and digital CD included) bilingual copy of "The Art of War"
in both traditional mandarin & English, along with an old K-Bar fighting knife.

Basic training part 2 – George Brown-Fowl-In-The-Bushes, the olden ways

(Real Adventures of Jonny Quest – opening theme)

February of 2012
Buffalo, New York (USA)
All over town, countryside and wild lands

During this same period, Lucas learned the incredible fun and happiness of nature by camping, foraging, fishing, hunting, and long term survival in diverse conditions from a very gentle, elderly neighbor who, at 88 years passed, was reaching the end of his life and wanted to pass his knowledge to someone. This person was also recommended by William Noyce after a prolonged background check and interview. Since his children and grand-children all lived spread out across the country but had not shown interest, he took Lucas under his wing, helping Izuku devise a way to combine the naval infantry basics with active hostile climate survivalism.

Old mister George Brown-Fowl-in-the-Bushes was from native descent, from the old Apache blood. He had traveled the world firstly as a sailor in 1944, at the end of WW II, where he served on an American destroyer as code & communications officer. He intercepted several Nazi communications about special projects being run by the Ahnenerbe from recovered Thule Society artifacts. Those items had slept idly in a vault under Munich for two decades, before Himmler's people found them in a clean-up effort against non-Nazi beliefs and books. Some of the things he learned about he would tell Lucas and Izuku, then guide them to seek out their own sources and materials. But he had seen and heard things in the war that clearly demonstrated that humanity was not alone in this world, and the Earth still had dark dreadful places where the frail humans dare not dwell.

In the fifties he acted as scout – explorer, trained & supported by the US Navy, in many Asian countries to infiltrate populations, then help set up resistance cells against communism. In the late sixties, while retired from service, he was drafted by the CIA as civilian consultant to set up name-lending corporations to pass materials towards the freedom fighters in the Arab countries around Afghanistan while directing refugees or collaborators back to his handlers. In the nineties he was again used by the US Navy as consultant, but mostly to analyze data supplied by the CIA to prepare the maps & briefings used by marine strike teams for their missions against the newly risen wave of Islamic insurgents all across the world. When he met Lucas he was well and truly retired, just enjoying the sun on his porch when the blond little ball of goodness moved into the neighborhood. It took him a few years to warm up to the kid and decide that he was the one, but when he did decide to teach, he didn't hold back anything.

He taught him the old and forgotten ways of peace, serenity, meditating by a calm brook or foggy pond while accepting any event thrown his way by Nature & life as a bounty, not a hardship. He taught the eager little beaver, his nickname for Lucas, things not even an expert level eagle-scout troupe would try, such as foraging both in nature and city dump-sites, tracking animals, people & vehicles alike, and how to interpret weather patterns before setting a wild camp or squat in town. His teachings were always balanced between old traditions and modern urban reality while mixing in spirituality and several of the eldritch occurrences he had lived, thus always remaining entertaining in Lucas's eyes while staying useful and very down to earth practical.
With Izuku's constant presence and help, George taught Lucas to find, trap or hunt and then prepare what he got without disgust or waste. He taught him collar & snare traps, mechanical spring-jaw traps, pits & dead-falls according to his target and terrain. They showed him to shoot long rifles first with a small cal.22 Cricket rifle, then an old favorite around the world, the Lee Enfield cal.303 bolt action rifle. This was side-by-side with the traditional leather slingshot and wooden bow that were great fun to use. George showed Lucas how to make traditional sedatives to baste an arrowhead or knife blade before usage, so as to poison his target into a stupor and obtain an edge in the fight. He showed him how to cover his tracks in any environment along with the basics of camouflage from natural items, junk found in dumps or laying around. He helped train him to become the steady, enduring swimmer that would astound the SeaQuest crew with his long stays in cold water and superb acrobatics along his dolphin friend. He learned to climb a cliff, walk in deep snows and find safe passage in wild lands, on the ground or the trees above.

George taught him the old Apache tongue along with some old military and CIA codes & ciphers, as well as that odd unnatural language they had intercepted from the Nazis and their fantastical research projects. He showed Lucas how to set up "shop", run movements in, out & around for people or materials, and how to get money / valuables to finance the whole thing without any outside help. Basically, he began to actively teach Lucas what is called tradecraft; the skillset and tools of a CIA agent on mission, just as he had learned many decades ago. He pulled out old, moth eaten manuals that he let Lucas scan to digital for his archives and contacted other old people from back in the day to get the missing ones, as well as a few little items the kid should always have at hand. Lucas was, quite accidentally, being trained by two pros in the oldest school of espionage and defensive lifestyle; the one where tech & gadgets meant nothing, but human intelligence, self control and a good, clean, well ordered life would save him and his loved ones from grief.

George and Izuku would sit with Lucas at breakfast and lunch, telling him old war stories of bravery, endurance, the brotherliness of the service, but also the true stories of betrayal, treason, and sometimes, the power madness that gripped the higher brass in military organizations. They gave him together in 2 years at around 8 to 10 hours a day, six days a week, an emotional, social and historical education such as normally would happen to a young man of 17 or 18 years of age, when he voluntarily joined the army, going through basic training and the first three or four years of service with his brethren at arms.

Lucas would never forget the sacrifices of body parts and pieces of shattered souls left behind so his ancestors could leave Europe to reach the USA and live in peace away from fascism, communism, and the madness of the meat grinder that was Nazism and WW II. He learned about the following wars of Korea, Vietnam, the arabo-muslim quagmire, and the genocidal wastes of Africa's deserts. He learned, and would from then on, live his life by the concepts of Honor, duty, public service, remembrance of debts due in blood, and being a gentleman under adverse conditions. This from two mismatched, used up and broken men who loved and cherished him when his grand-fathers and father could not be present for him.

George gave Lucas a few useful items during his training so as to set him up to be autonomous because he could see the boy's family breaking apart at the seams. The person Cynthia was lining up to replace Lawrence in her life would probably never care for Lucas, even if he never hurt him intentionally. Well, from afar, that was the impression that George got; only time would tell.

These items were a Victorinox Swiss army knife; the big beef of a model with about 60 tools on it that came with its sheath and a whetstone. Lucas would always keep it on himself, or in reach on his nightstand, for the rest of his life. Another more discreet gift was a good, very complete set of flat-packed lock picks and burglary tools that folded in three parts and had loops to put on his belt, or on a strap to position at either forearm or calf. This meant that Lucas was taught to use the kit, craft manually replacement parts, and do the same jobs with replacements of fortune found ad hoc.
by foraging.

George then gave him his last gift; a blue cyanide pill in a silver locket shaped like a dolphin adorned in turquoise stone. He told Lucas to always remember what his family had gone through to reach America and survive the barbarities of warfare. Lucas swore to himself on his blood, he was born free, he would live free or he would choose when and how to die freely of his own hand. He would never be bound or enslaved, not by anything short of a god's own intervention.

Basic Training part 3 – Vratsina Ityolisk, lace, velvet and shadows

(Earth Final Conflict – season 1 opening, instrumental only)

March of 2012
Buffalo, New York (USA)
All over town

While Cynthia was blissfully unaware of her little angel's abnormally unusual curriculum for an 8 to 10 year old, she had a brainwave to send Lucas out to do four to six hours of manual labor every week, under supervision of his life-coach Izuku. He would thus earn a small amount of spending money while learning personal responsibility, budgeting, and pride in accomplishing hard honest work. It really was a good parenting idea, in theory. She would never learn what really happened when she was at the office and Lucas left the sanctuary of the house to visit his many friends in the neighborhood.

One of Lucas's new friendly neighbors was an elderly polish lady of some means named Vratsina Ityolisk that lived four blocks away in a medium sized, garishly pastel colored victorian, three storey house. She was introduced to Cynthia for approval as someone who would teach Lucas the necessities of homesteading, cooking, preserving foodstuffs, and the essentials for passing through life's hurdles with no more than bumps and scrapes. Basically, she would give a female counterpart to what Izuku Shu was teaching, and put a woman's perspective in his life. She was never presented to captain Noyce, never mentioned to him, nor was his opinion ever asked about her. She was just an ordinary neighbor that was a bit lonely in her old age, and Lucas liked to talk to old people; it reminded him of his grand-parents whom he missed dearly. So, Cynthia had no objections and no fears. If a background check had been done, the woman would have been warned to not approach the pure and innocent little Lucas within a hundred miles.

In reality, the kind and reclusive old polish dame had a checkered Technicolor-ed past. After arriving as a poor orphaned 11 year old on a boat during the unrest following WW II, she did every crummy, dirty, and morally crass job she could to survive. In her twenties she had a flourishing drug-running operation in Boston. This was followed in her late thirties by a cheap no-tell motel in New York City, with a brothel hidden in the basement that had secret exits towards the sewers. It had been in spitting distance of where the UN Building and its many foreign diplomats would reside from 1952 onwards so no trace remained anymore.

Then, in her late fifties, she had several illnesses linked to grave diabetes, obesity from bad reactions to a botched surgery & medications, so she turned towards the more sedentary lifestyle of information passing, power brokering, and becoming an avid black marketer around Albany in New York State. She retired to Buffalo to help financially and emotionally an old female friend about four years ago. It was one of her old working girls from the motel; she had married much above her station in life but was now widowed and alone, dying from cancer in the hospital.
Her friend was dead for a few months now and all she had left in her life to do was to sink deeper into depression by contemplating the fatly deformed, sick, and utterly useless cow she had become. Talking to the adorable little blond angel that rang her doorbell on a sunny Tuesday morning to ask if she needed yard work done for a reasonable price was much more enjoyable and rapidly became addictive. And he was such a cute little thing, trying to pry information out of her on the sly; his budding tradecraft was really exceptional for his age! She just couldn't pass up the chance of getting her hands in somebody's operation one last time and jumped in without regrets.

Vratsina taught him useful languages from continental Europe: Polish, German, Magyar, Estonian, Ukrainian, Russian and even a smattering of Norwegian by the old method of telling olden fairy tales, like the original Grimm writings and semi-official folklore from the depths of Central Europe and the Baltics. Occasionally, this devolved into discourse with George about old native spirits and the aberrations the Nazis had unearthed, or the multitudes of demon - human hybrids from the mythologies of Izuku's people. These many conversations lit up his passion for history, sociology, ethnology and archaeology, as well as his drive to go through the main Sci-Fi series and Fantastical tales of the time to get a good grip on what people believe, or fear, in the society around him.

Vratsina guided him through the meanders of managing a house, a land or a business in a more formal way that connected well with the lessons of his other two mentors. She showed him how to live in or around the streets, back alleys and dead zones of society while quickly spotting resources or dangers. She drilled him into having always prepared several go-bags spread around town, and at least three escape plans for each house or business he dwelled in. She impressed the vital importance that each plan be layered with a principal idea, three exits solutions and two redundancies on each exit, for the moment where it will inevitably blow up in his face like a Bouncing Betty.

She showed him how to interact and work with the local authorities, the civilian bureaucrats, the police and the federals, as she knew many from her many invisible webs of contacts and services. She taught Lucas how to lie like water in a pond, without a single outwards symptom or expression, how to offer gifts to bribe an official properly. And, when all else fails, blackmail or violence, depending on the resistance of the official and the level of threat he presents.

Lucas was neither outraged nor repelled by Vratsina's past, her lines of work, or the large list of contacts and businesses in her control. His opinion by then was that humanity was mostly corrupt and well passed any chance at large-group redemption. You had to meet each person, one at a time, look in their eyes and shake their hand to get to know them deeply enough to judge their life & deeds. Vratsina was still alive after all she had seen and suffered, but had chosen, in her twilight age, to gift upon him her time and efforts to show him the side of life his mother would never want him to know about. Lucas would not dishonor Vratsina, himself or his other two mentors, by turning his back on a true friend and important teacher in his life.

When, at nine and a half years old, the signs of marital strain and imminent divorce became obvious in his family, it was Vratsina that helped him cope and decided that he needed a series of intense, vital lessons before his parents split and he most likely would leave the area forever.

She called the manager of one of her establishments in Buffalo, arranging for Lucas to visit the middle-class hotel cum brothel in disguise and its many hidden secrets. With Izuku and George tagging along, they took Vratsina's old, white, Lincoln Continental towncar, and went into the choking streets of Buffalo's busiest district. Lucas called the car the streetboat because of its massive boxy size, but damned was that thing roomy and comfortable. No comments about it being the only kind of car that could still accommodate Vratsina's girth behind the steering wheel were ever made as even Izuku was afraid of her temper when mentions of her physicality were made within her hearing range.
The hotel was 12 storey high and had 4 officially reported basements, 3 of which were underground garages, the fourth and lowest was the building's machinery and public utilities arrival & counters. It also held the vault, drug lab, infirmary, a few cells, and a large shredder connected to the hotel's gas-fired water boilers to dispose of whatever materials might inconvenience the owner. Lucas thought it a very wisely made setup. He went through the security systems and exit protocols with a fine-toothed comb to learn what made a place like that tick in an orderly fashion. He never commented on the 1930s Art Deco style because, at that point in life, his sense of aesthetics was almost nil and his appreciation of architecture too.

(Kesha – Take it off)

July of 2013
Buffalo, New York (USA)
The Burgundy Velvet Lounge, Hotel & Spa

For the last six months of his life in Buffalo, Lucas visited twice a week the old but well known Burgundy Velvet Lounge, Hotel and spa, near Buffalo's airport sector, and met some of the most banged up yet most genuine humans he ever did in his young life.

There were chambermaids that whored themselves to make ends meet every month. A host of students, some young adults but also some teenagers, for whom prostitution and drug running gave them the income and flexible scheduling they needed to pay for schooling to get out of the poverty they were born in. There were some runaway kids that haunted the streets and offered manual labor in the kitchens and hallways, in exchange for just a bit of old food from the trash bins, or a spot in the garage to sleep during rains and winter.

There were also, to his surprise because of his youth and inexperience in life, upper class and very rich people as well. Preppie kids rented rooms by the hour for smoking, drinking, and injecting all manners of intoxicants while using or trading the cheapest sex. Anything to forget their lives of neglectful or violent parents, absent relatives, uninterested adults at school and many other things that a young mind could want to stupefy out of itself for a few hours of respite.

Rich and influential adults were no better in their vices or justifications. Men of power wanted more power and paid for the symbols and gestures of power to be performed, with money ill-gotten from lobbyists for favors accomplished in their offices. For a wad of cash, the basest and most demeaning things they could force a person to endure were ordered, and never did the thought come to their mind that it was hypocritical to pass laws and jail persons for these things while secretly having them done to themselves.

The most depressing for Lucas though, were the men and women whose families were collapsing like his had done. They came to the Burgundy Velvet to find a bit of temporary solace in the arms of lovers, coworkers, or just the latest plaything, instead of going home and working on at least making sure their kids were safe from the worst fallout of their mess. No, the nannies and governesses would do that, mummy or daddy had a very important business meeting out of town and would come back at some point…

Through the Burgundy Velvet's all-encompassing security and surveillance systems, more than a thousand cameras and three thousand microphones, Lucas began to understand the practical applications of spying and information brokering. He lived vicariously through the monitors and then could decide which official from Town Hall needed to be supported or curtailed. Which
syndicate could use some cash or get a warning not to blockade renovations on the hotel, or else
consequences would need be applied to certain union execs that forgot who owned them. It was
this exercise in the obtaining & usage of power through information that Lucas learned the two
most deeply influential lessons of his entire life.

ONE: Knowledge is power; it's a truism if ever there was one, but the fact is that most people don't
know that every bit of information has value and use. Lucas learned to amass, organize and bank
his information into huge databanks before datamining them for anything by any subject that he
might need. This taught him that every aspect of human life could be mathematically quantified,
then used as indicators of a person's honesty or reliability. These variables could then determine
the psychological buttons to push to get a reaction. This would become the basis of his almost
preternatural ability to, on the fly, see and comprehend the biological & mental patterns in humans
and animals, individuals or groups, and establish an interactions profile.

TWO: Dignity; some are born with it, some acquire it, and others throw theirs out with the trash.
To Lucas it was the most important part of human being's existence. You could live stupid but
dignified, you should seek death rather than live intelligent and powerful in depraved crass. For all
the easy access to alcohol, drugs and cheap meaningless sex on demand that was around him,
Lucas never indulged in vices, keeping himself well removed from it. If he had lived closer to his
parents and was more secure in their affections, maybe he would have sampled some... But no, he
was semi-abandoned, not really but almost neglected, in a benign let's have the best tutors take care
of him because we have business meetings all year long kind of way so his view of things was
different from other kids. The fact that his mentors had in fact stepped up to the plate for him was
also a fundamental difference between him and the whore-kids in the hotel's corridors.

DIGNITY in concept meant "always be true to himself and to others" unless his survival was at
stake. This meant to him that his mind must remain inviolate or else he would be living in untruth
and irreality. Thusly his body could not become contaminated or he would lose contact with
reality, then he would slowly become like his parents and the adults around them. Also, the
dangers of addiction and the long term effects of poisoning by alcohol & drugs were explained to
him by Vratsina and Izuku. This meant that Lucas would always seek out non chemical ways to
cope with stress but also with pain and illness. He would develop a severe dislike of all
pharmacists and doctors because of their casual pushing of toxic products without a whit's care for
their effects on the people taking them.

DIGNITY in action meant take care of yourself so that you could help others in their time of need.
Work hard and set an example by doing competently & efficiently instead of just bitching like an
old time plantation foreman. Use wealth wisely so you create prosperity for your village around
you, and have some spare to help those suffering illness or misfortune. This especially is what
made both George and Vratsina decide on a course of action that would alter Lucas's relation to his
parents for the worse while setting up his life and autonomy for the better.

It was with these intense and depressing visits that Vratsina taught him to respect the hardships and
the endurance of poor people. She taught him to value the destitute, the sickly and deformed, the
voiceless masses that toil invisibly in maintenance tunnels and sewers beneath the streets of each
city. She showed him the friendships and alliances that could be made and nurtured in any social
class or group, if only he could abstain from bigotry or judging others just on money and pedigree.

She also gifted him with a few tokens of appreciation for his efforts and success under her tutelage.
A nice, high class traveler's expedition backpack that was actually reinforced Kevlar on aluminum
frame with straps and manual locks. It was big but serviceable, and an innocuous coloring that
spoke of old age with long hours on the road. Nobody would pay attention to the old scrap of
canvas or its user. Eh eh eh, camouflage basics in action. However, it was the books, folios,
artworks and eldritch artifacts contained in locked boxes and folding metal bindings with welded seams that would occupy the mind and dreams of Lucas for many decades to come.

Her second gift stunned Lucas into speechless paralysis for a few hours when he learned about the extent to which he had touched the old woman. Vratsina had transferred the Burgundy Velvet Lounge & Hotel into a company she had started under an anonymous numbered bank account out of Switzerland and routed through the Isle of Man near Britain. She had created a trust foundation with Lucas as sole trustee and put the numbered Limited Inc under the trust as a money making entity to supply the foundation with the income to satisfy the condition of its existence: keep Lucas alive & healthy, and pay his living expenses in full.

Because of the way banking, incorporation and financial laws are made, as a trustee written into the founding papers of the trust, and the only one written in to boot, Lucas had 100% control of the foundation and its subsidiary companies regardless of his age. Legally, no one could deny this or try to take it away from his control. He was now set for life and fully autonomous at ten years old, even if he wasn't emancipated yet.

Formal schooling: University part #1 community college

(StarGate Atlantis –season 1 opening theme)

December of 2013
Buffalo, New York (USA)

Lucas had always been a very empathic child, very polite and respectful of any people he met but these visits and the populace he encountered changed him. Vratsina's overly large gift had not helped his equilibrium either. He went through a 7 week period of depressed morosity before slowly perking up again and deciding actively that he would eventually be rich and successful like his parents. This was not arrogant pride, not avarice or greed. It was a decidedly moral choice to obtain and accrue wealth in a durable way so that he could use his mother's law firm to create and maintain socially responsible businesses that would create local jobs and prosperity around their emplacement. He could not save the Earth or humanity just by himself. He knew that was impossible as he was both a gifted mathematical mind and very rational character. But following his principles, he could start with one person, then another and, one handshake at a time, one employee at a time, could eventually make a lasting difference in a few lives.

That is why, with business projects in mind needing tools & credentials to see them realized, and after hundreds of long hours of working with his mother as if he were her officially hired assistant, he petitioned a local community college. He wanted to see if he could obtain a way to pay for the right to pass the tests for the advanced bureautics course & the legal secretary / paralegal assistant classes that they taught. These were both cursus that were in the certificate bracket of college or university classes, and normally only took one full year of study for each. However, they were also very much classes based on book learning, memorizing protocols and writing reports; there were no laboratories or term papers to produce on a controlled schedule along the trimesters that classes lasted. This was right up his alley since he had read those manuals along the last two years. Because he worked with Cynthia and needed to harmonize his work ethics & habits with hers, all the work was already done, he just needed to pass the tests.

He was accepted as his request was just in the nick of time, and came from a very interesting child with a very well connected background. He more than aced both exams at 112%, having answered
extra credit questions and given truly advanced answers that he knew from experience working by Cynthia's side. He hung his two new University Certificates on his bedroom wall in pride, showing them to his parents and tutors, thus impressing them with both his drive and initiative in doing all the administrative work by himself to obtain his prizes.

Lawrence, by that time, was almost disconnected from his son. He had been raised by his grandparents then nominally by Cynthia but, in truth, mostly by Izuku Shu and that odd old man with the odd native name. He had no awareness of Vratsina until she died. So it was a veritable avalanche of surprises that awaited him when he tried to reconnect with Lucas to learn anew who and what his little son was. His surprises would never cease as long as he was alive to see Lucas grow and become an even better man and human than Lawrence thought could exist.

Changing of the guard

(Star Wars symphony – Jedi funeral of Qui Gon Jinn)

January of 2014
Buffalo, New York (USA)

When Lucas had just turned 10 years old, in the first week of January, George Brown-Fowl-in-the-Bushes died peacefully in his sleep. He had named Lucas in his will as principal beneficiary and had made provisions so that Vratsina would handle the execution of the estate. He had left almost everything to Lucas in living gifts when he had started to feel his old war wounds acting up, the November before, so all that was left was the public reading and some paperwork that Lucas, as a trained paralegal, could process with his eyes closed while asleep.

His parents were disgruntled about these bequeaths but Cynthia read through the documents and notarized will, concluding that it was armor plated. They could not force Lucas or the executor of the will to reveal anything but they learned, out of necessity, the existence of the foundation and some very limited, tightly controlled version of what it entailed and could do in their son's imminently capable hands. Cynthia was torn between professional pride, motherly concern, and righteous anger that it all happened under her unsuspecting nose, inside her own house for the most part. This event rang the death knell of the tight knit bond mother & son had forged which would never fully heal in either of their lifetimes. The feeling of betrayal that Cynthia experienced was such that she actually pushed Lawrence to take Lucas for the next several years, or else she might just let him go in the street to use his newfound money to manage by himself, and be damned the opinions of society.

Lawrence, less emotionally involved, saw that his son now had a secure future to fall back upon if his education or health went southwards, so he breathed in relief that it would spare him paperwork and decisions to process for the little tyke. Given the other blows to come, less decision-making would relieve much more than just the amateur parent from his nightmares of more workload piling on his overcrowded desk.

(Star Wars symphony – Funeral march of Queen Amidala)

February of 2014
Buffalo, New York (USA)
Two weeks after the reading of George's testament, in the second week of February, Vratsina Ityolisk was rushed by all urgencies to a hospital after suffering a brain aneurysm. She never woke up, dying on the operating table as she arrived. She had also named Lucas in her will as primary beneficiary, stating that she had no living relatives and never given birth since she had been infertile because of a venereal disease in her impoverished adolescence. She left him everything by legal inheritance and had asked Izuku Shu to execute the will, if George was already gone. She had not had the time to alter her testament in the short interval since his death and so a few things were to be arbitrated on the fly by Izuku and Lucas as the only inheritor stated in the documents. Once again, everything was actually given to the trust foundation or one of its subordinate divisions, rather than to Lucas in his proper name, so as to dodge his parents and those pesky laws on the age of majority or custodial guardianship.

Lucas now had exclusive and executive propriety of a small fortune consisting of three dozen buildings operating as hotels, restaurants and several garages (in reality chop-shops…) all of which were incorporated with numbered Limited Incs and were then clustered by activity sector, not geography, under a second layer of numbered Limited Inc before reaching the Crowned L Conglomerate, the company that Vratsina had created in Lucas's proper name before putting it under the trust foundation. These incremented layers acted like the peels of an onion, each thin and malleable, but together tough and opaque to any scrutiny. Just the monetary aspects of liquid cash, bonds, debentures, treasury bonds, stocks and such could make an accountant's head spin, and then the real estate holdings because there were not only commercial but also residential buildings, such as small apartment buildings of 12 or less units and many townhouses, all rented out for profit.

Lucas knew instinctively that each house or commercial building must have a bolt hole or panic room in the basement as part of Vratsina's own exit strategy, in case some of her colored past caught up to her. He would pay dearly some reliable contractors to discretely visit, refurbish and equip these bolt holes to his own exacting requirements, then start putting them to better use than staying in lockdown when empty. Later on, after his health stabilized and neither parent paid much attention to his movements, they would become his sanctuaries to escape from his family's turmoil. It was because of this habitual disappearing routine that William Noyce would have him followed, found out, and would try to exploit him as a lever against Lawrence. The backfire from this would be amazing in how efficiently and ruthlessly Lucas put back in his place the pudgy naval officer.

(Star Wars symphony – Obi Wan Ben Kenobi; fleeing into the oblivion of Tatooine's sands)

March of 2014
Buffalo, New York (USA)

A month after Vratsina's death, in the throes of a dreary month of March, Lucas was given a bad news of a lesser caliber but still unpleasant; Izuku had been let go. Lawrence did not see the actual necessity of keeping the guy around and since the Chinese man really did give him the creeps… Add to that his very visible implication in all those testamentary wrangling and a blow out tempest of rage from Cynthia, it was decided not to renew his contract. Knowing well that Lucas could just pay the guy himself and bypass his parents along the way, Lawrence moved them both over to the western side of Africa, at the shore-side village that served as the World Power Plant's managerial and staging area. They would share a two storey penthouse styled condo that occupied the entire top of a 20 storey high building where only the higher managers, and military officers ranked
commander or above, could live or even get in the lobby. This was a very rarefied stratum of society and Lucas's first real feel of military personnel in active service, rather than old retirees.

Waylaid by health

(Gundam SEED – Honoo no Tobira / through the door of flames)

April of 2014
West coast of African continent
World Power management village

The last blow to Lucas came when his father, who actually genuinely cared for the boy, took him by the hand and brought him to the hospital complex built unto the management village's community plaza. He wanted to set Lucas into a different position in his insurance scheme by hiring him as a senior personal assistant (SPA) to give the kid some real experience in the workplace, all the while leaving him enough time to register for correspondence classes from a University of his choice. They both panicked when the blood work came back and Lucas was immediately admitted for more in depth tests. The discovery of childhood leukemia was a crushing blow to an already emotionally exhausted child who broke down, crying for the first time since losing his grand-parents two years prior. They were lucky; the disease was caught in the very first stages and could be combated effectively with new synthetic antibiotics. Of course, they registered him for a marrow transplant as well, just to be on the safest game plan possible.

Cynthia was depressed by all that surrounded her son and, due to her emerging relationship with one of her coworkers, began to withdraw from his everyday life. She started to content herself with reading the weekly reports that Lawrence sent out, until they became monthly then stopped altogether. She didn't call or ask about it, caught up in her new life and unwilling to look beyond it.

Lucas would, by sheer stubbornness the doctors would say, survive the Leukemia and come out on top even better then before. At least, it was his opinion. Lawrence wasn't so sure and Cynthia was surprisingly silent about it all. Because he had the marrow transplant very early in the treatment scheme, and the disease had not progressed that far, his immune system had a funny little Lucaesque way of reacting to the medications and graft. The poor kid woke up from the grafting procedure normally, spent about six hours awake while being prodded by doctors and then promptly fell into a three week coma. When he woke up with a childishly yawned "waaass for breakfassstt ?" the nurses rejoiced and called his dad back. Then the fun began in earnest.

Stargate original movie (Ra rising from sarcophagus)

May of 2014
West coast of African continent
World Power management village

It will be, from that point on, a known fact that Lucas and modern chemically-based medicine do not mix well together. Anything stronger than your average Tylenol with codeine would set him vomiting or falling asleep with only about half of the curative effects occurring. This would mean a
lot of headaches to all medics who came to treat him during his life.

The second, very much life-altering effect, would be discovered rapidly. Due to some unusual reactions between his immune system, the graft and the medications, Lucas's already odd hearing and auditory system was modified further to implicate his visual system as well. He now had synesthesia, a rare but harmless condition in which people perceive sounds as colored text floating around their vision. Basically, he became able to "see" sounds and read spoken language even with his eyes closed and ears plugged because of how his nerve sensitivity to vibrations had augmented beyond the already abnormal way it worked. Also, the visual aspect of the text changed to match the honesty or emotion of the person speaking, so he could very easily determine the actual undertones and veritable meanings in a conversation, even without seeing the participants face to face.

Furthermore, because of the interaction between the auditory and visual cortices in his brain and a set of brand new neural pathways that no one ever saw before, he was able to "see" the point or item of origin of any sound or vibration that he concentrated upon. Lucas would quickly adapt by finding online some self-made exercises from other children that were blind or visually handicapped and had developed a version of human echolocation. He would develop this skill as well, but would never reveal it to anyone other than his future wife and children. This combined with the training from his 3 mentors meant he had become a living lie & stress detector that would be a nightmare to negotiate with, if you tried to be dishonest or insulting against him.

(Albert William Ketelbey - In a Persian market)

May of 2014
West coast of African continent
World Power management village

Since he felt no other effects from recovering from the Leukemia, he was rapidly moved back into the penthouse with his father. As Lucas had rightly predicted, Lawrence spent around 14 to 18 hours a day working, either in his private office in the apartment's first floor or mostly in the actual management tower, two streets away. When he went down into the sub-oceanic construction site, it was for a week at a time thus Lucas was always left behind to his own devices, thoroughly unsupervised since the servants had no authority over him.

As planned, Lawrence had in fact hired his son as senior personal assistant and put him on payroll with a nice salary that included bonuses for performance or ideas that might help the project avoid delays and administrative snafus. At the beginning, the other secretaries and PAs were unimpressed by what they considered blatantly abusive nepotism for a whiny brat, but by the middle of the year they sung a different tune. Several liars, fraudsters and minor attempts at soliciting bribes lay broken at his feet. Even the recently promoted admiral William Noyce had gone away grumbling about "good for nothing brats" because his need for a supposedly very important, face-to-face meeting had been denied on the count that his reasons were not, in fact, important at all.

Formal schooling: University part #2 Harvard

(Star Wars symphony – Naboo Lake Country)
During this time Lucas actually took the year easy, since half of it was gone by the time he left the hospital in functioning order. So he took correspondence classes from Harvard University in a type of course that was book based with absolutely no homework or term papers, just final exams to pass for the diploma. He managed to complete by year's end a standard-plan Bachelor of mathematics, geometry, physics, statistics and probabilitive calculations. The little runt took 6 months at part time to complete what people take 3 to 4 years at full time to get done because to him, speed reading and calculating come easy as breathing. That diploma would stun Lawrence while Cynthia would never give sign she cared.

Because of his illness and the weekly hospital visits he had to endure, he chose to supplement his daily gymnastics routine at the med center by registering for an actual paramedic formation. The basics class began at half-year in July and went well as he was already trained by Izuku and George in a very advanced level of survivalism so he didn't have any catching up to do. Because he wanted that license, yes an actual right-of-practice paramedic grade 1 license, by year's end, he managed his schedule into placing four days with 3 paramedic lessons in each of them to allow for faster progression. He got the license in December in time to call it his birthday present to himself, while his Bachelor's degree was simply useful for the future.

Lucas usually stayed indoors, in the apartment because his office was there. Yes, right on the first floor next to his father, Lucas had his own private office. Since he was paid to work, and Lawrence did have several expectations to be met for the basic salary & bonuses to be disbursed, then he had to perform appropriately. It's obvious that with the inheritances that he received, he did not need the work or the salary, but it was useful to get him the best web access services, communications equipment, and a top of the line smartphone of his own choosing. Also, the actual access to people since he managed to discretely download a copy of his father's contact lists for any personal, business, military or governmental affairs that Lawrence had ever connected with. Lucas had learned well from his mentors and mother how important a well furnished list of contacts was to maintain a business, and a safe family life.

One of the major benefits of his working side by side with Lawrence was that they usually had breakfast and often lunch together, thus they managed to establish a peaceful relationship between them. Dinner was usually eaten out at the village's only luxury establishment with clients, military officers or politicians passing by for an official tour. Lucas was never invited because Lawrence thought his son would be bored to tears and disturb the conversation. Lucas never asked to go because he didn't care about either the WPP, or the meetings surrounding it; he had more constructive uses for his time alone in the penthouse.

During his free time in those six months of that year, he took the time to revise in depth the inventories & reports about his many businesses and rental properties around Buffalo. He viewed pictures and films of the real estate then annotated the reports to determine the renovations or upgrades to budget, to see if it were more advantageous to do all in one pass or spread it out over a few years. Several businesses were failing with the old age of their owners whom had no next generation relatives interested in continuing. Since these were well located and ideal as small community corporations, Lucas decided to make offers to buy them out and revamp them by hiring local youth to work, focusing on creating full time jobs as much as possible. His long term
objectives could begin here, and then grow unto the rest of New York State.

It was during his long stays in that penthouse that he left only for about three to five hours a day for his medical and fitness routine, as well as paramedic training, that Lucas began to take an interest in music other than just listening at it. He found a small freeware online that allowed to convert the keyboard of the computer into a synthesizer to emulate about a hundred different instruments, one at a time or by mixing arrangements. He became truly engrossed with the musical experience, deciding that he would pursue it as a hobby more seriously in the next year when things stabilized.

Despite having many military and corporate personnel around the village, Lucas learned almost nothing from them because he was essentially isolated in an ivory tower. Even the serving staff that cleaned and cooked were actually afraid to speak to him. He found this out by accident then Lawrence explained it was because they saw him as the big boss' son, and in their local culture, the menials and servants don't mingle with the higher ups for fear of making them angry, which could get the whole family fired from the jobs that Lawrence had influence over.

This meant that for those months, the only social contacts that Lucas really had to rely on for personal growth and stability were Lawrence, the psychologist, and a few others that he had to work with by telephone or web in order to do the job his father had assigned him. He was basically a glorified phone operator hidden away in a golden cage, with no means of enjoying the fruits of his work because there were no age appropriate venues in the village. Plus, he couldn't just leave to go in town: he was too young and no one was available to accompany him.

After several calm but acerbic comments by Lucas, his father realized that keeping him at the WPP village was useless to his son as he had nobody his own age to interact with and, alright, maybe because the personnel were grumbling about having to face a rabid guard dog every time they needed a meeting with him. So, trying to be a caring father, yet never asking Lucas his opinion to see if he had plans, he had pulled some strings to send him to Stanford as a boarding student, beginning next January. That meant Lucas had to complete everything in his planner by December at the latest. So that's how two more little nuggets of wonder dropped on Lawrence and he didn't know how to interpret them. Since he had quite impolitely decided by himself where Lucas would live and learn, his son felt quite justified in dropping his new diploma and license on him at the last minute, while putting his bags in the taxi that would take the unaccompanied minor to the airport.

(Star Wars symphony – Rebel fighters taking off)

December 22nd of 2014
West coast of African continent
World Power management village

"So there dad, have a bloody merry, fucking 11th birthday cum Christmas send off to you too!" were his parting words to dear old Lawrence as he left him standing by the building lobby, with diploma and license copies in hand. No, Lucas was not happy that his holiday visit to Buffalo to see his mother and try to patch up things with her had been scrapped, and that any decision made about his future had been stolen from him. He felt his father had treated him like a low-paid uneducated minion at best, or a misbegotten, retarded halfwit at worst. There was no way in unholy Hell Everburning's flames that Lucas would let that one slide by unchallenged. Lawrence would have problems around his workplace and construction site for the next year without ever knowing why or how. Money works wonders that way. Having passwords and server access at the highest admin
level that were never revoked made things even simpler.

Markings on a child's soul #2 - Lawrence's influence

Lawrence was not a bad parent. The reason was simple really. He had never spent enough time with any child to date to actually try any parenting that would mark the child's mind in a meaningful way, and so could not be called a bad parent. He could not be called a parent, period.

This is why when his little denim-clad megawatt of joy had dropped in his life after almost ten years of walking in parallel but never truly joining, a lot like train tracks, he did not even try to parent Lucas. With a pair of University Certificates at the ripe old age of 10 but not passed puberty yet, Lawrence saw the valor of discretion and instead started treating his son like a valued apprentice, rather than a childish scientist or a diminutive overmind. This very balanced and professional attitude was exactly what his son needed after receiving several damaging body blows to his emotions and psyche, all in the space of the two months needed to pack and move into his new dwelling with his dad.

Lawrence actually had shown during their year officially together that he did care and wanted to give his son the best life and future he could. Unfortunately, he was unable to spend more than a handful of hours per week with his son thus the rift between them never closed.

So Lawrence began to show his affection for Lucas the same way that he did with any employee that he valued; he gave trust, wide access, and the authority level to get things done without having to check over his shoulder to see if events were going according to plan. While Lucas was grateful for his father's trust and professional courtesy, he wanted his dad, not a new boss. But, in absence of one, he had no choice but to accept the other since the alternative was to have no one at all during his recovery and following therapy. It just wouldn't do to end up completely put aside like old luggage when his health was in the pits and he could not legally go back home to Izuku, or any adult that actually would give a damn about his welfare.

Quite by accident, Lawrence saw that his son was beginning to go down into depression. He was not a therapist or even close to medicine, despite all his doctorates; all his specializations were in engineering, architecture, high energy physics and geophysics. So he got out the trusted old phone book, virtual edition, to search the WPP village's directory of medics for something that might help his son. Since the village was never intended for families, there were no pediatricians or any type of child specialist at hand. He went with the next best thing he could see; the newly formed UEO had set up an infirmary specializing in wounded and traumatized soldiers as part of its permanent presence in the project's management village. They had psychologists and psychiatrists for dealing with bad cases of PTSD and the mental illnesses sometimes caused by chemical spills or radiation leaks at classified work zones around this particular area of the world. It was pretty generic, but the only service available at about 700 miles around. It was a bad case of try this and if it doesn't work, then sending Lucas back to Buffalo to try something else.

Lucas actually felt both relief for the help offered and gratefulness that his dad cared enough to notice his flagging morale. He relished being put into a light paced regimen of daily physical exercises to build up his health coupled with private counseling. They hit the jackpot with a UEO navy psychologist that happened to be studying to get a pediatric psychology license after her military service was over. The fact that she was a 26 year old woman with a skin tone and features that reminded him of Cynthia is something that helped Lucas on a subliminal level when he needed to become more open and express his feelings more extensively, but he never admitted it to
anyone. Some things, a guy just has to keep to himself.

It was this simple and yet determinant gesture that Lawrence made that would help Lucas a great deal in his later life. He showed him that there was nothing wrong, unmanly or less adult about asking for help when you're wounded, ill or depressed, and need a hand to get through it. It may be the only truly lasting impression that Lawrence ever gave his son, but it was a mindset that saved his life at many occasions.

Faux depart; Travel woes in unaccompanied minor

(Star Wars symphony – The Imperial March)

December 22nd of 2014
West coast of African continent
Airport international terminal

Lucas wanted to bang his head on a wall repeatedly, very hard and very brutally. His numskull of a father had put him, an 11 year old unaccompanied minor, on a commercial airline right smack in the middle of bloody Christmas holiday craze, on a 22nd of December! Do you think the airline people or the guards at the customs gates were amused? No, they were not! And Lucas was about to let the planet know that he was not either. Besides, he knew that Stanford admissions would be closed for a good two weeks anyways, so he was going to rearrange his schedule by his lonesome and screw whoever thought they could lead him around on a leash, like he was some fat duchess' lapdog. This blond poodle was gonna bite!

Dodging into the nearest restroom, he got out his best business suit: flint blue pants and jacket that match his eyes, crisp white button down shirt and a modern, youthful waistcoat in gold tone to match his hair. Everything was put together with a solid brown leather belt with turquoise covered steel buckle to hold his swiss army knife sheath on the right, lockpicks at the back and emergency mini medkit on the left. His k-bar knife was on an ankle strap on the left calf. The whole ensemble was adorned by a tie that was a luminescent turquoise tone with silver and gold filigree weaving a hypnotic pattern, then a tie clip of solid gold with turquoise logo of Crowned L Conglomerate and his right hand index bore a gold ring with an amethyst surrounded by 4 smaller sapphires and 4 mini emeralds in a wheel pattern. The pocket square of his jacket was emerald green monogrammed in golden thread, with his expensive smartphone behind. The pocket protector in his shirt's right breast was made of polycomposite plastics and neoprene, rendering it stain-proof, watertight and cut proof so as to keep safe the many gold and turquoise colored pens, mechanical pencils, one extensible pointer / laser / LED and two homemade penknives. The solid gold genuine antique, mechanical watch on his left wrist showed dials for hours-minutes-seconds in one, day cycles in another, an imagery of the lunar monthly cycle in a last dial, and the date was on a set of spinning rollers to spell out the year-month-day. This century old navigator's watch had belonged to George Brown-Fowl-in-the-Bushes but had lain unused in a box in his attic for years. Lucas loved it at first sight and never would let it go.

After dressing up for war, he lined up his victim of choice then unleashed his often practiced megawatt smile on an unsuspecting ticket counter agent. The poor 21 year old girl was a part timer from the poor part of town that had been hired to handle holiday overflow, so she had no experience to deal with the situation in front of her desk. This sophisticated, urbane 11 year old was acting more politely, more patiently, and a lot more respectfully towards her than all the people she spoke to during the last week. It really seemed simple since all he wanted was a change of ticket
from here in Western Africa to San Francisco, USA, with layover in New York City, USA, in economy class be converted to one way passage to NYC, USA, in premium class with extras for an unaccompanied minor to be included because his father's halfwit secretary had forgotten them on the first purchase order. He produced his passport and BlueCross / BlueShield insurance membership card as proof of his age stating that "My maturity often leads to misunderstandings about these things" much to the amusement of the ticket agent and her elderly supervisor.

They both endorsed his ticket change then sent him ahead to the luxurious guest salon reserved for the best passengers, wishing him good holidays home. They never looked askance at his credit card, an International ZweissenBankur Platinum with biometric chip linked directly to the expense account of his foundation. The credit limit on that thing was astronomical, and just seeing the bank logo sent shivers down the supervisor's spine about what kinds of hells the client could unleash if he wasn't served to his very usual, and reasonable, standards. Most businessmen and high corporate types could take lessons in manners from this little gentleman as far as she cared.

Lucas stopped by the duty free shop to splurge on his much deserved Christmas gift for himself, and the only product in the universe than any self-respecting growing boy would never consider addictive or toxic, no matter what doctors said. Belgian roasted extra-dark coffee beans. Yes, he was addicted, and quite happily, thank you so very much. After two whole years of Izuku and George pushing what amounted to fence post syrup down his throat, and Vratsina's snobbish refusal of anything not produced by a silver samovar like in her youth back in Europe, he had developed a rather capricious discernment for which hot beverages he preferred.

During his stay at the WPP village he had used his privileged access as the boss' son to get delivered a whole year's supply of some prime choice Belgian roasted beans which he lovingly ground and percolated into liquid therapy so good you should need a license to brew it. His father noticed the improved quality and taste but other than a small thank you, never asked the 'how' or the 'how much money'. Meh, what did the infidel know, anyways? As Lucas was strolling around the highly aromatic section of the shop, he thought to himself that searching online for professional barista classes would be a good expenditure of his time on the plane, and would make a much deserved permanent improvement to his much neglected personal well-being.

(Star Wars symphony – Galactic Senate during the Naboo blockade debates)

December 22nd of 2014
Airbus A380 passenger Airplane
Premium class compartment

"Who the hell thought that putting an 11 year old child in premium class was bright deserved to be re-educated by ice-pick lobotomy", Lucas thought with silent venom to himself as he watched over the rim of his laptop's screen an unseemly display. An obviously spoiled rotten, rail thin and make-up sporting, little daddy's princess making a scene about the choice of magazines in the ladies' bathroom not being up to par with Arab Emirates Airlines? Why? He should have stayed in coach. Or chartered his own private Learjet across the ocean, then he would have an actual bed to recline and sleep in peace.

Making a sympathetic smile at the attendant, a pleasant African woman in her forties that spoke with a British accent, he asked for a refill on his Perrier & lemon drink along with a new muffin. As soon as he was done ordering, there was a blast of sound so harsh he actually held his hands to his ears in pain before seeing the cause of his agony marching towards him on the warpath. The
made-up little bitch from three rows ahead had heard him order and was throwing the motherload of all tantrums at both the attendant and him! Supposedly he was an uncouth, lawless renegade for having dared to order before the ladies had their turn. He waited until she was done venting her spleen for a good five minutes solid then replied innocuously "What lady? I just hear a tweetty little birdy kvetching on its tree." He then asked the attendant politely to get him also a combination of Aspirin and Gravol for the emergent migraine. After the little female harridan had turned to daddy dearest to cry a river, screaming a command that the mean boy be punished for besmirching her noble person, the rest of the cabin booed her to silence, shaming her back to her place while daddy shrugged and ignored it all. Father of the year, yeah?

Thankfully, that was the only incident and the pills made him sleep through most of the flight. Arrival at NYC was hectic as it was now December 23rd so the airport was a bullrush of madness and stress. He opted for the sane route of leaving the terminal as soon as security and baggage checks could be done, going straight to a taxi stand. With all the hard steel he carried, it was a nice thing that he had used his father to maneuver William Noyce into signing those UEO planetwide permits for traveling with blades & tools on his person or inside carry-on luggage. Otherwise he would never have left Africa, and would probably be stuck in a customs booth being strip searched in NYC. Lucas spared a kind thought for the pudgy officer and wished him well for the New Year, as long as they didn't cross paths. He honestly couldn't take the guy's obnoxious personality since he had his own to contend with.

Lucas got himself taken to a well-known limousine service he had found online that he had investigated through his contacts from Vratsina's legacy. It was time to put his hands in the mud and get things back on track. He got himself a nice black stretched limousine so he could slouch at will, eat, watch TV, browse his laptop or just sleep some more. He paid with his foundation's credit card for a one way trip to Buffalo, straight at the main lobby of the Burgundy Velvet Lounge. It would be his home for the next 10 days before moving on to San Francisco and Stanford University.
Home is where the heart hurts

The author wishes to express thanks to anyone who may read his story and encourages them to leave reviews, comments or even flame it hard. As with any who try their hand at publicly expressing an idea or story concept, all feedback is important and welcome.
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Second chapter: Home is where the heart hurts

His Excellency, The Lord of Burgundy

(SeaQuest theme – season 1 opening)

December 24th of 2014 – Lucas’s birthday
Buffalo, New York (USA)
The BVL – Owner’s suite

"What people don't know about hotel owners is exactly the most important thing to keep them from ever knowing", Lucas thought as he lounged in his large, podium mounted soaker tub, deep in his private bathroom. Being the owner of the Burgundy Velvet Lounge, Hotel and spa, meant one important and life altering fact: he now had a permanent private apartment on the topmost habitable floor of the building. The only thing above his head was a rooftop terrace with a kiosk-bar that only served liquid drinks, hot, cold or alcoholic, and small things like bowls of mixed nuts or candies. He was quite literally on top of his own world and nobody could reach him because the entire floor was actually six large apartments for the owner and several managers, plus two large conference rooms with the rest being closed offices for the secretary, the accountant, and the hotel operations’ cash vault at the bottom of the accountant's closet behind a false wall.

This meant that while the laws of the land, in almost the entire world, stated that it was illegal to rent an apartment to a youth under 18 years of age unless they were legally emancipated, he wasn't bound by that pesky little bigotry of society. He already OWNED the damned hotel complex; he wasn't renting it from anybody! Take that, bastards! If that blasted piece of shit of a law was abrogated, a lot of street kids could find some semi-legit work and rent a room or co-rent a small flat while getting off the streets, which would also drastically diminish the numbers of street gang members. But noooo, the all-knowing adults wanted it that way because then they got to arrest the kids and put them in church run orphanages or in privately built, privately run prisons that then gave kickbacks to the sentencing judges and the arresting officers. Lucas had the proof on the recordings of his hotel rooms and conference chambers, from when such deals had been made. He would shortly make a terrifyingly good use of those little nuggets of darkness.

After spending the most luxuriously decadent hour of his young life in bath salt scented waters
kept just warm by the built-in heaters and water jets, he finally got out and took a look, as always, at the surgery site on his mid-back, where the bone marrow graft had been implanted. There was almost no scarring visible to the eye, certainly no swelling or discoloration to indicate infection or worse, a sudden rejection. Lucas was still ill at ease about the graft material. He had learned from the doctors that what he had received was actually not original human marrow but a synthetic DNA filament produced from unknown base sources, in a laboratory somewhere off the maps. The only way this had been obtained was if Lawrence pulled strings or if some BVL connections had come into play without Lucas knowing about it. Still, he had gotten his hands on the vial that contained the material and had placed it into a locked transport vault. The vial was made of synthetic industrial diamond and bore a bar code, a QR code, and the textual mention "ABLN MK-03 syn mrw LIVE smpl / bcm FHW, PhD". To the surprise of Lucas, it also had a black tag with purple lettering and ideograms that he recognized as the weird primitive language that George had intercepted from the Nazis. The very same eerie tongue he had taught him and Izuku during their two years together.

Mind at peace, he went back into the bedroom then left to the male walk-in closet that was exactly the same size as the bathroom. The female walk-in, exact copy of his, was on the right side. The entire suite was built on a plan consisting of a combination great-room that served as kitchen, dining area and salon, all three sections separated by two sets of beautiful pocket doors made of stained glass framed in solid mahogany. The kitchen was close to the outside wall so as to facilitate service on the balcony. On the side was the large and opulent bedroom with a massive four poster bed, emperor size, mounted on a snobbish three-stair dais and covered in a burgundy toned baldaquin. The bathroom and its two closets were located between the great-room and matching size bedroom, it was actually the means to cross from one to the other. The idea was a corridor with four doors: one from the great hall, then at midway, on the right the bathing cabinet and on the left the toilet, vanity and sink cabinet, then at the end the door to the bedroom.

It wasn't the best floor plan in the world, any architect, or even just a housewife, would tell you. But given the layout, the massive size of the rooms, the completeness of all amenities, and the fact that he had balconies large enough for an 8 seat table and a small rolling service cart on two sides of the building, Lucas was incredibly happy about his property and not hiding it. The large traditional wood-burning systems integrated were incredibly reliable in case of power outage: stove in the kitchen, water boiler in the bathroom, and monumental stonework fireplaces with cast iron doors in the living room and bedroom. These were actually very good imitations based on traditional American crafts, commissioned when the Hotel had been built by the original owners 49 years ago, before Vratsina bought them out about four years ago. Lucas had been impressed by the planning and forethought of these people when he learned that every apartment, suite or conference room had similar wood-burners, all over the building, as a planned back-up in case that the gas systems or the electrical appliances gave out. With three fully integrated methods of lifekeeping in his building, even the worst winter or hurricane storm to flail the eastern seaboard couldn't knock down his little fiefdom. This methodology of thinking and building survivability integrated directly into the framework and infrastructure of houses and shops would influence his engineering, architecture and machinery designs for the rest of his life.

Since it was now the 24th December and his 11th birthday, Lucas decided to go in town to get a holiday lunch, see the decorations, and maybe take in a movie all by his lonesome. The only people who knew he was in Buffalo were on his payroll; since they liked both their jobs and their health the way they were, no problems in sight if he were minimally careful. He started by selecting some long sleeved thermal underwear to cover all his body with some decent sports socks that wouldn't itch like wool. This was followed by what would become his signature "civvies" when going around without dirty jobs or high class meetings in view. Straight legged jeans, semi-fitted and a blue so deep it looked black from afar, with a checkered flannel shirt in tones of blue
with gray piping and lines. After tucking in his shirt, he adjusted his belt and equipments, tested the calf strap for his k-bar then pulled on a long, slate gray winterized travel duster that fell to his ankles. He decided to not wear any hat, but kept an old fedora stuffed into a pocket of his longcoat with gloves in the other side pocket. His trip in town should be uneventful, but his luck sometimes would scare away a damned gremlin, the way things went.

(Star Wars symphony – The Naboo celebrate victory with the Gungan)

December 24th of 2014 – Lucas's birthday
Buffalo, New York (USA)
The BVL – Lounge

As planned, he had a blast and managed to not get into any trouble. He did decide to get a small present for his mother as a gesture of peace, but by now held no hope of resolution before he was 18 and autonomous. He was not going to get on his knees, bow his head, and ask his mother to take over his holdings for him until he was 25 years old or some such shit just to salve her wounded pride. She had been the one always leaving home, leaving him in the hands of strangers and hirelings, more than 60 hours a week. He did not choose that life, he simply adapted to survive and happened by a stroke of luck to get the better end of the deal.

After coming back from his errands, he told one of his (yesss, his!) bellboys to send the pair of bags up to his apartment, as he wanted to take a hot drink in the Lounge before going up. As he sat in the mezzanine at the Owner's Booth and sipped a nice seasonal version of hot chocolate spiced with cinnamon, nutmeg and crunched candy cane flakes, he let his eyes roam over the dining hall of his domain. The mid-afternoon crowd was thick with people on both floors of the restaurant. Some were resting their legs from rushed last minute shopping sprees, or simply enjoying what he had been surprised to learn from the manager was a very popular Traditional High Tea, served at 4:00pm each day of the week. Pleased to see about 80% plus of the seats occupied by people consuming something, he took this as a good sign for the health of his main business asset.

Christmas accounted for a large part of any hospitality's revenue; he couldn't hope to survive if the staff botched the service so bad it scared away the clientele.

Lucas went up to his apartment by the elevator, a glorious machinery made up of brass, mahogany and stained glass panels that he really enjoyed admiring as the levels went up. He passed the senior secretary, an elderly Thai lady in her early sixties, that waved gaily at him while still bellowing non-subtle threats at a supplier on the phone simultaneously. Apparently, news of the new ownership had not been well received by every partner and some were, a year later, still trying to bust open contracts with fixed service duration before their expiration date, in order to try jacking-up their prices abusively. Yeah, like he was gonna let that happen, halfwits…

After entering his private sanctum, he locked the door with all three mechanical locks; no electronics to hack from afar or fail in a power outage would lessen his security while he rested. After pulling off his mid-calf high, all seasons boots and dropping his duster on the coat rack, he sat by the large fireplace in the living room, lazily stoking the bed of embers with an ornate cast iron poker. The low banked flames reflected off his slightly bronzed skin and luminescent eyes while his mind wandered to his next action. It would bring much needed solace or a gut wrenching misery that would take years to fade. Sighing in anxiety and doubt, he took out his very expensive, professional grade smartphone and dialed directly to Cynthia's home. If past years were a good measuring stick, she would be there by now, wondering what to order in because she gave the staff
a week off. She would always prefer the disposable containers from the restaurant delivery to cooking herself then getting stuck doing the dishes after.

(Hymnals – Hark! the Herald Angels sing)

December 24th of 2014 – Lucas's birthday
Buffalo, New York (USA)
Holt residence

As Cynthia Holt sat restlessly, chewing her lower lip while looking through her second most valuable rolodex, her list of local eateries that deliver during holidays and storms, the house telephone began to ring. Since it was an older model telephone plugged straight into the wall, no digitals or electronics on it, she didn't know who could be calling her at this time. After all, the company she wanted was sitting next to her at the kitchen's breakfast bar, sipping a cappuccino from her own professional grade machine. His two kids were in the living room in front of the house, watching a movie, and each had a cell phone at their ages so no friend of theirs would call this number. Her office was closed and a client would call her cell if an emergency arose. So would Lawrence, he always had done that even before they were married. Fighting the sense of impending doom, she put her hand on Raymond's shoulder for support and picked up the set as the third ring died down.

"Hello, Holt residence, this is Cynthia Holt, who is this?"

"Hello mom, it's Lucas. I'm calling to offer my best wishes for the season and see if we could speak face to face" Was the polite and simple answer that set her gut to churning acid.

"Lucas! Where are you? Lawrence said he sent you to California for boarding school but never gave details of when, or how, or what school even. How can we meet? And when, even if possible somehow?" was her frigid answer, the most politeness she could muster as she collapsed on the bar stool next to her friend. His arm now around her shoulders the only thing keeping her from falling to sit on the floor, out of strength and over-emotional.

Her son responded with a politeness that was much more natural and spoke of his eagerness to mend the rift between them: "That thing that calls itself my male parent sent me, an 11 year old kid, with a full kit of carry-ons and checked luggage at the airport on the bloody 22nd of December, at the noon rush to boot. He punted me into the taxi without any adult. I had no one to guide me or accompany me on the plane." He made an audible pause to calm down: "I had a coach class ticket to California without mentions of being a minor, and the unaccompanied minor protocols hadn't been paid or even mentioned. Since there was no reservation to a hotel, and school's out two solid weeks anyways, I re-booked and came here. We need to talk, you and me. There's an abscess growing between us. I want to lance it and clean it before it destroys our relationship."

Cynthia was beside herself with melancholy and grief. She thought that Lawrence would keep his word to make Lucas stay away from her life and not bother her. She didn't know if she still loved him or even wanted to make the effort of trying. The feelings of betrayal and violation had slowly faded into the background, but the dull ache left in their place was not any comfort either.

She looked to her lover Raymond for support, but also for guidance. He nodded with his head and then made a "let him come" gesture with his right arm. She understood that he was curious about
her prodigy boy and wanted to meet the person that had a good chance in the next year or so, to legally become his step-son.

"Alright Lucas, you can come for dinner tonight, and if all goes well, maybe stay the night for the Christmas Eve. But understand me; you wounded me deeply, and I don't know what seeing you in person will do to me, or how I will react. Lawrence was supposed to keep your movements and activities apart from my life, and I'm not best pleased to see this happening right now. We will have words about that, young man! When adults plan for you, you are to obey them, not improvise!" she answered barely able to keep in check her rising rancor against the child's daring bravado.

Her son listened to her angry tirade with tears slowly crawling their way down his face as he lay down on his back on his massive, five-seat couch next to the fireplace. Taking his pride and shoving it deep in a drawer at the back of his soul, he swallowed back the bile rising in his throat, answering in a low voice, echoing with fear: "If you prefer to cast me out of your life and never acknowledge me again, well, you're a lawyer… Why didn't I get served with parental withdrawal papers, or authority relinquishing documents, or some such? There are four guys in your office that could do that for you, if you don't want the trouble of typing them out yourself."

Cynthia was gutted that her little boy would think about such things, and worse, think that she would do that to him. At the same time, she thought to the manila envelope in the drawer of her vanity in her bedroom, and the heavy, final sentence they carried if signed and given to a judge to notarize. She was a hypocrite and she knew it. She had prepared the paperwork the very week that Lucas had left for Africa with his father. She just chickened out of using it. Now confronted with what was obviously a crying, distressed child on the end of the line, she felt like an utter eel for having entertained thoughts of dumping her precious little friend like trash at the curb.

"I won't lie to you Lucas, you know me and the way things are with humans too much to believe any fairy tale that I might spin. You also learned my tells when I practiced my court speeches with you, when we worked together in the evenings. I have a set of documents to disown you permanently, even to the point of forcing you to drop the Holt from your legal name. We are going to have to sit, look into each other's eyes and decide what we do from here on. I'm not sure there is a relationship to salvage, but if you're willing to put that much effort into it, there must be something left that I just don't see." She took a lingering breath before continuing: "I won't make promises except to listen with open mind and heart. Everything else after that is to be revised and negotiated piecemeal. That's the best offer I can give while in the emotional state that am right now. Do you have a counter-offer?"

Lucas was stunned so much it almost hurt physically. His mother was so upset to speak to him that she had reverted to legalese and court mannerisms to take the discourse back to a civil point instead of the angry rant she had let loose earlier. He swallowed hard again: "Mom, you don't need to negotiate… I'm your kid, just tell me to come home and I will... I didn't expect to need lawyers and a familial mediator appointed by Judge W. F. Barnum at the Town Hall just to come by to say 'Merry Christmas' to my mom and put my head down on my own pillow, in my own home." He passed a hand roughly across his face to clean the tears and try to force himself back to a semblance of composure.

Cynthia's response was civil but formal: "we aren't at that point yet, but depending on what happens, I can only advise you to retain counsel for civil litigation soon. If only because your father is an airhead that will promptly forget both your needs or existence, leaving you to fend for yourself. If you are still set on this, you can come for dinner, but be advised that I have company and they are not optional. Further more, that arrogant Chinese bastard had better not be with you, or you can just go straight to wherever and not bother me again. Do you understand me?"
Lucas was torn between wanting to close the rift between them and running away across the globe to start a new life with a different name so people wouldn't know he was so unfit and unnatural that his own mother loathed him to the point of wanting to disown him publicly. He choked back a sob so strong that he bit his lip and drew a drop of blood between his teeth. Rasp in a breath to steady himself, he answered: "I will be at your house in about two hours. Chose anything you want from the take out menus, I know your habits at this time of year and I doubt that having people with you would change that. Do you want me to pay a part of it for you because of the inconvenience my presence will impose to your guests?"

His response was phrased politely but with a blithe civility that shocked Cynthia. She had never been on the receiving end of Lucas' business persona in her life and could barely suppress the chill that oozed down her backbone at that cold, impersonal tone coming from him. He was normally such a gentle bundle of happiness, a genuine megawatt of kindness. Now, to hear him put on airs & manners fit for the federal bench wounded her deeply, even more so because it was her own assault against him that made him fall back to defensive actions to protect his dignity and integrity from her angry rebuttals. She wiped her eyes with the back of her left hand distractedly while thinking of what to say to close this politely when a defeated "Bye mom, I love you," was softly heard before the line went dead. She turned to Raymond, filled with hope, fear, and boiling anger all mixed in her gut. Her baby boy was coming home, except he wasn't a boy and it wasn't his home anymore. She wept openly for a half hour on Raymond's shoulder before standing up uncertainly, to make her way to the bathroom to clean herself up. He might be her son, but Lucas was diplomated in Law and many other things; it wouldn't do to receive him in less than battle-ready shape or there was no telling what the result could end up.

Lucas dropped the closed phone on the couch beside him and turned towards the backrest to bury his face into the upholstery, trying to silence his heart wrenching sobs as much as he could because he could not contain them anymore but would not let anyone hear his weakness either. He was the Master of the Burgundy Velvet Lounge, not its slave boy being whipped raw; it wouldn't do for the staff to see their boss in a less than properly decorative composure.

After a good long cry that cleaned up a lot of emotional gunk inside his wounded heart, he made it to his bathroom and started the water for the bath. He went to his walk-in closet to select a new, much more formal suit styled for grand galas for the evening because he wanted to make a good impression on Cynthia's guests. Also, if things went bad, he would come back to the hotel to do the Owner's Christmas Toast in the Lounge and introduce himself officially as the legal owner. The publicity would be enormous, giving him credentials when dealing with Stanford U that would help a lot. He took the wall mounted phone inside the closet, calling down to the reception desk to ask them to prepare his beloved Streetboat with a driver for the evening.

Mother, where art thou?
About an hour later, Lucas stepped out of the cargo elevator, the hotel's secondary lift used only by personnel for delivering room service at the floors or moving maintenance equipment. It also served as private ride for the high management from and to the garage levels and 4th basement, whilst the front elevator only went from basement 3 to the rooftop terrace. Lucas ignored his reflection in the stainless steel doors of the lift as he walked through the corridor and climatized waiting room, to the outer door that led into the open area of underground parking level 1 in the first basement. He didn't need to go further than a dozen feet to see his car with the evening’s chosen driver waiting for him.

The young woman had rosy white skin, blond hair in a ponytail that reached mid-back and gentle green eyes. She wore the uniform of the hotel's driving staff because Lucas had in fact created and incorporated a luxury car service to cater to his best clients. This also meant that he was able to convert one of the garages he owned but was lacking clientele into the parking and maintenance building for his cars just two streets away. The receptionist at the lobby desk placed the orders but the dispatcher at the garage handled the assignments. Only specific types of people would be chosen to drive his luxurious vintage cars around. He required they had paramedic training or were ex-military or ex-police. Some cadets that failed the academy could follow a privately supplied course to correct their missing skillset and attempt to pass a special test as well. Lucas always tried as much as he could to help veterans and people of police or military families when hiring or creating businesses. The capabilities of these people just shouldn't be allowed to waste away.

The ride to Cynthia's house, not his home anymore apparently, was uneventful. The license plate on the car was well cleaned and visible with a small band of LEDs around it for nighttime clarity. There were two little square fanions in burgundy toned material with the great "BVL" crest imprinted on each side at the front of the car's hood, like diplomatic cars used to identify their country of origin. The car also had OnStar and LoJack beacon systems with luxury options that meant that police license plate scanners, laser radars and radio/cellular frequency scanners could detect them and identify the car from well away. This meant in certain areas of town that you got a little nod or a touch to the officer's cap when they saw the car roll by. His clientele was very diverse and their proclivities as many as the vices that kept them coming back. Lucas had thought to get out of most of the criminal activities but found he could not for two good reasons.

(The Godfather I – main theme)

First, it was bloody lucrative and accounted for about ¾ of his yearly income. He could become destitute from a bad blow if he didn't have that much money coming in regularly to pay not only the legal stuff, but also the bribes at city hall, several functionaries and three scores of cops in the precincts around town.

Secondly, there was both power and security in these activities. The power to decide who got the good merchandise, and who got cut out of the market and choked to death on debts they couldn't pay because they had no stuff to sell. Security was because he had contacts in those social circles where he didn't physically move who would warn him of impending crises, but only as long as he had something they wanted or could use to sell to make money from.

No, he could not get out cleanly, or safely, but he could rationalize his operations. He could then quit certain sectors known for violence while investing discretely in invisible areas like the financial markets, antiquities, and certain activities that were still legal abroad. Here in the North American Confederation he had a good solid plan about buying out abandoned factories, razing them and raising new factories that would be urban farms in contained environment with about ten levels of rental apartments above. This would create mini green villages around urban areas and revitalize both the ecology and the society. If he happened to make a tidy sum by selling fresh greens from local farming to grocers and restaurants, well, why not?
His thoughts about businesses, legal and not, were ground to a halt when the driver called out to him that in about five minutes they would be arrived. Se asked if he needed a detour to a convenience store to get snack foods or a soft drink for the evening. Like any professional driver, she was trying to anticipate her master's needs but didn't know him well enough to divine his intents. It was only the first time she drove him and to date he seemed the quiet, shy type. Her only answer was a shake of the head in negative and she left it at that. This homecoming was obviously a bad job in progress if any indicators were true. The suit he wore was high class for a soirée at the Lounge, but at home it was either overkill or dressed to gut the arrogance out of whomever he was meeting. She coasted the car slowly to the curb next to the house as the boss had indicated not to block the driveway. She would escort him to the door, and unless she was invited in, she would just stay at a small restaurant they had passed on the way.

(Hymnal – Angels we have heard on high)

December 24th of 2014 – Lucas's birthday
Buffalo, New York (USA)
Holt residence - vestibule

Inside the house, from the well lit living room, two young teenagers were waiting anxiously the arrival of this mysterious prodigy that they heard so little about. It was as if the subject was taboo when Cynthia was present, and their father Raymond knew next to nothing about the kid so couldn't say much on his own. The 15 year old son, Derek, and his 14 year old sister, Tanya, were sitting on the boxbench that was the base of the large bay window when a large, white car of an older model made a smooth stop in front of the main walkway. Seeing a professional driver in old style burgundy uniform with matching cap, black boots and white gloves get out, circle the car and come to open the door, they knew the evening was going to get off with fireworks.

(Star Wars symphony – The Imperial March)

"Daaaad! He's here!" shouted Derek towards the back of the house, where his father and maybe step-mother were placing the freshly arrived food in serving bowls and setting the table. It took only ten seconds for the two adults to come to the front to see for themselves that, indeed, the prodigal son had come. Accompanied, it seemed, by a blond hottie in a uniform that rich people's private chauffeurs used to wear about sixty or seventy years ago. Derek was wondering out loud just who the woman was while his sister was more interested in ogling the 5 foot tall lanky boy that marched in front of the adult. His burgundy colored longcoat was cut in a style that was old and vaguely military, with broad shoulders and stylized shoulder pads, high straight collar, tightly belted waist and heavy, reinforced lower hem that brushed his ankles with every cadenced step. She couldn't see his face because of the old style fedora hat that was jammed down to his eyebrows and he kept his head lowered as he marched.

Cynthia almost gasped a sob when Lucas raised his head to look at the windows, to see if anyone had heard them arrive or if he would need to ring his own doorbell to access his own house. When he had left for Africa, his mother had reclaimed the keys on account that he was too young to keep track of them for long when unused; that he would lose them or worse, they would be stolen and he would never know. As he saw four people in the living room window looking out at him, he only recognized one, his mother, but not the others although the man vaguely resembled someone from one of his mother's office party pictures he had seen, a lifetime ago.

As she opened the front door to greet her wayward son, Cynthia was herself greeted with his aura
of presence and the discrete smell of well chosen high quality cologne. Her husband, though he was a bit vain, had never taken the pains to dress up and prepare himself the way that Lucas had done tonight. She could see that just like herself, he had appraised the different scenarios for tonight's outcome and had dressed for waging war the way that they both understood so well.

Raymond's first impression at meeting Lucas was "Wow, snazzy dresser for an 11 year old" but also in the back of his mind were the findings that he and Cynthia had discovered about the Burgundy Velvet Lounge, Hotel and Spa; they were golden with Town Hall, while many cops and bureaucrats in Buffalo would do you a bad turn if you dissed the Lord of Burgundy as they called the owner of the hotel. These informations had given pause to any plans that Cynthia had about retaliations or a disciplinary placement in a strict-system school against Lucas, for his unauthorized activities behind her back, during the two years prior to his leaving. And now, here he was, with a chauffeured car and valet, dressed like a lord from the end of the Victorian era, when the great britannic houses were teetering on the edge of financial ruin because of debauchery and mismanagement.

The two teens were impressed by the high quality threads, glossy parade boots and stiff, noble posture of a person who'd seen shit come at him and sent back tenfold worse at the enemy. It showed in his eyes and firm, fixated features that he was expecting a hostile reception but was already girded for a fight. The blond beauty towering 6’ 3” behind him, standing at attention like on the parade ground, gave the impression that she was escorting an ennobled officer entering a palace for diplomatic talks with the enemy, not a son visiting his semi-estranged mother. If he put out an aura like that and he just turned 11 today, then what would the guy be like at 18?

Lucas stiffly saluted his mother and her guests by simply keeping his hands joined behind his back and giving a half-bow at the neck to each person in turn as they were presented. He then moved his arms forward; bringing a small bag into view which he presented to his mother as a peace offering for receiving him to parley. His use of the French word "to speak" was duly noted as when pronounced in that English accentuation it was meant as a formal request under the white flag to enter a person's domain or boat, to speak terms for a peaceful passage in return for payment or service. It was just like Lucas to use an obscure legalism from the pirate age to break the ice between them, yet set the tone of how serious he was in wanting to negotiate. After all, the alternative to parley was usually one or both ships sinking with their crews, something that was to be avoided then, and very much so today.

Raymond herded his brood back into the living room to watch TV for a minute while Lucas instructed his driver to wait until he called before leaving the area. He would know rapidly anyways if he needed the car later. He also instructed her to keep her bills from the restaurant or motel if she wanted to lie down for a nap; these were covered by the job after all. With the door now closed to ward off the cold and the small sprinkling of snowflakes that was slowly starting, the mother and son pair were now free to move deeper into the house for a short, quiet chat to set a few ground rules, for tonight at least. Lucas took off his longcoat and fedora, his gleaming black boots creaking against the polished hardwood floor of the corridor as he headed to the hallway closet to hang his affairs. Cynthia watched the almost militaristic bearing her 11 year old exhibited and was heartbroken to see what he had become, forced to grow and mature beyond reason because adults like her and Lawrence kept pushing him away, throwing him out or worse, threatening to lock him in a punitive school just because he dared to survive the abandonment.

Turning to his mother with just his actual inside clothes now, Cynthia was able to see how decorative and elaborate the suit's components were. The pants, waistcoat and knee-length jacket were in a burgundy tone that matched the longcoat while the button shirt was a pristine white. His tie was gold colored with silver filigree designs and a gold tie clip with a turquoise mosaic of the Crowned L Conglomerate logo on a disc in the front. She could see a pocket square in the left
breast pocket of the jacket, and a bit of his smartphone was visible when he moved. Every inch of him was polished, postured, coiffed and gave off a semi-military feel like looking at the uniform that nobles wore in the 1800s. It was both beautifully done yet chilling to see how naturally it fit him and his movements. The color was obviously a shout-out to his hotel and a question of personal pride as well, but damn it looked good when all arranged and coordinated like this. Cynthia had to admit that her little angel was going to break hearts when he turned 18, if not sooner by the look on poor Tanya's face. The girl might even be regretting the relationship between the adults at this point, because it would cost her any chance she might have had!

Lucas turned from closing the hallway closet's door, a pet peeve he remembered his mother harping about in his youth; she always thought that letting closets open to view was a sign of poor maintenance and lack of discipline. What was put in storage was there to be out of the way and unseen, no be exposed like a curiosity cabinet in the den. Now faced with the woman herself, he could admire the black evening gown, blue shawl and polished 2" heels she wore, like she was receiving the senior partners of her office for a serious discussion about her future in the firm. Just like him, she understood that this was a battlefield where they would wage a war of lace, velvet, subtle gifts and notarized paperwork tonight. All that remained was to join swords and begin the pass of arms.

(The Godfather I – main theme)

Her son opened the evening's duel of wills and wits with a polite, even toned: "Hello mother, you look resplendent tonight, more so than usual. Lawrence truly is a blind fool to have let you go the way he did." He then put his hands on both of her arms to make her lower down so he could place a chaste filial kiss on her left cheek. His follow-up: "Merry Christmas, mother, and many happy events in your life to come. Especially in light of the new relationship you have begun. If he's comfortable bringing his kids here, that must mean you are serious about this?" left her slightly uneasy. Her son had become quite taller, reaching close to 5 feet high and about 80 pounds, but these were still normal stats for an 11 year old boy. No, it was his suave deportment and authoritative bearing that jolted her. She had expected a meek, compliant child because she had heard him cry on the phone earlier, but the two hour interval had served him as it had with her. To lick his wounds, gird himself in body and mind, then take the fight to the enemy instead of waiting like a coward. Her son took much more from her personality and teachings in those two years than she had ever thought possible. It would make this evening either much easier or far worse.

Cynthia decided that there was no point in trying to set ground rules as she had thought to do; an over-emotional worried child would have agreed to keep her from becoming angrier, but the version of Lucas in front of her might react anyway, from simple silent acquiescence to laughing at her face and challenging her to do something about it. She didn't know what to do other than kick him out, but she really wanted to try and resolve this mess, so she swallowed some pride and led him to the kitchen / dining area at the back of the main floor.

First score to Lucas.

The three guests were trying, and failing miserably by anybody's judgment, to be discrete about how much an effort they were making at listening in to the low voiced conversation in the hallway. Since only Lucas had spoken to date to utter the protocollary niceties for the situation, Raymond was starting to have doubts about the situation getting better. He and his kids were dressed in a much more casual way, but still nice for the little soirée they had expected to be just among four friends. The males wore navy blue trousers with a button shirt covered by an open sweater vest along with simple canvas shoes for inside. Tanya wore a nice long evening robe in a more youthful and less stuffy design than Cynthia's overly formal affair. At her father's prompting she had forgone most of her jewelry and simply let her hair loose for once, instead of the usual french braid
she took half an hour to produce each morning. Compared to the main attraction of tonight's event, Raymond was starting to feel under-dressed and also understood why Cynthia, five years younger than him, was already a senior exec in the firm and about to be made senior-partner a the end of the coming year. If this was the style of people and situations she was geared to deal with, and had managed to teach her son a fraction of that, there would be fireworks at the dining table tonight.

Money, Money, Jewels and the Crown of the Land

(Hymnals – Oh Holy night)

December 24th of 2014 – Lucas's birthday
Buffalo, New York (USA)
Holt residence - kitchen

Cynthia was trying to control her breathing and steps as she led her son like a guest in what had been his house for an actual seven years of his life before he left for Africa. He must have spent some time outside over there because he had acquired a nice lightly bronzed skin tone that was much healthier than the last pictures of him she had. Since those were from the leukemia treatment period around May, she was glad to see he had rebounded so well. She truly loved him and would never wish harm or illness to him. She hoped he still felt the same.

As she indicated his chair, she told him: "You can take off your jacket, you know. That thing looks heavy and stiff, you'll be more comfortable in shirtsleeves for the evening." As she waited for his response with a small smile on her lips, Lucas was looking her in the eyes and trying to divine her underlying intent. He had meditated in the car for the last five minutes to set his synesthesia and perceptions to high sensitivity, because of how vital to his future and autonomy this meeting was. After all, his mother, father and mentors had all taught him that "The only unfair advantage in war was the one the opponent had over you". With a natural smile of his own, he nodded and unbuckled the belt and three decorative chest clasps then took off the heavy garment before looking at his mother with a raised eyebrow. Her better and more natural answering smile set him at ease as she pointed the breakfast bar: "Put that on the backrest of the stool, it won't be in the way like that."

As the three guests filed into the kitchen with the adult in front like a meat shield to protect the younglings, Lucas couldn't help but share a look of utter dismay with his mother before they both burst out laughing at the scene. Maybe having the comedy relief at the table with them would lighten up the mood enough to just get to know each other again, before the heavy talks started up in a few days. The three members of the Matthews family didn't know what was so funny but relaxed as they heard Cynthia's rich laugh being echoed by the reedy snorts of her son. For his age, his voice still hadn't broken yet and he was making a good showing of putting out a steady, commanding presence that belied his actual youth.

When Tanya tried to grab his right hand to look at the ring on his index, his reflex of turning and folding her own hand back against her wrist was fast, and well done for a beginner with little actual practice. Living an isolated life meant that the skills Izuku and George had given him were very seldom used, unlike Vratsina's savvy for life and business. He gently untangled their two hands without harming her then playfully wagged the very index in question under her nose in reprimand: "It's impolite to grab people at first sight like that, little girl" he spoke with exaggerated slowness as when speaking to a three year old, "You could insult someone and they could spank you for it." His playful smirk told everyone who the joke was on, and both adults sighed in relief, just as Derek
palmed his face while muttering darkly about girls and jewelry.

Lucas said out loud to the persons around the table: "I am a bit skittish about my personal space since the leukemia treatment went a bit wonky on me because the docs kept poking me to see the why and how of things. Please ask before touching me. It will take me some time to become familiar with all of you enough that you can place a hand on my arm or shoulder in passing without undue reaction on my part. More aggressive acts will draw out some reflexes that I have learned as part of my self-defense training. Thank you for your patience." He then gave a small shy smile to everyone and stood at ease, left hand on the back of his chair, waiting for the ladies to sit as was polite. His mother's frown was a surprise, so he raised his right eyebrow in the universal signal of "what mom?" that she knew so well.

After making everyone sit with a distracted wave of her hand, Cynthia began to serve out the food while Raymond passed the filled plates and bowls around like he was her busboy. Lucas thought the situation hilarious so he began a running comment about his skills and how if lawyering was no longer attractive, he could apply at the BVL to get a decent senior waiter's job there. Both adults were taken a bit aback by how casual the child opened up the floor to the heavy subject right at the onset, but the reactions from the teens showed them that it was the correct approach. Both parents realized belatedly that in both households, business and clientele had always been seen as neutral, safe territories of conversation because it was impersonal and far removed from emotions. This was actually a great start and Cynthia's relief was matched by Raymond giving her hand a passing squeeze of support, as he took another serving bowl to place in the center of the table. As the composite family sat for a delicious meal of mixed Chinese, Cantonese and Szechuan foods, everything seemed to become more peaceful, more agreeable and, yes, the mood of the two main antagonists went from weary to just relaxed for the evening to come.

(Hymnals – O Christmas tree)

As the meal and light hearted conversation about world travel, airline food, Skymall's funny nonsense and hotel management wound down around a serving of almond and fortune cookies, Cynthia was surprised to see her son stand up. He went to the cappuccino machine to make himself a strong allongé espresso with double sugar and triple cream. He brought it back at the table while swiping shamelessly a fortune cookie out of Derek's plate, as the older boy was talking with Raymond about an outing between Boxing Day and New Year's Eve. With a playful wink to both females around him, Lucas cracked open the cookie and unrolled the little paper to read out loud what fortune had in store for him. "You are the author of your own success story and the artisan that crafts its decors for the audience to enjoy" proclaimed the insignificant scrap of pulp.

Everyone looked at him then diverse guffaws and snorts of disbelief were heard all at once. Talk about generic penny-a-tale scrap that sounded like one of those talking people weighing machines in pharmacies! As Lucas tried pacifying Derek by offering to make him a coffee that actually tasted good while Tanya was begging him not to caffeinate her sibling any worse than he was, both adults rested back against their chairs and enjoyed the amusing noise that the three children made. It seemed at first glance that they were finding a way to gel together all on their own, and the parents were happy that there wasn't a blow out coming in the near future.

Lucas again took the initiative by suggesting that once the leftovers were in the fridge and the nice and expensive (snort!) pots and cutlery (disposable plastic) were taken care of (trashed), they could go to the living room in front to be much more comfortable by the fire. There was a long conversation that mother and son had to have; sooner would be better for all. He also gestured with his mug of dark aromatic goodness towards Raymond, kindly inviting the man and his teenagers to ask any questions they might have as well. Cynthia was truly surprised as she would have thought her son ashamed of the situation to the point that he would have asked for a private conference, upstairs in her office. Decidedly, he was on a mission to rewrite all her opinions and knowledge of
him in one sitting.

After the persons all took their refreshments of choice and Lucas produced for Derek a masterful cappuccino with extra froth, they filed towards the living room, settling into position with Lucas inheriting the best spot next to the big stacked stone fireplace. It wasn't favoritism as much as the need for everyone to be able to see and speak with him clearly that chose his location. That he had developed a genuine liking for live flames as a calming meditative aid was also a bonus for him. He rolled up his shirt sleeves and unbuttoned his waistcoat, accidentally flashing his ring, antique watch and the equipment pouches at his belt. The k-bar hidden in his left boot, under the pant's leg was unseen. The four people around him took in the appearance and meaning of some things before Tanya decided to make up for her earlier misstep by asking politely about the gorgeous ring and its significance to him. Boy weren't in the habit of wearing rings of that style.

Cynthia was eager for the answers, more so than the others, because it was her son. She should have known this already, not learn it from a meeting with strangers in the house. She signaled Lucas with a small gesture of her hand in a "gimmee" movement that he smiled at. Centering himself emotionally, he began to talk about the three mentors that marked his life in the order that they had arrived, how they taught him, how he evolved and matured because of them. Raising his hand to admire the small wheel of eight stones with the amethyst in the middle, he explained in a low voice filled with sadness and respect: "This ring was given to me by Vratsina by way of heritage, it belonged to the only man she ever loved, but could not marry. His father was rich, influential, and hated her with four different passions, so it seemed. He bribed a judge to get her the first of many short but numerous jail sentences that she got before she turned forty and was rich enough on her own to avoid such problems. She said, in the letter in her testament, that I was actually the second man she loved the most. She had dearly wished she could either adopt me, or be younger to marry me and make me a happy man." He ended his small speech in a soft murmur, lost in the reflections of the flames in the gems of the ring's face. His mother was stiff like carved stone and the three guests were put off by the unexpected landmine that Tanya's innocent question had stepped on.

Derek decided that since it couldn't get worse, he would ask about that beauty of a watch on his left hand. That thing was sweet and the teen wondered where he could get one. With a nervous gulp, he waved his fingers at the rather tall boy that looked so much like an old European nobleman sitting by the side of the fire in his great hall. Hearing the question, Lucas gave a genuine smile as he answered easily: "That watch belonged to George Brown-Fowl-in-the-Bushes. It was actually packed away in a crate, in his attic, with a lot of other vagaries and sundries he'd collected around the world since WW II. It had stopped at a date in the 60s, so he obviously hadn't been very attached to it. But it was solid 24 carat gold, made in Switzerland and completely functional. It was an antique back when George bought it; the original box & manual were all present in the crate. The timepiece was actually around 120 years old at this point." Again silence came in the wake of his words, but less tense. Cynthia's face had softened back to a relaxed state.

Lucas decided it was his turn; he pointed his beringed index at Raymond to ask in as ominous a tone as his 11 year old, 5 foot tall body could produce: "Where did you meet my mother, what are your intentions towards her?" His Godfather impersonation got guffaws from the two teens while his mother looked at him like he had just splashed a barrel of mud around the house. Raymond took a sip of his white wine then answered calmly, realizing that Lucas was trying to establish a sort of "some of me, some of yours" atmosphere to get everyone comfortable with the conversation. He agreed with the tactic and decided he would need a small, private chat with the boy to thank him for his efforts at making this easy as possible for his mother and her guests. Especially in view that it was still his house they were invading, whilst he had been exiled without due cause. Raymond was lawyer enough, and honest enough as an adult and a parent, to know that his lover had badly over-reacted above warranted.
Sitting backwards against the backrest of the sofa he sat in, he began his tale: "Cynthia and I met many years ago when we began working together in the same firm. We normally associated only when working on the same case or at office functions. We were each other's escort at a few mundanities in the last four years because my wife, Wanda, had begun a losing fight with a tumor in her brain. She fought valiantly for two and a half years before refusing further treatments. She let nature take her to peacefulness, about a month before you left with Lawrence. I grieved her, but we had emotionally separated about a year before that, when I learned she had contacted a divorce attorney in another firm, at about the same time her diagnostic came in. We agreed to stay civil, for the kids mostly, and just waited together for the inevitable to occur. By the end, I was both glad to have stayed with her, and that it was over. It didn't take long to bounce back, barely a month if that, and I asked Cyn for a first date. As for my intentions, well, I was raised to believe it's the Lady's prerogative to decide and speak of those things." He concluded with a laugh and a wink at the blond boy. His pout at being denied a juicy, sappy story was fun!

Turning to his mother, Lucas asked: "And you, mom? When did you know that it was over with dad? Neither of you ever told me how or why. It was just - "pack your bags, go with your father and have a life if you can" – sort of a thing. What's the explanation behind all that?" he queried with eyes full of anxiety and self blame. What would he learn now, and how much hurt would there be?

Cynthia closed her eyes as she drew a deep, calming breath, using the gesture to center herself while analyzing both the question and what she could answer that was true but wouldn't hurt her visibly anxious boy. For all his bravado and the demonstration of autonomy he made with his arrival earlier, it was still blatantly obvious that he was aching inside and didn't know how much worse it could become. She hated what was to come, but lying to him was out of the question. If they wanted to truly heal this rift, there must be honesty above all else or it would never end in their lifetime.

Squeezing Raymond's hand for comfort, she sipped at her red wine then began her answer: "What you have to understand Lucas, is that things between Lawrence and I were never all that close or intimate to begin with. Firstly, we are both to blame because neither wanted to put their career on hold for the other or for our couple's sake. We married, but the actual part about living in matrimony kind of hadn't sunk in at that time. We hadn't realized how much place in our life the other person would take, or how much effort it took to upkeep a relationship through a marriage, life and kids. We were far too self-centered and, yes, too immature and unreliable as people, to take the steps we did. Secondly, since we lived on two different schedules, with different priorities and goals, we actually drifted apart right from the start. Instead of having an adjustment period where the couple grows closer together, finding solace in each other's presence, we never got that. What we got was a period where we negotiated our rotations in and out of the house to set up receptions and mundanities with clients, bosses, and anyone but our spouse."

Cynthia took another sip of wine to whet her throat then closed her eyes, posing her head on the backrest of the wing backed chair she sat in, so as to avoid the nasty migraine she could sense trying to invade her mind. "We had a problem with communication, with contact, with even just trying to be in the same damned house for more than six hours together, without the blasted phone ringing with the latest crisis to put out." Here she stopped, shaking her head as she tried to fight the tears and sense of failure she always got when she thought back on those lost years. But they weren't lost, weren't they? She still had Lucas with whom she could rebuild their bond as he was far more willing to make the effort and sustain it than Lawrence ever was. "Your father was always more detached, more reserved in his emotions than I was. He always had that way of looking at a situation like it happened to someone else that he was just watching reported on TV. Getting an emotional response from him was never an easy undertaking."
With a shallow breath and look towards Raymond for support, she thought of how to phrase what she felt: "What I loved the most about your father was his honesty and integrity. You might never have gotten close enough, or just have not been with him long enough, to notice these traits in his character, but I assure you that he was the most moral man that I had encountered. And coming from a family of lawyers like I did, with a lot of corruption, money, peddling of influence and lawless lobbying, well, Lawrence was a breath of fresh air for me. He gave me a sense that things could be done rightly and honestly if we just worked at it together. He was a fool. And when he found out he was a fool, he kept it to himself, until I found out what he had done. The trust was broken and he had to go. I couldn't take what happened without a reaction."

Swallowing past a suddenly dry throat, she sipped the last of her wine and carefully laid out the event that broke their marriage and family: "You must have noticed that my parents died before you were born, when I was just 19 years old. What you don't know is how limited my own experience with a family was, since I went to boarding schools since I was 6 until I turned 18, then started college where I was set up in student residence. I had almost never been home with my parents in the lifetime that we had in common. Like you, I didn't really have a family or parents while growing to maturity. Lawrence was better off since his were alive and well. Well enough, in fact, to take care of you for five full years before the fire." Here her breath hitched, forcing her to pause to wipe some tears. "Lawrence it turned out, wasn't the man I thought. Because of my lack of experience at reading people in a family situation, I never realized that the morality and integrity I saw in him was just an illusion to cover the crass that he was willing to put up with, or even perpetuate, in order to get his blasted World Power Project up and running in his lifetime. Nothing is sacred, nothing is off limits, and nothing will resist the imperative to get that darned thing operational. Not even me, you, his parents, nothing."

(Hymnals – Adeste Fideles)

Turning to Raymond fully she asked if he could get her a Perrier and some lemon, her throat was itchy and dry, but she didn't want more alcohol for fear of starting to drink to forget. When he returned from the kitchen, he saw that Lucas had moved to sit on a cushion on the floor by his mother's legs and rested his head on her knee. It was a beautiful sentimental gesture on the kid's part that made Raymond renew his internal memo to talk with him alone. The boy needed some positive reinforcement in a big way to keep going as well as he was. It would be a very bad gesture to ignore him, staying away out of misplaced sense of propriety and boundaries. Mother and son both ached, and both needed some external perspective to sort out their mess, so he would help as he could, just being by their side for the rest. With a kind, reassuring smile to his own children, he sat back in his sofa after passing Cynthia her chilled drink.

Cynthia grappled with what she was about to reveal. They were contractual clauses for confidentiality involved but they had lapsed last year, before her son and husband had gone to Africa. They were in the clear to openly speak about events started three years ago. "Lucas, you followed the news about how the UN collapsed and was promptly replaced first by Confederations, then those united to form the UEO about 15 months ago, right? Well, Lawrence was instrumental in helping end the UN then place in power the woman at the top of the UEO executive cabinet, Andrea Dre. He helped by using the conference rooms at the WPP that he wired for image & sound to record some illegal dealings amongst the UN people then he fed that to Dre in exchange for protection, public funding, and legal exemptions from the normal restrictions on whom may operate military weaponry and ships in UEO territory." Here her great sorrow was seen by all four people in the room. "Lawrence then did the unforgivable; he connived with that rabid bitch to obtain for his power plant, a civilian installation if ever there was one, the militarized status of – classified secured facility – thus enabling Andrea Dre and the UEO admiralty to place permanent soldiers, weaponry turrets, and even nuclear weapons in the undersea site. I even heard a rumor, through several people that I know with military connections, that he allowed Section
Seven to build a black site in the foundation plate of the power plant, big enough for four dozen operatives and a dozen detainnees to process then dispose of in silence. No proof is available, but he was never able to even just look me in the eyes and deny any of it when I asked about it." The silence that followed that statement was followed by an explosion of anger like they had not seen in their lives.

Lucas sprung up and threw his coffee mug into the fireplace grate hard enough to make it explode like a grenade, sending shards of ceramic bouncing around the hearth. With great effort, he clasped his hands before him at chest level and started a breathing and calming exercise to manage the overflowing emotions and raw rage that threatened to drown out all logic and control in his mind.

(Star Wars symphony – The Imperial March)

After almost ten minutes of labored breath and clenched teeth, Lucas finally wound down enough to turn towards the persons assembled around him, raising his head to meet their eyes. He was still so enraged that his flint blue eyes had turned a darker shade of storm-seas blue that promised pain to the person who caused this. When he spoke, it was like a sentence handed down from Heaven had been pronounced upon the heathens: "So that is the sin on his worthless soul, what kept him away from his wife and son, broke his house and made him stray from the Faith of Humanity and the Law. Mene, Mene, Tekel UpHarsin! Lawrence Wolenczak you fool! So is it written on the walls of the temples and castles for All to see! Money is to help the people, build schools and hospitals, repair roads and clean the air and water, not pay mercenaries to enslave the very people you are oathed to serve! Jewels are to create beauty and adorn the citizens so they can identify each other, not make baubles or pay for undue privileges like a wastrel bum! The Crown of the Land is for the brow of the Just and Merciful, that he may guide and cherish All, not a gaudy statement of empty pride and sick vanity for base-born, churlish curs of your ilk, you knave! May your soul rot in the loneliness of exile and be forgotten!"

(Star Wars symphony – The Imperial March)

As Lucas panted in anger and loathing, tears began to cascade down his face in rivers of sorrow than he made no move to stop or hide. In his great heartache, and in his shame at being the son of this man, he no longer cared who saw. "Your parents tried to teach you the same things they did with me, the history, the pains and the inhumanity of warfare, and the madness of power. Why did I learn and you threw it away? Why did they sacrifice so much for you, if you spit on their gifts? Who are you to think you're above the Law and Humanity to arrogate yourself the right to defraud, perjure, make false oaths and then brake oaths made in public to obtain the trust and support of the People? Who the fuck was I born to?" Was his last exclamation as he collapsed by his mother, grasping her legs and weeping into her robe, hiding his face in shame.

(Gundam SEED – Akatsuki no Kurama)

Both adults watched the blow-out calmly, seeing that the young boy was making efforts at keeping the damage to a limited area. The two teenagers were quite flabbergasted that he produce such a loud volume, and put out that much harsh language. Even Derek, at 15 years old, didn't think he knew that much vocabulary or could turn out phrases like that without a good half-hour preparation. And those Bible and Torah references were something deep! The teenager really would like to have a talk about Faith and morality in life with this guy. The small family of three was very liberal Catholic; they went to church every Sunday morning and he actually enjoyed the teachings, the familial atmosphere, and the serene peace of the small cozy place where they attended. All three of them were low-key practitioners, not high-strung activists, but it didn't mean they believed less or were relapsed in their Faith. Obviously, his future step-brother had some high standards of personal belief and behavior that he really wanted to get to know about before he could judge the kid for real. Derek thought they would get along well, if they could agree on something basic like honesty and trust.
Tanya was bothered by two things: the utter bastardy of Lawrence at lying to everyone for several years while abandoning them at the same time, and the fact that the kid in front of her apparently had more education and personality in his hair than she had in her whole person. It was a body blow to her pride as a 14 year old that the 11 year old could incite such soul-searching with just a few phrases, and not even a rehearsed speech. She sat in silent contemplation while he knelt besides Cynthia's wing backed chair, his head resting on her lap to cry openly his shame, completely upsetting how she thought boys of any age wanted to be seen. He obviously cared more about morality, and the dishonor his father brought them, than whether it looked manly or mature to have a break down in public like that. It would be food for thought in the coming years. Right now, she had to think of something to help these people as she was decently certain that she was looking at their soon-to-be new mother and brother.

Raymond was again reminding himself that a talk with Lucas was in order, but now he amended his internal memo to make it a priority for tonight, before Lucas left or went to sleep upstairs. In either case, this child had just impressed the life out of him with his depth of morality and his honorable judgment of what he considered a truly depraved bastard. To trade away the peace and security of the planet to some coterie de sales boches just to built a boondoggle as useless as the Nazis' ever built, while imagining himself as some type of new messiah because he can produce cheap electricity? Pathetic! Immoral, inhuman and truly, deeply pathetic! Cynthia was right to dump his arse in the street, but now it was time to save what was worth keeping and cherishing. And Lucas deserved both, as well as a good long hug and a pat on the back for his excellent reasoning about the true sins in his father's behavior.

Lawrence had committed Pride, Vanity, Arrogance, Greed and also Avarice. But the most damning sin of all was that he was trying to usurp the rightful rule of human Law and democracy by actively supporting what was a far-right leaning organization based solely on military might. The UEO might present a polite and coy facade by using the old UN's blue helmets and white colored vehicles, but they didn't by any means have clean hands or clear motives. There were rumors around the office about the partners worrying about banking laws, attorney-client privilege laws, and even doctor-patient confidentiality laws. These were being methodically challenged in the courts of the member confederations by UEO lawyers so as to destroy any type of privacy or confidence that would keep the UEO's jack-booted thugs out of private citizens' business. Even the Habeas Corpus and the right to protect from self-incrimination were rumored to be scheduled for a fight in the Supreme Courts of Canada and the USA in the coming 2 or 3 years if the Bar Association's rumor mill was accurate. At this juncture, he had no reason to doubt the accuracy of these predictions and that scared him about the future of the member nations and the Earth.

Cynthia felt a sense of relief flood through her as Lucas broke down crying and clung to her for support, her hand resting on his head, carding through his hair in an effort to help soothe him. She had heard his strong words, stating plainly very harsh but well spoken and solidly built opinions that were normally proffered by young adults in their twenties. He truly took more after her in character, psyche and personal beliefs than he did Lawrence. There was a chance, a good strong chance, that they could fix this rift and heal their broken family. She had her own guilty admissions to make, while hoping that Lucas would prove as balanced and equitable in judging her missteps. If not, they would be looking at the end of their family, with any contact between them would go through proxies and attorneys from then on.

A mother's broken heart, a child's wounded soul

(Star Wars symphony – Naboo Lake Varykino)
Cynthia whispered to Raymond a quiet request that he immediately rose to accomplish while gesturing to both his children to come with him. They went to the kitchen and, under his guidance, found and filled a pair of glass pitchers with cold water and ice cubes, leaving him to take some small cupcakes from a bakery's carton box to set up a serving platter. They came back once their task was accomplished, the living room now silent, seemingly covered in a pal of gloom. They unlimbered their burdens on the coffee table, in the middle of the clustered furniture, taking their original positions once more. Lucas, still sitting on the floor by Cynthia, gratefully took a glass filled with cold water, downing half in one long gulp. He then leaned forward, elbows on his knees, pressing the half-empty glass to his forehead in an attempt to help cool the mental tempest raging inside his cranium. It was only a partial success, which made him want to reach for his med-kit and dispense himself some Gravol multi-symptom pills to take the edge off the pain and wooziness. If sleepiness weren't a problem right now, he would have gone the chemical road, but his mother had told him she had some things to say to him before deciding what came next, so he would have to endure in sobriety. He really should have accepted that half glass of red wine his mother offered him at dinner; it would have helped right about now!

Cynthia put a loving hand on Lucas's shoulders, gently massaging the stressed boy then squeezing the nape of his neck, hoping the gesture would show how much he meant to her. She felt many of her burdens loosen and drop away when he leaned his body backwards, pressing himself against her hand, before reaching out to tenderly grasp and stroke the wrist of her free hand as it sat in her lap. In this peaceful moment, Cynthia understood that she could not hold back her words or emotions. She had to be bluntly frank about everything or risk seeing Lucas walk out the door, never looking back at any of them. She would not fail her son or herself again.

"Lucas, you need to understand that Lawrence may be corrupt, and maybe he chose to walk the path of power at the cost of his soul, but I'm not perfect. I can't just lay everything at his feet and leave it there. That would be hypocritical of me and I have committed enough of that in our relationship, I don't think you could tolerate more from me. Lawrence became the way he is because I was never there for him, anymore than I was for you. Remember what I said about being away from home since the age of 6? My parents were both lawyers and were never the paroxysm of closeness. They both took extended business trips out of town as often as they could and usually worked long hours at the office. Although I have come to realize that a lot of that extra time was probably spent at the tavern or bistro with colleagues after work. Since they worked on two different types of law, father was a criminalist and mother was an incorporation & fiscality expert like me, it always seemed natural to see them apart. That's the model I grew up with so I hadn't realized how abnormal our troubled I was until recently." Here Cynthia took a glass of cold water offered to her by Tanya who had moved to sit on the coffee table so she could be closer to offer support, even if only by handing out tissues or water. The two males took the pause as an excuse to grab a cupcake and some water; they needed a boost with all the heavy stuff going around the place.

Cynthia drank a mouthful of cool relief before continuing: "I never understood that Lawrence may be corrupt, and maybe he chose to walk the path of power at the cost of his soul, but I'm not perfect. I can't just lay everything at his feet and leave it there. That would be hypocritical of me and I have committed enough of that in our relationship, I don't think you could tolerate more from me. Lawrence became the way he is because I was never there for him, anymore than I was for you. Remember what I said about being away from home since the age of 6? My parents were both lawyers and were never the paroxysm of closeness. They both took extended business trips out of town as often as they could and usually worked long hours at the office. Although I have come to realize that a lot of that extra time was probably spent at the tavern or bistro with colleagues after work. Since they worked on two different types of law, father was a criminalist and mother was an incorporation & fiscality expert like me, it always seemed natural to see them apart. That's the model I grew up with so I hadn't realized how abnormal our troubled I was until recently." Here Cynthia took a glass of cold water offered to her by Tanya who had moved to sit on the coffee table so she could be closer to offer support, even if only by handing out tissues or water. The two males took the pause as an excuse to grab a cupcake and some water; they needed a boost with all the heavy stuff going around the place.

Cynthia drank a mouthful of cool relief before continuing: "I never understood that I needed to make a stronger effort to create and maintain unity in our home for all of us, especially for you. The only way that I understood the expression – dependent minor – was as a tax deduction item, not in the sense that a living person would need my continued presence, interaction and support to learn how to grow into becoming a man. It wasn't until after Lawrence's parents died and we had our little incident together that I discovered what being a mother and educator was really about. In
reality Lucas, you are the one who taught me how to be a person and a parent. The emotional connection that I forged with you in those two years was priceless and I would have given my life to protect it from anything, even Lawrence. That's why it hurt so much, you see, when those testaments were read, when those things were given to you, and I learned about that foundation and the hotel. I thought that like your father, you had lied to me for years, had abused my trust, my confidence, and that you were becoming a monster in his image. So, to protect myself from more abuse and betrayal, I cast you out of my life before you could lie and hurt me again."

Everyone was silent for different reasons. Cynthia had finally laid out everything; she had nothing left to say. Raymond was waiting for a healthy and necessary explosion of rancorous outrage from Lucas who needed to let the poison out, not fester inside. Derek was locked in a loop inside his mind trying to figure out a way to solve this that didn't mean the whole family exploded. Tanya was stuck, feeling useless like a fifth wheel on a car.

Lucas however rose to his feet, walking away deeper inside the house, going to the small two-piece bathroom in the main corridor that was used by guests. He went in and locked the door behind him. For many long minutes nothing was heard until the water in the pipes began moving with their customary shushing sound echoing inside the solid wood walls. When he came out after about a quarter hour, the boy looked pale and worn, with thin dark bags under his eyes and little red veinules starkly visible in the sclera of his bloodshot eyes. He was wiping his mouth with a tissue; his face and the base of his hair at his forehead were damp, the humidity slowly crawling down the sides of his pallid face and down his neck. He had opened the top four buttons of his shirt showing the white thermal undershirt beneath, and taken off the waistcoat completely, dragging it on the floor by his side listlessly. He looked like death warmed over, and was no longer making any efforts to hide what it cost him to be here listening to these things. He was hurting, injured, and badly needed a break.

"It's about 10:00pm, I'm gonna go upstairs too lie down a while kuz I don't feel so good… I called the driver to pick me up at eleven. I'm going back to my hotel to do the Owner's Toast at midnight. I'm introducing myself officially as the owner in full view for the first time. You have to decide if you're coming. What I say and do… Well, you’re lawyers... Would you expect a client to hire you if you dissed his business in public?" With that in the open, Lucas started trudging his way miserably up the stairs to his old bedroom, hoping there was a bit of furniture left otherwise he'd go for the small settee in his mom's office. The floors were hardwood all over the house and, in this cold winter night, not a place to put a kid, even with the two full-body layers he was wearing.

(Hymnals – funeral dirge)

The four persons were left in silent introspection. The two teens were now sat on the couch together, side-hugging with an arm around the other's shoulders, worriedly lost in thought about their future family. Raymond heard the warning for what it was; he glanced at his lover and, he hoped, future wife to gauge her mindset. He had to make sure there were no misunderstandings. If she didn't get that her son was at the point of cutting his losses to preserve what little was left of his sense of self-worth and dignity, she could blow it all.

Cynthia was actually thinking along the same lines, and several others. Her son had made many choices just now. Firstly, he went upstairs to recover instead of disappearing into the night, so he chose to call this place safe and still his home, if she let him. Secondly, he chose to give them the time to make their own decision if they wanted to come with him, to be by his side as a family for what is America's most important and familial of all holidays. Thirdly, he made a clear choice by asking what any lawyer or accountant would consider a professional breach of ethics: you never judge the client or his business, you just advise dispassionately, and with great reserve, about what the norms & laws of society are concerning the client's activities. He was challenging her, all of
them, to keep up a standard of thought and behavior open minded enough to come see and live by his side before they decide if they wanted the relationship to continue.

Cynthia rose from her chair, walking to the bay window, gazing silently at the falling snow, hoping some of the white serenity that Nature was gifting them would impart some peace and wisdom unto her chaotic thoughts. She wanted to save the filial bond, but at what cost? Lucas had just drawn his line in the sand, and she had to agree that she had done the same, a year before, but never given him the courtesy of an explanation or a chance to defend himself. It was obvious he needed time to regroup, align his thoughts and present them coherently. She could also see that he wanted to be in a safer setting to finish this painful cleansing of old dirty laundry between them. Choosing the hotel as a safe haven was to be expected. She had, if she were to be honest, drawn out demanding a meeting with him just to force him to come to her on her safe territory. It was fair game for him to ask the same at this juncture. Besides, maybe getting out into town, taking in some fresh air and the Christmas sights would help them all to change their minds a bit, refreshing themselves for the next part of this harsh ordeal.

Turning to her soon to be relatives, Cynthia asked them what their opinions were. She stated clearly from the onset that she had no choice but to follow Lucas or lose his affections and his presence in her life forever. Raymond sighed in relief at that news; it would make the rest easier to plan his efforts to help them. Looking at his two kids on the couch, he simply gestured for them to speak their thoughts and would react accordingly. Both Derek and Tanya looked lost in deep thoughts but shook themselves fast enough. After a shared moment of silent sibling communication with eyes and facial expressions, Derek spoke for them. They would go with Cynthia to help any way they could. This would become their new family after all; it would be bad form to let it fall apart before even joining them properly. Their father nodded, asking Cynthia if she thought they had time to run home to get an overnight bag for each, because he anticipated the conversation later on would take most of the night. Since they lived only ten minutes away by car, it would be an easy back and forth, and they could not stop there once they were on the road to the airport sector. With all agreed, the Matthews dressed for the snow then left quickly so as to return before Lucas awoke and thought he'd been deserted by people yet again. Raymond was particularly worried that the child's mind couldn't take anymore at this point. It was crucial that they look into getting him a long term therapist to assist in his maturation until adulthood.
Rebuilding lives from trust and belief

The author wishes to express thanks to anyone who may read his story and encourages them to leave reviews, comments or even flame it hard. As with any who try their hand at publicly expressing an idea or story concept, all feedback is important and welcome.

Disclaimer: I do not own SeaQuest, Star Wars, nor any other sci-fi or fantasy series, movies, comics, cartoons or news items used in this fiction as they belong to the creators or broadcasters or publishers who put them out for consumption by the public.

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Third chapter: Rebuilding lives from trust and belief

A wake up call

(Star Wars symphony – Naboo, lake Varykino)

December 24th of 2014 – Lucas's birthday
Buffalo, New York (USA)
Holt residence – Lucas's childhood bedroom

Lucas woke up with a startled when his watch began to play the tinny bell of its alarm. Very advanced for its time, the miniature machine had a basic stopwatch function and a wake-up timer built into its design. This truly was a marvelous piece of the clocksmith's art; any navigator or explorer would have been well served by it, right until electronics became commonplace. Even today, Lucas wouldn't replace it with an electronic watch for fear of running out of battery life or getting hacked.

Rubbing the crud out of his bleary eyes, he grabbed blindly with the other hand until he found the nightstand, its lamp and then the switch to light up the place. It was still the same cheap $5 plastic lamp with dolphins and octopus painted on it that he had liked so much in his early childhood. Now it seemed paltry and insulting compared to the magnificent decoration and ambiance of his palace. Still, it warmed his young heart to see it was kept at its place. He had bought that thing a few years ago, when going through garage sales in the neighborhood with his grand-parents. It was old and used up, but he liked the vivid blue and green colors and the living scenes it depicted. One of the first purchases he had made with the little allowance his parents had begun to give him. How those times were far behind him. Back then he had to wonder if he could afford a hot dog during an outing with his tutors, now he could buy a dozen hot dog stands and make money from them to boot.

Standing up then walking to the mirror set into the closet door, he used muscle memory to guide his movements to reach into his med-kit on his left hip, letting his fingertips feel the Braille coding on the tools and bottles. He pulled out a small cylinder that he uncapped to put the drops in his eyes to undo the bloodshot appearance, then took and dry swallowed one of his much trusted ginger Gravol tablets to fight off nausea, headache and general wooziness from stress and a fretful catnap.
A small spritz of Chloraseptic in the mouth to disinfect and soothe the throat was followed by the
tedious job of combing, buttoning and positioning self and clothes back into fighting order. He had
given his mother enough demonstrations of weakness for one night, it was time to get serious
again. Looking at the hour, he checked himself one last time before replacing the bedroom as it had
been, then headed downstairs to face how much family he had left in this lonely life.

The Matthews had managed to go home, speed pack, and be back in around 40 minutes so they
were back in their original places with the bags piled up in the vestibule. The trip had been gloomy
and Tanya had actually cried a bit on her brother's shoulder on the way home. While they were
packing, it was Derek's turn to suddenly stop, lean backward against a wall, his head bowed down
in sorrow and anxiety, wondering why it was that the Holt's had collapsed like that, and whether it
could happen in their family. It almost did after all. Mom had begun talking to a divorce lawyer,
just a few weeks before she got the call from the hospital, about her routine yearly physical having
found out critical things. How close did they come to be like Lucas and Cynthia?

Raymond watched like a hawk his teens go through the emotional upheaval of living by proxy the
turmoil that the Holt's were undergoing. It wasn't easy because of the strong chance of a marriage
in the coming year. That made it much more personal because it was their extended family that
was destroying itself in front of them before they got a chance to know them. He might need to
look into a therapist for them too, not just Lucas and Cynthia. If things kept going that way, he'd be
in sessions too before the year was out. And with all the stress, action and turnarounds in the two
households, maybe it would be good for him to do that proactively. He couldn't help anyone if he
was out with depression or another problem.

When all three were packed, they were also better dressed for a hotel gala and Tanya now sported
her evening jewelry, but kept her hair just in a loose decorative silver loop. Raymond took a few
minutes with each before getting back into the car; each teen received a hug, a kiss on the cheek
and a good love pat on the rump that made them both squirm and squeal about being too old for
that. To which Raymond, loving father that he was, patted them again and stated with authority that
no, they would never be too old to be shown that they were loved and wanted in his life. His
grumbling teens made the trip back to Cynthia's a relief because of how normal and banal it was
for them to have some form of banter or complaints about parental overstep into their private lives.
Such as the fact that he ruffled Derek's hair as he got in the car's front passenger seat. Teenage boys
were such divas about their hairdos, eh eh eh! Tanya's suggestion that he get a buzz cut to clear the
trash off his head was all that was need to get things going and he drove in content silence, letting
the kids blow out the steam that they all needed to release before getting back into the fray. He was
a mature adult after all, he couldn't get into these things with them, now could he? That's certainly
why he asked them if he needed to stop the car and settle them down just to see the disbelieving
look on their faces. Being a parent was priceless!

Cynthia had used her short time alone wisely. She went to her own bathroom, en-suite to the
master's bedroom, taking a short but much necessary shower to take off the sweat, grime, and what
she felt was a layer of oily residue from all the negative and hurtful emotions that had floated
around the house since her son's arrival. Being honest with herself, she could admit now that most
of the negativity had been from her own making, with Lawrence looming in the background, never
helping or intervening when a husband or father should have. Both of them were damaged goods,
barely able to function in a familial setting, and yet they had arrogated the right, the authority, to
judge Lucas by criteria that they had never even explained to him.

It was no wonder the kid had taken the way out when it was presented to him on a silver platter by
people who could see how ineffectual a set of parents he was saddled with. And she could not
blame Izuku Shu any longer. He had done what she paid him for: he had taught Lucas to survive
then seek help to heal and prosper. Everyone had done their jobs except Lawrence and her. Well,
that was going to stop tonight! Her son had a mother; it was time she was present in his life, even if it bothered him so many years to finally have someone to be by his side to guide him right.

Besides, she snorted in humor, it was normal for kids to complain about invasive parents. It shouldn't be too abnormal for them to go at it, once in a while. She just had to remember the limit between family and business; her son's warning had been clear enough for a blind man to read. That, and the Bar Association would have no mercy on her because motherly concern was most definitely not a reason to breach client confidence, or attempt to hijack control of companies to run them herself. Lucas was legally his own boss on many playing fields of the game, she would just have to concern herself with the household aspect of family life. For the rest, professionals could be hired and supervised.

She went to her wardrobe to choose a more gala appropriate dress and pull out her travel bag. It was packed and ready for the red-eye flight just as always. She had to go across the country a few times to put out emergencies at some client's manufacturing plant or union meeting and was rarely called in advance of things blowing up. In fact, until a year ago when she was elevated to senior executive in the firm, she had been part of the around-the-clock short response team. Now, as head of the incorporation & fiscal status division, she had more time to herself and a lot more people to which she could delegate some workload. The worse part was none of them could perform as well nor have the calming effect that Lucas had when he was ten years old. It spoke badly for the profession, giving her headaches when trying to find a competent, tolerable assistant.

Her new dress was a deep shade of navy blue with discrete silver piping, lace hems at the collar and sleeves, a line of decorative silver buttons garnished in white lace from right shoulder to right hip, complemented by a navy blue sash bearing lace trim on each side and a tassel at each end, winding around the waist. She now wore sensible shoes with wide one inch high heels because she knew that she would probably walk a lot or even dance at least once with her son, if this really was a formal introduction as he had announced.

She had warned Raymond discretely to dress up too, and that it wasn't really necessary for the kids to come back if they felt uncomfortable in the situation. It was bad enough for the adults; the teenagers should not have to live this as well. Her lover had surprised her by calling while she was putting finishing touches on her ensemble to confirm that both his children had demanded to come show support for them, and for their probable step-brother as well. It was Tanya's critical reasoning that "There's been enough abandonment, neglect and passing the buck to the other guy in that house, it won't be me that adds to the problem. I'm going and I'm helping out, even if I just stand like a spare prick in the corner." Which had convinced him they were both serious, understanding that party favors and good cheers would be in short supply for the rest of the night.

She agreed with the sentiments of both teens, and with Raymond's more experienced outlook on the probable outcome of this supposed gala. She had visited the Burgundy Velvet Lounge to use the conference rooms a few times, while some of the less rich clients sometimes asked to meet in one of the actual bedrooms, in the storeys above the Lounge and spa complex. Raymond had similar experiences, and neither attorney had been impressed. She hadn't been back there in two years though, not since her promotion above mid-level exec because those meetings were now given to underlings. It was possible that her son had effectuated some changes by giving orders over phone and email. As Lawrence's SPA, he would have had superb comms gear in his office and a lot of time on his hands to work with, especially since her ex wouldn't have bothered to limit how much time Lucas worked all day. If there was a trait that Lucas got from both parents and grandparents on each side, it was being addicted to his work. She would need to see about pacing his schedule. See to it that he had some time to be a kid, maybe develop some healthy habits like daily exercise.
As she went downstairs she heard a dingy little bell sound off so she checked her watch: 10 minutes to 11:00pm. She saw The Matthews come silently as possible in the front door at the same time as she stepped to the ground floor. Quickly embracing Raymond and placing a hand on each teen's shoulder by way of thanks, she guided them to the living room to wait for Lucas. It didn't take long for the cadenced steps of his heavy boots to be heard going around upstairs before coming down towards them. He went into the kitchen to put on his jacket, using the mirrored surface of the refrigerator to finish adjusting his composure. He even pulled out his white velvet gloves from the jacket's pocket and put them on, massaging the right one over the bump of the ring on his index. Now armored and ready for another round, he placed his hand on the range oven, remembering all the times that he had cooked with grandma, when he was but a small tyke.

Snort! Small! HE should probably say 'younger' given how much he'd sprouted up in the three years since her death. He was practically 5 feet tall, which meant he was around six inches shorter than Derek, but just a mite higher than Tanya who seemed to pout every time she realized it. He could easily look his mother in the face, even if he still had to look upwards when they were too close due to her 5' 8" stature. Smiling softly at the good memories he had of this kitchen, of grandma's laughter and gentle guidance, Lucas used the positive emotions and remembered sounds as a virtual metronome to adjust & tune both synesthesia and auditive sensibility before joining another pass of arms with his mother.

(Star Wars Symphony – The Imperial March)

The four persons gathered in the living room heard the ominous, militaristic footsteps coming towards them, stopping at the closet which opened and closed in short order. A few seconds later Lucas emerged into the room, completely dressed as the moment he had set foot in the house, but with two differences: white gloves on his hands and a pair of thick solidly framed glasses on his face. The eyewear had a bronze colored metal frame which was much thicker than usual, clearly separate lenses that wrapped around to the side and several small jewels, amber by the look, in a discrete line from the end of one lens, all the way over and across to the other extreme side. The way the lenses were made was very specific; they covered the eyes from the sides and front from any wind or debris, like working goggles but in a stylish, decorative way.

Everyone looked silently as the five foot tall boy put on his fedora and his aura seemed to double, invading the room and demanding attention. Raymond and Cynthia shared a look of warning; they had just met The Lord of Burgundy and he was not best pleased. A polite knock on the front door with the decorative lion's head knocker brought to reality that they were now moving out. At a shout from Lucas, the driver came in, glancing over the assembly with a neutral, detached expression. Given their much more dressed up appearance, they were all coming to the hotel tonight. She would hold her opinion to herself about what that meant.

Lucas informed them that his car was big enough for nine large people so they would all embark what he referred to as "The Streetboat", his old and beloved short limousine, Lincoln Continental Towncar. Everyone took their bags and filed out while Cynthia took a last look at the house before closing the lights and arming the security system. The advanced domotics allowed her to control everything from the vestibule so she could set everything for a three day trip without worry about physically touring the whole house at the last minute. It was one of the many ideas that her son had given her, during their two years together as teacher & student, about better managing the household and their security.

A short journey begins
As they approached the car, the driver signaled them to come by the rear to place their bags in the trunk. It was wide and rather rectangular, but fitting for such a large vehicle. Raymond and Cynthia exchanged another look; at their ages, they still knew what the old expression "a three body trunk" meant about car size. This one could probably fit four adults if they were squished. Trying to ignore the obviously uncomfortable ideas, the adults dropped their bags then went to the car's side door to wait as it was still closed. The driver set the bags properly, putting an extensible electronic cable through the handles of the luggage to keep them from shifting during the trip and link them up to the anti-theft system. She then went around the side to open for the passengers to embark. She gestured to the teens, telling them to take the forward left settee so the adults could take the forward right. The Master would take the large three place sofa at the back for himself alone, as per BVL protocols. Once everyone was inside and placed, she closed and went to her side, getting in to begin the extensive checkup before getting on the road.

In the back, the four guests were eyeing the habitat with interest. It was a conventional placement for this type of car: from the back you had the large sofa with a square console on each end, then the doors on each side, then a pair of settees for two people on each side with the backrests placed against the exterior of the car, then the two separate adjustable seats for driver and escort. There was no partition wall between the front and back to allow movements, and the interior was scrupulously the same all over. Flint-blue velvet upholstery with silver trim and gold buttons accompanied by mahogany panels to cover a few extras like the mini bar, the ultra flat screen display of the computer / sound system, a few retractable cup holders & ashtrays. The dashboard was mahogany with small LEDs placed to enhance the visibility of the old mechanical dials and the gear shifter on the steering column. Everything inside spoke of understated luxury and quiet power; not like the over the top limos or loud sports cars that most of their younger clients used to flash the social status bought with their parent's money.

Lucas sat in the middle of his sofa, and opened the seat to his right by lifting the seat cushion upwards like a lid. He pulled out a hat and a stick before dropping his fedora inside, letting the lid fall back closed. He placed the hat on his head, thus showing it to be similar to an officer's forage cap, which completed his militaristic appearance. The stick wound up being a cane made of solid tempered steel covered in mahogany with a crown of eight small 1" gripping spikes at the bottom and a large, massive "L" shaped rubberized handle at the top. This tool was obviously custom made to fit his size. That it was heavy and could brutally maul the head and limbs of person or animal alike didn't escape anyone in the car.

The driver having finished her checkup, she unhooked the cabled telephone situated on the dashboard between the driver and escort sides. She waited a bit then spoke with her dispatcher, explaining her passengers and itinerary. Once she got clearance, the old motor roared to life, the inner mini-LEDs came alive, bathing the cab in diffuse greenish light that made an interesting contrast to the blue velvet. The large car was surprisingly quiet along the way, its road handling and suspension spoke of an age in the American industry of car-making when pride was put into each vehicle, and luxury meant exactly that.

The first few minutes of travel were silent as each of the guests were exchanging looks with each other and occasionally stealing a glance at Lucas in the backseat where he was positioned, ramrod
straight with his left hand on a retractable armrest and the right hand on the pommel of his cane. He looked like a king on his throne, the aura of authority that the adults felt around him had become less raw but more subtle and much more predatory. His flint-blue eyes were slowly panning left and right, taking in the roadsides and his guests at the same time in continuous movement. He was apparently content to wait that someone else starts the questions. They had an hour to pass before the hotel, so someone was bound to want to speak.

With two curious teenagers that also happened to be motivated to heal their future relatives sitting in the car, it was predictable that one of them would ask the little guy a question. Tanya decided to take the plunge since she had a knack for putting her foot in it. She asked in as stable a voice as she could manage: "What's the cane for? You don't seem to have problems walking around that I saw."

Lucas looked directly at the young woman, answering politely but succinctly: "It's more a symbol than a walking stick. The pommel is the abbreviated version of the Crowned L Conglomerate's logo but also makes it into a long nightstick like a policeman. This gives me a four foot tall steel baton to defend myself with in close quarters." He then kept looking at her with a detached, impersonal façade. He wasn't cold or repulsing her, but wasn't inviting either. The choice to continue would be hers, or theirs, not his.

Tanya looked into the spectacled blue eyes and saw weariness, not hostility, so she asked the second question instead of holding it in: "Why is it empty like a pipe? I heard it thunk on the deck when you took it out." was her interrogation.

The younger boy actually gifted her with a small smile along his answer: "That's perceptive of you. It's because of my synesthesia that I explained at dinner. Every time that I move the cane, the airflow through its length changes which causes resonances in the items and living beings in about 15 feet around. These variations are far too subtle for almost anyone else to hear, but my special hearing can pick up these small things without any real effort. If I'm walking in the dark or fighting several opponents, the phonics generated in the area by the cane will actually help me know about things around my feet or my back and guide my movements better. Anything else?" He finished with a genuine, if small, smile for her.

Derek took it as a chance to jump in with a conclusion: "That should mean that since its steel, you can bang it on objects to get stuff to vibrate and have a stronger, broader zone of resonance to perceive things, can't you? And that also means that if you hit something like a metal column in a building, you would get enough echoes to know where the walls, the stairs and the people are, no?"

Lucas laughed out loud, throwing his head back against the headrest of his sofa, genuinely amazed that these two kids could see and understand things that most adults, some veterans of war, had not seen. Yes, they would do well as a family, if they managed to heal the rift.

A nasty bit of wisdom for the road ahead

(The Godfather I – main theme)

December 24th of 2014 – Lucas's birthday
Buffalo, New York (USA)
Streets, going to BVL
Encouraged by her son's positive reactions to the other children, Cynthia waited for his laughter to cease then asked him if he encountered many situations where he had to fight for his life, like he seemed equipped and ready for. Her question left a pensive mood for a few seconds before the answer came.

Lucas thought of the way to best explain his life and needs but then just let it out: "I have never had to fight outside a gym or practice in the wild. It's all preparation for the event that will inevitably come as I'm from a very rich family, connected to the government, and now I have several holdings dipped in several shades of amoral grays, shite browns and piss yellows. Some of what I now call mine has been paid for in blood & pain by others, but was never reimbursed; those debts are gonna get called in at some point soon."

Sighing sadly, the young male explained further; "Plus, the national US statistics don't favor me, mom. First of all, two thirds of all boys are sexually assaulted in their lifetime at least once, but also one third are assaulted repeatedly for any number of reasons. Secondly, about one quarter of boys suffer physical violence from a relative, tutor or pastor in the name of discipline, in a manner grave enough to require hospitalization at least once. Thirdly, the money means that a kidnapping for ransom is the biggest threat that I face, whether myself or one of you as the hostage taken. Then there are the possibilities that someone wants to take over my hotel and other assets by forcing me to sell against my will. With so many hands raised against me in anger, I'd better be prepared to fight them back, shouldn't I?"

His blithe, deadpanned answer stunned them into a stupor for several minutes. He had an outlook on life that was far too realistic and gritty for an eleven year old. but his life didn't permit him childish illusions anymore.

Raymond whelmed his courage to ask the first important question he had all evening: "Are you moving deeper into the underworld or trying to make an exit?" The silence following the short phrase was suffocating as the child-sized baron of industry looked him over from head to toe and snorted a derisive response. "I might think that you're likable, and even that mom made a good choice with you as a future husband, but you're being much too forward. Know your station in life, lawyer. We haven't signed any contract or confidentiality agreement, and there are civilians in the cab. The contracts wouldn't cover or bind them anyways. Do you think I'd answer to that question in an unprotected setting like this?"

Raymond almost blushed at being called out publicly on his planned blunder but he had gotten the answer that was critical he obtain. Lucas would not implicate voluntarily, or by accident, anybody else in his shadier affairs if they weren't fully aware and wanted to be partners with him. That meant a sigh of relief from both adults that understood the exchange that had just occurred while the teens were looking rapidly from child to parents and wondering what they missed. Derek, especially attuned to his father's more protective nature, sensed that they had dodged a bullet as a family, and mentally made a note to ask when they would be alone. Tanya also had an inkling that the old ones had just skirted a heart attack because Lucas chose a specific moment to become obtuse and flat out rude. While he had used some few profanities at clearly chosen moments, he didn't give her the vibe of someone who swore and cussed routinely. And the way he shot down her father by invoking contracts… She was now aware of the long, deep game being played, making her shiver against her brother's protective side-hug.

Cynthia had to repress a wave of fear going down her spine; the voice from her son had changed from slightly flippant to menacing in a way that the adult defendants in some of their criminal cases hadn't been able to produce. She was beginning to see that her earlier thoughts had been right. They would have to create an airtight separation between family life and the businesses of everyone or else it would destroy them. She raised a hand to signal the teens then spoke clearly an order to
them: "Kids, this is grown-up stuff; you shouldn't be involved. When Lucas and us start to talk about those things, you will be told, not asked, to leave the room and get some entertainment of your own until we're finished with our meeting. Is this clear?" Her command left a taste of bile in Derek's mouth while his sister simply nodded her head, always prompt to obey when key words like "told, not asked" were spoken.

A kind patron's offer

(StarGate Universe – opening theme)

December 24th of 2014 – Lucas's birthday
Buffalo, New York (USA)
Streets, going to BVL

Lucas watched in detached silence from his sofa, unaffected by the byplay between the four people. They had clearly developed a very deep sense of community in his year of absence and it stuck sideways in his throat that his mother would do that to him. She had a perfectly good and functional son, thank you so very much, why the hell go look into the neighbor's house to find another kid to replace him with, damn it! Irked by his own thoughts and the pain they caused, Lucas shifted forward to open the squarish mahogany console on the left side of the sofa, revealing a mini fridge with water and juice in plastic bottles. He took a grape juice and forced himself to control his movements to not slam shut the appliance. Cracking open the seal on the branded retail bottle, he smelled the contents before taking a minute sip. After determining as best he could that it was fresh and probably safe, he drank a full quarter in one go. Resting backwards against the sofa, he dangled the bottle indolently in his left hand, the right hand never letting go of the steel cane, gloved knuckles tense and stiff around the handle.

Still miffed and not in a mood to be nice any longer, but still not wanting to come across as a boor, Lucas pointed to Derek, asking him a small question: "So kid, we talked about basic schooling at dinner. I know where you and Tanya go and all, but what do you want to do later in life? Lawyer like your father? Something else?" He took another quarter of his juice and capped the bottle before setting it in the cup holder he unfolded from the tip of his left-side armrest.

Derek was a bit surprised by the question. It was from the left field, so to speak, and had no common grounds with the rest of the evening's revelations. Probably why the little guy asked. Then the 15 year old snorted mentally; given they were almost the same size, he should try not to think about his new brother as 'little' or 'tyke' if he wanted to stay healthy. He was four years younger, true, but that was hard to say from the outside. Taking a breath and rubbing his hands on his evening trousers, the teen felt like he was being interrogated by his mom's father when he had been alive. The old crone had been nasty and arrogant, and always made it so you knew he was above you in life. Derek just hoped Lucas wasn't really like that deep down or this composite family could become hell to live in.

"I was planning to study a year of pre-med before applying to John Hopkins University to study for medical engineering. I went to the hospital a lot to visit mom and I started to volunteer two days a month at the children's wing after she died. I don't think I could take seeing people in pain all the time, but I want to help out as much as I can. I always had an easy time of it with machines in shop class, and circuitry in the tech courses, so I thought that would be a good compromise. I could heal people with machines but not actually have to be in the hospital all the time either. Maybe that makes me a coward or... I don't know what... But it's what I was thinking about. And no I hadn't
talked about it with anybody yet, you're the first to make me talk about my plans." The teen finished his answer a bit fretful, looking towards his dad, then Lucas and back to his dad, not really knowing which reaction he feared the most.

Lucas hummed to himself then stated: "You make up a written plan for your studies. Find the University's website with their list of classes; get informed about the term papers and projects they ask students to build. Make a detailed list of every important work you think you would have to do as part of the workload, then make a shorter list of personal projects you want to tackle in parallel. Ask your father and Cynthia to help you prepare it like a business plan. Someone from my foundation will contact you to send you the pre-printed forms as a PDF file that you can download and fill up on-screen before sending them back for analysis. If your plan is responsibly made with good chances of success, and your projects are interesting to support, the foundation could issue either a bursary or a low interest loan and, most importantly, a letter of recommendation to the Uni's registrar of inscriptions. I don't guarantee anything at any step of the road, but do your part maturely and honestly, and I will try to help out if it's possible."

His answer having again stunned the guests for a few minutes, Lucas reopened his juice to quaff the next portion of it. He didn't want to show it, but he had many layers of thick clothing and both the jacket and longcoat were actually padded as LBP – light ballistic body protection. That meant he got warm real fast and needed to hydrate periodically or risk getting light headed. The steady snowfall outside the car meant that opening the windows a bit was not recommended or he'd be sloshing in melted snow by the time they got to the BVL.

What drives you in Life

(The A Team – theme)

December 24th of 2014 – Lucas's birthday
Buffalo, New York (USA)
Streets, going to BVL

Tanya decided to break the wonky atmosphere left by the last byplay between her brothers (she hoped) and asked if she could take a water bottle. Getting a vague gesture in reply, she grabbed her courage and moved herself over to sit by Lucas's left side, then opened the mini fridge to root around it. Sitting up straight with her prize in hand, she was gratified to see that the boy had not moved away from her. She might have a chance to get close and try some sisterly intervention to try and stave off an explosion.

"Tell me, you said that you have a fleet of cars for your upscale clients to rent. Are all drivers women? What do they have to do to get hired? I mean, do you look for something they can do, or is there some formation, or what?" Even to her ears the question sounded lame and ill phrased compared to Lucas' excellent oration. She was starting to feel an inferiority complex forming about how much better at academics, business, politics and social niceties the kid was compared to her, despite being three years younger. She's need a pep talk from her dad after this.

"I have very demanding criteria to hire drivers for my fleet. These aren't pizza delivery mopeds run by teenagers. They are vintage luxury vehicles that carry people of power and influence, as well as the upper crust of my revenue basin. I can't afford to have just anyone take charge of one. The minimal requirements are, in order of preference, a grade 2 paramedic license or better, firefighter or search & rescue license, or mechanical certifications to work in a garage for ground vehicles.
Alternatively, anyone who has served in the military, police or search & rescue gets better chances when we ponderate the applicants and assign the interviews. We do have a couple of tactical specialists that specialize in bodyguard duty, oversight surveillance, and area-denial suppression fire in case we get to that point. Any other off colored specialties are not discussed in public unless you're the client, and the cheque cleared the bank already. I also gave orders to bonify the applications that come from military or police families specifically because these always have a hard time financially and socially. There has been a recent rash of anti-police mobs and political movements that just rub me wrong, so I want to help the servicemen as much as I can. Also, the minimal age of hiring is in fact twenty one years of age for that particular job. The physical needs are too much, and the licenses are hard to get. I have a grade 1 paramedic license since mid-December, but I couldn't handle the other requirements because I'm too small and not strong enough. Repairing a car on the roadside or maneuvering an unconscious patient for emergency treatment in the wilds isn't easy, and very hard labor. Have I answered all you need, little sister?"

His small term of endearment at the end got her all warm and fuzzy inside, until the part about her being little caught up to her ears. Tanya huffed a loud snort of teenage upset and crossed her arms across her budding chest, most definitely not thinking that he was making jokes about her development. No sirree, he was not, or else there would be sisterly retribution of the noogie type!

Derek had a full-blown smirk on his face as he joked at them:"Hey you moppets! I'm the oldest brother here! You're both half-pints okay! Or quarter-pint in his case anyways…" he finished with a finger aimed at Lucas. The boy's answering laughter was reedy but gentle, and far less cold than before. After a minute of glee, the eleven year old finished his juice, dumping the empty bottle in the trash bin in the right-side console of his sofa. Laying back more relaxed against the backrest and settling on both armrests of his seat, he said to everyone at large "It took you long enough to unwind and start acting yourselves. I'm not a monster from the ocean depths, I won't eat you. Not tonight anyways. I need to keep some place for the Yule Log at the gala. You should see what the pastry chefs came up with, it's enormous!"

A few blinks and incredulous stares later and there was an explosion of laughter in the cab as all five passengers were wracked by mirthful laughter and snorts of amusement at the situation. What a bunch of worry-warts they all were! The night was off to a good start after all, why borrow trouble when it would come all on its own soon enough.

A short journey ends

(Star Wars symphony –Arrival at Coruscant)

December 24th of 2014 – Lucas's birthday
Buffalo, New York (USA)
The Burgundy Velvet Lounge, Hotel & Spa

The driver pressed a large decorative button on her collar to activate the microphone hidden inside of it that was hardwired to the car's systems by a set of wires sewn into the uniform's insulation layer. A wire unspooled from the waist of her jacket to be plugged into the socket in her right-side armrest. This served as both a physical link to the speakers in the car so she could answer the passengers without shouting, and also as an anti-carjacking device. If the connector was removed without pressing a pair of hidden buttons, one on her uniform and one on the armrest, the car would give you exactly 2 minutes to complete an emergency bypass with one of the three command controls or it would start slowing down. In 60 seconds it would grind to a halt then shut
down the motor and electronics, except the OnStar and LoJack because these would start broadcasting an "auto theft in progress" on a hundred frequencies. The flashing lights around the car and the emergency flares that would be ejected from the front and back bumpers would complete the emergency assistance required setup quite visibly. By her opinion, her new boss took security and his people's welfare more seriously than the US infantry had, when she served in their motor pool in Bahrain for three years.

"We are now five minutes away from the Hotel's main entrance. Please dispose of all refuse in the bins and make certain that you have not dropped or forgotten something. Be ready to disembark in the following order: the two adults, the two teens, then His Excellency after them. Please wait until the hotel's doorman opens the door to get out."

The guests exchanged a few amused glances while Lucas joined hands in front of his chest and began a breathing routine to center himself for the dog-&-pony show about to unfold. He had received a text message from the Burgundy's Governor that there was media presence, that several of Buffalo's notables and local socialites were in attendance or RSVP'd to reserve a table in the Lounge for the Owner's Toast. His parents (And wasn't that a birthday-cum-Christmas present ladies and gents, he finally had parents that cared about him!) would have a surprise when they saw who had decided to honor his little person by coming to this shindig.

The car coasted smoothly to the red carpeted main walkway of the hotel's Grand Entrance under a brand new roofed colonnade slash balcony made of molded concrete and wrought iron in the olden style that Lucas loved so much. It matched well the décor and ambiance he had infused in his domain. His entire family would be surprised by the uptake in quality and service the place had gotten in the last year.

As long as they didn't look into the rooms for what went on.

The clientele was still what it was, but more discretely than before since now the minimal rental for a room was six hours or a quarter day. That did cut some of the lower scrap and kiddies just looking for a place to have cheap sex, wank or get high somehow. This slowed traffic down and made the workload of the chambermaids easier to manage. There was a lot less petty theft of towels, robes and menial utensils as well. Sending a few thieves into the dumpsters outside, at the back, with a broken leg had helped secure the place against theft, burglary, and pick-pockets as well. Idiots who couldn't learn the lesson after the third time went to the 4th basement.

One ring circus

(Star Trek; Deep Space Nine – opening theme)

December 24th of 2014 – Lucas's birthday
Buffalo, New York (USA)
BVL; Great Lobby, outside entrance

As the older gentleman in the old style uniform marched stiffly to the car and opened the right-side door, the passengers stirred to action. They had been looking like goldfish, with gaping jaws, at the two rows of uniformed valets and maids on each side of the red carpet, the assemblage of media crews and even a few local Buffalo celebrities that were loitering in the area, hoping for some camera exposure. As the family disembarked the luxurious car, a soft music began to play on the loudspeakers built into the colonnade while camera flashes surprised them. When the two teens left
the vehicle to stand by their parents, another older gentleman in uniform walked from the great stained glass doors. He slowly walked two paces ahead of an elder lady all dressed in burgundy toned robes and traveling cloak ornate in white ermine fur that leaned on a six foot tall mahogany staff with a golden disc embossed with the BVL logo at the top.

The four guests were completely flabbergasted when a crew from the Buffalo News Tonight TV program made their way to the carpet, the anchorwoman reporting the events in live feed.

"This is Manon Brookslow, social calendar and mundanities specialist here at channel 20, your local CBS News affiliate. We are here this Christmas Eve at the well known and storied Burgundy Velvet Lounge, Hotel and Spa complex, in the northern periphery of the airport district. This establishment is celebrating many events tonight all in one great gala, ladies and gentlemen. Firstly, it's the 50th anniversary of the hotel's foundation. Secondly, it's Christmas for everyone, and like all years the BVL has laid out an impressive Host's Table for Yule merriment. But the most important and marking event tonight is a changing of the guard, when the flags on the hotel will be changed tonight at midnight. You see my dear viewers, about 15 months ago, the owner, a very discrete, notable lady, who had owned the establishment for four years, made a living legacy of it. Tonight is the official public coming out into society of the new owner as well as, get this people, his birthday! Yes ladies and gentlemen, the new Lord of Burgundy has an interesting social calendar to say the least with a day of birth like that!"

Here, other news crews had come forward and placed themselves for better view. They were five crews, two dozen independent bloggers, plus social events and tourism editors from around Buffalo and New York State that were present at the Opening. After Lucas stepped out of the car, he unbelted and opened his longcoat and the jacket beneath as well, to give people a complete view of his suit and the full style that he wore. Then he took off his gloves to flash his ring and watch. Clothing and accessories were important social cues for wealth, power and personal capacities. Showing of the multi-layered aristocratic / militaristic style would give an impression of strength, order and discipline that he wanted people to associate with his management of affairs.

"And here he is dear viewers, His Excellency, The Lord of Burgundy, the newest baron of industry in our fair city of Buffalo. Look at that rich burgundy suit! Is that a uniform of some sort? And what bearing! The older gentleman you see shaking his hand his the Intendant of the hotel proper while the grand lady with the staff is the Governor of BVL Inc, she controls all the divisions and services under that branding. And yes people, that five foot tall person is the new owner! It's not a joke! Despite his youth, it was confirmed by town hall, as well as the New York State registrar of corporations and taxable entities. Let's get closer for a chat!"

The excited reporter, a white skinned brunette with green eyes, barely twenty one years old last October, had a bubbly personality that just loooved these social gatherings. There was always something new or groundbreaking to see and hear about. But the best part of her job was the people she met. This little guy was a human interest story by himself, owning the hotel was just banal by comparison.

"Excuse me, Excellency, Manon Brookslow, from channel 20's social affairs. Could we get a little bit of your time?" At this Lucas took off his cap and held it upside down in his right hand while still keeping a grip on the cane. A little self-training in deportment and manual agility allowed him to keep the baton still and grasp the bill of the cap between fingers. He then made a gesture that he had practiced in a mirror for maximum efficiency in front of an audience; he closed his eyes, took off and folded the glasses with his left hand before placing them in the right pocket of his jacket, under his opened longcoat. Then he raised his face towards the camera crew and, using his synesthesia to guide his alignment, looked straight at the reporter and opened his mesmerizing, luminescent flint-blue eyes. The poor reporter was struck speechless for about ten seconds before
she got a hold of herself and put the microphone in line with him.

"Hello Miss Brookslow, it's a pleasure to meet with you on this fine, many blessed night! We are about a quarter hour from the midnight bell and its own holier celebrations. What can I answer for you? And would you mind doing this on the go? I have to reach the mezzanine in the Lounge for the Inauguration; it wouldn't do to be late at my own speech, would it? I'm not a girl to be fashionably late!" His reedy laughter was contagious and Manon found herself laughing along him as she signaled her cameraman to follow.

"I have pulled some information about your situation and I must say that I am impressed with your accomplishments! Today you turned eleven years old, yes?"

"Yes Miss Brookslow; the wheel of time turns inexorably. We can't all age in beauty like you, unfortunately. We men folk are never lucky in that regard. But still, the last year since taking possession of the BVL was fruitful, and very rewarding, so it's worth marking its end in style."

Here the reporter was both amused and intrigued; this little guy was polite, mannered, amicable and also a damn good flirt with a choice of words that her last boyfriend at college couldn't hope to match. This interview promised to be good!

"I have it on good authority that you already have several diplomas and licenses, and you've not even begun your true education. Are you looking for other higher degrees or just a few licenses to expand on your repertoire of abilities?" She asked with a brilliant natural smile. Her easy going and charismatic approach had won stiffer, more repugnant, old crones than this guy, she was certain to get the good stuff tonight!

"I have two certificates and a bachelor already, as well as a paramedic license and a few sundries here and there. No need to bore your viewers with minutiae, humm? Besides, the future is much more interesting than the dusty old past. My immediate future this January will see me choose between Stanford, John Hopkins and Harvard in the USA. I have offers from the Sorbonne's Institut Polytechnique in Paris, France, as well as Oxford and Imperial College of London, in the UK. Several german universities in Berlin have made offers to host me, as well as one in Rome. It would seem that little old me is quite the catch on the market these days... What ever shall I do?"

He gifted the reporter with another expertly timed smile and flash of his blue eyes.

Now feeling that this kid had some media and oration training under his belt, Manon got more serious: "Explain to my viewers what you changed about this place. To those used to Buffalo, this place was known until recently as, pardon my frankness, a mid-level affordable pit-stop for those with a strong stomach and low standards about neighbors and service. That was not something to write in the Michelin Guide about."

Lucas gave her another professional Colgate smile that almost showed his molars hadn't come out yet, then answered winningly: "I changed anything that would make my mother uncomfortable coming over for a relaxing spa treatment, a lunch with lady friends, or a high importance meeting with clients and the opposing faction's delegates. I also wanted something of a better level to hold my own business meetings, bring colleagues from University like faculty or the board members of the school's perennity foundation. I really wanted to make this a familial place, but also a center of business and congress, like it was supposed to be in the original builder's plans."

"Employee hiring and retention criteria were revamped across the board; we endured a strong turnover in employees because of that, but we are far better for it. Integrity and honesty cannot be taught easily; it's better to hire correctly at the onset. Then we took the building to task with engineers and architects, sanitation experts and safety instructors, the works. We reviewed safety and evacuation plans, doors and equipments. We had hospitality specialists rate every last room,
conference hall and public restroom that clients could have to use. We contracted out a local community college to help local business and education by establishing a system of supervised – paid – internships to supply our kitchen staff with new people, fresh menu items and presentation ideas. This means that if the interns work well, they have a chance at a job here or in one of the other seven hospitality establishments that I own around Buffalo city."

"The old spa was actually badly run. It was a private company that rented the space and acted independently. They offered massages that were badly disguised prostitution. Most of the personnel had no formation on massage, hygiene or anatomy whatsoever. Now, like the hotel and Lounge, the spa, gift shop and car service are all internal to the BVL brand, operating under one roof, with one coherent plan of action. Central hiring, operating and client service guidelines are drilled into personnel then backed physically by custom-built software that runs the cash registers, inventory, monetary movements, work schedules, employee benefits, reservations and tickets, all in one massive, well geared engine of management."

Lucas turned towards the reporter to state firmly, with heavy menace in his voice that actually translated very well across the airwaves and into the TV sets of the viewers: "Nobody will ever again take down the reputation, the products, the services or the employees of The Burgundy Velvet Lounge, not while I'm alive to defend them! And it will be a cold day in bloody Hell if anyone ever calls my customers cheap sluts or back-alley scrappers again!" With his entire posture and demeanor screaming a challenge to all, it was an impressive display for an 11 year old. It was even more credible with the Governor, Intendant and Majordomo arrayed as a half-circle at his back like a retinue of private guards ready to assist him.

They finally reached the Lounge and its brand new mahogany straight stairs up to the mezzanine. Lucas guided the entourage up the two tiered flight and to the Owner's Booth at the middle of the mezzanine's balustrade, in the place of honor. The large bench with high backrests was actually a single large construction with three separate tables, each large enough for four people, placed in front to accommodate 12 persons in total. The central table was a bit more massive and gilded than the two side tables, to impress the difference between the Owner and his guests. There were no chairs on the far sides of the tables, just the passage and the balustrade so as to give the owner unobstructed view of the rest of the "O" shaped mezzanine and the main floor below. It was also the best way to serve since the massive monolith of mahogany did not permit access from behind or the sides.

Lucas guided his family to their places, together at the right-hand table. As they came to, he showed them how to unlock and open the backrest to use the wooden coffer behind the cushion as closet for their coats and purses. The well constructed piece of furniture was much more than just a trophy to showcase the Owner in public. As the Matthews and Cynthia were sitting, Lucas chose the place at the complete right of his table, placing him close to Cynthia, then gestured to the seat on his left for the reporter to take place. As the exited young woman took off her outer layers, the Governor of BVL and Intendant excused themselves to another table further along the balustrade. As the small party was almost finished sitting properly, a large and bombastic shadow towered over the group.

(Albert William Ketelbey - In a Persian market)

"Weeeell, well, well, what scurrying little blond coon did crawl out of my woodshed, I ask you?" called out a loud and obnoxious voice that commanded attention, if only by sheer force of decibels. Cynthia and Raymond were truly taken by surprise when the chief justice of Buffalo City's Courts of law, the right honorable Weddtner Freidmann Barnum, shook Lucas's hand as if he were an old friend from way back, then wrapped the other arm around the boy to pat his back loudly. His wife, Credence Millicent Tallmount and himself, were dressed to the nines for what promised to be the
gala extravaganza of the year. His suave tuxedo and cummerbund matched her small bouquet worn 
at the left shoulder just over a broach of diamonds and rubies that sparkled along the four rows of 
pearls dangling from her neck. This was high society elegance at its best, and the small family of 
four was starting to feel ever so grateful they had taken the hint and re-dressed for the occasion. 
Cynthia and Tanya were well appointed for their ages and social stations but still felt barely 
adequate. Raymond and Derek felt far less stress as they may not have a tuxedo but the traditional 
dark blue, three-piece suits with tie, pocket square and a few accessories, were meant as a go- 
anywhere solution for when this type of event got sprung up at the last minute.

As soon as the judge had sat his massive 6'4" frame down right next to the reporter with his wife at 
his left, completing the Owner's table, another notable guest came in all aflame: "Barnum you great 
lout, don't you go and monopolize that young man for the evening, you hear! Some of us would 
like some of his time as well tonight!" spoke the fiery red haired, green eyed fury that was known 
as the mayor of Buffalo City, Maureen Thelma O'Briain. A fair skinned woman of Irish descent, 
she had a temper that most public worker's unions and street gangs alike had learned to steer clear 
of in her two first terms of office. So had her poor son that she was dragging around with her 
tonight as his father, a traumatologist of high repute, was on call at Buffalo's Piety of the Sacred 
Heart hospital. The poor twenty-something was trying desperately to stay afloat and smile politely 
while having only the barest clue of what the whole shebang was about.

Since the coming year would hold a municipal election, it was fair game for the mayor to mooch 
the businesses in town for money and support. Lucas had tasked a team to do background checks 
on her entire family and close collaborators, as well as fact-check her claims and her public record 
of accomplishments. He knew that he would support her, unless she blundered or Judge Barnum 
came up with an argument against her. The chief justice was in it until he died on the bench from a 
heart attack, but mayors came and went every five years. The crusty old curmudgeon Barnum was 
72 years old and wearing it like Cynthia wore her permanente hairstyle. The long-term game 
demanded durable investments, not more enemies, so Barnum's opinion would be abided unless his 
advisers gave him solid reasons to differ from him.

The last two places at the left-hand guest table were filled promptly when the more sedate and 
personable chairman of the Buffalo chamber of commerce and his elderly mother presented 
themselves to shake hands with Lucas. Since his wife died three years ago in a botched carjacking, 
the man had become far more withdrawn from public life. It was the first mundanity of any 
importance that he was attending since her death. He spoke quietly in a calm demeanor that 
indicated to Lucas and his parents that the man was not long for public life. He would probably not 
present himself for the post at the next election, when his term expired at the same time as the 
municipal vote would be held.

The Matthews were impressed by the ambiance and quality décor of the Lounge. Everything was 
freshly painted or brand new woodwork and wrought-iron works that gave a distinctly late 1800s 
feel to the entire hotel. The old style uniforms worn by all valets, maids and waitstaff made the 
experience seem even more luxurious than their standard fare. Cynthia was mentally tabulating 
costs and expenditures while comparing with her memory of the place before Lucas took control. 
She saw that large sums of capital had been sunk into the place, but also the effect on the 
ambiance, personnel and clients was visible to the eye. This place had passed from a low-browed 
dive to a respectable establishment. She was not stupid; she knew that whores and drug pushers 
would still rent the rooms to offer services, but at least the hallway-lurkers and eyesores at the very 
bottom of the social ladder had been expelled. She and Raymond exchanged a knowing look, then 
both paid attention to the conversation Lucas was having with the reporter.

"You can call me Manon, I won't mind." The petite brunette was saying while reading the menu 
sideways over Lucas's shoulder. The boy had a full-blown smirk as he shared a look with Derek at
his extreme right. He may be eleven but he was the one with the twenty-something beauty leaning on his shoulder and whispering in his ear. "Ah! Take that brother! I'll show you how it's done!" the boy thought victoriously. After all, they weren't officially siblings yet, but it was good to see who's the real "big" brother in the batch.

Speaking to Manon he answered softly: "You can call me Lucas. I would suggest we keep things lighthearted for the evening. We could get together around the 28th or 29th of December to do a more thorough interview. It would give me a chance to receive you in my private apartment where we could speak easily without all the racket of the Lounge." With a playful smile he added as an afterthought "Don't worry about my cooking skills. I'll have room service send up a couple of platters, and I can make coffee to die for so you'll be warm and cozy by my side." He concluded and looked her right in the eyes, barely 12 inches separating them.

Manon was rapidly reevaluating both her interviewee and her options in life. Her three last boyfriends rolled into one hadn't come up to the proverbial heel of this child, and here he was making a proposal of meeting her in a cozy setting that even her most verbose male friend would be hard pressed to copy. She was going to get her "A" game out to play or she'd end up getting burned badly by this one. Even his mother and potential step-parent were nothing to sneeze at, high-flying lawyers, and not bad looking either. She now had a mountain of research to do on these people but at least her editor would take her requests seriously from now on. Crossing her arms with hands touching the crooks of the elbows, she set herself to rest comfortably on top of Lucas's left shoulder, asking coyly: "How cozy a setting are you talking about, sweetie?" he simply smiled and got up, leaving her imagination in a lurch.

The boy excused himself to pass between his table and that of the Matthews, his family looking at him wide eyed because of his interactions with the reporter. Judge Barnum's bass laughter in the background wasn't easing their minds at all. He just made a vague hand gesture to appease them, then spoke clear commanding words to a waiter that was waiting for him. The young man held up his clipboard and pushed a button on the electronic device at the top of the board. This activated a pinhead camera and microphone, just like a smart phone but embedded into the clipboard. This allowed him to relay orders to the kitchen, bar or DJ's booth next to the mezzanine's bar. This technological innovation was demanded by Lucas as a way for each staff and servant to have a panic button and camera at hand at all times whilst in service.

Within two minutes, another male waiter approached carrying a tray with a bottle and long flutes. As he began to set the glasses and bottle on the tables, the first waiter was taking wrought iron elements off the balustrade and after turning them flat on the horizontal, set them into pegs mounted on both the banister and the front of the owner's table. This simple trick of having a set of completely movable metal planks made of iron trellis gave a stable and solid stool that allowed Lucas to climb three steps and then the platform itself at half the height of the balustrade. This setup gave him a podium upon which to stand to be seen above the high balustrade so he could speak to the assembled crowd.

Taking a flute of the high quality french champagne from the Owner's Reserve, he raised the quarter-filled glass up above his head. The DJ, who was watching events through the monitors in his booth, lowered the lights as he pushed the button that would make the small electric motor pull the cord to make the old bronze bell dangling from the ceiling toll the Christmas midnight call. Then a pair of stage lamps illuminated the Podium with the new owner standing as tall and proud as five feet of humanity could do. The DJ was a showman at heart; he had, over videophone, passed many an hour of the last year speaking with and training his new boss in the arts of the scene and the catwalk. Damn! But the boy had depths of untapped talent under that blond mop! This was gonna be the Gala of the Old Year and the New Year put together! The rest of the family was good looking and well put too; that would help the group pictures during the rest of the night.
The black man, tall, muscular, and impeccable in his burgundy BVL uniform, rubbed his hands in anticipation of the media reviews tomorrow. It would be grand, and just the beginning of a long career.

Hail to the chief

(Wagner – The ride of the Walkyries)

December 25th of 2014
Buffalo, New York (USA)
BVL; Lounge mezzanine

Lucas, looked over the crowded around and beneath his podium; at least two thirds were in classy tuxedos and gala gowns while the rest had high quality bespoke suits and evening dresses. Even the younger crowd, grand-children or children of his suppliers and clients, had made an effort to dress up, though a lot wore casual business jackets and opened the top two buttons of their dress shirt to show of their undershirt and give themselves a relaxed party appearance. Some of the girls, barely above Tanya's age, were just shy of sluttish by their lack of fashion, style and poor manners, clinging like limpets to teenaged boys of no discernible reputation other than their family's money or surname. After waiting for the bell toll to cease while he evaluated the whole assembly, he then raised his flute high and clanked his gem studded ring against the crystal to signal the beginning of his allocution.

Every person in the Lounge had stopped talking at the bell and now turned to look at the person demanding their attention; their eyes followed the lights to the source of a sudden crystalline sound. They beheld the medium form in a burgundy suit, standing at the balcony, right hand on the pommel of a strange walking stick while he raised the crystal flute of champagne in his left hand over his head and tapped it with a beringed finger.

"Ladies and gentlemen, clients, visitors and personnel of the Burgundy Velvet Lounge! Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! We at BVL are most gloriously exultant to welcome you at our great gala to celebrate many blessed events in our history as they are accomplished! To our 50th anniversary and many happy returns!" He took a sip of champagne, letting the crowd roar in approval for a few seconds before continuing. "On a more personal note, today was my birthday! I turned eleven winters old, with many more ahead to get to know and appreciate you all!" Again a tiny sip whilst the crow clapped politely, covering the undercurrent of surprise and some murmurs of ill ease from anyone but his special hearing. He smirked at the Bouncing Betty he was about to drop in the plebes; "Let them bark about my age and size after this, tail-wagging dogs and bitches!" he thought savagely to himself. The money flowing into his coffers would vindicate him plenty.

"And finally, my preferred reason to give this party tonight; the renewal of BVL as a prosperous corporation, and its expansion into two prime hospitality markets. The coming week will see me sign the blueprints and authorizations for construction to begin for two new bigger and better hospitality complexes under our banner in the cities of Washington DC and New Cape Quest."

Here Lucas took time to sip a drop of champagne to let the crowd's explosion of surprise and several bursts of incredulity pass instead of fighting the people to be heard. They would peter down soon enough.

"Both will be on the shoreline with feet in the ocean thus allowing for rental marina berths and..."
floatplane services to be added as well as four helipads! Each complex will be fully integrated with two 12 storey flanking towers, one 24 storey central tower, and between them a congress center, a sports & fitness center with olympic pool and elevated running track on the balcony. All around the whole thing will be a cobbled vegetalized alley for pedestrians and wheelchairs with small clinics, health spas, beauty salons and many gift and traveling utilities shops to browse. Along with a massive three level Burgundy Velvet Lounge in the base of the main tower, a children's delicatessen in one tower and an all-day party club for 16 year olds and above in the other, several eateries, treats kiosks and a terrace bar on each tower top will keep guests fed, socialized, and entertained at all minute of their stay."

Lucas beamed at the further expressions coming from the crowd, amazement, doubts, hopefulness and contempt all mixed together. All giving him an excellent portrait of what kinds of human resources he had to work with in the context of business and social relations in Buffalo.

"There are many other features in those coming resorts; the full pamphlet is inside the party favor bags that you received at the door on your way in. By the 3rd of January, the web site will be taken down and a new one will be put in service, including the full tour of this hotel, virtual preview of the new ones, and the ability to now reserve Lounge seats and rooms or conference halls online, or get a vidphone agent to call you to guide you through our services."

As the people were now openly discussing the renewal and expansion of BVL as a profit making entity, many social affairs bloggers and editors were busy pulling out smartphones or tablets and rapidly composing articles to send off to publication. While the average persons were mostly content with things, a few at each end of the spectrum had reactions that demanded analysis. The very satisfied could become partners while the clearly miffed or outright angry would bear watching under a gimlet eye, lest they cause some form of trouble or setback.

Lucas closed his speech with a new round of seasonal wishes and came down his podium to regain his seat. He quickly put the flute on the table, close to the far edge, away from him, and picked the iced water tumbler instead. At the appointed time, waitstaff began to circulate around tables to ask for orders and offer the Holiday Merriment Special or the chef's plate of the day. Several guests ordered partial or full meals but about half were in a solid party & dance mood, so they stuck to drinks and finger food in easily portable plates allowing them to go around the tables to speak with their friends. Lucas could see almost all of this from his well appointed seat at his private booth, so he was subconsciously running statistics of attendance and consumption in the back of his mind.

Turning to the right-hand table, he addressed his pseudo family: "Again, Merry Christmas to you, and my sincere wishes of peace for the coming months. I hope we get to know each other well so that if the two houses do indeed commit an arrangement, it will be kind and supportive to all involved." His words were polite and too damn politic for an eleven year old, but after his inaugural speech, there was no one interested in trying to correct him or worse, take him to task for such impersonal wishes at his own mother and another adult. Said adults had just been schooled publicly in what happens to people who think they have a handle on Lucas and his mentality; they get shoved into the concrete mixer and get poured into the foundation that he will built bigger and better on top of.

Oh, Holy crap of a night!

(Star Trek; Voyager – opening theme)

December 25th of 2014
Buffalo, New York (USA)
After a well supplied soiree, there was a half hour of notables and dignitaries that passed before the Owner's Booth, to shake hands and get their pictures taken with Lucas. The reporter from channel 20 had gotten two mother-loads at the same time she thought; nobody but her had been interested in tonight's assignment so she walked away with interview dates with both Lucas, for a personal portrait, and the BVL Governor, to talk about the expansion projects. She would be golden with her producers back at the station for months to come, and the CBS network would want it too.

Cynthia and the Matthews were dead on their feet, their smiles held in place more by muscle spasms than real pleasantry. At 3:30am passed, it was time to hit the hay and they all were lucky it was a hotel; finding a flat surface to sleep on wouldn't be a problem. They more or less blindly followed the blond bombshell in front of them since he knew the building better than them. They got in the shiny stainless steel lift and ascended levels without a care but became interrogative when they stopped at the 12th floor all together. The boy guided them along a well decorated corridor lined with heavy mahogany doors back towards the front of the building, to stop at a door marked "His Excellency, The Lord of Burgundy" in ochre lettering on a bronze plaque. The complicated steel key-card was fitted to the mechanism that held the door handle and the kid led them inside.

The four guests were surprised to see a great room with two pocket door dividers made of stained glass and mahogany with both the kitchen woodstove and living room fireplace lit, banked to a bed of low crimson embers. Two kettles were slowly puffing steam from their place on the chains suspended above the living room fire. A decorative tea service gilded in russian motifs with a silver samovar mounted on a lit coal burner was set on the low coffee table, centered between the five-seat couch and the four settees around the hearth. A triumphal antique wood cabinet placed across the coffee table in front of the massive couch was fully open, revealing a combination of radio, short wave radio, CB scanner and ultra-flat TV cum vidphone console all fitted for a retro look. Soft classical Christmas carols and hymnals played from speakers in the cabinet and hidden around the entire suite to fit the seasonal mood.

A long wheeled serving cart had been placed away from the stone fireplace and connected to the wall outlet to keep its units working. Covered by transparent heavy glass doors or lids were assorted pitchers of fruit juice, fat-free milk, coffee cream and two gallons of fruit salad, large raw fruit in slices or chunks, crudities and salad greens. A shelf held serving bowls of many vinaigrettes, dips, english cream, hollandaise sauce and pure Canadian maple syrup. The top of the cart revealed a real treat in the form of generous multi-level presentation platters filled with many sorts of bonbons, chocolate truffles, candied fruit bits and four flavors of ice cream in two-gallon drums with an assortment of sprinkles, drizzling sauces and whipped cream in a spray can. A nice find was the cold drawer with uncooked sliced breads, bagels and muffins with butter, peanut butter, jams and marmalade, cottage cheese, cheddar, mozzarella and ten types of sliced imported cheeses from Europe. Another cold drawer held cooked but edible cold or hot french crepes and waffles to make either breakfast or dessert. This setup was confirmed by the large warming drawer containing rectangular serving pans of scrambled eggs, whole hard boiled eggs, baked beans, potatoes with onions and peppers, and several others with cooked bacon rashers, sausages, ham steaks, beef salami slices, strips of London Cut style steak and fillets of cooked & smoked salmon. Another dry drawer held an impressive array of teas, herbal infusions, coffees and chocolate drinks, all in clearly branded and illustrated individual packets that you just add the liquid of choice and condiments. The white powdered sugar, brown sugar cubes from cane, agave and fructose were neatly ordered in their bowls with utensils. There was golden clover honey in a crystal pot sat beside shakers of cinnamon, nutmeg, crushed mint leaves and crushed candy cane flakes. All in all,
it was a mobile buffet for those who had partied until the wee hours and had no clue whether a second midnight cap or an early brunch was in order. For those poor souls needing a fill-up before going to bed and sleeping off their merriment for a good 12 to 16 hours, it was a godsend.

(Albert William Ketelbey - In a Persian market)

"The many splendored benefits of owning a hotel with good staff and well equipped kitchen at your service, ye merry gents." Softly declared Lucas as he started to take off layer after layer of clothing right next to the wooden cabinet with the video screen. He was putting them on the wooden wall-mounted coat rack next to the massive furniture as he took them off. Soon he was down to his undershirt and burgundy trousers, having also taken off his belt and tools, boots and socks. The thick lush carpet around the living area was warm enough that bare feet would be just comfortable after almost 6 hours enclosed in hard parade boots. He then took off even the thermal undershirt and, now finally comfortable, made a straight line to the cart and its edible treasures.

The two teens saw the value of a good idea when it was presented to them, and teenagers are always hungry so when offered a buffet they shrugged, undressed in record time like the little guy had done, and it was a bare-chested Derek and undershirt clad Tanya that joined in exploring the goodies awaiting their pleasure. The adults undressed at a more sedate pace, supposedly because of maturity and self-control. In reality they were afraid of getting stampeded by three ravenous beasts hunting for sugary prey. Now down to their undershirts and barefoot as well, they picked up a plate and browsed the offered bounty while smiling tiredly at the banter that the pseudo siblings were maintaining as they prepared their drug of choice.

Raymond, in his late forties, eschewed the sugary things for now and used the built-in four slice toaster to make himself a smoked salmon bagel with baked beans, warmed up hard boiled eggs, bacon, salami and bowl of fruit salad. The generous layer of hollandaise sauce over everything demonstrated that Cynthia's cooking style and tastes had taken hold of him. Cynthia was also going the deli brunch route with a toasted sandwich filled with butter, salmon, bacon, salami and scrambled eggs accompanied by garnished potatoes, fruit salad and a pair of emmenthal slices. Derek showed his age and eating habits were not just a cliché but a proven fact with a monster of a plate consisting in two waffles; one topped with thinly sliced London Steak, bacon and salami then slices of mozzarella, then scrambled eggs and two scoops of beans and some maple syrup. His other waffle was heaped with candied fruit bits, vanilla ice cream and drizzled with caramel sauce. Tanya's imminently reasonable salad of greens, crudities, fruit chunks with a shy drizzle of dressing accompanied by a side dish of salmon, one boiled egg and one garlic toast was almost pitiful compared to the others. Lucas proved he was the Lord of the domain and Cynthia's own progeny by mounting a whopper of a plate; a toasted bagel sandwich with butter, swiss cheese, ham, bacon, salami and some greens drizzled in hollandaise sauce with a self-made composite side dish of garnished potatoes mixed with scrambled eggs, cut sausage bits and liberally poured maple syrup. A small bowl of beans with an oatmeal muffin served as his appetizer while another bowl containing fruit salad topped with maple ice cream, vanilla whipped cream and caramel sauce with some chocolate truffles served as dessert to his feast.

As everyone sat on the carpeted floor or settees and began to look at each other's plates, a concert of snorts and gleeful mirth ran around the room. Tanya's proud decree that men were pigs was met by a very comical three-way repartee of "I'm still a growing lad, you know?" after which everyone was eyeing Raymond as he shrugged comically, amending playfully "I never said how I was growing, or where." The next row of laughter was freer and franker than the first as the many stresses and anxieties of the day began to truly leave them. Sitting there, not really dressed for anything but one last meal and then a quick bathroom trip, all five persons valued the quiet family time and dug in with renewed gusto.

Lucas sat on the floor with his back to the fireplace, letting the glowing embers apply a soothing
massage to his aching back and neck with their gentle heat waves. He had finished his appetizer and placed his main plate in front of him when he called the others' attention to himself. "As Lord of Burgundy, I would take this moment to thank you for your kind attendance this night. As Cynthia's son, I would offer to share my tea with you. Please allow me to serve you." He then waited, hands joined in front of him, for the answers. His mother recognized the tea set as an antique from around three centuries ago, fit for a noble house in St-Petersburg; being poured tea from this was supposed to be an act by which the host honored his guests. She accepted but kept her reasoning to herself to see what the others would do. She was especially curious to see what Derek would do; she had perceived that his curiosity about Lucas had skyrocketed since he first met the boy. The 15 years old spent most of the gala soirée asking Cynthia polite, whispered queries about her son. The Matthews were not uncultured by any means; Raymond had a few clients of Eastern European ancestry and several Russian or Slavic immigrants had used his services as a citizenship & naturalization expert. He cleared his throat and answered in the best tourist-level Russian he could that he would be honored. Lucas' answering megawatt smile told its own story. Tanya being an avid tea drinker nodded politely as she was chewing a mouthful and didn't want to sound like her brother did, as a wild boar rummaging through a city dump. Derek looked the little child in the eyes for a full minute before he placed a hand over his heart and gave his host a half bow at the hips from his seated position. Lucas answered in kind with an even greater, natural smile of real joy and set to playing "mother" for his guests and, he hoped dearly, composite family.

(Sovietic Red Army Choir - Gosudarstvenny Gimn Rossiyskoy Federatsii)

The pungent smell of the black Russian tea soon permeated the room, embalming the people into a comfortable aroma that both awoke the senses but appeased the mind at the same time. The very high quality loose leaf tea was imported from Russia by boat, found only in selected shops owned by Slavic migrants or their progeny. It was an excellent beverage to go with their food and everyone drank two or three cups along the meal. Lucas began a low voiced explanation about Vratsina having found the old piece of silversmithing in a permanent bazaar in Czechoslovakia; the whole tea set was original and quite complete, with enough pieces for twelve covers. Lucas told them how he had learned to prepare and drink tea from all three of his mentors, according to their ancestral customs. He freely admitted to having become somewhat of a diva when coffee and tea were concerned. He wouldn't drink just anything presented to him, he needed to know how it was made, and with fresh quality ingredients. Instant coffee was a repugnant but necessary evil, tea from a bag was a deplorable debasement of custom, and anything from a K-cup or similar depravity was a punishable heresy that he would never lower himself to do. Better drink plain hot water straight from the tap than that!

As his newfound family was chuckling or belly-laughing at his expense for his beginner foodie mannerisms, Lucas felt peace suffuse him. He lounged back against the large thick base of stacked stones that surrounded the hearth, letting the radiated heat from the stonework seep into his weary soul to give him an inner peace that he had needed for a long time.

When Cynthia yawned right after her last bite and sip of tea, the signal was clear that bedtime had arrived. Lucas was just beginning his dessert bowl but had planned this already. He reminded them of the bathroom layout and told the adults that they could share his bed for the night. The living room setup was actually the way it was because the couch opened into a large queen-size bed while the four settees would reveal a single-person bed in each so there was ample place for six large people in here. The kids could finish (Ahem! The male pigs, you mean!) their plates leisurely without holding back the adults' need for slumber. If they wanted to talk a bit before sleep, nobody would mind. The adults found the arrangement agreeable and went around the kids to give hugs and kisses while Raymond didn't miss a chance to tweak Derek by giving him love pats to his rear to make him squirm in protest again. The poor boy was just sooo much fun the way he reacted to
Lucas was, for the first time since he had received his leukemia diagnostic, flabbergasted to the point of dumbstruck stupor. Here he was, minding his own private little business, laughing wildly at Derek’s attempts to escape his dad's loving and very hands-on embrace. He wasn't bothering anyone! But then Raymond lets the teen go and promptly pulls the five foot tall boy to his feet so he could wrap a one armed hug around his shoulders and neck while sending his right hand behind him to firmly pat his rump while planting a loud kiss on top of his hair.

Lucas hadn't had a physical proof of genuine affection from anyone since the last time Lawrence had held his hand at the hospital during a dialysis treatment, a few weeks after the marrow graft. Completely unsettled by the innocuous gesture from a complete stranger that was done quickly but gently, with the long practice of a father used to horsing around with his children, Lucas froze and then began to shiver as his brain tried to comprehend what happened to him. He could compute assault and violation, pain and humiliation, neglect, isolation and abandonment but not affection or love given freely in a genuine way. All the people he knew for a proven fact loved him and would physically show it were resting eternally in Mother Nature's womb, or had gone into exile without leaving any means of contact. He stood alone, all hands around him were raised in anger and aggression, not kindness and support. He needed help to reboot but had no means to express the necessity or the distress he was experiencing. He was alone, entombed inside his own soul, held captive by a wall-less prison crafted by his own defensiveness.

Raymond sensed immediately that the playful situation had just turned catastrophic and passed from sleepy to full wakefulness in a blink. He guided the child to sit directly on the stonework in front of the open fireplace then grabbed a large fluffy bath towel from the coat rack where the boy's clothing was laid out. He lovingly wrapped the towel around Lucas, helping him to fold up his legs at a 45 degree angle and put his head between his knees to help steady him and regulate his breathing. Making sure to keep his voice at low, scrupulously even tones to avoid scaring the little child he held onto, Raymond explained to the others that Lucas had gone into shock but would recover soon. He politely and very delicately commanded his teens to start clearing the plates and clean up the cart's mess if any. He wanted a pitcher of cold water with ice from the kitchen, chilled to the point of condensation droplets on the glassware to be cold enough. Then he asked Cynthia to unfold the couch’s large bed, it would be Lucas's place tonight as soon as he was steady and able.

Derek immediately offered to sleep with his future step-brother to wrap his arms around the little tyke and offer him a safe haven for the night. Cynthia was presently too emotional for words, especially since she didn't really know what to say, so she just hugged Derek and placed her forehead against his in sign of thankfulness. The fifteen year old was just as upset by the events and took the few seconds the affectionate gesture offered to center himself then squeezed her forearms in thanks. He sent Tanya to the kitchen to fetch the pitcher while he tackled the cleaning job around the cart. "Never let it be said that teen boys always dump the cleaning chores unto girls or live in filth rather than sweep a dust rag" he jokingly thought to himself as he did a good job of his task. He also had the bad feeling that humor would be rare in the coming days after the reaction his baby brother had just had.

Siblings, parents, and a dark dreary night

(Adrian Von Ziegler –Fatal Lullaby)

December 25th of 2014
Buffalo, New York (USA)
Lucas was able to move and go to bed after about a half hour. The calming, soothing presence of Raymond on one side and Cynthia on the other had finally anchored him enough that he was able to start a breathing exercise and re-center his mental processes. He gestured towards the coat rack and Tanya rooted around the wooden shelves piled with clothing and equipment until she found what he had signaled he needed. From the pile of belt sheathes, she took a thick rectangular pouch with a stylized emerald green Caduceus embossed on the flap. She brought it over, sitting on the end of the coffee table in front of Lucas, so she could open and search the packet under his direction. He silently and very slowly shook his head, holding out his hand; she relented, opening the pouch before placing it in his waiting fingers. He actually didn't look inside, but closed his eyes again and just moved his fingertips around the tools and small bottles the pouch held. He took out his all-purpose remedy and best friend of the last year; the multi-symptom, ginger & willow bark based Gravol. Out of a sense of despair, he then pulled out his never before used cylinder of Prozac mood stabilizing pills to help combat the shock and disequilibrium he was still reeling from. The adults were reading the labels as he opened the Gravol tube to take a single green tablet but both grabbed his hands before he could break the still intact safety seal on the Prozac.

Looking left and right at the faces of his adult family, he didn't understand the looks of consternation and fear that he saw. Wasn't it the normal way in North American and European cultures to keep kids quiet and stable by alternating punishments and drugs? His research over the web when he was much younger had indicated that the overwhelming majority of families, schools, churches, hospitals and reformatories all did the same thing: threats, then punishments by taking away necessities, then beatings of varying severity and damage, then chemical doping until the kid stayed still and silent, obeying at the beck-&-call of the adults around them. That's why he had pills of Ritalin, Prozac and Valium along the liquid Propofol in a spring loaded needle and a few others in his custom mini med-kit. He needed the certitude of being able to enact an emergency stabilization on himself before the adults around him started to get crazy ideas about how to manage his attitude or emotions instead of leaving him alone. His paramedic license number coupled with very stupidly programmed web-order pharmacies had allowed him to create and pack the kit to his specifications and needs, not what screaming trembling grannies afraid of everything in life would restrict him to.

He had no idea how to react when Cynthia, for the first time in over three years, began to cry on his shoulder, nuzzling his hair and tickling his ear with her warm breath. Raymond's firm, steadying hand rested on the nape of neck, holding in place a cold compress; that was a comforting novelty that he could get used to. That helped to cool his cranial temperature and feelings enough to restart emotional processing again. Tanya held a small glass of cold water with an ice cube in it, ready to hold it out to him if he gestured for it while Derek sat on the coffee table by her side, arms folded with his hands under his armpits as if he were trying to hug himself. As he visually took in the scene, Lucas suddenly recovered his equilibrium and then his mighty mental faculties restarted from cold-stop all the way to full awareness without warning. Blinking away furiously the fresh batch of tears threatening to leak from his eyes, the child cleared his throat loudly and very determinedly wished a good night to all assembled along with shooing motions.

There would be no more healing or soothing him tonight, and questions were not welcome as his closed facial expression indicated clearly. All four persons around him were discomfited to see how badly he recovered, and how closed off and aggressively defensive he had become. Raymond however had been expecting this all along; he silently let go, stood up, thanked Lucas for being a gracious host in lending them his own bed for the night, then made his way to the connecting corridor to wait for his lover to join him. Cynthia offered to spend the night with him but her son
politely denied needing any help. The episode of – whatever that was – had come and passed. If necessary, he had a doctor on speed dial that made house calls in the Buffalo area when hotel personnel had an emergency, either at work or home. His mother relented with a loud, sad sigh, realizing just how many rights and purview into his life she had abandoned when she sent him away without giving him a chance at defending his dignity before her. They would now have to endure and hope he asked for help before leaving for Stanford, in less than ten days.
Fourth Chapter: being loved again

Opening young eyes

(StarGate Atlantis – season 1 opening)

December 25th of 2014
Buffalo, New York (USA)
BVL; Owner's suite

Lucas woke up with a startle. That was becoming a bad habit he would need to nip in the bud if he wanted to go through his nights in a restful way, otherwise the wake-up would always cancel out any respite or peace of mind the night might have imparted him.

Slowly moderating his pulse rate into his basic breathing exercise, he carefully extended his senses while keeping his eyes closed. His powerful auditory capabilities told him the scene that awaited him upon opening his eyes. He was in the wide couch-bed, lying on his left side with a warm, sleeping body in front of him. Sound and size told him it was Derek that had served as his teddy bear for the night to help calm him into peaceful slumber, instead of the fretful, nightmare filled period of disquiet he would have endured if he had slept alone. Carefully crawling apart from the bigger and heavier teenager was easy as Derek was a lump of dead weight, and didn't even alter his breathing while the child moved. Lucas blushed a bit in the darkness, realizing just how tightly his arms had held to the teen's torso, face pressed to the warm skin of his back, like the young man was an overstuffed pillow for his personal comfort. He would really need to do something to thank him for that. It was so rare and precious to receive help like that without asking or paying, especially amongst boys, that Lucas felt a heavy moral duty to reward the gentle teenager for his kindness.

As he got up from the bed sheets, he saw that his nighttime companion wore only his regular boxers that had been his underwear the day before, but he had no recollection of when or how Derek had slipped in with him. Lucas himself had washed and changed in the bathroom without any help; he wasn't a baby or an invalid. A quick five minute shower under a hot spray had removed the burning sweat from his episode of shockiness, while the soothing waves from the new and luxurious ionic head dried him and massaged the knots in his back, neck, and the budding
migraine under his hair. He had come back straight into bed wearing nothing but the loose-fit plaid lounge pants that were his preferred sleepwear. Tanya had already been deeply ensconced in the settee-bed closest to the hearth, having drifted enough at the time he came out of the bathroom that she was no longer coherent. He had no idea what clothes or preparations she had made for sleep. Neither did he know for the adults, as they had been secluded in the master bedroom at the time, and his mental acuity had been severely mortgaged. No matter, any information on their personalities to be gleaned could be gotten later in another fashion. Besides, the entire apartment was wired like the hotel; he could review the recordings to have his answers at his leisure when it was needed.

Lucas placed back the bed sheets around Derek to create him a nice little nest of warmth then went to the wooden coat rack and shelves next to the massive multimedia cabinet. A quick visual got him the long thick terrycloth bathrobe he was hunting for. The burgundy colored garment was plush, sinfully soft against his bare skin, and allowed him to retain warmth without getting stuffy. He toed his plaid motif slippers from the lower shelf of the shoe rack, at the bottom of the assembly, and shoved his feet into them without leaning down. The loose footwear was made for comfort and being placed or removed without manual assistance. It was a perfectly designed solution for nasty mornings like today, or rough nights when he didn't even want to detour by the shower before burying himself under his covers.

Seeing the serving cart was still present, Lucas went to it for some solid sustenance. He grabbed a personal tray from the drawer holding the place settings for more formal gatherings where valets and waiters would be present. Thus armed, he went back to his old friend the samovar, seeing with pleasure that the coals had been refilled and kept alight all night. A quick glance at the small clock on the cart in passing had confirmed it was actually 14:40pm. Given they had gone to bed at around 05:30am, it was a reasonable period of rest. Serving himself some freshly brewed tea, an english breakfast variety, he took a long mouthful before refilling the cup and placing the fine silver on his tray. Back at the cart, he took a plate that he loaded with his normal morning fare when facing a long day.

An oatmeal muffing split in six parts stuffed with wild berry jam served as a starter. He then took a bowl of beans accompanied by garnished potatoes, bacon, a slice of ham steak and scrambled eggs with some shredded cheddar loosely sprinkled on top. Munching contentedly on a slice of salami he had filched in passing, he drizzled some hollandaise sauce on his potatoes and meats while eyeing the fruit salad container. His dessert had been rudely interrupted last night and Cynthia could confirm for you that one did not come between a Holt and their precious dessert with impunity! Raymond had better learn that lesson quickly if he expected marital bliss with his mother and him in the house. Deciding that yes, it would be the healthy (snort!) thing to do, he took a small bowl of fruit salad, topping it with some crushed nuts, cinnamon, nutmeg and a large scoop of vanilla ice-cream with some caramel sauce. He would naturally eat it first along the muffin before the ice-cream melted to make a soggy mess of his creation. He was a growing boy; he needed all the calories he could take in. Besides, that humongous noggin of his took about half of everything he ate, leaving little for the rest of him to use for growth. He was five feet tall already, but more height could only be good. His doctors had been adamant about establishing a dietary plan for the leukemia treatment and following year. They had surprised him by explaining how many natural sugars, oils and proteins his brain burned up per day. No wonder teenagers had such a sweet tooth while being savage carnivores at the same time!

Having obtained his bounty, he made his way towards the formal dining area and, balancing the tray with both hands, used his foot to toe the pocket doors closed. He would be able to activate the TV screen mounted on the wall next to the table without waking anyone. He could then begin to see if the news around Buffalo had mentioned his little gala from last night, and what the opinions had been. Cynthia had shown him how a reputation was just as much a tradable commodity as
wheat. You needed to sow it, grow it, tend it, harvest it, put it in a silo, then spend it wisely because if you had no reputation then you were not even worth the cash in your hand.

A being that was anonymous, or even worse, stuck carrying a bad name, would not be trusted enough by anyone to be sold anything, whether it was food, medicine, tools or weapons. You would get nothing your own hands had not created, and no one would trust your craft enough to purchase your wares, and so doing, keep you alive. In a social setting, reputation and popularity were not luxuries or games; they were the basis of survival. Across the vast expanse of human history, millions of intelligent, erudite people of good morality and great usefulness to society had been robbed, beaten, maimed or killed simply because they were unknown or disliked, and so the crowd thought it could act with impunity. The worse in all that was that generally, the crowd was right. Nobody cared, nobody stopped them from carrying out their crime, and no voice raised itself to demand justice or vengeance for the fallen. And if there was such a call, then a liberal spread of bribes or threats made them fall into oblivion.

Man, his thoughts were depressing for a Christmas day wake-up! Food! He needed to take his mind off this funk, and food was the obvious and universal remedy for whatever ailed pre-teens the world over!

Now seated in one of his comfortable, well padded dining armchairs, he took the remote, powered on the set, switching across channels to CBS-affiliate station 20 to see if Manon Brookslow's report had hit the air yet. He was quietly finishing the last mouthful of his appetizer and moving his main dish in place while gazing sleepily at the weather report, a sunny but freezing day, when the door to the area slid open gently to let Raymond step in, closing the door behind him. The adult male was dressed in a set of solid blue pajamas, slippers and a burgundy terrycloth robe like Lucas had on. His hair had obviously been combed by simply carding his hands in it. There was a fine stubble of beard around his lower face instead of the clean shaven appearance he had worn yesterday. He did seem fully awake and he was carrying a tray with food, although a more conventional amount than the systematic three course style Lucas was compulsively preparing at each meal. Blargh! It was his hotel and his food; he'd eat however he wanted. So what if he had upper class manners? (Snort! In who's reality?)

Stepfather stepping in fatherly manner

(Hymnals – Oh Holy Night)

December 25th of 2014
Buffalo, New York (USA)
BVL; Owner's suite

Raymond remembered well his mental memos from the previous day as well as the rather bad accident that closed the night. He had hoped to get a personal moment alone with Lucas and was relieved to see that he would have it with so little effort. The way the child sat, lounging in one chair with his feet propped on another while paying equal attention to his culinary art and the TV made him relax. If Lucas was at ease then they could perhaps converse peacefully without it turning into another armed engagement, like the dinner of last night at Cynthia's house had come close to.

Sitting in front of the boy to leave the line of sight to the TV screen unobstructed, Raymond could only smile at the amount of food the small child could consume. Derek had been the same at that
age; a walking garbage disposal, but without the better taste and manners that Lucas exhibited without effort. There was a whole world of difference between the two boys; Raymond wanted to understand so he could offer assistance without causing another mental collapse like the night before. Or was it this morning actually? Damned, but he hated all-nighters at his age. His body clock wasn't as reliable as when he was twenty years old, and he couldn't function with so little sleep anymore.

Thankful that the kettles of water in the hearth had been refilled at some point, he had made himself a large high quality mochaccino from one of the individual packets the serving cart offered. The aroma had helped clear his senses, and the first sip of liquid rapture had rebooted his sluggish mind to an acceptable strength for the conversation he wanted to hold. Still, as long as neither of them had finished less than half their plate, Raymond would hold his peace. He didn't want to block Lucas' appetite or cause him a stress spike that would make him nauseous. This was especially critical in light of the fact the child seemed to munch on Gravol tablets like they were TicTac breath mints, something that also worried him. So, coffee in left hand to help warm the appendage, he started to eat his rather classic assemblage of scrambled eggs, bacon, potatoes and four slices of peanut butter basted toast. It was a moderate portion for him, but he could go refill without worries. The cart seemed to have been replenished at some point; everything that had been consumed was full, and the soiled dishes and cutlery were replaced.

Lucas took the time to chew slowly on his food, giving himself the chance to observe the body language of the adult sitting across from him. The quiet, slow movements indicated that Raymond was at ease, and there was no aggressivity or anger to be found. Good, Lucas thought as he forked some sauce slathered ham into his mouth, it meant that they might get a chance to talk without having another bloody accident of - something - happening to stop them. If they were to become a complete family, they would need to start communicating at some point without causing a scandal, or digging trenches and pit-traps all around themselves. That wasn't a way to live in a family, and Lucas would be damned if he was the cause of strife in the household. Better live apart and alone, away from them, than have his presence felt like a plague.

After a half hour of companionable silence, Raymond lounged backwards in his stuffed armchair, stretching his legs, working a kink out of the right one. As he gazed curiously around the dining area for his first true look at the place, he saw the preponderance of old, vintage furniture made of massive mahogany. The methodical use of electric, gas and wood systems was actually generalized to all rooms in the suite, something of an oddity that he would ask Lucas about later. There was a large glass-fronted buffet separated in three distinct elements, the flat middle and the two round consoles. It was an incredible showpiece of cabinetry and glasswork. The fine hand-painted china set and the ensemble of sterling silver flatware exposed behind the glass panels were exquisite, giving the impression of a display case in a museum or a jewelry store. It was obvious that most of this was from the original constructors with a few touches from the Lady that had owned the place before gifting it all to Lucas. It was an incredible generosity that boggled the mind of the experienced attorney, even though he had executed some dicey wills in his time, just never an estate of this size and complexity.

Taking an active interest in Lucas, he saw that the child was finishing his meal at a sedate pace, not rushing himself, and clearly not uncomfortable from his presence. Clearing his throat, Raymond began the conversation and hoped the child would respond positively to his words.

"We have never met or interacted before yesterday, so I can understand if you tell me that my opinion is presumptuous or displaced and that I should be silent. This is your dwelling and place of business therefore I will respect your decision, as I know that you would respect Cynthia's house or mine if you accepted our invitation and visited us." Receiving only a neutral expression in reply, the adult swirled his coffee slowly as he lined up his thoughts. He had quickly found out that
speaking to this boy would always demand a sustained mental effort, and now doubly so, because of the delicate subjects he needed to broach with him.

"Firstly, I wanted to thank you for your clear and visible efforts yesterday, at Cynthia's house. It was obvious that you cared about her when you sat by her side and offered emotional and physical support in her moment of need." He looked the young child directly in the eyes to convey his frankness: "You acted as a truly good son, and I thank you for supporting my friend when she was in crisis. She may be your mother, but given the estrangement of the last year, there was no expectation on her part that you would be forgiving, much less cooperative, or willing to give of yourself so much to help her. You proved to me that you are a much more mature, stable, and reliable person than Lawrence, Noyce or even Cynthia in her turmoil, had led me to expect. I find that yesterday's dinner was not wasted time for my family, and the friendliness you extended to my children, carefully reserved though it was, makes me glad to have made your acquaintance. We Matthews are richer and better for having met you." He concluded with as pleasant a smile as he could give. It would be up to Lucas to decide where he wanted to go from here.

Lucas silently placed his utensils in his empty plate, setting everything he had used in the tray which he pushed aside to his right. He got up, turning left towards the kitchen area where he took an oversized covered thermal mug made of stainless steel, placing it on the dispensing tray of the counter-top espresso machine. The professional grade appliance would be at its proper place on the bar of a high-class Italian bistro. It offered about three dozen various choices of coffee, chocolate and tea based drinks, either hot or cold; he just had to punch in his choice. The machine did everything, from grinding the beans or leaves appropriately, mixing multiple beans, leaves or powders; then it created the milk froth and disbursed condiments, all fully automated. The boy selected a variant of the cappuccino with some caramel and nutmeg to sweeten it a bit, setting the dial to 'large' to fill his day mug. As the machine produced its aromatic bounty of liquid solace, he thought about the very considerate words spoken to him by his adult guest. It was obvious Raymond wanted to establish a durable peace between them, but he suspected that the older man wanted more. Perhaps a real emotional connection? A friendship? Further conversation would enlighten him.

Back in his chair, feet up again, Lucas held his precious mug with both hands, close to his chest as he smelled it, then drank a small mouthful of percolated vitality. Raising his eyes to meet head on the calm gaze of his brunch companion, he gave a simple nod; even his many languages and oratory skills were not supplying him with something intelligent to contribute. Without knowing what the man's endgame was, he could not simply answer. Raymond would have to commit himself to his course of action much further before Lucas gave a verbal answer and bound himself to words and deeds that he could not undo.

Sensing the boy's mood and his reasoning, Raymond took a swallow of coffee then continued on his mission: "I find myself indebted to your kindness for the way you spoke to my children and me, inviting us to participate in the conversation after dinner was over. Your openness and the welcoming, polite acceptance, of our persons proved quite more civil than we had any right to expect. We were intruding into your own home, blocking you from having a proper homecoming and reconciliation with your mother. Anger, or at least resentment, would have been a natural reaction, and I for one would not have blamed you. Instead, I find that I respect you a great deal for your aplomb in the face of doubt and adversity. I hope that both of my children can learn from your example in the coming years; it would help them grow into better members of our shared community if they did." Here he took Lucas's example, going into the kitchen area to use the massive automated barista, bringing back a brimming cup of mochaccino with a dash of froth and nutmeg. It was the holiday season after all, it wasn't like he would drink this at home or even at Cynthia's; both of their machines were woefully outclassed by this beast.
Lucas watched as the man moved around with the slow, sedate pace of someone who was not hurried to get somewhere to get something done. He had all day for this talk, and clearly wanted to have it while they were in peace to speak freely without witnesses judging them both. He probably thought, rightly so, that Lucas was embarrassed by this morning's breakdown and subsequent brusque attitude. Mentally humming himself a season's hymnal while translating the lyrics in Hebrew just to keep his mind busy with something to do, Lucas waited until the man was sitting with his own version of liquefied paradise in a mug. At that point he made a deeper nod of his head along with a vague hand gesture which could be interpreted as acceptance or an encouragement to continue. Raymond took it as both.

"The moral judgment and philosophical stance that you took about Lawrence's decisions concerning WPP have, quite frankly, astounded me. I don't think that 1% of the young people in our Law faculties or Divinity colleges could come up with the reasoning and interpretation you spelled out so eloquently. Your refusal to repudiate the teachings of your grand-parents, as your father so clearly did, speaks very well for your character and personality." Raymond picked up a small bit of remaining toast, now cold but still edible, and munched it thoughtfully, taking the time to look at the child, trying to see some sign of his thoughts. Unfortunately, Lucas had learned to be a marble statue at a very young age from three masters of the art; then he went and learned from his parents on top of it. There was nothing to see and Raymond was getting the gist of where things were being led. Lucas wanted to see the whole game plan before he began to participate in the conversation, becoming bound by the words spoken, just like any lawyer would do in an intense meeting. "Nicely done, kid" he thought silently.

"The car trip here was an eye opener of its own kind. As a father, it gladdens my heart when someone compliments my children the way you did. Your answers to Tanya were reserved but polite and you very clearly think well of her to have accommodated her questions the way you did. However, it was your offer to Derek that set me back to wandering if you could comprehend the value of what you offered him. Besides the monetary aspect, which I am sure you do understand as well as any professional does; it's the publicly stated validation of his dreams and projects that made the entire soirée worth it to me. The emotional balm that you gave his soul, that was a priceless gift. You acquired my friendship at that moment, and I will not forget the why."

Lucas looked embarrassed for a second before schooling his features back to a relaxed, less artificial stance than before. His reedy voice piped up: "Derek is a nice guy. I was happy to guide him a bit towards what he needs to become the person he can turn into, if just given a chance to try. Plus, if his projects are good, the advances in medicine will help everyone, even me at some point. Having been hospitalized for critical care recently, I can attest the importance of supporting talented young people who want to try their hand at entering the medicinal sciences. It was no hardship and hardly worth complimenting me about, especially since it's mostly others who will actually do the paperwork and effort. I just lend my name and trademark to it." Lucas looked at Raymond curiously. To him, some of the things being said were banal, he would not have wasted time on them, but the older male seemed decided to perceive some value or better motivation than what the boy has felt or expressed at the time. Perhaps a differing perspective like this was what he was missing all along to help re-balance his emotions and his evaluation of his life.

"Lucas, you might think that way now, but when you have children in your care and someone comes by, making an unsolicited offer of help like you did, then you will understand what it feels like, and why it is important for me to thank you properly. Please don't put down the value of your gift or demean your inherent kindness. You deserve better than to be treated like that."

Raymond's tone was truly kind but the underlying firmness told Lucas that the man's opinion was made and he would not be swayed. The child was unsettled. It had been a good long year since an adult that might deserve respect had 'corrected' him like this, with a balance of honest gentleness
and solid belief that would not compromise because it was a question of moral judgment. Raymond saw him as worthy and that was it. Still uncertain of the whole conversation or the man before him, he fell back on that despicable habit of humans everywhere; he shrugged to indicate he wasn't completely in accord but chose to keep quiet. "Well, you do that one just like every kid I ever met. Let's have an eye roll now, and see your proficiency at that one." Raymond's humorous dig surprised Lucas who found himself smiling wide before he could comprehend his reaction to this stranger. The adult clearly had an agenda, but maybe it wasn't a hostile one.

"Did you know, Lucas, that the Gala was a real treat for my kids? They rarely get invited anywhere because I'm not important enough to warrant a ticket or even just a standing spot. What you did, having them at the Owner's Booth like that, was a class act. Again, I find myself thankful but unable to show you how much because I don't want to pass a boundary and have you disjunct like last night, when I tried to be playful with you, the way that I do with Derek and Tanya. I honestly had forgotten your warning at dinner about being touched and needing time to acclimate to your presence. The fault was mine alone, and I apologize for the trouble I caused you." Here he stopped speaking and waited. Everything depended on the reaction the child would have. With the hope of a composite family hanging in the balance, he wished that he had been genuine enough to pass along the message of emotional support and acceptance that Lucas needed to hear to start healing his wounded soul.

Discussions about families and positions

(Hymnals – Ave Maria)

December 25th of 2014
Buffalo, New York (USA)
BVL; Owner's suite

Lucas was looking into his mug as if it would reveal the secrets of the universe. "In granulae Java veritas, indeed" he thought ruefully, bemoaning the absence of divine revelation. He needed some time to think and was hopeful the adult wouldn't press him for an answer in short order. Lucas might be linguistically gifted and a brilliant orator, but managing and expressing his personal emotions was still a chore. The year he spent in Lawrence's care was not helpful in maintaining human contact, turning him into an isolated loner by the force of events. Since he was a very sociable, empathic child, it had been an excruciating ordeal. It resulted in his developing an unnatural habit of withdrawing and avoiding contact with people for fear of how bad it would turn out the next time he was forcibly isolated and his friendships were broken. Here, with this person that he did not know, he was forced to evaluate the risks of abandonment versus the benefits of creating a new soul-sustaining bond that he desperately needed. He was truly sick to his body, mind and soul of always being set aside in a box, sent away in exile, or just plain forgotten by everyone.

Nose still turned down to his coffee, Lucas spoke in a low doubtful voice: "What do you want from me?" he asked from the adult. "Nothing is free in life, and nothing worth having is cheap or painless to obtain. Some things even cost you blood and misery to keep hold of. So what do you want and what's the price? What am I expected to pay for this?"

Raymond sucked in a breath in surprise; that was faster and much more direct than he had expected. The phrasing stunned him; the child obviously had bad experiences if he already knew of the costs of life and survival. Then again, you couldn't acquire a title like "The Lord of Burgundy"
without giving of yourself to the Forsaken Altar. Something, somewhere wanted its pound of flesh for that event to happen, and the payment would not be cheap or pleasant. The lawyer passed his gaze over the glassed buffet, letting his eyes move and feed information to his mind in an attempt to find an inspiration as to what he should say. For an 11 year old, Lucas was an impressive person and a monster of an intellect, but at the same time, his emotional situation was unbalanced. That was the angle, but it could explode in his hands if not carefully presented.

"Let's put our cards on the table and play this frankly. I want my children to love and respect me as a human and father. I want Cynthia to be happy by my side, married or not is not important for me at this time, just her continued presence. That means that, by extension, I need to establish a durable relationship of some sort with you. The reasons from Cyn's side are obvious; she would not want another Lawrence-type personality in her life - or yours. For my children, they are used to my character and attitude, yes, but would not tolerate that I develop some evil stepfather type of situation with any child. If I am to be a parent, or even just an adult that you refer to when you are in need, then there must be some form of accord and respect that is more than toleration of our mutual existences. The cost of this will be, like any family, some relinquishment of personal space, privacy, autonomy and perhaps you will have to - bend a bit - to accommodate the group's needs. I can guarantee that you will not bear this cost alone and we will all, including your mother, do our share of adapting, considering your necessities and desires along ours."

Lucas sat straight in his chair, his hands clasped around the mug as they rested on the table before him. His entire body language had shifted to indicate full attention and serious consideration. This was a clear and concise proposition to negotiate a living arrangement for the family with him included. He would need two things before he proceed to kick this into high gear and get the dogs-of-war involved. "What are your final intentions towards my mother and me? What arrangements have you made with Cynthia concerning Derek and Tanya for their placement in case of parental incapacity?" The question was asked in a carefully neutral tonality, with an expression like carved alabaster on his face. The child's body language was so controlled and constricted that Raymond thought the few FBI agents he had worked with would not be able to read anything from him. "Note to self; take the damned police profiler class at the security academy - ASAP!"

"Again, as I said yesterday, that is for the lady to decide if she wishes to discuss these things as they are intimate to her. My intent, for my part, is to be by her side in one capacity or another as long as she will accept me. I will not stay with a person whom is hurt by my presence, hurts me or we just tolerate each other. I want a healthy, respectful partnership with an equal, not a daily contest of wills and bad tempers. And I am not blind or born from the last rainfall, Lucas. Your question about my children in case of my incapacity has more subtexts and understatements then there is small-print legalese in an insurance contract for patients in long term assisted-life facilities."

Lucas did not physically react; he just stared detachedly at the man who was presuming to dig himself a place in his mother's life while she had attempted to boot him out of it. He would not give him any help or indication of his preferences. If the guy was actually perceptive enough to see the non-spoken questions, then he should be intelligent enough to craft answers for those items and speak out. He was a damned lawyer, and a specialist in personal rights, social status, citizenship, naturalization and immigration. He should be able to handle a basic discussion of principles concerning the recomposition of a family with new heredity lines, parental authority and custodial guardianships in it. This was the man's daily bread; Lucas would not butter it for him. Let him prove he was competent and deserved to be regarded with respect as a professional, then he would see about what type of parent or guardian he could get out of it.

Raymond sighed in relief; the child's placid demeanor was actually a good thing for him; it meant that Lucas thought he was interesting enough to listen to, yet harmless enough to not react
defensively. Now for the part of the discussion where anything can happen since he was clueless as to what Lucas actually wanted or hoped for. He had no choice but to charge ahead.

"Very well; my agreement with Cynthia to date is that in case of my temporary incapacity she assumes legal custodial guardianship of both children unless they have reached 18 years old as per the age of majority in the USA. In the event of permanent incapacity or death, the same applies, but with the option legally written into my testament if she wants it, to discuss with each child whether to adopt them. Each teen would have the right to agree or refuse individually, as per the family law of New York State and the federal jurisprudence in place over US territories. Cynthia was supposed to discuss this with you as a fail-safe, in case Lawrence forgot you, misplaced you, or just exiled you somewhere then abandoned you. The real question you are dangling before me is more about what your status with me would be. Cyn and I have begun speaking of marriage and, pursuant to this, possibly mutually adopting each other's children so as to grant each of you an extra layer of legal and familial protection. I have offered it to Cynthia, and I was waiting for an opportunity to speak with you at some point."

Not seeing an explosion or any sign of repugnance or negativity, Raymond forged on: "As you are aware by your own legal formation, State and Federal laws declare clearly that children 11 years old and above MUST be consulted by social services and the family court judge before placement is determined; these include family recomposition, foster care, orphanage and adoption. The judge is not held to follow the desires of the child before they are 14 years old, but after that their opinion must be recorded in the files during the trial or placement hearing. A child with money and connections might actually know enough to take a lawyer for himself, then petition the court or interject appeal of a decision rendered. Normally, any child under 18 would either obey the judge blindly, or seek social and legal support from a group like a church, or a nonprofit organization that helps homeless and victimized children to combat the decisions of a bad or biased judge. Was my answer complete enough for your need?"

Lucas made his first facial expression in a while by closing his eyes and letting his mind wander along the words he heard. Using his eidetic memory to recall while activating his synesthesia at its best level, he felt and read each word, sentence and emotion in the man's speech patterns. The conclusion was that the offer was genuine, done out of real care for a child that he saw in dire need of assistance for survival, and some parental guidance for his everyday life as well, since he had precious little of that. There was no aggressivity; no simmering anger, no sense that the offer was contrived or made by a sense he would look bad if he didn't propose this in counterpart to what him and mother were discussing for the two teenagers. He opened his eyes to focus on the man with the sort of glare that business people reserved for beggars and suppliers seeking to hike their prices while holding back a critical delivery.

Raymond could not help the shiver that ran down his spine when the child turned those blue death rays he called eyes towards him. It was unnerving how this five foot tall kid dressed in plaid and terrycloth could pump out menace like a patch-bearing rider in a biker bar that just saw you scratch his ride with your keys. The desire to run for his life was nudging him to cut his losses and run for home with the kids lumped over his shoulders like potato sacks. Then something truly weird happened; Lucas gave him a megawatt smile of true, genuine happiness and asked him if he wanted to play the wallet game. What the hell happened here?

Sleepyheads, assemble!

(Hymnals – O Christmas Tree)
Derek Matthews was content; he was resting on a much softer and plumper bed than he normally did, had a few covers more too, and he was warm like a summer morning on the back porch, just before the noon sun reached zenith on the horizon. He would have stayed buried under the bed sheets quite satisfied with his lot in life, with just his nose poking out of the textile mound for some air, when the twin enemies of all sleeping teenage boys the world over prodded him mercilessly. His nose picked up the odor of freshly brewed coffee which signaled his primitive instincts that yes, the time to fuel the engine had arrived. This unfortunately brought him into a semi-wakeful state where he felt the other problem, a pressing need for a bathroom in urgent delays or he would have an accident in his sleep.

Grumbling about the cursed unfairness of it all, he fought to reach full wakefulness then pulled himself wretchedly from his warm bliss, sighing in relief when his feet touched the plush carpeting. The fireplace had been kept alight all night so the mass of stonework had radiated its life bearing gift to the entire living room, including the blessed rug. Derek still shivered from the neck down to his feet as he was very scantily clad, covered only in thin flannel boxers and no body hair to speak of. Still, the basic necessity of hauling hide to the restroom was pressing and he barely thought to grab his overnight bag from his side of the bed before running to the toilet cabinet.

Now that he was sat on the common man's throne, Derek relaxed enough to take advantage of his enforced situation to root into his bag to find his sweat pants, long sleeved 4-seasons t-shirt and some thick winter socks. He never wore slippers, even at home, but didn't have any objections to staying in the living room for the foreseeable future to spare his feet any chill. He also pulled out a medium weight sweatshirt with hood and two-handed pocket on the abdomen. While he didn't really like the thing, it was warm and practical to keep in his travel bag in case his scout troupe had to camp out unexpectedly, or the family went to an uncle's place and they were missing pillows or blankets.

Looking at the cabinet now that the pressing matters were dealt with, he saw that it was actually a combination toilet, vanity, mirror, and a special bathtub with high wall and door that opened inwards. It was completed by full glass walls and three visible shower heads, two mounted and a corded one. Derek had seen TV ads of such things; it was a hip-height sitting tub with a plastic bench and handrails for the elderly or the handicapped. That explained why the door opened all the way to the floor tiles, to allow a person with a walker or wheelchair to maneuver inside. The setup was simply adjusted to also serve as the standing shower. He knew from having used it last night, during the meal, that the other cabinet held a massive two-person soaker tub with a mini sink & mirror built into each side of it. It also had a vanity and toilet that were identical and placed the same, only the bath differed. The conclusion, after remembering Lucas's story about the huge twin walk-in closets, was that the setup was to accommodate the two adults at the same time when rushing their preps for an event. That, and it helped to keep large gatherings happy when you didn't have a lineup for the facilities.

After washing his hands and splashing some warm water on his face, Derek got dressed for the cold and was picking up his bag when he noticed the glow behind the cast iron door besides the vanity that indicated live fire. Kneeling down on his right knee and steadying himself with both hands, he scrutinized the interesting contraption from up close. He quickly realized it was a mechanical system completely integrated into the wall, hidden behind the thick mahogany panels; an old wood-burning heater to feed warm water to the bathing system. Whaddaya know! Those
things were neat! He'd seen some on TV, in shows like This Old House or a few others, dedicated to restoring vintage properties back to how they were built. He would ask Lucas about it.

As he left his cabinet, he encountered his sister, wrapped in a thick bed sheet, slowly shambling her way to the other cabinet like a zombified girl, mobile but not fully aware. Her lack of reaction at his gleeful cackle when he noticed her extreme case of bed head convinced him that she would take some time yet to be accounted fully human. Oh, the joys he could have pranking her! He would be a very poor older brother if he didn't do something to her night bag or bedding since she had the habit of going back to sleep for up to an hour before really getting up. And sisterly shrieks of outrage were such a way to start the day; it warmed his impish heart just to think about it. Besides, the worse dad would do is wag a finger and tell him not to be surprised when she retaliated. Snort! They'd be lucky if dad wasn't rolling on the ground, laughing himself into a conniption at their expense. Loving father, that man; really he loved them both so tenderly. Snort!

Derek pulled a small item from his bag as he went to drop it by the bedside. Tanya's surprise would be small but amusing, and would last only a minute or so when triggered. No harm, no foul, and no humiliation. Their parent's rules for pranks had been drilled into them since birth and he would abide, especially since he despised bullies of any type. He would not be bullish or mean spirited to his sister, but a little sibling ribbing was in good humor. Besides, his little scamp of a sister could play dirty when she wanted, and he'd gotten it good over the years. She was hardly a defenseless little daddy's girl, no matter what she made you believe!

Placing the body heat activated dermal patch in place at the foot of the bed, well away from searching hands, he replaced the covers and straightened up just in time to see Cynthia leaning against the doorway to the median corridor and the master bed. She was grinning at her soon to be step-son and wagged a finger at him in playful admonition for his prank at Tanya's expense. He noted with great amusement that she made no move to stop him. Instead she walked over to him and placed a loving arm around his mid-back and guided him to the service cart. Her long night dress and burgundy terrycloth robe shushing dully against the carpet as she moved.

Wearing a truly bratty smirk of satisfaction, Derek allowed his mother figure to lead him to his natural destination of choice: free food of the self-serve variety. He was a growing boy; he needed proteins and vitamins and all the good stuffs to built up some muscle mass, or he'd stay a thin little fence post all his life. His grin only got bigger when Cynthia poked his ticklish belly with her index and threatened to spank him if he pushed Tanya so far it caused a scene while they were guests. The threat was rather funny because the good humor between them meant that he knew she was just pushing hot air to play up the firm parent shtick. For a pair of lawyers, the two adults in his life were sure easy to read sometimes! And not particularly serious either. Weren't lawyers supposed to be drab and dispassionate?

Cynthia enjoyed the few seconds she had her arm around Derek as the teen was a kind gentle child and very good company. She never admitted it out loud, but he reminded her of Lucas a lot, before his tenth birthday and all the changes it brought. She did know that she had accepted him into her life along Raymond far too rapidly for it to be healthy; he was her placebo to replace her own son and that was not good. Not for her heart, and certainly not for her real son who had not done anything to deserve being banished from her life and soul. Still, Derek was easy to like, and comforting in his love towards her, the filial bond establishing almost as fast as she consolidated her relationship with Raymond. It was true that Tanya was just a pace behind his brother in how fast they had connected, but still. She knew she would have to be careful of both young boys' emotions and equilibrium when she started working on repairing her link to Lucas. She wanted to recover the old without sacrificing the new as she had realized four or some months ago that she really needed them both to feel satisfied as a mother. Each of the three children brought something to her heart and, after last night's dinner and gala, she knew she had a moral obligation to try and
rebuild her torn bond with her birth child. It's just that the task was so daunting she felt afraid to undertake the project by herself, but she had no idea how to ask for help and wasn't sure that Lucas would tolerate outsiders. He had always been a very protective boy, truly territorial in how he defended his relationship with her. She just hoped there would not be conflict between Raymond and him. But then again, Lucas had depths of intellect and shades to his temperament that they didn't even know about. Sigh! Time would tell; nothing to be done about it.

Derek sensed her mood so he decided to take it upon himself to try to lighten up her day. Seeing the clock on the serving cart said 15:07pm he calculated they had slept for a bit more than 9 hours. It was a good period of sleep and sufficient to be well rested from yesterday's events. It also explained the yawning pit in his stomach. He told Cynthia that he had his belly and two hollow legs to fill up so she better not stand between him and the buffet cart, he didn't give any insurances for her safety if he got a craving!

Cynthia's answering smile and gentle squeeze to the back of his neck was all the encouragement Derek needed to pick up a tray and start fixing another monster plate to satisfy his gurgling stomach. A large base of scrambled eggs, garnished potatoes and mixed chopped meats were quickly layered with some grated mozzarella and an unctuous layer of hollandaise sauce. A pair of buttered toasts and some raw fruit slices with some maple syrup to dip them in completed his first course. He promised the adult by his side to eat slowly and with good manners; he didn't want to block his appetite and forgo his second serving!

Cynthia's peals of laughter rang in the living room just as Tanya shuffled back from the toilet and plumped herself back into bed without so much as a glance at them. She kept her attention to the bowl of beans on her tray as she began to fill a plate with bacon and ham steak, potatoes and a pair of cold hard-boiled eggs. She chose herself an oatmeal muffin since they were available instead of the usual bagel. Seeing Derek dig into his plate already was making her gut growl in hunger. As she finally sat on the end of the couch-bed beside Derek, Tanya suddenly shrieked in outraged surprise, then practically started burrowing head first through her bedding like a mole.

"Derek Logan Matthews! You nitwitted ninny! I'm gonna get ya! How dare you cut off my sleep after the night we had?" Her towering rage was truly magnificent to behold and her teenaged brother was fighting the urge to just drop on the bed and laugh himself hoarse. "You're gonna regret this, I swear!" she shrieked again as she threw him a pillow which he ducked while protecting his food tray with both hands over it.

The pocket doors to the dining area opened and they saw Lucas and Raymond coming out, openly amused at the noise the two siblings were making. Tanya held her discovery up for everyone to know her brother's crime; a dermal patch that became very cold when activated by body heat. The thing is, this model is used to fight migraines and fevers, so the hotter it was, the colder it got. And Tanya's bed was quite the toasty setting indeed. She got such a cold spot on her calf it hurt almost like the beginning of ice burn, as if she were to hold a Popsicle in her bare hand for ten minutes!

Since the adults were very much not interfering in this fraternal spat, she actually turned her doe eyes to Lucas to see if some sibling charity was possible from his side of things. "Luuuccccaaassss! Derek's been mean to me! You're the host, make him stop! Pleeeaaase!" She half cried, half simpered to see if she could get a reaction from the cadet of the group.

A family at long last

(The Eagles – Hotel California)
December 25th of 2014  
Buffalo, New York (USA)  
BVL; Owner's suite  

Lucas looked at her with a face that looked like he was constipated but unaware what was wrong with him. Resetting his face to neutral, he shook his head, looked the adults over to see them cackling gleefully, then decided that the better part of valor was abstention. Ignoring the shortling boy and pleading girl, he made a line to the cart to plate up a warmed up waffle with fruit salad on top, sided by bonbons, topped with a large ball of vanilla ice-cream and dripped caramel sauce. He also decided that his growing body could use something more, so he took some bacon and salami slices on the side with a small bowl of beans. Bringing his new tray to sit on the couch-bed beside Cynthia, he grabbed a new silver cup and filled it from the samovar. He had the feeling he would need fuel for his motor sooner than later.

Raymond also took another plate but much smaller, just a plain oatmeal muffin and some side meats to munch on. He did pick up another packet of mochaccino which he promptly fixed up since he could see his kids were in shape to get up and have at it already. He chose to sit on the end of the settee-bed beside Tanya so as to act as a buffer between the siblings until they cooled down. His daughter shot him a look of betrayal as she went to get herself a tray. With this much noise and activity, going back to sleep for an hour or three was a lost cause.

Lucas was swirling his tea thoughtfully while he chewed a rather sizable bite of his waffle and fruit sculpture. The ice-cream would give him brain freeze if he didn't keep the hot beverage coming in. Receiving a playful grin from Derek for no reason he could discern, the child answered with a polite smile of his own but was still somewhat confounded as the events of last night. He decided to follow the advice that the shrink at the WPP village had given him; when in doubt or ignorance, ask someone for help.

"Hey, Derek, why did you sleep in the same bed as me last night? There were plenty of others around." Lucas asked politely but his confusion was plain for them to see and feel. The teenager raised a finger to point at his full mouth and took the few seconds to chew and swallow before answering. "Kuz ya needed someone with ya. By the time I got back from the cabinet you were tossing and turning in your sleep already. So I told myself it wouldn't hurt to try and hold you. I got in the sheets behind you and like a miracle ya went stiller than a tree. I just kept at it and fell asleep in there. You okay with that?" The teen asked, afraid he'd passed through some boundary or caused another breakdown when the kid woke up. Since he wasn't in shock and his dad seemed to have been talking to him quietly in the closed dining room, he hoped he hadn't done anything bad by accident.

"No, its okay; just surprised me to wake up with another body in my bed. My ears wake up before the rest of me, so the effect of your breathing was weird to listen to. It just never happened before so it kinda of froze me awhile, but I'm okay now. Just one of those things I gotta adjust to, with real people moving around me instead of just the vidscreen. Living at WPP village wasn't a social outing. I was isolated almost all the time except for therapy, gym and the paramedic classes. So I have to get used to people again. Thanks for your help; it really did me a lot of good." Lucas's simple but heartfelt words made Derek feel warm all over. It wasn't easy for boys his age to express that kind of feelings in public, and receiving compliments wasn't always easy when it was that personal.

Tanya brought her food back to her spot next to Raymond and also served herself some tea from the magnificent samovar on the coffee table. She didn't want to admit it out loud, but she did feel a
small needle of jealousy when she thought about all that wealth having just been given to Lucas for no real or discernible reason. Why had it not been them who got this? And why was it all given to the child rather than the competent adults in his life? Well, to Cynthia at least; she could guess realistically that Lawrence would have sold every last nut & bolt to abscond with the money to finance his damned hole in the seafloor. It just boggled her mind and she didn't have a clue why, or how, to approach her problem. She just knew it was hers, not someone else's.

Raymond watched his daughter pick at her scant brunch as much as she ate it. The thinly set plate of scrambled eggs, smoked salmon, garnished potatoes and a toasted buttered bagel with a few fruit chunks was a light portion even for her. He kept a constant watch on her habits for fear that she would get sucked into the nasty habits of dieting or worse, bulimia or anorexia, that were peddled by hordes of jealous, spiteful little bitches in schools or social media. On a regular day, she ate about half of what Derek could put away. In a situation like today, with stress and some other factor weighing on her mind that Raymond could not guess at, she was down to about 1/6 what her brother consumed. It worried the older male but he knew that now was not the time to go fishing for information. His children were both open hearted with him, but mostly in private when at home, not in other settings. Out of home, they tended to clam up just as bad as any teenager would.

Lucas chose this particularly silent moment of introspection to verbally carpet bomb the pseudo-family with enough surprises and decrees to make them feel the world had been upended around their ears without so much as a "by your leave".

"Cynthia, Raymond explained to me some of the discussions you have had concerning marriage and custodial arrangements for those two. On the 28th of December, you will both be contacted by my legal cabinet; Dross, Dregs, Scraps & Fraggz, Inc. My personal attorney, Mister Stoney Fraggz, specialist in familial foundations, trust funds, estate management, heredity and conjugal and familial contracts, will be petitioning for a formal meeting amongst interested parties. The purpose will be the establishment of guidelines towards writing a letter of principles which will then serve to negotiate familial composition and custodial guardianships between us. The presence of Derek and Tanya at the meeting will be mandatory as they are both above 14 years old, and I would even recommend they retain their own individual counsel. I have a list of good lawyers that I can recommend if necessary, though they are a bit in the pricier bracket of the lot.

Cynthia was looking at him as if he had grown two new heads spontaneously. Raymond was perplexed into stupor while the two teens were blinking their eyes almost in synch, trying to parse through the announcement without breaking their minds. Derek was no lawyer material and Tanya was more interested in media and public relations, not the nitty gritty of contracts and proxies. Raymond cleared his throat in a slow, deliberate manner that Cynthia had heard many a time during important meetings, when they were about to cross pens and by-law numbers with an adversary from another firm.

"We, the conjoined parties of Holt and Matthews, would receive positively your request pursuant to preparatory work in the elaboration of principles of agreement, sic conjugal, custodial and testamentary dispositions for the purpose of public notarization of said acts and patents. Please have all correspondence forwarded to our legal study at Granger, Farmer and Tiller, partners at law. We will of course not represent ourselves as to avoid conflict of interest. Your suggestion to supply my children with independent counsel will be taken under advisement. Please send all other missives, duly notarized, in care of our attorneys while mentioning the case file number."

While everybody else was watching the unfolding scene, Raymond kept a close eye on Lucas to gauge his response. The smile he gave in answer to the legal acceptance and nomination of representation was truly blinding. What did the kid do to his teeth to have them white like that? At least it meant that the plans for making their family one single entity could proceed without fear of
blowing up in their faces. He just had to help mother and son find what they needed to establish trust and a new accord to restart their filial bond. Meeeh! No biggie, right?
Fifth chapter: Your Christmas present has arrived

A brand new toy!

(SeaQuest theme – season 1 opening)

December 25th 2015, morning
Buffalo City, New York State
The BVL – Owner’s suite

Lucas truly thought he had just received the best birthday and Christmas presents all at once; he got to have two functional parents and two siblings too! Take that Universe! Score one for the kid! Said child then did what he had been wanting since yesterday; he set his tray on the coffee table then wrapped both arms around his mother from the side in as strong a hug as he could produce with his stature. “We’re gonna get better mom, you just wait! We’re gonna be together again, and Lawrence, and WPP, and the UEO, and nobody else will ever take us away from each other!” he told his mother as he buried his face in her shoulder, practically vibrating with readiness to take on the world to defend his little patch of familial safety.

Cynthia was taken off guard again; the events of the last ten minutes would do that to a woman. Still, she was being given what she had hoped for, so she placed her right arm around Lucas to steady him and show him the affection and love she had never really stopped feeling. Her baby boy would need all the support she could give during the process, even if it was obvious he intended to make it as painless as possible for all of them. Pray to god it would be so!

Raymond took a small mouthful of coffee to hide his wide smile. Teenagers were notoriously fickle about public displays of emotions, and pre-pubescent boys were particularly tetchy about that. Lucas was an even more special case because of the weird life he had been through the last three years. It wouldn't do to start off a relationship with his new son by having a blowout because he couldn't control the shit-eating grin on his face when some sobriety and deportment were required. Besides, it was their moment to the two of them; he could tease and annoy the little rugrat at leisure later on. What father figure didn't get some fun from his kids?

Derek and Tanya both felt elated, relieved and also truly out of their depths with what had just
happened. It was as if Lucas had given the adults permission to get the family together. Wasn't it supposed to be the other way? They would ask dad later. Now though, there was fresh meat for the grinder and the siblings exchanged a look to establish the ground rules between the two eldest so as to show the younger kid the order of things. With a solid nod and wink, the two Matthews agreed and the turf war would begin in earnest.

Derek set his finished tray on the coffee table then relieved Cynthia of hers. After that, he climbed further into the large bed, sitting himself in the middle. Before anyone could react, he reached out, grabbed Lucas by the arm and dragged the squealing child to himself so he could wrap a full two armed hug around him. Lucas was screaming like a greased piglet in a rodeo, and trying just as hard to get loose. Derek quite simply plopped the kid on his lap and hugged him tight while dropping a big sloppy wet kiss on top of his hair. Suddenly, all noise stopped in the room; childish noise, adult exclamations, Lucas's fussing, everything was deathly silent.

Lucas slowly pivoted his head towards Derek in a rather morbid imitation of an evil doll from a horror movie and asked in a bone-chilling tone that promised much, much pain: "Did you just slobber all over my hair?" and Derek, bright boy that he was, replied "Yuppp little munchkin, I thunk I did that! Whaddaya gonna do about it?" he challenged with a smirk of infuriating brattiness.

With a speed and agility that were noteworthy for a kid his age, Lucas sent his little hands along the bigger teenager's ribs and started a tickling war that soon had the two rolling in the bed like a pair of dogs fighting over a fresh bone. The others were amazed at the turnaround in Lucas's behavior from last night when he had frozen stiff in fear and shock from Raymond trying something similar. After about four minutes of wrestling, Derek was now turned on his stomach, head towards the coffee table, with Lucas sitting cross-legged on his mid back like a highly ornate paperweight.

"So you big lug, are you going to molest my poor hair again? Mannerless cad!"

Derek had his pride at stake but couldn't shake the 80 pounds of childish outrage perched just beneath his shoulder blades, pinning him to the mattress quite effectively. Where in tarnation had the brat learned to fight dirty like that?

"Nuhaaan! You can't make me! I like messing your hair! Sides, it's a girly do! You should cut it like mine, that's a guy style!"

The look of doom on Lucas's face promised retribution of epic proportions to his new older sibling, and it was just Derek's bad luck he couldn't see the warning for what it was.

SMACK!

"Ouch! My butt!"

Derek tried to turn around and see what spanked him when the answer made itself heard.

"You are a naughty, bratty, ill mannered little boy Derek! And I know just the way to change that state of things! Now, we are going to discuss politely your assault on my most munificent coiffure and you will apologize profusely or I will have to apply corrective measures to get your cooperation. Is that clear?"

At that point, Derek had turned his head around over his shoulder enough to see Lucas flex his right hand in a menacing way and then point at the teenager's suddenly vulnerable backside.

"You don't scare me runt! Do your worse! Sides, Tanya hits harder than you and she's a girl!"
It should be mentioned at this juncture that teen bravado and survival are in fact very much mutually exclusive.

"Oh, you wanna see if can play rough, do you?"

SMACK!

"Ouch! No! Dad, make him stop!"

Since Derek was coming to terms with the monkey on his back, or more likely that he couldn't get him off without help, he resorted to the tried and true parental intolerance of sibling fights. Unfortunately, both adults were now sitting side by side on the settee-bed next to his sister, and all three were laughing like loons at his predicament. Seeing no help from those quarters, he tried to plead his case with the blond hellion sitting on his spine.

"Come on man, it was just a little brotherly fun! Ya know, a little siblin' ribbin' and all! Didn't mean no nut'tin by it, I swear!"

His answer came in the form of another swat to his unprotected rear with a very droll "Don't swear in public, boy! It's not polite!" from the amused 11 year old.

Derek's high pitched girly yelp sent the other people in the room into fresh peals of laughter. The poor teen had found his match in both temperament and playfulness in his new sibling. Neither parents nor sister felt he deserved any help until he learned what it felt like to be joshed with the way he liked dishing out to others. Whilst no bully by any stretch of the imagination, it was a nice turnaround to see the prankster get his medicine sent back at him by such a small messenger.

"So, little man," asked Lucas with a massive grin stretching his face "Are you going to respect my hair or do I need to convince you of the wisdom of leaving alone my chiefly attribute?"

Derek was not going to let the half-pint kid lay the law on him like that, no sirree! He tried to buck and dislodge the runt again but Lucas grabbed the hood of his sweatshirt to stabilize himself while applying another swat on his poor rear to settle him down.

SMACK!

"Yooouch! How the hell can you hit so hard at your size?" Derek asked the child-sized terror behind him.

"Lots of volleyball practice at the gym as part of my physical therapy all of last year. I was an expert at service; you know that big smack on the ball at the beginning of each set? It went a bit like this!"

And SMACK! "Hooow!" Poor Derek suffered another painful slap on his well exposed rump, noting to himself that thin flannel and sweatpants, even together, do not in anyways make a real protection.

Having finally got the message, the teen joined his hands in front of his face and begged the menace on his back to spare him.

"Sorry! I won't do it again! I won't mess your hair anymore! Please, I'm sorry!"

Lucas looked at the other three people and asked, trying to hold in his laughter; "Do you think he means it? Kuz it looks like he's gonna try and make a fool of me the moment I let him go."
The adults were busy chortling in humor while Tanya shook her head vehemently. "Don't believe him, Lucas! He's mean and dishonest! He'll get you as soon as you're off him!"

Her brother was flushed with outrage at his sister's betrayal and voiced it promptly: "You darned little rat! You were in on it! You winked and signaled you wanted us to show him we're the oldest! Don't believe her! She lies like a rug, I tell you!"

Lucas poked Derek in the head gently with his index, saying amused: "What did I tell you about swearing in public? And people say I'm the immature child in the house! Have they met you yet?"

At this, the two parents just couldn't handle it anymore and exploded in deep belly laughs that shook the settee-bed hard enough to make Tanya bounce along with them. Her own mirth at her brother was not in any way lesser, just less vocal. Lucas took pity on the huffing and grumbling teen, so he moved himself off his back at high speed to put a safe distance between them. It was suddenly looking very comfortable on the mattress behind his mother. His rapid exit surprised Derek enough to get cleared out of the zone before the older boy realized his freedom was restored. Quickly kneeling on the bed, Derek produced a full pout and sulked miserably as he rubbed his rear with both hands, moaning exaggeratedly about his pain and the bruising he was sure to find from such harsh violence upon his poor butt. The total lack of sympathy from the rest of the room only made him pout harder, and he made a show of gingerly sitting in seiza style on his heels with slow movements and facial grimaces of pain. They were just heartless, the lot of them! That's what they were!

Raymond wiped tears of mirth from his eyes and placed his glasses back, wagging a finger at his son, admonishing him: "Lucas had warned your sister last night about putting hands on people without warning. Apparently, only one of you was mature enough to learn the lesson. Now what do you have to say for your self, son?" His new explosion of laughter only made the teenager pout anew. His dad was a traitor just like Tanya. She took it from his side of the family, he was sure.

Cynthia was covering her mouth with both hands in an effort to stop from laughing herself silly. It really wasn't working that well. She was shaking with amusement and Lucas, kneeling in the bed behind her, leaning on her back while shaking with his own laughter at the teen, was not helping stabilize her. Seeing the most magnificent pout on Derek's face, she exploded in laughter again, leaning on the also mirthful Raymond on her left. This displaced him, her and Lucas and the three fell into a sloppy pile on the bed. Tanya could no longer hold it inside and followed suit, both in laughter and collapse. Derek got off the bed, hands deep in the belly pocket of his hoodie, and got out in a huff, going to the kitchen and closing the pocket doors behind him.

Do we have all the parts?

(Adrian Von Ziegler – Blood Night)

December 25th 2015, midday
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
The BVL – Owner's suite

Immediately, the humor died down and Lucas asked, worried, if he had gone too far, if Derek was hurt or angry because he left the way he did. Raymond exchanged a meaningful look with both women before holding out his hand to the child so they could right themselves up into sitting position. Once back upright, Raymond told the youngest member of their family "If you're worried
about him, you should go and ask him directly. Besides, it's your apartment; as the host, you are responsible for his welfare, aren't you?" Lucas nodded with a determined glint in his eyes and promptly made a line towards the closed doorway. He opened, slipped in and closed back the door without slowing down. If his new brother was hurting or angry, he deserved a chance to say it without an audience ogling him like some sideshow in a circus.

The boy quickly found the fifteen year old at the kitchen fridge pulling out a bottle of orange juice and a doughnut from the bakery box inside the appliance. Setting himself about five feet aside, Lucas leaned against the counter and waited for the older boy to notice him. As he poured himself a glass, Derek saw the blond mop on his left and turned his head partly, multi-tasking between his food and eyeing the kid to see what the situation was. Lucas seemed ill at ease, fidgeting with his arms crossed and his hands under his armpits like he was hugging himself. It was a gesture Derek was familiar with, for having done it many times in his life when uncertainty, stress or guilty feelings were gnawing at his gut.

"What's the matter little guy? Do you want some juice before I set it back?" Getting a shake of the head in answer, Derek put the bottle back in the fridge and then squatted before his new sibling, wondering what ailed him now. He was horsing around just fine a minute ago. What gives? "Are you okay Luke? You look kinda stiff all a sudden." The older boy asked gently while looking the child deeply in his eyes to see if he could guess his problem.

Lucas answered the interrogation by the surprise move of unfolding his arms and quickly wrapping them around the teen's neck and shoulders, giving him a good long hug. "I was just playing with you. I didn't mean to hurt you. Are you okay? Do you want your dad to look and see if you need help?" At that point Derek wanted to bang his head on the solid metal fridge. Of course, damn it! The little guy had so little interactions with a real family in the last few years; he wouldn't necessarily have realized Derek was just trying to mooch some sympathy from the others. Lucas must really think he had hurt him if his offer to ask dad to check him out was any indication. Those play-swats were just big love pats, they couldn't possibly do more than sting for a few seconds, and Derek had actually enjoyed roughhousing with his new brother. The kid was quick and agile, and a whole lot of fun to tickle fight. No way he was gonna let Luke think he was injured or mad at him!

Pulling the step-stool from under the counter, he sat on it then helped his little brother to sit on his lap, with the child's right arm and shoulder burrowing instinctively into the warm body of the teen for support, his left hand grabbing Derek's sweatshirt to hold onto him. The older boy wrapped his arms around his sibling and began to whisper gentle words of reassurance in his ear, letting his hot breath tickle him and comfort him at the same time. Neither saw the door open or the adults, leaning on each other, silently witnessing and approving of the scene between brothers. Hearing Lucas apologize to Derek for hitting him and embarrassing him in front of people brought home just how empathic and open hearted to the emotions of others the small child was. In rare moments like this, his real age showed clearly, as did his great fear of causing anyone harm that wasn't truly necessary.

The parents were gladdened; they really did have a full family around them and neither child wanted to leave or be kept out of the recomposed unit. They had all that they needed to restart their lives on the right track, they just had to figure out how to do it right. Time, patience and a good dose of tolerance would do the rest.

RTFM People! Okay then, where IS the blasted manual?

(SeaQuest – season 1 opening)
Raymond knew that a certain touchy subject had just taken front of the line for their next discussion. He needed to make Lucas see the need for a therapist ASAP if they wanted the child to be stable and healthy at some point before the age of 35. Given the stresses that his situation would put on the entire family, some group sessions for the whole lot would be mandatory and he would insist with his teens that they have a few individual sessions of their own so they could ask someone about the embarrassing or awkward stuff they didn't want their parents to hear about. Getting either Cynthia or Lucas on board would be backbreaking labor though; they were both fiercely private, and the temporary dismemberment of their family was fraught with misjudgments, false perceptions, and a lot of shame that hadn't been resolved. Damn but it was gonna hurt everybody, trying to get this team in gear and rolling on the same tracks together.

Lucas was soaking up the warmth and affection his newfound brother was pouring onto him like a thirsting man lost in the desert would walk naked in the rain if it started to fall. His wounded soul and loneliness were being healed in a way that only the pure, raw affection of another child could produce. Adults always had protocols, social boundaries, and their own damn foolish pride in the way of getting the hurt fixed; they never helped the way that was really needed. Only other kids were straight enough, and raw enough, to get the truth out and get the job done. So Lucas was in a lesser version of Nirvana right now, and didn't want it to end. He was beginning to realize though that he needed to start getting better at this family life thing or he'd blow out and turn banal little events into catastrophes on a daily basis, just cause he got his signals crossed.

After a good ten minutes of sibling therapy, Lucas got off Derek to pull out a drawer hidden in the thickness of the kitchen counter next to the fridge. This revealed an integrated slimset touch screen computer with speakers and wireless combined vidcam / scanner for fingerprints or bar codes. This was quite the recent addition to the hotel, and fundamental of the custom-made program to manage every aspect of inventory or people movements. He quickly opened up the secured intranet, finding the app needed. Typing at around 200 words a minute, he set down in writing the diverse notes and reminders that the last two days had brought to mind. He needed to start looking for a support group and a therapy center near Stanford, or look into the Uni's medical services to students and families. The website said they had a couple of clinics and a full medcenter on campus. Surely they had psych assist? He wasn't the only kid genius enrolled in their classes; their admin's page boasted about a lot of prodigies in the last twenty years, so that would mean a lot of hands-on support personnel already available and experienced. He mandated one of his many research teams to just the Stanford situation; planning schedules for travel and meeting the admissions committee, vetting classes to create a list of suggestions and courses he could just test out of to get the credits without the hassle. The living arrangements and health care for the foreseeable future were dependent on getting admitted, but he would need a hotel room or apartment for the first month anyways. He attributed a beginning budget at 100,000$ and a first meeting in two days, on the 27th at 9:00am in the conference room on this level.

Closing the computer and folding back the drawer, Lucas became aware of the other three people in the doorway since Tanya had joined them a few minutes ago while he and Derek were wrapped around each other. Not that Lucas was embarrassed by the public display of affection; offering love and support was supposed to be the prime reason for the existence of family units, right after insuring the survival of the offspring. Derek still sat on the step-stool but turned towards Lucas to see what he was doing that was so urgent. He could guess that being owner of the hotel meant business at any hour if there was an emergency, but there hadn't been an alarm or phone ring, so he
was curious. Playfully poking his brother (That never gets old thinking brother!) in the hip, Derek got his attention real quick, along with a squeal of laughter. Now having the beastly brat where he wanted him, the teenager asked "What's all the furious typing about? Inquiring minds want to know!" he finished with another poke at Luke's belly to make him squirm again. Dad was right! This is funny!

"Oh well then; I'll tell Tanya. She can try to vulgarize the answer so you can understand. Like you said, it was 'minds' inquiring, and I don't believe you think with anything but your stomach, sooo I won't waste my time." At his brother's gaping mouthed expression, Lucas burst out in loud laughter as he scampered out of the kitchen before the teenager could recover and give chase. One tickle fight per day was enough for his poor lungs to scream out, thank you so very much!

With the adults and spare sibling now joining in razzing him again, Derek did a good job of pouting while hiding his own amusement in the doughnut and juice he had procured to plug the remaining hole in his stomach. It was the Holidays; moderation could wait for the New Year to begin. As he walked by the parents (Yes! I got two!) Cynthia placed a gentle hand on his shoulder and squeezed as a reward for his gentle kindness towards Lucas. The teen stopped forward movement, instead leaning sideways into the woman's embrace while keeping his drink and pastry safely away from them both. Her arms snaked around for a fast hug, accompanied by a motherly kiss on the left temple that made him close his eyes and hum in delight. Cyn was such a good, comfortable mom; he just knew they would get along fabulously as a group. Even though getting told what to do or taking a penance for misbehaving sucked hard, he had the instinct that she would never want to create an adversarial climate in the house. Just like Lucas, she valued cooperation and willing participation, not authority and dominance.

Raymond followed the mother & son duo at a sedate pace, enjoying the sight of his very sensitive gentle boy absorbing Cynthia's freely given affection. Just as Lucas had been deprived of parents and human interaction last year, the three years passed had not been good for his children. Their lives and psyche had suffered as they visited their dying mother in the hospital. Learning about the attempted divorce had poisoned the atmosphere in the house for a long while. They had both become morose, melancholy and both had gone through a depressive patch of about four months when his wife finally did die.

Tanya had become aggressive and headstrong about the dumbest things; obtaining her obedience meant grabbing her arm and growling orders directly in her ear as anything else had no effect or was rudely refused. Even threats of added chores, restrictions or full grounding to her room had no effect. The occasional swat on her backside had simply produced a flat stare. The one time he had been truly angry beyond all patience and took her across his knee for a spanking, she had stayed stiff and silent until the end when, dry-eyed and angry, she shot the snide parting comment: "Some lawyer you are, using violence and pain instead of words to make your point!"

Derek had not been any better; just introverted and deathly quiet in his pain. While he obeyed flawlessly every order and performed in school without the grade drop Tanya experienced, he took refuge in music. The damned headphones were secured to his ears at all time of day, even at night when he slept. It was like his son had become ensnared by the harmonics and would never willingly put the MP3 player aside unless given a clear order. But then the moment the task was done or dinner was finished, back to his room with the door closed and the headphones back in place.

Raymond had later learned that there were professionals that could have helped; general practice psychologists yes, but more specifically grief counselors that were available on reference through the mortuary where his wife had been exposed. He had sworn to himself not to ever go down the path of isolating his family, but to seek help before it got to the point of angry words and hurtful
gestures. Honestly, he wasn't sure they had forgiven him the misunderstandings and oppressive feeling in the family during that period of their lives. He didn't blame them and never would; as the parent it was his job to provide help, especially health and spiritual care. He accepted their judgment humbly but hoped they would give him a chance to make his own amends to them. The displays of humor, affection and sibling acceptance that he saw today were a balm on his heart, reminding him that he must forge ahead or risk losing it all.

As they regrouped in the living room, Raymond saw that Tanya and Lucas shared the settee-bed next to the fireplace which he was poking and adding a few logs to. Tanya had a hand on his back and spoke in quiet tones, asking about the history of the family that built the place and why they chose to live in the hotel itself rather than make more rental space. The apartment was huge so it would fetch a good price with rich travelers, or maybe one of those long term renters that many hotels were now gearing to house. Vanity Fair had an article about that trend in celebrity residences a few months back. Lucas answered her with more informal language, more openly and less guarded in his reactions. He leaned backwards against her chest, using her as a spontaneous cushion which she took in stride as she happily declared that she finally got her turn to play with their new little sibling. Christmas had come for her too, at last.

The adults sat together on the couch-bed's end properly while Derek decided to live life large, going to sprawl out full length on his stomach on the settee besides his two siblings. That Tanya extended an arm to massage his back and neck was just good fraternal proceeds which he would return in due time. Raymond took the opportunity to plunge in the turbulent subject of therapy and sessions just to be interrupted by Lucas chortling gleefully at his expense. "That's what's been eating you since yesterday?" the young boy asked. "I used a shrink most of last year and it did me a world of good. I already have memos about Stanford's health care and finding out whether they have on-campus psych assist, or I'm going to travel out of Uni to a clinic for sessions. I will have to set up all of that when I get over there in a few days. My research team will be making prelims on the 27th. I'll take it from there."

Raymond looked at the other members of the family, seeing that they were actually impressed with Lucas for taking his equilibrium seriously while also respecting Raymond's courage in bringing up the controversial idea. Cynthia voiced her assent to Lucas's proactive stance, offering to use the vidphone to participate in family sessions with him if it would help. Yes, Raymond thought, they would get it right if they just gave an honest try.

The rest of the day had gone by in simple playful family atmosphere that had done wonders to help heal Lucas and Cynthia while comforting the three Matthews that everything would work out in the end. Towards 21:00pm, Lucas asked if they wanted to spend the next night or go back home; he would supply the car for the trip. Since they were all quite tired, they preferred to head home. Lucas told Cynthia that he could not leave the hotel because of meetings for next year's budgeting happening tomorrow morning, and he wanted to see the Boxing Day rush for himself to be sure his staff and new policies could handle the strain. He would see her on the 28th as scheduled for the legal briefing about the family composition. It would happen at their firm anyways.

Slightly put off that her son wouldn't be sleeping in his bed at home, she was a bit depressed but understood. She'd had a small conversation with Raymond this morning before going to sleep, about the necessary separation of family and business, about how Lucas would be intolerant of anything that would challenge his independent management of his assets. She now had to swallow the bitter pill herself and it wasn't easy or comforting. At least the building was filled with people capable of helping since his hiring policies had hiked the quality and competency of the staff tremendously. Cynthia still would not sleep easily tonight.
Assembly by adults required? Then go get some!

(The Rolling Stones – Paint it Black)

December 28th 2015, morning
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
Offices of Granger, Farmer & Tiller, partners at law

It was now the 28th December in the morning; Lucas was dressed in his flint blue business suit, sedately enjoying the warm luxurious padding of his Streetboat's cab while munching the last bits of a quick muffin to add solidity to his second coffee of the morning. Breakfast had been sacrificed to the altar of expediency since he had taken a half hour shower to massage the stress away. As the light changed, the luxurious white car sped towards the meeting at the well appointed and reputed offices of one of the cleanest, most honest law firms in Buffalo city; Granger, Farmer and Tiller, partners at law. Established some 217 years ago by the ancestors of the current directing partners, the firm used the complicated but venerable system of having Founding-partners, then Senior-partners, then Junior-partners, then Senior executives - department leaders like Cynthia, then executives - project chiefs like Raymond and finally, the hordes of untitled lawyers, accountants, researchers and secretaries. At some three hundred or so people in the building, which they owned in full and occupied solely, the firm was a solid fixture in the legal landscape of Buffalo. It would take a lack-wit of significant incompetence to disregard their storied accomplishments and the many thousands of contacts they maintained around the country and abroad.

His legal representation, Dross, Dregs, Scraps & Fraggz, Inc, were actually a remainder of the first proprietors of the hotel. Vratsina had simply not had the energy, or the desire, to go through the motions of letting them go then finding and reshaping a law firm to her needs. Lucas had no time to spare but the necessities of protecting himself and his newfound family could be handled the same way the UEO or the WPP worked all day; vidphone, emails, and priority secured couriers for those things that needed a personal signature, or were physical like gifts.

Or bribes. Or threatening packages. Or a pound of plastique stuck to the undercarriage of somebody's car. If people wanted to get personal with him, they would get their wish, just not how they thought it would happen. Yesterday's late evening discussions over a heavily encrypted Skype connection had borne fruits already. The small autonomous band was affiliated to the Bratva, the Russian Mafia, and yielded information and contacts in San Francisco as well as the basis of a protection network around Buffalo city independent from his own operations. This bore thought for later organization, then forcible integration into something he had simmering in one of the many slow cookers at the back of his mind.

As he sat patiently in the car as it parked, he saw his Mother and Raymond in the window of the waiting room next to the large welcoming lobby. They waved at him but were not truly surprised to see him wait for the escort valet to leave his shotgun position next to the driver to open Lucas's door and take his briefcase to carry it for him. They had learned just how the child was adept at using social conventions and protocols to offset the disadvantages of his age and stature in a public meeting. Walking out of the slow falling dusting of snow, Lucas and his young valet tapped their shoes on the mat to clean off the snow and then the boy formally shook hands with each adult before giving a magnificent megawatt smile and glomping his mother in full view of everyone. As Cynthia was protesting the sloppy wet kiss on the cheek her brat of a son had just surprised her with, Raymond snorted in glee while making a sign a the reception desk to call upstairs, to confirm the principal party had arrived safely. A quick energetic walk up two flights had them at the conference room level, rejoining with Derek & Tanya with hugs and kisses for both. Much to
Derek's chagrin the younger boy decided to slobber a kiss all over his soberly combed hair. Lucas was such an evil little gremlin! Just you wait, he'd get the runt back!

As the laughter of the joyous reunion settled down, three elderly persons entered the room to officiate the meeting. Firstly was Raymond's lawyer Mister Adalbert Mudrow Tiller II, Founding-partner, specialist in familial contracts and custodial arrangements. Secondly was Cynthia's lawyer, the venerable Madam Juliette Hermine Farmer, Founding-partner, semi-retired, expert in divorce, separation of familial assets and joint custody arrangements. One of the few lawyers in town that old Judge W. F. Barnum really respected and routinely told Lucas that the profession would go down the drain, when she actually stopped practicing law actively. Lucas had seen the official biography, and the private investigation report from Vratsina's first year in town, and agreed. But her loss would open an opportunity he would not let pass. If sacrificing some dignity to keep his family safe in his absence was the price, he'd pay the butcher thrice and call it a good job done. The last person was his attorney, Mister Stoney Yagghed Fraggz, partner at his much simpler study, expert in familial and custodial situations. Where was the rep for the teens?

"Hey mom, where are the lawyers for the kinder?" Lucas asked playfully but with an undertone in his voice his mother couldn't place. Raymond winced hard, the three elder lawyers suddenly stood stiffer and the valet backed against the wall near the door, all of them much more aware of what had just spoken up in their presence. The two teens standing around their little sibling were tone-deaf to such minute changes of voice pitch, tone and manner. Derek answered honestly that they had opted to use the same rep as dad because they had met him a lot of times in the past few years. They felt confident in the older gentleman's ability to settle an arrangement that all parties wanted amicable and equitable. Since there was no adversity or distrust towards either parent, the kids had chosen to pool together with them for expediency.

Tanya looked at Lucas eye-to-eye, telling him clearly that they understood he had inherited vast holdings with the management law firm came along with it. They did not blame him for using these people, or even just having counsel separate from the family; it was a necessity given how the foundation was set up for him exclusively. Their mother had done something similar when she left all her worldly possessions to them. The lawyer holding trust over the warehouse and financials never told Raymond anything unless the child concerned was sitting in the room to approve the talks. They held no blame or animosity towards him defending his financial base or his autonomy.

Somewhat appeased about the situation and motives of everyone, Lucas still gestured for his valet to bring forward his briefcase. Rooting around the separated pouches, he found the packets he wanted. He handed each teenager a thick letter-sized ocean blue envelope with a large golden Crowned L Conglomerate logo on the front. The flap was sealed with the envelope's own adhesive plus a strip of clear tape and signed in pen ink on top across the flap, tape and front panel. This was a notarial style of signature used by legal pros and process servers, as well as police for their evidence baggies, to ensure that any tampering with the envelope could be seen by eye the moment you handled the parcel up close.

Each teen had wide eyes at receiving this, especially when Lucas explained that he had these drawn by another attorney at his firm, Mister Maynard Sully Dregs, partner, expert at trusts and foundations. It was an expenditures account with credit card, financed by his foundation through CLC to allow both teens their own personal counsel, chosen independently of parental or sibling protests. The offer would be good until each reached 21 years of age or sent a notarized written demand to rescind the agreement and collapse the accounts. The accounts could not be used for anything other than legal services, and they had to have the cabinet of their choice be inscribed and authorized at the bank by the CLC accountants for the credit card number to activate and pass the payments.
Both parents were mightily put off at this move while also ecstatic because it proved that Lucas had already attached solidly to his new siblings and was extending protective wings around them. The two lawyers helping the parents were beginning to get the gist of where the difficulties and pitfalls would be in these negotiations, whilst Fraggz was simply happy the boss hadn't brought anything more demonstrative of his real power base than the twink in servant's blacks. He could imagine what the prim and prudishly proper people of G, F & T would say to a squad of ex-marines in BDU's carrying AR-15's and grenade belts around the office while the hummer burned gas outside. Vratsina had been much more discrete and far less reactive than this guy; on the other hand, he had built up the BVL brand & services to the point of grossing an extra 30% in a single year. His business and political acumen were noteworthy, his risk tolerance just as much because of how nonexistent it was.

As everybody settled down, taking chairs clustered along their alliances or employers, the noise tapered down to just the rustling of clothes and the whispered crinkling of papers. Madam Farmer, as eldest of the hosting lawyers, took the lead to welcome everyone, took attendance then signaled the stenographer at the back of the room to ensure the recording was good. As preliminary she did have the teenagers' new documents opened, read and inscribed in their individual files, as per the requirements of the law. They were of age to be considered sufficiently intelligent and educated to choose their own living arrangements, and thus must be treated accordingly, or the courts would forgive neither of the lawyers present.

The suspicious flint-blue semi-glare from Lucas as he surveyed the proceedings kept all the reps on their toes. While a clean and honest firm, Granger, Farmer & Tiller were not innocents, nor deaf to the happenings of the streets. There had been rumors for five decades about the happenings inside that hotel and the lives of its many owners. That the newly minted Lord of Burgundy had passed the sill of their door to hold council in their hall was not something they were ignorant of. A call from judge Barnum to the boardroom of the firm had told the founding partners just what they were playing with, making events more serious than let on publicly.

The old matriarch wondered if her two subordinates had any realistic idea of what had happened in the basements and connex buildings of BVL in the past 14 months. She doubted it. In her experience with them, Cynthia would not be able to hold in her emotions about such a massive thing, and Raymond would be walking stiffly, barely reacting out of fear of setting off the main man at the table. No, they had not been initiated to the real behind-the-curtains operations that the Owner of BVL had begun to set in motion. It would be visible to the naked eye when he did. That was the time she planned to finalize her retirement, leaving Buffalo for the family's historic retirement home; a well tended rural manor in Vermont's forested hills.

She had no desire to be present should the expansion phase of his empire building scheme turn to street warfare between gangs, cops and civilians. She had been apprised by an old friend in the BCPD at town hall, in the evidence tagging and scanning office adjoining central booking. There had been a steady influx of ex- and para- military, police and S & R people at a rate that had been hard to understand until the new BVL luxury car service came active, along their complete overhaul of the employee basins for the hotel, lounge, spa, shops, and all businesses owned by Lucas Wolenczak through any of his companies. He was building a private army right under the noses of everyone in town, disguising it as kindhearted help for military personnel discharged from the service that were looking for a decent job, and possibly a career path.

Some of the best combat and vehicle experts to be had in New York State were silently routed to an old but obscure private investigations cabinet that had suddenly switched buildings to a massive warehouse at the airport. They suddenly expanded personnel by twenty-fold to take up a variety of sectors the old owners had never touched. Bodyguard detail, bounty hunting criminals and suspects that police could not find, lending bail money and recovering bail-jumpers, etc… They had begun
offering discount-price surveillance to charities and some free support staff for public events
gathering the families of servicemen and police so as to build up reputation and popular support for
their outfit.

No, Madam Farmer held no illusions about the true nature of the pale skinned, blond haired, blue
eyed Patron Angel of the New Inquisition sitting at her conference table. He was the harbinger of
new Faith and Law, spreading them with Clean Steel and Pure Fyre. She wanted out of this blasted
town while the going was good, and she planned on taking as many of her kin with her on the road
as would be bright enough to follow her. The rest could, and most certainly would, burn in the
conflict.

Master Tiller held similar view to his esteemed colleague, Madam Farmer. The signs were upon
them; the street rats were being herded to the sewers and never seen again as rats. When they
emerged as decent humans and police recognized them enough to ask a few friendly questions, the
only answer they got was "I found a good beginner's job with a chance at better, if I tough out the
first two years." Same story across over two hundred vagrants, but about as many disappeared and
haven't been found. They never would be. Ash flushed down the sewers was indistinguishable
from the rest of the sludge flowing to the water treatment plants.

Master Tiller was old enough to remember a conversation from thirty years ago about the family
that built the BVL hotel edifice. The client had told about the builder being rich, but also from the
never respected, lower end, of a mafia family from Queens, in New York City. The guy who told
the story was as old as Tiller had been, but settling his affairs in order because cancer was gnawing
his liver and years of hard liquor, and smuggled Cuban cigars, had barred his entry on the national
organ recipient database (NORD-USA). He had worked at BVL since its opening, maintaining a
shredding plant big enough to take an entire Renault-5, slicing, mincing, and grinding it down to
metal shavings barely a sixteenth of an inch round, before shoving everything by pressurized air
into the incinerator that also served as firebox for the gas-fired water boilers. No one ever escaped
the BVL unless her Lord wanted it.

Master Tiller knew that Lucas Wolenczak did not want any witnesses. He would lay his life on it.
So he planned on taking as much of his family as had functioning survival instincts, leaving
Buffalo and New York State to go to their new permanent lodgings for the beginnings of a new
life. They had managed to acquire and build-up a vast functioning farmstead of 200 acres located in
the grandiose forests of Montana, near Great Falls. Hopefully, the albino rat bastard would let them
go unharmed.

Despite the mental ruminations of the senior attorneys, or perhaps because of them a skeptical
tongue would say, the process of establishing the guidelines went so well that they managed to
write the letter of principles the very day, then have it all notarized by all five parties and counsel
before dinner. The three page document came with eight annexes totaling some 7,000 pages, four
of them just for Lucas, his foundation, and other holdings they had not known about.

The actual custodial arrangements and cross-adoptions would be negotiated by the lawyers through
emails and vidphone, subject to the actual marriage contract now in discussion. The group would
assemble in conference again only to commit the final notarization. Lucas then added the
stipulation that the documents must be submitted at the civilian courts, at Town Hall, to have a
judge revise them and then apply the Court seal along the notarial stamps and client signatures.
Lucas wanted as much public recognition and societal armor plate around his new family as the
law allowed him to put. Everybody agreed with the idea, and Lucas knew that Judge W. F. Barnum
would be happy to oblige in order to keep his secrets and good relations with the BVL secured.
Where'd we put the batteries?

(The Eagles – Hotel California)

December 28th 2015, evening
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
Law offices, streets, BVL Lounge

At the end of the work day, the family of five was debating where to eat dinner; Cynthia was backing Lucas' suggestion of the BVL restaurant since it was nearby, and would mean no dishes or chores tonight. A chuckling Raymond reminded her that it was a weeknight so her housemaid was hard at work cleaning everything until 21:00pm tonight; she wouldn't have any chores anyways. Derek and Tanya were trying, and failing miserably, to hide their laughter at how not-domestic their new mom was, while attempting to push the restaurant option too. Less than 10 minutes by car would see them warm and fed speedily which, for teenagers, was of the essence when hunger struck.

Raymond saw himself outnumbered, even though he had not really wanted to eat at home either. He made a show of gracefully accepting the offer of a meal at the Lounge so everyone could be happy. Lucas then asked if their car could take that many as he had the valet too. Cynthia offered to host her son and employee in her ride while the Matthews would go with Raymond. They always took separate cars to work in case of a meeting in town or an unexpected errand came up. Raymond just didn't like depending on others to reach his kids' school in an emergency so he rarely relied on transport other than his own vehicle.

By a natural occurrence, Lucas sat alone in the rear while the valet offered to drive but was sent to the shotgun seat at Cynthia's right. She explained that the only time she was going to be driven around was in a taxi or one of her son's cars. In her own car, she would drive and no one else.

The young servant, a latino boy named Carlos Renalgo, all of twenty-two years old and very little experience in service jobs, chose to agree rather than commit a blunder that his ultimate boss would take offense at. While not afraid per say, the valet had heard things since his hiring at BVL; he preferred to not look for trouble when everything indicated trouble was placed in the seat just behind his own already. He spoke quietly, and very politely, with the adult during the short trip, glancing at the rear-view mirror every few minutes to see what the boss did. Lucas was sat at the right, behind him, his right arm positioned on the door's armrest, the left across his lap. His eyes were closed and head laid backwards on the headrest. He seemed relaxed and asleep but the servant knew better than to believe that.

"So, is your valet job satisfying?" Cynthia asked as she signaled to change lanes, taking a left at the next intersection. Damned rush hour traffic was a plague to endure.

"Yes ma'am, I'm pleased with my situation. Is certainly improvement on w're I was before." Here the young man turned to the window on his right, hoping that he managed to hide the wince of pain and chagrin that overcame his features. Memories flashed in his eyes of taking his father's beatings to protect his little sister, five years younger. Hoping he could get home from work soon enough to deflect the old man's drunken rages, but not always in time. A couple of months ago, he tried to pass out his daughter to the landlord, to pay the rent he had drunk up, day 'afore that. Carlos had been desperate then a dark miracle had descended on his life.

The chop-shop he worked in as cheap not-so-legal labor got overhauled by the new owner. First big thing to happen was a mandatory health check on the boss's coin for all workers; from lowest
grease monkey to the pinstripe-suit on top, everybody got poked, pictured and filed. Carlos had to take off his overalls and unders to show why he was walking weird and had problems moving his arms and back. Pictures, a film by digital camera, and a battery of questions that were thoughtfully written in Spanish explained the lashing marks and bleeding injuries. Then all hell broke loose around him.

When he had listed his sister as his dependent for the incredible and holy miracle of the collective insurance policy the owner offered, again on his own coin, the hombre asking the questions got nasty real quick. Apparently he now worked for somebody with Power. The kind the cartels in Mexico have but don't know how to wield like responsible adults. Normally Carlos would have been afraid of going to the policia to get help for his sister, but the new boss had it good with several judges at the Town Hall. And he wasn't hiding things, he was solving them.

By the time he got home that night, there was a herd of black-&-blues with blazing lights in front of the cheap tenement he lived in with papy and Audrey. They took the old man down hard, and when he tried to sate his drunken fury on the cops, well, they didn't take well to it. He needed that ambulance real bad when it got there. The moment Carlos came in reach of a badge, the officer asked about him and his sister. A short ride in the squad car later, him and Audrey were getting poked and photoed at central booking to make up the case against papy. They both got a hospital stay for three days, especially him for his injuries, but strangely they let his little sister in the bed next to him without questions. The boss paid for it, no bills or questions asked.

The case was heard in court about six weeks ago, in front of a middle-aged woman called Her Honor, Judge Evelyne Nasser Badr Azzahara; division of family & child law. The arabic woman had fled the misogynistic depravities of Saudi Arabia with her two younger sisters, mother, and ailing grand-mother, when she was 14 years old and never looked back. She was well respected in legal circles for her virulent dispatching of domestic tyrants and abusive parents was legendary around NY State. It took less than sixty minutes of reading the file and watching the pictures for the judge to send the wheelchair bound papy to jail for a total of 34 years. And there was still the resisting arrest, assaulting officers and menacing to murder his children for denouncing him to be arbitrated. Supposedly, the chief judge of Buffalo had already taken the case himself. Carlos threw his manhood to the rubbish and cried like a niño when the judge gave him custody of his hermana, citing that she was eighteen years old in less than nine months so there was no justification for placing her elsewhere.

Then more surprises happened. He got canned from his job at the garage. Because the boss told him that the "big" owner that owned like a dozen chop-shops around town wanted him elsewhere. With his sister cause they wanted to speak to her. The meeting with the hotel's admin made him weep and he still didn't give a damn. They offered both jobs with good pay, group insurance, health checks in-house at the renewed spa & clinic in the hotel, and employee pricing for the gift shop and lounge. Being part of the food coop that covered all employees in all the boss's businesses would allow them to get batches of cheaper groceries through the hotel's kitchen. That meant they could now afford to eat three solid meals a day instead of one and a half thin rations, when they were lucky that papy didn't drink the money that week.

"Yes ma'am, I very happy in job. I hav'n't had it long, you see. But I don't think I wanna do anything else for a good long while to come. They hired hermana Audrey too. She's at garage that handles the car service. She's dispatcher in the office, doing phones, checking GPS and OnStar. Things by computer to make sure the drivers are okay, or get help if they're not. We both got lucky to find these jobs. Papy was killing us with his drinking, but the boss, he saw sometin and we here now. Not gonna change if I can help it, and Audrey either."

Cynthia listened well to the short, heavily accented reply as her bullshit-meter was going in the red.
The young man was happy, that she was certain. It was everything he didn't say that got her furiously thinking about the persistent rumors around the Burgundy Velvet Lounge & Hotel that made her shut her lips and paste a smile on them. Like any lawyer, she had informants in the police department; she had heard of several altercations between police and some of the poorer habitual drunks or violent domestic abusers in the trash districts of town. What called her attention was the slew of exemplary sentences the judges handed down to these people, and the fact that about two dozen had resisted arrest bad enough to result in death or lifelong handicap. In either case, the perps were no longer threats to their family and could no longer hold custodial guardianship of minors. Somebody had given the impetus to clean up the city, and she shuddered at the thought that she might soon get to know who led the effort from behind the anonymity of numbered companies and plush lawyer's dens.

Lucas was listening to the conversation quietly. He knew well that Carlos was grateful for their new lives and would not betray him. Now, he just had to find a way for the young man to not be so afraid of him in the future. Thankfully Audrey was mostly blind & deaf to that side of his ventures. To Lucas, people like Carlos and Audrey were like batteries; they brought energy and vitality to his enterprises, more liveliness to his community. They were vital because without them or their kind, all that existed in the so-called 'Free World' would collapse and never function again. Human life was the engine of creation and human soul was the fuel for the engine. If you eliminate the living human from the system, you get synthetically reproduced idiocy or systemized incompetence built into the programs of the computers, but you don't get anything of value, not without living humans involved.

It was really cheap getting good, decent people to come join him on his side of the fence. A good job with decent wages, a sanitary dwelling, some respect for their efforts at enduring through the BS that life dumped on them, and he had the most precious, yet also the cheapest, commodity in America; human souls. Unlike the fascistic fools in Washington DC or New Cape Quest, he knew the true potential and value of humanity let free. He remembered the lessons that Vratsina had given him about respecting the poor and destitute so he could tap into their untold resources and subterranean networks of informants, mules and traders. The North American Confederation and the UEO would not like what was happening in the old USA; their choke-hold on humanity was slipping and Lucas would be the one to break their fingers, one handshake, one smile, one human soul at a time.

Adeste Humanitas; verus puram in fedelis vita venit.

This is an adult entertainment product? What's that mean?

(The Rolling Stones – I can't get no Satisfaction)

December 28th 2015, evening
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
BVL Hotel, Lounge

When they reached the hotel, Lucas indicated to both drivers that they should go to the down ramp on the right to access the underground car park. There was a brand new cabin with heat and toilet to house a visible guard whose job was to signal when rich people needed a valet to go park their ride when they came directly to the ramp instead of driving up the lane to the main lobby's great doors. It only took a minute for the extra driver to come up the staircase that was hidden inside the cabin, next to the sanitary block. It went down all the way to the fourth basement and served as
valet access from the waiting room in the first basement, air duct and emergency exit for all levels in one construction.

This was part of the many hidden structural and procedural changes that Lucas had designed & instituted around his holdings. Multi-function structures, passageways and chambers that served both daily business as well as the need to evacuate promptly if things went south in a hurry. "Always have three exits, and two redundancies for each", Vratsina had taught him. He tried, and sometimes he could come close enough for it to make a difference.

None of this was visible or suspected as the entire family (Yes! We're family! Together!) left the vehicles to walk up the decorative lane to the main lobby and the official entrance to the Lounge. Once inside, the Majordomo at the great doors bowed to his master, welcoming the composite family to their home. Cynthia and the Matthews took a second to absorb that statement, then the two teenagers celebrated by putting Lucas between them for a patented Matthews sibling sandwich, in which poor Lucas got squeezed until he squealed in laughter at their antics.

Walking past the lectern and smiling floor manager at the Lounge's Grand Entrance with barely a glance, Lucas was about to guide his family up the stairs when a hand roughly grabbed him, yanking him back so hard he almost fell to the floor. A large fat man, ruddy in the face and sporting a boorish angry glare, was sneering in contempt at the overdressed little maggot that dared to bypass his own importance in the queue to get a seat in the now prestigious restaurant. Six months ago it was a waste pit, but now it was the place to be, especially after those reviews had come out online during the last week. Just the décor was stunning, but the female personnel was gorgeous. There was even a menu handwritten on a chalkboard at the entrance like the best restaurants in Paris or London did to advertise the day's special confections. He wanted in with his girlfriend, a ditzy brunette attracted to his money more than his person, but it mattered not if he got what he wanted in the end.

(Edwyn Collins – A Girl Like You)

The 32 year old black female that was floor manager for the evening shift had immediately pushed the alarm button on her lectern then marched around the counter to stand in defense of her master. Her artificial right leg was perceivable only to those that paid attention as she didn't limp and was athletic enough that most men would rather look at her ass or boobs than see the rest. The old style burgundy uniform that she wore was impressive; composed of trousers, full white button shirt, waistcoat, knee-length jacket with black boots and white gloves. It was a nice tight fit, but tastefully done and actually tailored for her body to accentuate her physique while never making her look less than a full human. Lucas would never tolerate a sluttish or unseemly display at his front desk in any business, not even a cheap brothel. His Madams had class or they worked in the backrooms where their uncultured crass didn't repulse him and his customers.

The plentiful hard steel and two small cal.22 pistols covered by the uniform were habits that had saved her womanhood and her life in Kabul four years ago when her humvee had hit an IED in a blasted, ruined borough of town. They had been attacked by almost thirty young boys, 14 to 19 years of age, almost as bent on raping her as killing the marine escort that was carrying her to do her job. She was, until that botched mission, a CIA Intel analyst and translator in charge of interrogating the relatives of local collaborators, before the US and Allies trusted them to go along on missions. She survived but gravely injured, becoming a lesser person in the eyes of a male dominated agency that took every excuse it could get to remove women from any position that wasn't on their back or knees. She took the miserable pension and handicap benefits her three years in the Company had earned her, then came crawling back to her hometown.

It was a miserable life for four years before she got wind through old friends that some female old
timers, harkening from the Agency's more open-minded period back in the cold war, were passing around coded credentials to other women the Company had pushed out. Desperate, she made the effort to track down the origin of the codes, got contact then found herself with a job, a decent apartment and her self respect back in full. If she happened to do like a lot of the people in BVL and call her employer "Master" or "Lord" instead of the more usual "boss", well, she felt good about it and he had earned it, so screw you. Like the fat tubby was about to find out.

By now, even the airhead arm candy had figured there was a problem and was backing away from her supposed date. Since she loathed the guy but hung around him mostly for the fat gifts he handed out, his fate wasn't her problem; she was actively looking for a way out. What she found instead was a 6’ 3” black amazon dressed in burgundy that was pulling a pair of slim plastic pistols from the large waist pockets on each side of her jacket. The sound of heavy booted footsteps pounding their way through the lobby from several doorways was scary for the many patrons waiting in line for a booth. Lucas stabilized himself, snobbishly dusting off his arm where the man had grabbed him.

(The A Team – opening theme)

Everyone was suddenly aware of the manager having pulled a matched pair of pistols and pointed them at the floor right in front of the fat man's feet. Behind them a dozen persons in heavy body armor with rifles, grenades and several pieces of sharp, nasty equipments were making an ordered column to blockade the way out, then the other exits suddenly had red lights appear in the door frames, signaling the doors were locked by central security. The fat man was now sweating profusely as he watched the assemblage of deadly steel and muscle arrayed against him. He was clueless why, deciding that he should try his most suave voice to ask the manager. She was a dumb niggress cunt but she was dressed civilized; maybe there was hope for her monkey-spawned kind yet.

"Keep quiet, ya fat tub-o-lard! You just assaulted the Owner and Lord Master of the Burgundy Velvet Lounge! Get on your knees and put your trap on the ground before we make you!" Was barked from the column of what looked like US marines in solid-gray BDU’s. The twelve AR-15's with integrated silencer and underclipped grenade launcher pointed at his face convinced him to slowly, and painstakingly, lower his mammoth girth to the carpeted floor then put his hands behind his head. He was cuffed and hoisted to his feet quite painlessly by what felt like experts in non-lethal action. It was then that he saw that of the dozen soldiers keeping watch over him, only four were male and two of those were faggots or his queer-meter was off kilter worse than his capacity to tell apart fine wine and cat piss. If he weren't in so much trouble and publicly humiliated, it would have felt like paradise: so many muscular bitches to choose from, then break to his will under his cock.

Lucas moved forward, placing his right closed fist over his heart. "Well executed, corporal Derland. My compliments to your team. Please take this carrion down to security, we'll process him later at the end of the shift. That way, if there are other fools, the black-&-blues can get the lot in one trip." With his orders given, he pivoted to walk up the stairs, his family following in tightly grouped formation under the watchful eyes of soldiers, managers and clients alike.

As the family was sitting down at the Owner's booth, Lucas guided his newfound relatives to seats that maximized their exposure to him. He would sit at the right extremity of the central table with Derek at his left, then Tanya. At the other table at his right would be Cynthia, then Raymond. This put him squarely in the middle, able to answer all of them without shouting over the din of the dinner time crowd.

After they were seated and calmed, the waitress came to place the special menus reserved for the
mezzanine’s VIP tables with pitchers of water and baskets of steaming hot bread rolls freshly taken from the oven. She asked each person their choice of aperitifs, not giving any indication of opinion when Lucas called for a bottle of Cinzano Rosso Vermouth. The mellow fruity wine was so lightly alcoholic that Lucas would need to drink the entire bottle without any food to become inebriated. The adults were surprised about his consumption because they remembered he had refused the wine offered at the Christmas dinner, although they did believe that was due to stress and the need to keep his head clear for the discussions with his mother.

Derek thought it funny, asking Lucas if he would get his in a sippy cup to not spill any. Tanya snorted in her iced water, almost spilling some on her dress thus making both brothers chuckle at her expense. Lucas replied to Derek in an affected snotty tone "Nonsense child; I shall imbibe from a finely chiseled crystal chalice as is the proper protocol for a notable industrialist of my high born station. Not that I should expect a mere boy, such as your low born self, to comprehend. I say, lad; should ye not be situated to the hired help's table? Acting out of your station in life, are you?"

The two adults were grinning, exchanging smirks of satisfaction about the natural playfulness that had quickly installed itself between the two boys and girl. Tanya was openly laughing at her older sibling getting outfoxed at his attempt at ribbing the little guy while Derek began to fawn over Lucas, calling him "m'laird" and "highness" with exaggerated manners and fake devotion making the returned waitress smirk at their banter.

As the aperitif was disbursed to the guests, Lucas placed a finger at the lower quarter of his glass to indicate his limit. He told the young woman to bring thermal carafes of coffee for the two tables when she returned with the salads and cheeses that he insisted everyone try with their meals. Since it was a good idea that put vegetables in the teenager's plates, both adults were quick to agree while the older boy and girl made a show of pouting, calling Lucas a traitor to teenhood the world over for making them eat healthy. As the frankly laughing waitress left, the child replied that he remembered what they ate from the cart during their Christmas stay in his apartment; the quantity of fruits and salad they gobbled could have decimated a small farm.

As the promised salads and cheeses were placed before them, each person gave their choice of appetizer and entrée to the two waiters that came to deliver the first official course. The woman and man combo were efficient while not afraid to joke about the events downstairs when the boss had arrived. Their zinger about Lucas being a diva that couldn't go a day without making a spectacle was the cause of much mirth from the family, especially when the boy just shrugged it off by saying "I'm good at it and the people love me, why should I stop?"

As the family ate its way through mixed mediterranean salad with fine selected cheeses from Europe, Derek asked about the security squad. He joked that he was certain the laws about private armies were that you couldn't have one. The adults almost choked on their greens as Tanya slowed down to chew thoughtfully at the comment. Lucas took a slice of gruyère cheese from the serving plate to nibble it while chewing a mouthful of salad. His brother was opening a can of worms which Lucas was not in a hurry to expose publicly. Town Hall's support would last only as long as he stayed under the radar, keeping the secrets of his clients and their habits quietly out of public view.

"I am sorry Derek but the operational protocols and troop strength of BVL security are confidential, to insure the best most comfortable stay to all our guests, in the Lounge, hotel or other amenities we offer. This is a must to deter thieves, vandals, and event saboteurs like gatecrashers and identity scammers." Forking some salad into his mouth, Lucas took a few seconds to line up his answers for his brother to satisfy his curiosity. Derek was much more interested in Lucas and his own doings than the hotel personnel anyways, so Lucas decided to redirect his attention. "You need to understand brother, that every hotel in the world has some form of in-house security,
though most is just the blazer & tie rent-a-cop variety."

He continued between bites "I have made a moral stand to help our injured servicemen and their families as much as possible, therefore I hire a lot of ex-army and ex-police people. When I get the resume from a close-quarters-combatant (CQC) or a sniper, putting these people at a desk or bussing tables is a bloody waste, likewise with artillery and ordinance people. Ground transport experts I can route to my car service and motorpool, while aircraft and naval pilots I will start sending to the floatplane and marina services as we build the bigger, ocean front resorts. For now, I try to give jobs that valorize their skills as well as takes account of their being human, not just the leftover scraps of whatever operation the Pentawhores tried to pull, then flushed when it failed repeatedly."

Taking the last of his vermouth in one swallow, Lucas signaled a passing waitress that took the glass away, replacing it by a saucer with a coffee cup inverted on it at his hand's reach. She went to a small service console that she opened to reveal a fridge with small thermal pitchers of cream and condiments for drinks. She brought a pair of trays with the necessities for coffee and tea at the same time as the waiting team from before brought the potage course. Once the exchange of empty plates for soup bowls was completed, Lucas gestured to his brother that he was not finished answering him.

"Because I hire at the middle and top of the competency pool, I get better people with more skills, therefore I can easily make investments of equipment and renovations that become profit-making when presented to the clientele properly. Imagine if you will, an elderly lady of means with no family or support that travels to go attend the funeral of an old friend. She will have good clothes and jewelry along the travel clothing and necessities for personal care or passing time. That usually means nowadays an e-reader or tablet; both are expensive, and very easy to steal because of their small size and low weight." He finished the last few spoons of potage then pushed the bowl away from himself.

"Now imagine this old lady, being wealthy but alone in her life, having to choose between the average inn or low capacity hotel and my renewed BVL resort. With us advertising in-house security capable of repressing & repulsing bandits or robbers, to keep our corridors clean, plus randomized guard patrols day & night to complement the security cameras. Which place will the lady choose to spend her money in? Which would you feel more comfortable entrusting with your mother, sister or daughter?" Lucas let his answer hang in the air as the main dishes were being placed before them and the sullied bowls removed.

The parents were tickled at the meals their children had chosen, given how they tried to get out of the salad course. Derek had an amazing piece of beef bavette in onion - mushroom wine sauce, oven baked potato with sour cream & chives, sided by mixed vegetables grilled with olive oil and garlic. Tanya had been more adventurous than usual, choosing a generous surf & turf plate that held chicken breast grilled in olive oil, sirloin steak strips in red wine sauce with chives and onions, a fillet of Canadian salmon smoked in maple syrup with peppercorns and herbs, sided by a puree of potatoes, carrots, turnips and celery. Lucas had decided to stay the course and chose a more american plate of smoked beef brisket slices, BBQ back ribs, coleslaw, dill pickle and potato wedges garnished in onion, green peppers, mushrooms, and oven baked in herbed oil.

The adults could only laugh and tease their two oldest children about how much greenery they ate tonight, much to the pair's faked annoyance. Lucas was safe by virtue of the fact that he had proven to eat vegetables and fruits with every meal. Even though his selection sometimes boggled the mind; like when he created a fruit & ice cream sculpture for breakfast. By comparison, the plates of the two parents were conventional; each had a stuffed chicken breast wellington with rice, grilled vegetables and potato puree.
Tanya had listened carefully at her brother's explanation but had a few questions of her own. "Tell me Lucas; is it normal that you have that many women in your employ? Are you choosing them, or is it just what's available to hire? I mean, the car driver the other day, the manager downstairs, around 60% of the waitstaff and eight of the security that I saw, they were all females, and damn competent by the looks of it." Her question took her family by surprise because the observation was astute and Cynthia wanted to know as well so she gestured to her son to go ahead and speak up.

"As I said, I prioritize hiring from military and police families. What most people don't realize is that a lot of women are beat cops and ground soldiers like infantry, motorpool techs, IT techs, or ship mechanics. Some used to be field medics and medevac pilots or drivers. There are a lot of women in the armed or public services, but a lot get dumped like last week's trash the moment they have an injury or a health issue. For the last fifteen years there has been an increasingly disturbing wave of machismo in the upper echelons of the admiralties and chiefs-of-staff of the North American Confederation. That poison transferred over to the UEO military services when they were formed. Agencies that compose the 'Alphabet Soup' in DC are the worst culprits; they are actively trying to push out women, or keep them from joining the ranks because of this religion driven madness. A certain subset of white southernist christian males think they own the planet and should rule because their invisible sky-daddy on his cloud said so. Part of their creed is that females are weak, good only for house chores or sexual slavery." Lucas poured himself a coffee, preparing it to his liking before gulping about a quarter of the contents in one hot swallow. He was pissed and it showed.

"That, you see, is the reason I hire so many women. They are trained, competent, and they are available. On top of that, many have friends elsewhere in the VA hospitals or retired from service, but located in other towns and states. They phone, email and send parcels to each other as part of veterans' networks or support group therapy for PTSD. I hire one and get positive comments to about seven friends in the same situation. My hiring office gets references and recommendations from people, then does a thorough background check. If the person is someone we could use or have a temporary job they could do until we can really use their skillset, we call to start active recruitment directly." He plunged back into his brisket to avoid further questions for a while.

The family got the message from his pinched expression that he thought the subject matter should be discussed in private. His new siblings were still curious but had enough experience living with a lawyer at home to know the face he made when confidential stuff was off limits for public discussions. The adults were grateful that Lucas had found a way to explain things to his brother and sister without the gory details behind his reflection in hiring these people, or keeping what they recognized as fully trained marines in deployment-ready shape inside his hotel. Such things should be reserved for the adults, and only after the contracts and binding oaths were taken so they all had as much protection as possible.

Made for use in all terrains and conditions

(Carols – Jingle Bells)

December 28th 2015, evening
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
BVL Hotel & surrounding neighborhood

"Hey guys, why don't you go take a tour of the hotel facilities for a while? Or even a walk outside?"
The neighborhood has changed a lot in the last year. It's safe for the two of you until around ten in the evening without problems, and I can have a guard go with you. The parents and I have some things to discuss, but there are NDA's involved that you can't sign."

The two teens had heard that term NDA (non disclosure agreement) a lot growing up so they understood the gist of what Lucas was saying. He was probably going to make an offer to take on the two parents as his personal lawyers once the cross-adoptions and marriage were done and notarized. They couldn't blame him as the feel they got from Mister Fraggz was not good at all.

The two attorneys heard the same words but got a different translation; danger minefield ahead. Being the attorney for a family member was always dicey unless the relationship was flawless and no conflicts of interest could happen. Unfortunately, in a normal family, mixed interests and conflicts were the daily rule so lawyers tried to avoid representing their relatives unless they could control both the outcome and the client. Both parents understood that controlling Lucas would never happen in their lifetime and the outcomes were probably not desirable either.

The teenagers were still unsure so they looked to the parents for instructions when Lucas clucked his tongue impatiently, pushing a hidden button inset into the rim of the table in front of him. About five minutes later, a young man with fair skin, short brown hair and brown eyes dressed in drab-gray BDU's but no visible armor or weapons appeared from the left side of the booth. He made a small bow at the neck towards Lucas, saying in a steady low voice "Your Excellency." Standing at rest, hands at his sides and back straight as a steel girder, the twenty-something was a nice sight that had both teens taking in the view, wondering where the heck their brother found these people. The two adults got the message loud and clear; their son had not been making friendly suggestions when he told his siblings to take a walk, and the adults' opinion had not been necessary since the decision was already made. This would need some effort getting used to, the child's ability to produce immediate results on any decision he made.

Lucas swirled the freshly poured and fixed coffee in his cup while frowning in concentration. He wondered if had gone too far or been too ham-fisted in his reaction, but he was used to deciding things then seeing them done rapidly. Whether as Lawrence's SPA or now, as Master of BVL and its many webs of services and contacts, his will had been carried out promptly. He saw no reason whatsoever for that to change or slow down. In his business and off-colored ventures, movement, speed and flexibility of execution were paramount for survival. The adults would have to adapt quickly along the lines he drew for them, or he would do as Lawrence and Cynthia had themselves done to him: partition them into a quiet and safe little corner of his life then forget about them.

Looking at the silently waiting soldier, a prime specimen of the US Army Rangers, Lucas took in the many hidden pockets and belt sheathes as well as the bulges at both shirt cuffs, indicating for those who trained with such equipments, the presence of wrist-rigs. Hidden, spring loaded mechanisms to hold & push a blade or gun into the palm of the hand. The quick-draw weapons array was becoming standard amongst all the people that Lucas was hiring and training up as body guards or CQC for security around his businesses. If a criminal saw an AR-15 or a shotgun, they didn't usually think about the many knives or additional guns that the other soldiers could carry, and an opening could happen in the blink of an eye.

"My brother Derek and sister Tanya require an escort around the borough but might want to go further afield in town. As it's still the holidays and the weather is nice, I don't foresee a problem with accommodating such a small thing. Take one of the service jeeps from the hotel motorpool and escort them around. If you don't get a call before 23h30pm with different orders, get them back here and up to the 12th floor; apartment #4 has been prepared for their needs for the night.

Questions?"
"Excellency, what are the RoE for hostiles encountered? And is there an expenditure system for the mission?" The man asked, his calm voice setting the teens at ease but the parents on edge.

"RoE standard for VIP passengers, maintain live link to overwatch and scan actively for police presence to get assistance if needed. Call for an intervention if the black-&-blues can't handle the operation in progress. Prioritize evac & evade, not engagement. Expenditures billed directly to me via the normal channels for a recon mission."

(Carols – In a Wide Open Sleigh)

The soldier nodded and actually saluted by placing his closed right fist over his heart, saying "By your will, Excellency." He moved sideways and gestured with his hand that he was ready to move now. This time the kids got the message without fail, getting their coats from the caissons built into the booth and following the man towards the internal exit situated at the back of the mezzanine, past the bar, kitchen sub-section, restrooms and rear service staircase that only went down to the main floor of the Lounge to allow easy evacuation in case of fire. Walking through the single-panel heavy mahogany door, the soldier led them to the service lift at the back of the hotel, placing a steel key-card engraved with circuitry into a slot in the control panel. The lift came to life, rumbling for a minute before opening its stainless steel cabin.

"Miss, Sir, after you." He gestured for them to walk in before him. His entire posture and demeanor saying clearly he was on the job, thusly he would be stiff and not very responsive for the evening. The teens followed instructions as they had been taught by their parents but with small glances and gestures at each other. Sibling habits and signals established since infancy served to communicate that they had no clue what set off their brother, but it happened fast and hard. They would need to speak with their parents, then ask Lucas what they did wrong or it could get ugly fast.

The ranger was amused by what the kids thought was discrete and efficient signals; his boss would laugh himself silly at the thought. The standardized silent system used by US Rangers was world famous for its complexity and flexibility. It was about as good as a brand new International Sign Language, and a lot of other US service branches and militaries of other countries had copied or emulated it. These kids were easy to read and fun to watch as they worried about the boss's moods. Meh, Lucas was an easy guy all things considered. And for a crime lord holding power over an underground fiefdom, a hell of a good employer and caregiver. Yes he had a temper, and some triggers that got him nasty quick, but they were few and most of them he agreed with anyways.

As the lift stopped at the third basement, a small metallic bell sounded outside the shaft to warn people of incoming transit on their level. The soldier got out with the teens following towards what looked like a reinforced steel plate door. A small plaque on the doorframe proclaimed it the "Security Watchroom # 2" in black block letters with a small red light in the middle of the plaque. The man pushed a button on the door's control panel and a buzzer sounded; the light changed to green while the door panel slid sideways into its pocket to allow passage.

Inside there was a full width counter topped by a glass wall like a bank teller's kiosk, heavyset and obviously armored against attack. A visible metal apparatus hung over the kiosk, set into sliders in the walls that served to come down fast to barricade the entire counter from floor to ceiling against weapons fire and breaching. The kiosk was split in two service areas, left and right, with a large steel plate door in the middle between them. There was a single white middle-aged woman behind the glass; she gestured for the three persons to move with the soldier in front.

"What are your marching orders Theo?" She asked the young man with a pleasant smile while rather obviously checking out the two kids behind him.

"VIP escort with recon expenses, bill to the Master's account. It's his brother and sister so I was
told to just drive or walk around town with them for a sibling evening of fun. Default recall is 23h30pm back here at F12 #4. RoE's evac & evade, coppers in charge. I need a branded credit card and Keys for a BVL jeep from pool. Also, I was told to keep overwatch live-link at all times. That's it ma'am."

As the teenagers were beginning to wonder what planet they had wondered onto, the woman behind the counter chuckled, replying lovingly "You're my nephew, Theodore. You don't have to 'Ma'am!' me all the time on the job, even when the Lord is here. He told you that himself. I'm sure the kids aren't going to tetch because you weren't stressed out over having to baby-sit a pair of highschoolers on a holiday night."

She moved backwards thus allowing the teens to see she was in a motorized wheelchair, and the fall of her burgundy colored uniform's skirt showed both her legs missing from the knees down with some mobility issues in her left hand and arm. She pivoted the chair to reach into a drawer to find the card and key-ring before turning back to her waiting soldier-boy of a nephew. She unfolded the top of the counter at her station and placed the two items inside then closed the lid. A slight ding was heard and a touch screen computer built into the wall at her right side queried her for informations and authorizations. She typed the required data with her right hand quite rapidly then pushed a button next to the screen. A whirring sound was heard, accompanied by paper sheets emerging from a slot beneath the vidscreen.

Turning back to Theo, she pushed the papers through the safety slider she opened in the glass wall. "Here you go son; the usual ID forms, expenditure responsibility agreement and car license for the next 12 hours. You three just have to check a few boxes and sign at the bottom of each page before I give out the card and keys."

Theodore processed his own part with practiced efficiency then explained to the kids what they were signing and why. The ID sheets were to confirm who each was, and that they accepted the soldier as their 'responsible adult' protection detail for the next 12 hours, as well as his own ID as BVL employee so they could positively recognize him in a crowd.

The expenditure agreement stated that they were aware of the limit on the card (30,000$ USD); it would not work to purchase tobacco, alcohol, guns or illicit things, only services and products that their escort would deem 'age appropriate'. Theo laughed as he told them the boss had a very lax view of age laws and propriety, so they should be fine. Besides, the card usage rules stated that only Theo could pass it since it needed a signature on all transactions to be receivable. That did mean there were some stores they would not be able to go into because they had not installed a module for e-signature (electronic stylus) to their sales terminal. They did get a list of stores that had established agreements with BVL for mutual rebates for the customers of both commerces; each store was vetted as equipped, safe and carried youth or family type products that were harmless like toys, clothes, electronics, travel supplies, etc…

All in all, this promised to be a fun outing until Derek spotted something on the 'Escort agreement contract' that made him green around the gills. "Eh man, what's this shit in that text mean? : 'It is understood that reasonable use of force may be required and is therefore explicitly allowed to ensure the safety, orderliness and obedience of minors under charge of our care in all areas and activities covered by this excursion'"

The soldier laughed at their faces as he replied with a playful smile and voice that he seemed to have copied from their little gremlin of a brother-to-be: "Exactly what it means kiddo; I'm not just a professional soldier and escort, I'm the ADULT in the group so I'm responsible for your welfare, health and lives. But, I'm also supposed to keep you on the right side of the laws, keep you decent with folk you meet, and try to stop you from bratting out in public." He really thought it funny that
they thought there wouldn't be any rules and consequences to follow on the trip.

"Sooo, that means basically that if a quick slap on the shoulder or grabbing and squeezing your biceps a bit is needed, I can do that. If you were to be a full-out pest and throw food at your sister while we are eating in a restaurant, then I have to go through some steps in escalating order. I would have to try to calm you verbally and then with a touch or squeeze around the arm. If all the gentle ways fail, I am allowed to grab you to pull you up and give a couple of good smacks to your backside in front of everyone. If you squirm or try to fight me off, I am allowed to hold you under my arm or take you across my lap and spank your ass until you calm down and follow orders."

Seeing the kids about to panic and bolt for the door, he grabbed both by the upper biceps and held them on the spot. When they realized nothing else would happen, he modulated his voice to be more gentle and far less of a joker than he had been before. "Understand me clearly, it's important for all of us to get this clear and out in the open right away. We are NEVER allowed to hit a child confided into our care with anything other than the empty hand, and nowhere else than the arms or backside. We have no right to ever pull off your clothes to hit you on bare skin, especially not your bare ass. We would get charged with armed assault, aggravated armed assault, or even attempted child molestation if we tried those sorts of things. Plus, the boss has a dim view of hurting young people; that means a shorter life expectancy if he doubts my integrity or kindness around kids, and a miserable end if it's you two that I hurt. Are we okay to go or you want to abort and go upstairs already?"

The teenagers swallowed reflexively, sweaty palms clenching in stress and honestly wondering what the fuck they were getting into with their brother and his crazy ways of doing things. Grabbing his courage with both hands, Derek asked his sister in a voice far weaker and unsteadier than he would ever acknowledge using "You okay with this? We can just go and watch TV in the suite he's lending us. I know it's not like were savages, we don't aggravate people or make a scene in public usually… But this wasn't in the talks before we left the Lounge. The idea that a complete stranger could manhandle us, even holding us down, and wallop our hide doesn't make me feel safe around him."

Tanya was looking at the three persons around her, noting the sympathetic, embarrassed look on Theo's face and the gentle, patient visage of his aunt behind her glass wall. Derek looked about to be ill so she pushed him to sit in one of the four dingy plastic chairs that lined the walls around the waiting area they were in.

"Could you explain simply why that thing is there in that paper? Lucas never made any mention of it and I'm pretty sure my father would not allow it to happen. We both go to a private catholic school but dad never allowed them to paddle us; he would come to the school and settle things himself if we had really deserved it. And since it's a really liberal, progressive type of confessional school, they never in Derek's five years or my four, called dad and asked him to come over and put us back in place. Detentions, cleaning the gym or schoolyard, stuff like that was the worse we ever got, and no more than twice in a year at the worst period."

Seeing that they were both insecure and almost, no, pretty much, offended by the rule and its implications, Theo signaled for Tanya to sit by Derek as he moved across to sit on a chair away from them, to give them space and breathing room. The boy seemed to be calming down, getting back his normal color. The girl just seemed really curious, completely incapable of understanding how things work in the harsh reality that protection details live with every day.

"Look guys, the rules were made because of a lot of situations we lived through when we were in the military services, or from the experience that employees from other hotels talked about. This isn't a sick joke aimed at you, and it ain't meant to accuse you of being wildlings or delinquents.
The basic truth of the matter is this; the world out there wants to hurt you. Your family is rich and well connected, so hostage taking is always a risk. You have nice clothes and jewelry, so you're marked by cons and pick-pockets. You show a credit card in a store, so a guy with a scanner or camera in his baseball cap gets near you so your identity is stolen, your life gets ruined." He paused to watch their eyes, trying to get a feel of whether they were listening open-mindedly or just waiting because he said to sit and wait.

"Okay, so my job is to stop those things from happening but to make it work, I need you to follow directives like your life depends on it, because it damn well does. That means that adults who have a basic understanding normally follow verbal cues, but you'd be stunned at how many airheads in their 20s, 30s, and older we gotta deal with. For under-age persons, we have a looser set of rule because of the antiquated but still legally binding laws about 'it takes a village…' and 'children must obey all adults around them…,' and a few other pieces of crap that we still have on the books. The unpleasant reality is kids aren't trained or willing to follow in a crisis; they panic or freeze, sometimes run off blindly. So these rules were made to allow us, and guide us, in using safely the most minimal force needed to get a kid to safety, or keep our protectee from being such a pest that the cops come in to arrest then haul him off to jail. Trust me people, that would be a lot more damaging than anything I could do to you. I'm not a threat to your welfare, but a jail cell with a couple of rough street kids or young adult coming down a drug fix, that's another story."

Derek looked up from gazing at his hands pensively, stating clearly without compromise possible: "I understand the reasons and necessities. I refuse how they apply to me and my sister. We should have been warned ahead, and been given a choice. I know kids should comply and obey, but for fuck's sake, we just got back from a meeting with a horde of bloody lawyers about consolidating the whole family. The main subject of conversation was getting to appreciate and understand each other. Now this gets dumped on us! Without warning, or asking our opinion, or even just giving us an option of going back home to our own things. No, it doesn't work that way! Are you supposed to follow us in the apartment too? Your papers say 12-hours escort. Are you gonna babysit us all night? Do we have to worry about a damned attack dog armed to the teeth every time we eat, talk or move around?" Derek was panting by the time his rant was over. Red faced, hands clenched into fists, it was obvious the kid had never been made aware of the dangers and costs of living rich, famous, and powerful. It was his first encounter with real power and what happened in the lives of those called to wield it.

"I can call the boss to ask what the other options are. But normally, a meeting like he has with your parents takes between 4 and 8 hours to complete. He very clearly wanted you close by to keep them aware that you're safe and available to check on. He also wanted you to share that suite for the night with them after the meeting was over, instead of putting them on the road in the wee hours of the morning. It wasn't meant as disrespect for your persons or your choices; it was just the quickest and easiest organization to set up."

The siblings looked at each other, Tanya seeing that her brother had just gotten a bad stroke of negative emotions that wasn't going to disappear anytime soon. A few gestures and facial expressions later, they both asked to be taken up to the apartment instead. There would be no escorts or protection of any sort ever again if they had a say in it, unless those rules were changed or suspended for them. Even just knowing that other kids could, and would, be subjected to this made them despondent and bitterly angry. Lucas would hear of this.

Theo went back to his aunt Cecilia, asking for numbered forms. He took the printed pages to fill before handing two pages for each teen to sign. Derek glared but took the sheets, reading them very carefully this time. They were the same for both: a formal client's request to cancel the escort detail with all afferent services, plus a complaint formulary that had a basic summary of their objections and angry comments already typed up by the lady in the wheelchair. Seeing nothing that wasn't
true or inexact, they both signed then handed back the sheets with disdain written in their faces and body language. Theo sighed sadly; he had wanted this to go well so he could talk to them about his boss and the great good he did to the community around them.

The woman took back the credit card and key-ring for the jeep from the sliding drawer before speaking up to her nephew. "You go ahead son, take them upstairs to the reception desk to get the suite's key-card while I send this over the management wire. You don't have to stay once they are inside, they'll be safe there. Have a good night kids. I'm sorry we couldn't make this a happy outing for you."

(Hymnals – Funeral March)

Theo led the two frustrated, angry teens out the door and through the enclosed section of underground level 3 towards the front of the building so they could take the main elevator to the grand lobby for the apartment keys and documents. He walked with hands in his pockets behind the two adolescents, feeling that this was a failure because of him, but knowing in his mind that the kids were right, they should have been warned ahead. Well, the boss would handle the fallout; it was his decision after all, not Theo's.

Terms of warranty: none!

(Star Wars Symphony – The Imperial March)

December 28th of 2015, evening
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
BVL; 12th floor – executive conference room #2

Lucas had just taken his jacket and opened his waistcoat to breathe a bit when the two adults came in the door, escorted by a female valet wearing the formal burgundy uniform of the hotel waitstaff. Giving the woman a friendly nod, he sat in his large heavy mahogany chair. The high plushly padded backrest; the long and wide padded armrests; the three inch thick seat cushion, the sturdy bronze casters and pivot mechanism all made this piece of furniture a genuine director's chair. The large golden BVL logo embroidered into the burgundy upholstery made certain everyone knew who sat in that throne. Whilst the other chairs were good quality and well padded, they were just half the size and decorative presence his demonstrated. It was not very subtle, but it was a leftover from the first builders. He actually liked a lot of their style and deportment; he just built on top of it to add panache and prestance, with some teeth.

As the two parents set themselves into their seats, taking some cold water from the serving tray in the middle of the table, a beeping sound was heard from the table itself. Unfolding a slimset touch screen from the thickness of the table in front of him, Lucas tapped the messaging icon to accept the priority email. Quickly a frown formed on his face as he gritted his teeth in anger and disappointment. The spoiled brats had refused his hospitality and tried to insinuate that his people were criminals for having set in place some operational safety rules to help keep the little blighters alive and functional. Looking towards the adults he cleared his throat, rapping his left hand knuckles on the tabletop.

"There has been an incident with our wayward kinder at the security office just before going out for their trip. Both have elected to come spend the evening in the suite I have set aside for your family to spend the night. I can ask that they come here first, or we can have our meeting and
resolve this tomorrow at breakfast. Either way, there will be an accounting of what they said and
did with my personnel. I have the written client's request to terminate services and the complaint
sheet; they are opening on the terminals before your seats. Just pull the tray out and read. The
scrolling and panning arrows are universal, as are the text size, spacing and coloration options."

Lucas stood up, going to stand before the monumental fireplace, holding out his hands towards the
joyfully dancing flames, thinking that this was a damned way of getting the official business part
of the family affairs off the ground. Taking off his waistcoat and tie, he opened the top four buttons
of his white shirt then marched to the coat rack besides the large sliding patio doors that led to the
conference room's balcony. He put down the last articles of clothing he had removed.

Noises of disbelief and confusion attracted his attention so he walked back to sit in his chair,
grabbing some water to have something to fiddle with in his hands as a coping mechanism to
control his temper. The two adults were now rubbing their foreheads and glaring at the screens in
front of them in a comically mirrored expression that was so matched, it looked like they had been
living together several decades to be so attuned.

"Am I reading this right? The escort would have had the right to coerce or hit my children if they
misbehaved or became a public disturbance?" Raymond asked with more than just some
disapproval in his voice. The man was livid with anger and Cynthia was the same, just in the
pinched lips, frownful and blazing eyes kind of silent anger she always had when truly pissed off at
something. Lucas wagged his right index at them, his ring reflecting the flames' light when it
moved. "You should read the entire two pages of text, not just the complaint. The case is both
more complex and much simpler than it looks." He leaned backwards into the plush backrest,
feeling that the evening would be a waste of efforts from now on.

As the two lawyers read the second page their faces relaxed but then frowns and blinks of
interrogation began to appear. Cynthia looked to her son and hesitantly spoke up "Lucas, why
didn't you tell them about these rules before you sent them out? I can see the logic spelled out and
the situations it is meant to cover, but I can see they feel you sprang this on them like a trap and
they were caught without options. This was obviously not your intention, I can see that, but the
kids will be furious and won't accept the reality of why this is the way things are done."

Raymond was calmer now, taking off his glasses to wipe them with a handkerchief before placing
them back on his nose. Blowing out a breath of stress, he turned to his new son to comment "I have
worked with families that have valets, drivers and body guards. In some cases, they were given a
temporary limited In Loco Parentis entitlement, or even partial legal guardianship, but not
custodial, to handle things when going out for an errand or traveling with the parents on business
meetings. My children have never lived this and are not used to how the great houses work through
live-in tutors, servants, and delegated responsibility. It's a shock for them, please be aware of this
when you judge their actions and punish them."

Lucas blinked slowly several times as he digested the man's speech. "Are you saying that you are
going to let me arbitrate the situation then help enforce my decision, even if you don't like or
approve of my choice? Even if Derek or Tanya throw a fit and get mad at you?" He asked quite
incredulous. In his life, when there was a problem like this, people usually protected their own
family first, themselves second and Lucas never, unless they got paid or commanded to do it.

"Lucas, I know that you are new at this family situation, and so are we by the way, but I said
something to you a few days ago that I meant much more seriously than you seem to have realized.
Derek and Tanya quite obviously haven't gotten the message when I told them the day after when
we returned home. Let me repeat: WE WILL, all of us as a family, respect your decisions inside
your homes and places of business. In counterpart you will abide our way of life when you come to
our homes and offices. There will be mutual respect and consideration or we will not visit such a place that we cannot abide. My children made a choice and, while it is legitimate as demonstrated by the forms and fact that they have not left the building, it can be construed as an insult to your hospitality and brotherliness. Such refusal of protection is, at the very least impolitic, and the way it happened is ill-mannered. I thought I had raised them more conscientiously than this. Please receive my apologies and be certain that I will attend the matter when we are settling down for the night."

Looking over both adults for a few seconds more, Lucas gently tapped an icon on his touch screen and a tonality was heard. "Yes Excellency?" was heard promptly from speakers built into the walls and ceilings of the room, covering everything in sound waves. The child lounged backwards in his throne, asking in a more restful tone "Has Theodore Dunlop gotten the key-card for suite F12 #4 yet? I need to speak with him."

The receptionist moved and a new voice was heard in the air "It's Theo, my Lord; what are the new orders?" The grumblings from the teens and a least one rude comment from Derek were heard in the background, eliciting a frown of displeasure from both adults while Lucas became annoyed. "Theo, crank up the sound to the speakers at 7 then move aside so all three of you can be in the screen." Lucas paused to drink some water, biting back the angry retort wanting to fly out at the kids in the lobby.

Once everyone was in the camera's field of view Theo asked "We're set, Master; what now?" in the cooperative tone and manner that Lucas valued in himself and others. The snort of disbelief and face of contempt his teenage brother aimed at Theo was not welcome, and his attitude grated on his nerves. "Listen here brat! I'm in a meeting with Cynthia and Raymond about important adult matters to set things right for the family. I don't have time to hold your hand and stroke your bruised ego. Your fifteen years of age, have won two dozen merit badges from the scouts, earned a couple of altruism honors from your church, and this is the attitude you have? Keep it up and I'll tell Theodore to put you on your knees in the lobby for a half hour of time-out like a tantrum throwing baby, and Tanya next to you as well!"

The sheer venom in his low even tone, coupled with the thin lips, flaring nostrils and laser sharp eyes made more impact than if he had shouted them down. The two teenagers were red-eared and pale faced with embarrassment that the adult employees and passing guests could hear them get reamed out by what was visibly the youngest member of their household. It shouldn't be legal to do that to your siblings, especially not in public.

"We're sorry" both spoke out contritely but bitterly, knowing that any kind of public tiff would get their dad, and possibly Cynthia too, angry at their attitude, no matter what reason they had. They were on their way to the suite as they had chosen freely, had not been coerced, and were quite safe. The unpleasant rudeness and childish lack of manners was not going to be favorable towards their case at the end of the day.

"I am displeased with this situation." Lucas pronounced slowly and clearly to control his boiling blood. "You were both gifted with my most competent and reliable escort, a good spacious car and money equal to a grown man's salary for a full year. You could have spent it on pleasure and frivolity that you had not worked for, nor deserved. All you had to do was behave responsibly while enjoying an evening of holiday cheer. Since I don't know you personally and haven't gotten you gifts for the Christmas season, I thought this could serve as such. My mistake; it will not happen again. Any money or items you get from me in the future, you will have worked for it or paid for like any client of BVL. It's quite obvious you are not really spoiled, but the excessively sheltered lives you led have done your attitudes no favors. That will need to change promptly if you want to be accepted inside my territories and businesses."
The blond child drew in a lingering breath and drank half his glass of water before laying down the law on his errant siblings: "Following a conversation with our parents after they read the files you signed, they have elected to let me dispense the consequences of your actions. You are both restricted to the apartment until tomorrow morning. You will go there, change into the nightclothes supplied and have free time until 22h00pm, then bed. If the adults decide upon their return to have a nightcap, they can invite you to eat alongside of them. Otherwise, you are expected to wash up and go to bed. Period. Theodore will be spending the evening as babysitter since it's now obvious that you're not capable of managing your attitudes by yourselves. He will set up in the dining area and is instructed to not let you have anything other than water or fruit juice until the adults get in, or breakfast is served tomorrow. He IS given leave to administer whatever inducements to behave are needed to keep you both in line and compliant. End of message." Lucas's lips were thinly pinched, his entire face was closed off and stony. What patience he had for the meeting had evaporated; the rest of the talks would be harsh and unyielding from his part.

In the lobby, the teenagers were completely devastated; their evening was a washout and both parents would come down on them as well. Tanya was fighting against the tears pooling in her eyes while Derek just had a vacant expression in his face, looking in empty air as he tried to understand what blew up in his face and how to fix it.

Theo was sympathetic to their situation, he was twenty six years old and remembered getting grounded or sent to his room so dad could have the dreaded 'talk' with his backside in peace. These weren't his best memories but it helped to compare how the Master had dealt with his siblings. "It isn't so bad, you know. You're allowed to watch TV or put on music, play cards or one of the board games. Even the video games on the BVL network weren't put off. The only real punitive part is you can't leave the suite or gorge on food till your parents say otherwise, or breakfast in the morning. Since you already had a hell of a dinner in the Lounge, it's hardly any misery. Stop bellyaching and move; the elevator's waiting." He pointed to the lifting machinery with one hand while saluting the receptionist with the other. The elderly woman nodded to him but graced the teens with a pinched lipped mien of displeasure.

The two siblings got in the elevator, standing closer to each other than normal, both feeling Theo's presence in the cabin like a menace more than a reassurance. They didn't know him and even though he was younger than thirty, and not that big, his six-foot, two hundred-twelve pound frame wasn't a small detail either. Damn their brother for hiring types built like bloody iceboxes.

Walking out of the elevator at the 12th floor, they were met by Raymond in the executive lobby, wearing only his shirt and a frown. The adult had taken off his jacket, tie and opened the two top buttons of his dress shirt. It was clear by his crossed arms and closed facial expression that he was not a happy parent tonight.

"Theodore, please get the suite door open and the lights on while I get my brood in order. They shan't be long." The request was spoken calmly in even tone but carried an undercurrent of steel that Theo didn't want to mess with. Besides, the security staff had read the mandatory briefing on the Matthews and the father wasn't a bad guy or a menace. The kids would get scolded and maybe a swat or two but nothing worse. And honestly, both could use a spank on the seat of the pants; it would clear their heads and make them think before they just went on a hormonal rush.

Passing by the adult without comment or a look at his charges, he went down the corridor and unlocked the suite, going in but letting the door open.

"Stand up straight, faces forward and look at me when I speak to you." Raymond commanded from his children when he saw them with their heads bowed, looking at their shoes, not him. "I am embarrassed at your attitudes and angry by the impolite manner in which you have comported
yourselves in this house tonight. Both of you know clearly that you are guests in the home, dwelling, and place of business of your brother. He would not act out like this in the homes or offices of anyone without expecting retaliation or being told to leave until he can accept, and follow, the same rules as others.”

Taking a pause, Raymond checked the faces of his children to make sure he wasn't laying it too thick. "Yes, exceptions can be negotiated. But that gets done before hospitality is asked, not after the fact when you are in the house, holding the person hostage by the threat of making a scene when leaving the home in a disgraceful manner to shame the proprietor. We taught you this in childhood, your mother and I. That rule has not changed since, and I remember confirming this clearly two days ago, after we returned from the gala at this very hotel."

Seeing no reaction or sign that one of the children wanted to speak, he finished the reprimand in a gentler tone to soothe their hearts a bit. They were good kids and had gotten enough already, it was time for some forgiveness as well. "Cynthia and I spoke a bit, agreeing that the punishment given by Lucas is sufficient in severity and duration to accomplish the effect desired. We will not add to it unless you misbehave further to force our hand. Any disrespect or disobedience against Theodore will be dealt with by him personally, with Lucas reinforcing the lesson as soon as he hears about it in the morning. We reserve the right to modulate the reaction from Lucas, in less or more, depending on the complete situation. Now, come and let me hug each of you, then go to your suite, try to be good from now on and it will pass quickly. Everything will be better in the morning for all of us."

With a quick hug and kiss on the cheek, both teens went away despondently to what promised to be a dreary evening. Hopefully, the soldier would stay quiet in his corner and not bother them.

Raymond walked back to the conference room, praying that nothing worse happened tonight. His poor heart couldn't take much more and he was just 44 years old.
Fiefdom of Burgundy

The author wishes to express thanks to anyone who may read his story and encourages them to leave reviews, comments or even flame it hard. As with any who try their hand at publicly expressing an idea or story concept, all feedback is important and welcome. If you follow the story, could you leave at least one review, even if it's just an empty blurb with the word 'review' just so that I can get an idea of who is interested in it? Thank you for the effort. Disclaimer: I do not own SeaQuest, Star Wars, nor any other sci-fi or fantasy series, movies, comics, cartoons or news items used in this fiction as they belong to the creators or broadcasters or publishers who put them out for consumption by the public.

Created; March 2016

Revised on; September 2019

Crossing in from now on:
Martin Mystery cartoon from 2003 to 2006
The real adventures of Jonny Quest cartoon 1964 & 1996/97 only; written forms ignored
Thunderbirds TV animation 1964/66, live film 2004 and cartoon TAG 2015 only; written forms ignored

Sixth chapter: Fiefdom of Burgundy

Fatherly Lord

(SeaQuest theme – season 1 opening)

December 28th of 2015, early evening
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
BVL; 12th floor – executive conference room #2

"I just spoke with the kids; they looked like death warmed over. I don't like to confine them for the evening but at the same time, it's not any different than they were already doing by themselves, so I don't feel guilty about it either." Raymond told the two persons in the room as he regained his chair.

"I don't think confinement to a locked room, especially with a guard, is good for children that just act childishly" Lucas responded calmly from the cushy depths of his throne. He had slouched into a comfortable recline and had no intention of getting straightened out anytime soon. His aching back was much too satisfied with the current position for any change in posture to be worth it. "Grandpa always said that locking up a kid gives them the message that they are dangerous, can't be trusted around others, so you exile them or lock them in a surrogate jail until they are docile again. It doesn't work because it makes the kids doubt their humanity and their belonging to the family, so it's a shit punishment to use. In this case though, they were already set on going to that suite for the evening and no plans passed that. It's not like I'm actually confining them all that
much. If they take a minute to think things through, they'll see it's pretty much symbolic. I hope they see that because at 22:00pm I will go meet with them before they turn in, to see if we can talk or they really need the early bedtime on top of things."

"Tell me Lucas, why did you tell the guard to stay with them if the escort is revoked? They are inside the walls, in a suite even, so the lurkers couldn't get to them. Why the guard?" asked Cynthia. Although she was not worried about them, the two siblings were dear to her heart or she would not have agreed to adopting them. On the other hand, she was just curious about how her son did things. His performance with the attorneys all day then the ruffian at the Lounge made her hungry for more information, and a deeper feel, of who and what her son was.

"It was for two goals that are actually complementary. First off, I will make my apology to them for not explaining the options or making it look like they had no voice of their own. They had a choice, but they didn't ask properly or were passed caring when the blow-out happened. I will personally explain and reset things for next time. Now, goal 1 – Derek panicked for no reason that I can discern; that worries me. I am hoping that keeping the irritant at hand will make him spill the beans, either by accident or in confidence to Tanya who will then speak with one of you to see if you can help her brother. It's also why I said to Theo to keep the compliance settings as they were planned. I know Dunlop; he's one of my best people available for escorting minors or skittish elderly persons. He will mess with their heads a bit to unsettle them, then appease them enough for a talk. That brings up goal 2 – Theo IS a good guy, but I heard in his tone of voice the guilt he had because this outing blew in his hands. He felt awful but didn't know how to fix it. Now he has a chance to show them in person that he's not the child beater Derek seems to think he is, and he'll get to show both the caliber and moral standing that I ask of my workers. Everybody wins, even the kids if they take a breath to think before they bitch about stuff for no reason."

"Nicely done, my son. Now, are you available for a couple months to teach me that? I could use a parenting primer." Raymond said with good humor as he filled a crystal stem glass with some cream of mint liquor to go with the plate of multi-varied wafer cookies the valet had put in the center of the table for evening tea. The Massive silver Samovar had been brought from Lucas' suite, it was gently puffing steam while the valet wiped and placed the cups, saucers and utensils at each person's reach.

Cynthia snorted while extending her arm, holding a stem glass towards her wayward companion whilst Lucas just chortled in mirth at the concept of him parenting anybody. Maybe in three or four decades. The female valet actually smirked, thinking that he was doing a great job already with all the employees and dependents of BVL, and all the other projects he was setting up. Any kid who wound up with him as a dad or uncle would be well taken care of, never lacking for love or attention.

"Now unfortunately, we come to the nasty bits of our familial arrangements. As you are my parents or soon will be, we are going to need to set some boundaries between work and house in order to keep sane. Raymond has already shown a firm grasp of the concept. The question now is you, mom; can you separate your son from the businessman that will employ you? If you become my attorneys of record, will you be able to stay detached and professional at work but committed and caring at home? Will this arrangement work or collapse? I need to know because I have a plan concerning the two of you that hinges on your capacity to make the partition and hold to it."

Cynthia stroked her chin pensively as she slowly sipped her mint liquor and chewed one of the exquisite imported wafer cookies that she would have to watch out for, or she might end up bingeing out on them. Naughty boy, her son was, tempting her with such delicacies.

Getting more serious for a minute she swirled the liquor in its glass as she wondered what exactly
Lucas wanted. Then she had a brain wave, thinking about what he was afraid of. It was so bloody apparent that she wanted to hit her head on the table. That was her answer right there.

"You don't need to worry about giving orders or telling us off at work for fear of us retaliating at home under the guise of familial management or discipline issues. We hope in counterpart that any home problems will not transfer to the contractual relationship we will be entering with you."

The look of surprise on her son's face told her she had hit the nail right on the head. For all his public façade and displays of power, Lucas was still only an eleven years old kid, very much scared of being abandoned or getting hurt by the adults around him. What he needed more than anything was reassurance and support to validate his life as a person; the money, prestige and luxury were just accessories around the person but had no real value. His most fundamental fear was to be exiled or sent away, like what happened when they sent him to live with Lawrence's parents, then with hiring Izuku Shu and recently, when he was essentially cloistered like a monk at WPP village. Now they needed to elaborate and fine tune a setup that would protect everyone while being flexible enough to not rip their heads off when a family tiff happened, or a misunderstanding about orders and goals at work muddied the waters.

Suite F12 #4 – Oy Vey iz mir!

(Hymnals – funeral dirge, slow tempo, magnum voce, with choir)

December 28th of 2015, early evening
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
BVL; 12th floor, suite #4

The teenagers came into the apartment, seeing from the doorway that the setup was different from the Owner's suite. There were two bedrooms side-by-side with an open corridor at the right hand leading to the master bedroom and amenities beyond. The great room and its three separations was a duplicate of the one in the Owner's suite but without balcony or window, only the great bedroom at the back would have that. They saw that Theo sat himself at the dining room table with pitchers of water and juice, glasses and cloth napkins on a service tray in hand's reach. He had pulled one of the slimset touchscreen terminals from the table and was contentedly watching a newsfeed while waiting for them to get in.

"Alright munchkins, take your gear off and dump it on the couch, you'll get to it in a minute." He closed the feed and pushed the screen back into the table before standing, indicating for them to stand at four feet in front of him. Seeing the exchange of looks and slow-motion compliance, he shook his head in sad amusement, fervently wishing things got better fast or the evening would be painful for all of them.

"Okaaayy then, dudes…" he started in a sarcastic imitation of teen-speak that made the real ones cringe in hope they didn't sound like that "We need some rules to make sure that everything has its place and we don't bark at each other without a reason."

"Firstly and obvious; you don't leave the suite without permission from me, your parents or the boss. If you do, I'll have security hunt you down then lock you in a holding cell in basement 4 until your adults get to you. At that point, all bets are off and I won't help you save your skins. His Excellency decided this and the others backed him up; since it's HIS house, you do what he says or you're gonna hear about it, clear? Now, the entire suite including the balcony is available. You can
bunk in separate rooms or share, or even unfold the couch. Siblings in the same bed is normal when you have a bad bout and supporting each other is a healthy thing. That's your choice to make, I'll only interfere if your hurting one another or ill."

The teens were sullen and bitter but silent while the ground rules were laid out for them. After their father had scolded them, they had no stomach for a fight about menial things. So far, everything spelled out was banal and what they would have done themselves anyways, so why fight about it?

"Secondly; these liquids are there on the table for you. If you want more, or a different sort, you ask me and I'll see if we can get it. You do not root around the fridge, pantries or cupboards, or you will get punished for BOTH dishonesty AND challenging authority. You are on short rations for the evening, live with it. And since I saw with my own eyes the bloody huge dinner and dessert you had, don't cry me a river about starving or I'll punish you for BOTH lying to my face AND making false accusations of child abuse by way of not feeding you properly."

Now the teens were chaffing at the bit. The bastard thought he had the right to punish them like he was in charge! And doubling punishments to boot! For what? Dammit! That wasn't gonna pass! Both now had frowns and pursed lips in matched expressions that would be comical if it weren't for the blow-out about to happen at any second.

"Thirdly; my name is Theodore Michael Dunlop, or Theodore or Theo. You don't need to say 'sir' or 'lieutenant' or any title. Just be calm and polite when you speak to me and I'll return the favor in kind. I'm not a teenager sitting a pair of babies for pocket money; I'm a professional soldier set as night watch. My job is to make sure you stay in the suite safely unless there's a fire or med-evac to go through. As the boss told you on the screen, you get changed into your nightclothes NOW then you are free to do what you want until the bedtime set for you at 22:00pm. That means you hit the bathrooms at 21:30 and lights out at 22:00 sharp or you will get punished for BOTH tardiness AND willful disobedience. Any questions?"

Derek was spoiling for a fight by now and not willing to back down from what he saw as a big bully trying to muscle in on him and his sister. With a tone that was frigid and contemptuous he spoke challengingly "Punishment! What fucking punishment hein? And what the hell is that about taking doubles when you feel like it!" The boy's fists were clenched and his face red with rage; it was clear he was at the point of explosion and no longer trying to contain himself.

Theo sighed sadly; he had really hoped not to do this because he really thought scaring children to obtain their compliance was bad policy. He knew from experience in his own childhood that explanations were long to give but always yielded better, more reliable attitude changes than fear and pain. Thankfully, his US Ranger training had included a battery of non-lethal methods and some very nice negotiation skills to talk the locals into helping with a mission. On top of that, the boss had paid for him to go through programs for professional baby-sitters and live-in tutors to know how to care for kids, regardless of health or temper. If Derek thought he was getting physical with him, the kid would be disappointed. Theo had no desire to hit or hurt the teen, just get him immobile and calm enough to talk through what ailed him in the first place, because it was a damn big problem if his instincts were right.

"Okay kiddo, you asked for it!" Theo said in almost bratty playfulness before he surged forward to grab Derek like a squid extending its arms to bring prey into its ring of tentacles and teeth. The poor boy was already so pissed he could not see straight, and had no fighting skills whatsoever so he couldn't have really resisted even though he dearly wanted to. Theo quickly had him flush against himself, face-to-face. He wrapped one arm around Derek's back to clamp and lock the boy's limbs in place. The other arm was at the nape of his neck, resting on the top of his shoulders firmly but delicately to not hurt the kid if he made a reflexive move out of fear. He completed by stepping
the tip of his toes onto Derek's feet but keeping his weight only on his own heels to not hurt the kid’s toes. This took all of four seconds to accomplish.

Now completely immobile except for his head, Derek was aware he had no chance to get free unless Tanya did something drastic. Since the soldier was not harming him, he could guess his sister, even smaller and less aggressive than him to begin with, would not try anything. He was stuck and had nowhere to run. Looking deep into Theo's brown eyes he saw sadness, sorrow and other emotions he couldn't identify, but anger, rage or a desire to hurt him weren't there. His own adrenaline rush was ebbing out, the stress from the spike of rage spent as he realized he was not going to be ready to fight a man like Theo anytime in the next decade. All he had left was a bruised ego and humiliation to drown in. And his mom and dad were gonna hear about it so he'd get punished by them too.

Visionary Lord
(The Godfather – main theme)

December 28th of 2015, early evening
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
BVL; 12th floor – executive conference room #2

"Well then I guess I have to take a risk and explain my project to you. My attorneys at Dross, Dregs, Scraps & Fraggz Inc, are not up to the full task and complexities that my holdings will soon represent. While they are uniquely suited to some of the less savory aspects of BVL operations, and Mister Dregs in particular is quite adept at navigating the seedy underbelly of humanity, they are just not good enough by themselves to carry the brand name correctly. On the other hand, the people at Granger, Farmer & Tiller, partners at law, are simply too goody two-shoes and don't have the street creds or the teeth to cut it out in those markets and areas of life where my ventures are wont to meander. The solution is therefore simple in concept, yet imminently messy in application: we will concatenate the two firms into a single large company offering the full gamut of legal services, public relations, lobbying and representation, proxy services, process serving and ushers at law, etc….""
body language, but she was busy pouring a cup of tea for Lucas, making certain she was angled with her face away from the adults. Could Lucas have ownership of a debt they owed or blackmail material on the partners? He had clearly alluded to their criminal world expertise and shady leanings.

"Secondly, both the Farmer matriarch and the Tiller patriarch are looking into pulling out as many of their relatives and dependents out of Buffalo City, and New York State, as possible. They are looking to completing the sally as soon as July of 2016. They have given me signals through discrete channels that they wish to enter treaty negotiations with me concerning their exit rights following my purchasing their parts of the firm."

Raymond paled to unhealthy tones while Cynthia stared dumbly at the eleven year old, her mind having blanked at the knowledge that the founding partners of her firm were speaking to Lucas behind everybody's back as if it were a James Bond mission. And what the fuck does that expression 'treaty negotiations' mean dammit! He's a kid, not a government! He didn't have borders to defend and customs outposts to watch over! And why on god's blue Earth would two of the three founders want to dump their centuries old heritage to vamoose out of state like there was a new wave of the Black Plague sweeping the land?

"Thirdly and most importantly as far as the Law and the government are concerned; no I am not a lawyer or member of the firms concerned, but that is a matter of time and money. In their current forms, only my cabinet is an incorporated company that works with shares and voting stocks. which I have already bought out in full then put in a closed capital society. G, F & T is and old form Legal Study Partnership that has neither shares nor stocks, but they did evolve the company structure and legal status, about 73 years ago, into an LLC - Limited Liability Corporation. Now, an LLC as a registered tax-paying corporate entity can effectuate another change of structure to become a share-based Incorporation, thus putting voting stocks on the market for sale, thus becoming an open capital society. Or, if a treaty of non-aggression with certain parties is established in confidence a priori, then the voting stocks could be sold privately to be held as a closed capital society. This is the situation that I am going to negotiate with Farmer and Tiller, which will hopefully drag Granger into the process to evacuate them as well."

Cynthia was trying desperately to wrap her head around the maneuver that her son was trying to mastermind with nothing but money, paper and a few innuendos versus the hundreds of years of accrued history and three hundred workers that G, F & T could field to defend themselves. She was the expert in corporate forms, incorporation and taxation brackets and such, but this… It really boggled the mind.

He was planning on exploiting a particularity of American law that came into effect in the early 2000's when the government changed the laws regulating legal studies and cabinets to allow them to become incorporated. This allowed the new firms to sell shares to non-lawyers because there were more and more massive firms coming from other countries that offered multiple services that were not lawyering per say, but connex products and services like representation, lobbying, proxy voting on boards of companies, etc… Without that specific particularity, the project would not work. She knew for a fact that it would never be possible in Canada or England which still abided the old code that only lawyers and notaries could be partners in a cabinet, no shares or stocks, just collective name partnership or the LLC common in american business landscape.

The little bugger was right after all; with enough money, elbow grease and time, it would eventually happen on his terms, if the main partners sold their interests to him. Would they? She suddenly didn't want to know if or how. Some things she was still too young and innocent to sully herself with, despite being a lawyer and 39 years old. Eyeing the mint liquor, she gestured the valet to refill her glass.
Raymond was adrift in his thoughts about the new work environment that this would present? Impose? He wasn't certain which and that did scare him a lot. At any rate, the boy in front of them would upset the judicial landscape of New York State and far a field with his maneuver whilst also laying hands onto and gearing up one of the biggest and meanest law firms you could find in New York State outside of New York City or Albany. The thousands of active clients and several more thousand contacts and business partnerships were truly awe inspiring, and the being in charge would truly be able to lord it over others at any venue or event he attended.

(The A Team – main theme)

Looking at his new son, Raymond knew now why the employees called him 'Master' or 'Lord' or 'Excellency'; he truly was the Lord-Master of the Fiefdom of Burgundy and he was on the path of conquest. His domain was small but prosperous, well populated and exceedingly capable of expanding and seizing land, riches and people. The little boy at the end of the table was a genuine medieval Lord, the workers were more like serfs or dependents than salaried employees, and they obviously liked the security and respect they got from this old style system with twists.

Suddenly Raymond felt a wave of illness make him feel light headed, almost faint.

What was that comment Derek had made at dinner tonight? 'The laws about private armies and you can't have one?' Oh, for Pete's sake! The bastard little crud wasn't just hiring ex-cops and ex-servicemen out of kindness. He needed protection for all the underground stuff he had, and needed to prepare an exit in case he wanted to turn legit but the buyers and suppliers wanted to take control or even remove him altogether. He really was running a medieval-style fief, but with several modernizations in both the societal model and the economics of the thing. Oh bloody Hell! The pillock of a git was screwing them all, and getting away with it to boot! Could they stop it? Should they? Was there a way, especially without destroying their family? Or starting a war in the streets? Now the comments about Farmer and Tiller negotiating exit rights made a lot more sense. So much sense in fact that Raymond wished they were offered something a lot stronger than mint cream. He needed some Jack Daniel's or some Bourbon in a bad way, and a lot of it!

Suite F12 #4 – I come in peace

(- Flat silence; no music -)

December 28th of 2015, early evening
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
BVL; 12th floor, suite #4

Tanya was seriously questioning her brother's wisdom. He might be older than her by a year, but sometimes he acted like any little 5 years old she ever saw. Compared to Lucas, he would always be the lesser sibling, no matter how hard he tried to get better. It hurt her deeply to think that about the brother she has known for all her fourteen years of life, but it was a truth so evident she'd have to be fit for the psychiatric ward at Piety of the Sacred Heart hospital to try denying it. She could empathize with Derek; Lucas had money, influence, power, and all the toys you could want. Except he had no one. He had no family. He had no close or extended relatives to turn to. It was him alone against the universe, and those were odds that you couldn't win with; no matter how good, rich, equipped or connected you were. The Law of Averages meant that numerous idiots would always win against a single high quality individual. Always.
They had two loving parents; even though mom was dead, she had died loving them truly and fully. Cynthia had not done that for her son and Lawrence was a failure even worse. They had grandpa on mom's side before he died, and even though he was an ornery snob, he had loved them strongly as well. Dad's brother Raynold had died celibate and childless when they were five and four, but the few times they met him he had been full of wonder that they could like him and want him in their lives. His kindness still shone in the love of scouting he had given Derek and the passion for music & dance he had given her. Lucas had only debts of remembrance, duties, obligations, calendars and programs. And now they were taking his mother from him, right when he could have a chance at reconciliation, the only chance before leaving for Stanford for years.

She understood Derek. She felt for him. She would always support her beloved sibling, the feisty outdoorsy half of herself. But she grieved for Lucas, for the pain, shame and humiliation that had been heaped upon him in proxy of another. The only reason Lucas was reviled into sufferance was because he dared to survive being set aside like a pair of old, worn-out boots that don't fit anymore. His only true crime was trying to take care of himself instead of falling to his knees, head bowed, begging the adults for help or charity that would never come; just like society expected children and teenagers to do under threats of violent reprisals, should they ever attempt independence.

Walking forward slowly, she made sure to stay well in front of Theo's eyes and placed herself on the soldier's left. She reached out her left hand to card her fingers through her sibling's hair from the side, gently massaging his scalp and then his neck. She felt him calm down; she saw him close his eyes, bow his head and let the tears fall. There was much sorrow this night. They had a lot of healing to do before things would get better.

Taking a good look at the ranger's facial expression, she saw the relief, the sadness, and the understanding. Before his Master, which man was it that could stand and be seen as great in comparison to The Lord of Burgundy? She extended her right hand, placing it on Theo's upper arm, gently squeezing the biceps in way of thanks for his restrained response to her brother's distress. The man had the right to be angry and standoffish, but had chosen to act as a real adult who is truly responsible. For that, at the very least, she owed him respect and he would not have to fight her to receive it.

Generous Lord

(Earth Final Conflict – season 1 opening, instrumental)

December 28th of 2015, early evening
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
BVL; 12th floor – executive conference room #2

"You both seem like you saw a ghost. I know I'm a rather pale shade of milky white but still, aren't you exaggerating a bit?" quipped Lucas from the cozy depths of his overly stuffed throne. Damn but the padding on this thing was nice for his bony back.

Both adults were not amused; Raymond was close to hyperventilating and Cynthia was stuck with the sense that she had just lost control of her life and career. Neither was in shape to hold a serious conversation but going home to sleep for a week wasn't in the cards for either of them.

"Well now, if you have recovered your composure enough we can proceed with distributing the spoils of war to the vanquishers. T'is the Season and all that… Although I do hope it works out
better than with Derek and Tanya. It should though. After all, these come with contractual obligations and renewal terms, so there shouldn't be any mistaking the intent nor the chain of command in the situation." His predatory smile left no doubts as to who the topmost echelon of said chain was.

Turning to Cynthia he gestured towards the thick pile of folders and envelopes that the valet had taken from the built-in mahogany cabinetry and put between her and Raymond in two distinctive piles. "You both get two Christmas gifts for the price of one" the child said with a bratty smirk in full force on his face "On top of being gifts of a new job and life-long investment, I have already classified and indexed the paperwork for you just like you taught me a few years back. They are also compliant to the legal codes active as of the 1st January of 2015, since the USA has a funny habit of setting a lot of law changes to happen on that date every year." 

"Now the actual fun portion of the 'little proof of affection' that I have given you; I have already incorporated a legal services firm under the amusing name of 'Minotaur; guardian of secrets, confidentiality and privacy'. I do believe that the name and logo will say what it does rather boldly enough to not have any doubts about what lies within its many divisions." Lucas picked up a sheet of paper from his own freshly arrived pile, displaying it aloft. "Martin Ludovic Mystère, from Sherbrooke in Quebec, is an aspiring juvenile artist with a raw talent for 2D, 3D and animated drawings. His renditions of my Minotaur, its Labyrinth and Crypts will become emblematic of trust and cybernetic safety the world over. I met the guy online by trolling around the web as I had little of genuine importance to do at WPP, even on a rush day. I was surprised to see that a 12 year old kid had made artwork of mystical beasts and legends that go very well with the thematic that I want to maintain around Crowned L. The Monarch sitting in the middle, his many servants and guardian beasts surrounding the fiefdom to hold it secure and functional."

Cynthia was silently watching her fiancé but he kept silent, signaling that from now on he was following her lead in the conference. Blast! She had wanted him in front as a distraction so she could have time to think about the events before committing herself. "Tell me son, since when do you have a legal cabinet? I don't recall there being one in the legacies that your… mentors... had left you last year?" She hoped that the residual disgust and hatred was not so apparent in her voice but the sudden tightened lips and frown on Lucas's face showed he'd heard it clearly.

With a contemptuous sneer, Lucas answered in a foul mood at the woman that had no rights whatsoever to judge George, Vratsina, nor even Izuku. "As you specialize in incorporations madam lawyer, you should be well aware that anyone can incorporate a US federal numbered INC for about 1,000$, adding the international trade number & tax ID for about 500$ on top. Since I am a minor, the law says that I could not do that myself. But the same law says that any existing company – such as a familial foundation – has an unlimited right to created and arrange INC companies at will. This can be like Minotaur, a proprietary division of Crowned L that is closely held; no voting stocks will ever circulate publicly. Or it can be a truly public company where all shares are negotiable at the stock exchange."

Lucas took a sip of tea and a wafer cookie before continuing more calmly "As for the timeline, I was working as SPA for Lawrence without any real social life, even in the evenings or weekends. Consequently, I kept busy by learning about my holdings and setting up a few things that I just knew would come in handy in the very near future. If the buy-out of G, F & T doesn't pan out, I have the contingency of folding Dross, Dregs, Scraps & Fraggz into my own legal firm, then harvest workers from other firms around the state and beyond. I have money in hand with a good steady income; paying cash for quality people that will then increase both the income and the spread of my influence as Lord of Burgundy is a cheap price to pay. It's only money, and the human potential that I get in return is priceless, so I will always win at the bottom line, no matter what anybody thinks."
The two adults got confirmation that their son wasn't after money or riches of the conventional kind; he was after people. He wanted the capacities, the history and the contacts that only came from living people, something that no pile of cash could ever get. But, if he was kind, respectful, and treated his employees equitably, then they would volunteer their history. They would expose and then use for his benefit the capabilities that are normally kept in reserve for a personal emergency. He would obtain people of the high quality and competencies exhibited by Theodore Dunlop, getting them to perform for him out of loyalty to his cause and creed, not just do the motions like some cheap hired muscle in the hood.

They both concluded without saying a word to each other that Lucas wasn't hiring so much as proselytizing, then setting people on a path of life & belief in what looked more and more like a philosophical movance, or even a cult system. Oh Gods above! Their son was a missionary! Or a crusading Paladin? They would need to talk about this amongst adults at a later date, but right now the hour was grave and they needed to focus on the rest of his speech.

"The way things are, G, F & T will be gutted to the point that the branding will be void of sense so the Inc that holds this identity will be folded under Minotaur as a closely-held division and be used in Canada, England and other countries where lawyers-only cabinets are the norm. It will also allow me to retain certain older clients that would balk at a change of name when they bank a lot on the firm's reputation to unlock stalemates, or make things get in marching order with less effort."

"Coming to court with a reputed attorney is good, but coming with an average attorney from an excellent, well equipped firm is better because your lawyer has back-up to fall on if things go pear-shaped. That's why I decided to go with a large, multi-service cabinet in my corporate structure. I am good in mathematics of all sorts, but especially in statistics and probabilities; I ran the numbers thus finding that large multi-service firms outperform single-man high-name lawyers by a margin of around 7 to 3. The future of my judicial peace of mind and capacity to defend my holdings or people lies that way, so we will follow the math to do what is proven to be the most profitable investment of men and resources."

Seeing no objections or comments from the parents, Lucas blinked several times, frowning at them. They looked like they just saw old W. F. Barnum teaming up with Mayor O'Briain to do a burlesque skit on the Owner's Table down in the Lounge. What skittish creatures, adults…

"You look like you could use a break and some air; I'll unlock the patio doors then let you have a half-hour to walk around, use the restroom, and maybe get some air on the balcony outside. I can even light up the small stonework oven on the patio if you want some mulled eggnog while you air out your heads."

Suite F12 #4 – We accept your peace

(Gundam SEED – Akatsuki no Kurama)

December 28th of 2015, early evening
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
BVL; 12th floor, suite #4

Theodore was relieved beyond words that the boy had calmed down, and that the girl was apparently aware of something because the gestures she made were filled with meaning, not just a
bit of spare gentleness to pass around. When he trained with the US Army Rangers, he had never envisioned having to use his skillset on a kid like Derek so he was imminently relieved because there was no way he would think of this little guy as an enemy combatant, or a threat to US national security. Hitting or hurting him would be a patent proof of Theo’s own failure and lack of maturity, not a bad comment against Derek for acting out because he didn't know how to ask for help with the pretty deep problems he had inside.

Nodding in gratitude to Tanya, he was a bit surprised to see her shy smile, then even more surprised when she moved her hand upwards to squeeze and rub the nape of his neck in a sisterly gesture that felt good to receive. Because he had seen her movement he was able to quell the trained reflex of disengaging, aggressively putting distance between his body and what touched a very vulnerable part of himself. She was no threat, and his instincts told him the bad pass was finished. Now they could sit, talk it out like real people instead of growling and barking like dogs in a pissing contest for alpha position in the kennel.

Theo loosened his arms but kept them supportively around the younger male, he was still crying softly, head bowed and eyes closed, occasionally shaking through a silent sob that he wouldn't let out for others to witness. Making a gut-feeling based decision, Theo very gently guided the distressed teenager to one of the settees and sat in it before helping the boy to sit on his lap sideways, his left side resting against Theo's chest with his hands joined, resting on his lap. The position allowed the ranger's right hand to rub his back and neck in an effort to help soothe the pain inside of him, while the left arm around his front kept him steady and safe.

Tanya gifted the man a genuine smile, confirming his decision by sitting on the settee to his left. She used her left hand to hold and squeeze Derek's joined hands while using her right hand to again rub and squeeze Theo's shoulder and neck. It was nice for Theo whose parent had died when he was seventeen years old, plus he had missed a lot of this gentle touching since he was an only child at home. His aunt was still healthy at the time, but he upped and joined the US military the moment he finished high school before even turning 18. He was in pain, searching himself, so the rangers had given him the home he needed. Only his aunt's accident with her car last year had brought him back. Getting an offer for both of them to work at BVL with some damn good benefits was the only reason he asked for his discharge from the service. He could work at what he liked doing, which his training made him competent for, all the while caring for his handicapped, lonely aunt each day.

"It's okay Derek. You're still my biggest brother, and I still love you. I won't leave you. I won't replace you. You don't have to be afraid, or sad, or hurt inside. Nobody's asking you to compete with Lucas and be better than him. It's not possible. He's not normal, and never will be. But he's paying for it every day of his life in tears and blood. Please remember that we have something that he doesn't, and never will, have, cuz he can't rewrite history. We have a family that never turned its back on us; they never exiled us, never thought to lock us up in an orphanage or juvenile prison. For him, that's a dream that he will never be able to have. His parents used or rejected him shamelessly. They exploited him to the bone, or wanted to imprison him without justifying why; for the crimes of others or his own was never important. And on top of all that, we almost took his mom when he’s not even sure she still wants him or not. What does he have left to envy in this world? Money? Connections? Power? What of those would he not give to have his family back around him, safe and reliable? We're the lucky ones Derek; he's just surviving how Nature lets him."

Lofty parental interlude
Raymond and Cynthia were standing close enough to each other to be mistaken for siamese twins joined at the hips. The were wearing their outdoor coats, standing on the balcony near the small lively wood-burning oven that spread light, warmth, and good cheer on all the private little space. Set twelve storeys in the air with nothing but a wrought iron balustrade to keep them from falling, the terrace was well appointed for a conference room annex. The blasted wind was chilly but had nothing on the tempest inside both of their minds. Their son, all 11 years old, 5 feet tall and 80 pounds when sopping wet, had revealed he was a heavy weight in the economic and legal fields of not just New York State, but the whole of the USA. The wake-up call for the parents was traumatic, but not as much as finding out that the blond little gremlin would soon be their partner – slash – employer in the law firm they worked for.

Madre de Dios in Cielo! What had they gotten into now?

The skinny little devil hidden in childish features was about to upend the societal norms of America and Canada with his manner of doing business, taking care of his people and their families. The worst part of the scheme; they could not see a way for it to fail as it was stated. Lucas had been diligent in separating the lawful, legitimate parts from the underground parts, then building airtight walls with very few passageways between the two worlds. He had money to give, many easy ways to launder or recycle the cash flow, and several major real estate and industrial projects on the table, already working or soon to be, so the cash flow would actually get bigger in 3 to 6 months.

He still hadn't told them what he expected from them, nor had he really broached the criminal or underhanded elements of his vast holdings. He had not spoken of his links and alliances with politicians, judges, senators, senior functionaries and such. They suspected it had something to do with the hotel and its many depravities along the years. Neither was stupid enough, or prudishly moronic enough, to think that new furniture, rugs, paint and a few personnel moved around would change the clientele, their needs or their suppliers that much.

They were of the same opinion that the whores, pushers, lurkers and thugs existed in and around BVL because it suited the methods and purposes of her Lord. They both worried what that might be, but asking would bring answers they were not ready to receive and live with. As things were, they had no way out without destroying every thing and person they held dear, including themselves. And at this point, they were not blind to the possibility that driven by survival and the rage from multiple abandonments and humiliations, Lucas might decide to cut his losses and make them all cease to be threats permanently.

He had the means; why not use it?
The two Matthews came out of the bedroom they were sharing dressed in the nice, soft and warm nightclothes that had been supplied to them: lounge pants with drawstring at the waist, four-season semi-fit T-shirt with sleeves that reached the wrists and thick ankle-high socks with a reinforced sole that meant they could forgo slippers but still have warm feet.

Except that someone with a sense of humor had given the kids a mixed bag of items with only the socks being matched pairs, but in fluorescent pastel colors. Everything else was unique so they had to make up their minds as to what went where while clashing the least. Derek's gray pants and lavender shirt were passable together until you saw the hot pink socks. Tanya was alternatively amused and embarrassed by the canary yellow pants, teal shirt and powder blue socks.

Hearing Theo laughing himself silly at their expense from the depths of the sinfully padded couch, the siblings huffed in teenaged pride, promising each other with rapid nods that retaliation would be had. Someday, somehow, they would get even with the big lug.

"Oy! Did'n'a yar parents show you to coordinate colors when you dress? Mwuhahaha!" The ranger was shaking in unbridled mirth at the poor kids' faces. They were sooo cute when they were pouting like that! He wished he had little siblings to rib and have fun with. Ah well, maybe in a few years he'd have his own tykes running around, making him laugh.

"You do know," Tanya started in a snobby nasal tone "That as the responsible and mature adult of the moment, you should be showing respect, decorum, and deportment befitting your station to your charges, don't you?" Her brother nodding at her words like a demented bobble-head doll didn't add any seriousness to the situation at all.

Between renewed spasms of laughter, Theo barely calmed down enough to reply "Oh I know, I just don't care! Mwuhahaha!"

Nose up in the air in fake high-born contempt for the plebeian menial, Tanya sniffed in affected disdain while taking her brother's hand, leading the silently pouting boy to the other side of the great room, next to the media cabinet. "Come on, let's watch TV; even the cartoons will be more spiritually uplifting than this halfwit!"

Theo had now stopped laughing enough to sit straight and take a long look at his two little roomies; they were clear eyed, standing straight, and even though Derek still had redness in his eyes and around his face from crying so much, he seemed well recovered. Good; it would make talking to them about the blowout downstairs feasible. Not easy, no, but feasible.

Theo went into the kitchen and called out loud with brattiness in both voice and manners "Oy! Ragamuffins! You want some juice? Got apple, orange, grape, and some mixed up premade smoothie thingy that I'm not sure what's in it, but its purplish. And milk. Can't forget the milk. The parents would 'cuse me of feeding you guys just junk when their backs are turned."

Hearing soft footsteps coming, he turned to see both kids walk into the dining area, to take places in the padded mahogany chairs closest to the kitchen proper. Taking this as the most verbose peace offering he was getting tonight after what happened, Theo took the serving tray and brought it to the table. After placing his burden in reach of all three, he took off his BDU's overshirt and rolled the wrist-length sleeves of the brown T-shirt up to the elbows before sitting in front of the two teens. Said children were ogling his arms wide-eyed, making him realize his mistake; the wrist rigs
that had been concealed by the loose fitting overshirt were now visible in full. The youngsters were obviously re-evaluating what he said about being a professional soldier on night watch. He really hoped they didn't become too afraid to speak again.

"Look guys, I'm sorry I'm sitting here with hard steel on me, I don't want to hurt or intimidate either of you. My job is to protect you and that means equipment as well as skills. These are not toys and I don't go around flashing them for fun. His Excellency has made these rigs and training for their use mandatory across all branches of BVL, plus other companies he has that have body guard or perimeter patrol jobs. Like I said earlier today, there are nasty people out there that want to hurt you, and some are so far gone that a rabid mongrel dog would be easier to reason with than those lowlifes. Take it easy and don't grab my forearms, we'll be okay."

"Are those guns? They're so small… Do you have anything else on you that we need to stay away from?" Tanya asked in a weak voice, as she held on to Derek's right arm with both of hers in an effort to stabilize herself. She had always hated guns, weapons and violence in all forms. It hadn't sunk in that Lucas walked around all day carrying just a little less than Theo because she never really looked at his kit in detail.

"Well, I got the full load for a job; I wasn't on holidays you know. I have the two wrists, a dropping piece and blade on each ankle, a couple sharps around the belt, and the three standard survival pouches at the waist, just like the Lord. We all carry those since the boss ordered them and has us train with them. Even the civvies like the waiters, valets, managers, etc… Those three pouches are vital, so you train or you get bitched at until you get it right. Since it's paid formation, they do it and perform. Some a lot better than others, that's true, but everybody tries hard 'cuz it's for their protection and staying alive."

Derek was impressed that Lucas would pay for so much equipment and training for his people to keep them safe. He was slowly getting past the lump in his heart about how much authority and raw power the kid had in his hands. Derek was honest enough to admit it was crude jealousy and seething envy with a huge dose of fear that had mixed together to make an explosion that he hadn't even seen coming. Trying hard to keep a clean tongue and a better attitude than earlier in the day, he swallowed only to realize his throat was dry and swollen. He used his sister-free limb to pour himself some orange juice before deciding that he needed to talk with this man to set things right. He drank a quarter of the glass before addressing the older male.

"Look man, about earlier when we got in, I wasn't stable. I had stuff inside but I hadn't realized it was boiling up, waiting to spew like that. Thanks for not breaking me in halves or not smacking me around some. I deserved worse than you gave, so thanks man. I owe you for that."

Theo lounged sideways, slouching on the tabletop, his right elbow planted solidly on the wood, head resting canted to the side in his right hand. His left hand played with the glass of juice he had taken but not drunk from yet. He made a funny face and winked at the boy good-naturedly, not angry at him. "I heard what your sister told you. It's a hellavu weight being family with a Boss like that. When the guy earns by rights the title 'Excellency' and wears it more responsibly than a lot of elected officials in the country do theirs, that gets even worse. The fact he's a tetchy little bobble-head of a moppet ain't helping nobody's sanity or pride either."

Derek choked out on his mouthful of juice and almost sprayed it before swallowing it properly, bursting out in laughter while Tanya was fighting against the humongous grin that wanted to break out on her face. "You didn't just call my brother a, a… Oh, man! You're sooo dead!"

Theo smirked at the two kids and waited for some calm before stating in gleeful mirth "Oh, he knows! I tell him to his face about twice a day!" The guffaws of laughter were sweet music to hear.
Maybe in an hour or two they could be at ease enough to get the abscess drained and be ready for the parents when they came to check on their runts. The boss had warned him by SMS that he would come at 22:00pm so Theo wouldn't bet against him making it on time.

Lord-Saint-Master

(Earth Final Conflict – season 1 opening, instrumental)

December 28th of 2015, early evening
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
BVL; 12th floor – executive conference room #2

"So, have you recovered enough to continue or do I need to break out the smelling salts? Or maybe a Bible, cuz one of you looks like she needs the Extreme Unction more than a medic."

Both adults studiously ignored the snarking pasty white little gremlin and the smirking valet as they put their coats on the rack before gaining their seats with great dignity and decorum. This would be more credible if Raymond wasn't dressed-down casual and Cynthia hadn't taken off her jewelry and shawl. Ah well, 'hope springs eternal' and all that tripe…

"Now let us get to the meat of the matter: As outlined in the submissions before you, I plan on making each of you a senior partner in the renewed G, F & T with seats on the board and votes. It's just that Minotaur will hold 60% of the shares & votes, thus maintaining my absolute control which I will never let go. Be advised that the contracts stipulate that you must give ME the right of first refusal in the event that you wish to sell the shares. In the event of transfer by inheritance, I again get first refusal unless you place them in an indivisible family foundation as base capital for the money engine that funds the foundation's activities. This can be negotiated at a later date. As Senior Partners on the board you each get a fully funded, staffed department to take care of clients, external and internal. You will find that I have taken the time to establish procedures for Minotaur and its subdivisions, so setting up new systems or recycling good ones from another company will be easy. Just follow the template or ask the people above for help. Questions?"

"Do you have any idea of what you're planning to do? Of how much money it will cost? How in the worlds can you afford all this?" Cynthia barked, completely out of her capacity to grasp, or deal, with the fast paced changes her son was throwing at her. Raymond was silent, lost in his mind, not nearly aware enough of his fiancée's words or their impact as he should have been.

Lips pursed and tone frigid, Lucas looked down his nose at his mother and responded contemptuously "I assure you, Madam Lawyer, that having multiple qualifications in Law and Advanced Mathematics, that I understand the consequences and costs much better than you. The firm of G, F & T is valued at about 115 million $USD but is being sold in parts at fire sale prices for around 90 million $USD with all dependencies and client lists. If I take the administrative and transaction fees, the profit margin I should be getting in selling the shares to you and all the sundry miscellany that usually go with a case this big, we round off at 100 million $USD. Your shares are worth 20 million $USD for each, while you also get a six-figure salary, performance bonuses, expenditures' account and of course, the dividends from your stocks every fiscal quarter. Add to that list the fact that as stockholders in the firm you will also get several nifty deductibles in your taxes that you didn't have before, and you could be grossing around 1,5 million $USD a year as of the tax filings for the 2016 fiscal exercise. Does that show you how aware of the value and repercussions of this deal I am, Madam Lawyer?"
Both adults were completely shattered by the figures. Unfortunately for them and their family, they were so sidetracked by the money and sheer unequivocal gumption of the project that they forgot whom they were addressing, why they were here, and what was at stake to begin with.

They would spend decades regretting the words and decisions made this evening when they searched their lives to find out were they lost their precious son. The blame was on them. The boy was willing to give them the guarantee of prosperity and safety for the rest of their lives, and that of their children and their descendancy beyond. They refused, trying to shame Lucas at the same time. They wanted domination and control over him as the only proof that he was a worthy, non-threatening child. They would be made to understand their folly soon enough.

Raymond cleared his throat to speak in what he hoped was a more conciliatory tone than Cynthia. He was wrong. He came out distant, cold and snotty; like the child's gift was a handful of wilted dandelions found in the backyard after school. His clammy complexion and hesitancy to look Lucas in the eyes like a man didn't help his case, and the several patent lies he spoke to try to falsely appease his future son made things worse.

"You have to understand Lucas, we Matthews are not used to obtaining anything that we have not earned by hard - and honest - work. I, and my children as well by extension, cannot accept this type of unilateral gift. We may be less fortunate than you have become, but never to the point of so brazenly snatch a part of the very important legacies that were bequeathed to you under the guise of receiving a style of 'welcome to the family' present. We can, and we will, manage our lives humbly, without the charity of either you, Cynthia, or Lawrence, whatever his contributions to your wealth may have been. I will instruct my children to refuse the money and investments until they are 18 years old. At that point, it will be their own conscience on the line if they wish to accept undeserved charities from questionable provenance."

Lucas would not have needed his synesthesia to tell him where the lies and bypasses were; they were practically written on the wall next to the man's head as he spoke them. He was in essence telling his future son, if that was still going to happen, that any contribution or help to the finances and prosperity of the family would be refused, treated as offal. That he was using the excuse of illegalities in the portfolio was transparent and insulting in the extreme. If the money making crimes were in his control, the scurvy rat would not throw them away or hesitate to use that cash for his pleasure and social status.

The real problem was confirmed by Lucas' synesthesia that Raymond was allowing his lower instincts and basal emotions to override his fiscal and political judgment. So long as the young child was the owner of such vast holdings, of which he wouldn't give up control or his position of safety, then Raymond would rebuff him by calling him an indocile, unworthy child. It was all about cock-shaking and balls-jiggling; the same damned doggy-dog-dog tail-wagging pissing contest it always was with all the bloody adults, and most teenaged males, that were older or bigger than him. Well screw that!
The 11 year old asked neutrally; "And you mother, what is your position on the proposal up for vote?"

Cynthia gave her son a poisonous glare, hissing out "I should not have let my fears of the hotel, the money, and the rumors around it all, stop me from putting you in a christian orphanage so they could beat the arrogance out of you, forcibly putting you back where you belong. At the feet of adults and society, like any other child! I regret not disowning you! I regret having gone in public to speak of not only keeping you, but getting cross-adoptions that will impose your unnaturalties on others!" Cynthia stopped to take a deep breath but kept up the flow of insults soon enough.

"You see me ashamed to be your mother! You are a hypocrite and a perjurer! You lie like water, searching the lowest point while drowning anyone foolish enough to just touch you and the filth you call a life! You exploit and destroy people like a meat grinder! You sit on a throne and commit the unnatural depravity of making full humans, adults before Law and God, call you 'His Excellency'! Even worse, they call you 'Lord', as if a menial cur of an ill-raised child like you could ever be so improved or exalted enough to stand besides the one true 'LORD' of the Faith. You act like a missionary spreading Gospels, but in fact you're just a jumped up dope pusher using and abusing people in their time of weakness. I am ashamed, I tell you! I will go to the streets as a nameless whore before I accept anything from you! And let me tell you; those damned little bastards of his," she pointed vaguely at Raymond, "had better refuse you too, or they can go work the brothels for you!"

The valet discretely left the conference room when she saw her Master push a brass button inset into the rim of the table. A vibration on the wristband at her right hand told her to get out while the going was good. When the marine squad came in, it wouldn't be time anymore. These people were confounded fools that fully deserved the punishments they were going to get next. She hoped Theo had a better report about the kids but having seen the father, she doubted it.

The woman had barely stepped a full pace outside the room that she was yanked hard to the wall next to the door as twelve large bodies wearing armor and weapons at the fore went inside in single file, swarming the room and putting down hard anyone who wasn't the boss himself.

The two adults didn't have time to scream or even whisper a protest as they were pulled from their chairs then harshly thrown, face down on the ground, regardless of bruising or contusions. They were then cuffed behind the back with a metal pipe-gag shoved into the mouth and secured by a strap around the head. After that, the squad leader inspected them both, presenting them to her Master for further orders once she was certain they were neutralized.

"We have an undesirable guest in our care tonight; luck would have it that he is also the kind that the Burgundy Velvet Lounge does not - let go of - so easily. He will therefore pay his debts of blood while serving as object example at the same time. Sort of recycling him as we use him, you know? Now, corporal Derland; take them to basement 4, in the incineration plant. We have some trash to dispose of tonight."

The woman put her closed right fist above her heart and replied in a strong voice, free of doubts or hesitations "Yes Excellency. Should we call in Butcher, sir? He usually handles the wet-works here in the basement."

Lucas pursed his lips in thought but shook his head negatively. "No corporal; this particular individual has a few things that interest me. Besides, I have to practice my paramedic skills if I want to keep them in usable shape. To your duties, soldiers. I will be down in a few minutes after I change for harder labors than the meeting room."
Theo was animatedly gesticulating with his arms wide open and trying to keep the laughing teens from dismissing his hunting story as a load of BS because, yeah, he had bagged a deer when he was 12, and it had been THAT BIG, so why couldn't they believe him? It's not like he was fibbing them about the eight points on the racks or the 400 pounds of meat they brought back. His uncle Henry had been right proud of him, too! Why didn't they believe him? Life just wasn't fair with him… And no, he wasn't whining; he was a grown man, thank you very much! Grown men don't whine, not even a little!

The siblings were laughing themselves hoarse at the poor guy's expense; they believed him all right, they just didn't have to tell him that! His miming and gesticulating were so much fun to watch, why stop him mid-story? Besides, there was nothing good on TV so they might as well enjoy what entertainment they had while it lasted!

Suddenly it all went pear-shaped.

Theo stopped dead to grab his right wrist with his left hand then urgently pushed a button on the rubber wrist band partially hidden by the wrist-rig with the pistol. The small flatscreen was displaying a message that had the ranger go whiter than a bed sheet and completely numb all over his body and mind. The Lord had enacted a code on his parents in the conference room. The marine stack was moving from conference room #1 where they had been parked in hot idle in case something happened. Lucas had always had a knack for foreseeing catastrophes on the horizon after what his biological parents had put him through. He would never get caught unaware or unprepared ever again in this life or the next.

Quickly unrolling his T-shirt sleeves back to ready, Theo stood and began moving towards the entryway at the same time as he grabbed his BDU's overshirt and pulled it on in fighting order. The kids were looking at him wide-eyed but stayed sitting, Tanya holding Derek's left arm with both of hers once again. Theo put his eye to the peephole in the door and stood there, stock still until some muffled noises came from the corridor then rapidly disappeared towards the rear of the floor. A few minutes passed before Theo unlocked the deadbolt, security chain and main door handle lock, opening the door a crack and emitting a sharp, low whistle to get someone's attention. Apparently the person acquiesced the demand because he opened the door halfway to let someone in before closing and locking everything back up.

The young asian woman looked to be in her mid or late twenties; she had black shiny hair in a ponytail down to mid-back, deep soulful black eyes, and wore the burgundy uniform of the valets that served clients all around the complex. Their uniform was a bit less formal and a bit more flexible in the joints and back than the waiters or managers because they did most of the basic physical jobs required to serve the demands of customers. She looked weary, tired, and above all else, bitterly angry.

"Come on Lashu, what the hell did they say or do to get that reaction from him? He's stable and reliable like nobody I was ever able to work with in the field! What the fuck came down?"
The woman snorted derisive contempt through her nose, almost like a horse sneezing. Her face became set in a closed mien that still expressed quite well her disapproval and anger against what she saw as ungrateful louts.

"What happened, Theodore, is that our Master sought to bestow great honors upon his parents by presenting them with great boons of wealth, future prosperity, safety, as well as an unassailable position in society. I had the grave misfortune of bearing witness to the miserable parentless bastards refusing this most generously presented act of loving filial piety and then…"

Lashu was now swearing alternatively in Mandarin, Cantonese, Manchurian, and some crass expletives from Korean gang slang she learned in the streets of Hong Kong as a child hooker before good fortune smiled on her mother and her.

She might have been dirt poor, raised as a ten-yen whore in the back alleys of Honk Kong's portuary district, but her mother had been married to her father. He died just a week before her birth, from an accident in the shipyard where he worked, thus leaving her mother with debts she couldn't repay. The house was seized by the bank so they were evicted just after her birthing. Her mother still tried to educate her about hard work, manners, propriety, deportment, and being polite with elders or people of power. She also taught her to always be polite and deferential to people who showed kindness, gentleness, charity and mercy to anyone as one day it may be her that benefits from such treatment, therefore she must never close her door or her heart to such beings of goodness.

Above all else, her mother had taught her that being a whore was sometimes nobler, and less crass, than the work and attitude some of their clients had. Dignity, integrity, honesty and nobility were in the heart, not the body, wallet or social station. Most of the clients never understood that, acting worse than wild boars rutting in public. Her mother did understand so she made sure her poor little Lashu would know it, and have every chance to put it into practice at some point of her life, when they got out from the Triad's grip. There was a call to send girls to Cancun for a big UN conference, but there was a risk they wouldn't come back if immigration caught them. They took the chance, worked the conference-goers then were promptly abandoned by the Triad because it was cheaper than bringing them back or establishing an operation in Cartel country. They used their fake papers to reach the USA and a new life, finally free of debts and the Triads' violent methods.

Lashu was truly a product of a very traditional Chinese education and culture. She accepted that women could do most jobs, even management or hold authority over large groups of men, but at the same time she had a very conservative view of family, heredity, legacy and filial piety. The duties of family members to one another and society were exactingly clear and sacred before Buddha; one did not contravene these without incurring great divine reprobation.

When it happened that Karma gifted a child with means above their age and station in family or life in general, it was expected - and almost obliged - that the child would tithe large gifts unto his elders, siblings and kin, in gratitude for birthing and raising him properly so that he could obtain this success. However, it also behooved the parents, siblings and relatives, to bestow great honor and recognition upon the child for his dutiful adherence to filial piety by having rewarded his humble family much above their merits. To fail to give thanks and remembrance was uneducated and crass. To act like Holt and Matthews had done was uncultured, uncouth, and a sin against not only the virtues of kindness and charity but against filial piety itself. And threatening the child with disownment! What in Confucius's fork-bearded chin had the gormless harridan been thinking?

She couldn't hold it in anymore; she exploded verbally in ghetto-slut english: "They both acted like a pair of knaves so low as to deserve being branded 'untouchable' on the face with a burning iron
and being cast out into the forest naked at night! May the spirits of their ancestors haunt them and lead them astray into a swamp full of hungry mosquitoes and leeches! May their rotting corpses be pissed on by wild boars and foraged by rats! May they be denied blessed sepulture and a picture in the family shrine! Shen! (God!) Why does such a kind and gentle soul receive so unholy wastrels as parents? What karmic debt does he carry to be humiliated and conspuated in his own home and business by his own blood and kin like this?"

Completely spent and emotionally drained, Lashu accepted the open arms Theo presented her, letting him hug her, wrapping his strong caring embrace around her like a warm blanket. She couldn't hold it in anymore, deportment be damned, so she placed her face in the crook of his neck to cry the choking sobs of hateful despair that were clamoring to get out and be heard.

Tanya and Derek were very happy to be sitting on chairs or they would be huddled on the floor in shame, looking for a hole to crawl in, to die of humiliation without anybody finding them to hurt them worse. Unbeknownst to them, they both had tears running down their cheeks; a silent testament to their instinctive awareness that their family was now defunct, their parents were damaged and dysfunctional, just like their brother was hurt and injured deeply. Their lives would be damaged, drowned in painful sorrow and melancholy from now on. The repercussions of having someone wealthy, equipped and supported like Lucas was, for an avowed enemy were horrendous on top of everything else. They would be social, economical and judicial outcasts by the 1st of January at the latest.

What a way to ring in the New Year with fireworks and cheers!

Derek took his sister's hand, guided her to stand up and, both walking on shaky legs, maneuvered around the adults' back to discretely reach the entryway to work the locks until they were undone and the way clear. A squeeze on his arm from Tanya made Derek look to his right to see Theo frowning at them with an angry warning in his eyes; he was occupied with Lashu and thought their little game plan was a rather low blow. The siblings exchanged a look and, still holding hands, came back towards Theo to stop at a yard from the embracing adults.

"I, we, are sorry Theo. This is our brother who's hurting and we have to see if he's alright. Dad and Mom have each other, they can wait some. It'll do them good to stew for awhile anyways. They were high strung about a lot of things, so we're sure it's their fault. Cynthia had a chip the size of North America on her shoulder most of the year and I'm guessing she couldn't dump it in time to use her head to talk with the little guy. Sucks to be her, but she earned it in full. If Lucas really made an offer like that to them and she spat on him, wanting to disown him, then she's the one losing out big, not him. He'll just be free from a burden that's holding him back like an anchor on a ship. We need to go, man; let us, please?"

Theo chewed on his lower lip as he thought about the mood Lucas was in, and the damages that could be incurred from a bad encounter with the two kids. They, at least, had learned something tonight and weren't gonna make things worse if they could avoid it. The problem was, if the blowout was as bad as Lashu said, and it was certainly that or worse, then just existing might be enough for Lucas to see them as threats dire enough to warrant calling a code on them too. Theo didn't see the two kids as threats or problems, just teenagers in need of a little diversity in their education and outlook on human life. Something Lucas could decidedly help with, if he calmed down enough to remember they were supposed to become family.

"Okay you two; here's the deal: you open the door and stand in the opening in view but still inside the suite. If he wants to hear you, he'll actually come into the apartment and talk. If not, he'll go on his way to the service lift and you'll have to wait until he's ready to talk with you, if ever. I won't lie to you guys, it's bad like a hurricane on the open ocean with no land in view. He had the
marines do a hard take-down on 'em, draggin' their stinking hides to security holding in the basement. I reckon' he plans on scaring 'em hard before laying the law on 'em fools."

Theodore was obviously upset and worried as his New York streets accent was starting to show up more pronouncedly. It didn't help the kids but certainly made them aware of how much a balls-up their parent had made. They opened the door and stood in the opening, still on the suite's plush carpet, waiting for something that should still be their sibling in spirit.

Lashu sniffed, clearing her throat in embarrassment before moving away from Theodore to wipe her eyes and set herself back in serving order. Her master had need of her tonight; she would not be the one to abandon him nor make the situation worse by her lack of action or adherence to his simple and understandable desires.

(Gosudarstvenny Gimn Rossiyskoy Federatsii - Sovietic Red Army Choir)

The relative silence was shattered by the opening and loud banging closing of Suite #1’s door, followed by cadenced, militaristic marching that even the corridor carpet could not dampen fully. The source of the heavy, menacing footsteps came to a halt before them, all black like an anti-light, the dull silver faceplate and inhuman – Shooosh – noise of the aerator filling the spaces around them with a jarring vibration that made their bones and teeth resonate painfully. For the life of them, because of the stress and the tunnel-vision effect of the situation, neither Matthews would remember enough be able to describe the suit or its components passed the reflective silvery mask and that it looked heavy, stiff like diving gear thickened with armor plates.

Seeing that this thing was 5 feet tall and that both adults were now in a version of a military salute with their right closed fist over their heart and left closed fist at the small of their back, the two siblings understood clearly that it wasn't a mistake. Their adopted brother marched in arms towards war with their parents. He would win then return; they would lose and then what?

Derek let go of Tanya's hand because he didn’t want to make this decision for her; he had his own faults to atone for and now this. Was there no end to the sorrow and humiliation tonight? Kneeling on both knees in the doorway while careful to stay in the suite's boundary, the teenager sat in seiza style on his heels, placing his hands on each knee with fingers splayed, then bowed his head fully to show penance and submission. He personally hated doing this, but had the gut feeling that asking for equality or respect at this point would see him thrown out the window, or joining the adults in the basement, rather than repair the relationship with his young but powerful brother. His heart constricted painfully in his chest as Tanya copied his position on his right. There would be angry words and blame aplenty later when dad came back. Nobody had the right to force his children into this damned game of power & lordship against each other in order to save the whole family, especially when the stupid adults made no effort, with their mom just acting out like a harpy in heat, screaming and insulting but not contributing anything.

(Star Wars symphony – The Imperial March)

"– Shooosh – Why do you issue challenge against me? – Shooosh – My orders were clear; not open for suggestions! – Shooosh – Do you truly seek confrontation with me this night? – Shooosh –"

At this point the darksome figure moved his right hand towards a holster for a small sized pistol on his hip. The message was clear; no defiance would pass muster anymore.

"No, Excellency, I offer no challenge. Merely repentance for my impolite misdeeds and an offer to make penance for my sins."

Damn, but Derek hated speaking and acting like this. Unfortunately, the teenager had seen the
boy's hand move towards the gun and was sweating rivers under his arms. If it got bad, he had no chance at all to fight his way out of here, not with Theo and the valet backing up Lucas as they would. Then there was Tanya; she had even less chance than him to fight it out. She'd collapse in a fit of panic so bad, she probably wouldn't even see or hear the shot that ended her life.


Tanya was crying as much as she was sweating. She too, had seen the move on the boy's right side, though she didn't see what his hand grasped. She did see the holsters and sheathes on his left well enough to guess it was another weapon of murder, so Derek's life was now on the line for real. If her brother would die tonight, she would not let him go alone into the Void; she would hold his hand as she always had when he was in pain or melancholic about something.

"Forgive us for importuning your procession, Lord; we are children and rarely do as told. It is the nature of the beast you see, to explore, test, and come back again no matter what. Yes sir, I too, offer to make penance for my part in the evening's misdeeds. And I ask, as sister unto brother; what need we do to see our parents live through this night undamaged beyond the unjust and mismanaged anger they already drown in."

"They called me an animal! – Shooosh – An unnatural monstrosity! – Shooosh – An abomination that should be removed from society like a tumor! – Shooosh – She, the rabid minging cunt of a bint, said she would disown me in shame! MY shame! – Shooosh – She said out loud she would let the christians have me, to make me disappear into one of their orphanages, never to be seen again! – Shooosh – Do you know what they do to children in those damned places? – Shooosh –"

"Yes Lucas, I know what they do, what they hide from the World's eyes. I cry every time that I hear or see it on the evening news. To think that my little sibling could have been sent there makes my skin crawl. I want to hit her around the head to wake her up to finally see what she is throwing away. A person. A full, capable, gentle, caring and loving person. And no matter that she adopts us, no matter what dad and her say, I know they had no reason to say these things to you. I don't know you or your life, but I want to try. I want to be by your side, see for myself what a great and beautiful soul you have." Tanya raised her head to look right into her reflection, gazing back at her from the smooth silver mask, waiting for his judgment to fall. It's not like she could do anything else anymore.

"– Shooosh – Very well. I accept your offers of penance for your misdeeds. – Shooosh – Beware though; you will indeed be penitent when I am done with you. – Shooosh – As for the parents; your lives in service. – Shooosh – If you want to save their bodies and health, it will cost you your entire life in service to me and my creed. – Shooosh – Their sanity, well, we'll see about that. – Shooosh – I am bound to interrogate an unexpected guest that has proven a bountiful trove of information on subjects I have searched long and far to find. – Shooosh – I will not let menial details like the sanity of Them stand in the way. – Shooosh – Take the offer NOW or forever hold your peace! – Shooosh –"

(Silent Hill 'original movie' – The darkness falls, with siren)
When the two siblings looked each other in the eyes, Derek instinctually knew his sister would not try to survive him. She would live by his side or follow him to the Ether. The alternative was not so bad, especially when he looked real hard at the conditions of Theo, the waitstaff, valets and administrators he had seen to date. Yes it would be a form of indenture, their continued service - or else. But would it be so bad? Tanya was right; this would give them years to repair their composed family and get to know their sibling along the way. Maybe someday he would warm up to them enough to forgive some of their sons enough to treat them like family, rather than mere employees, or worse, threats to keep at hand so he could neutralize them if they plotted betrayal.

Together, brother and sister answered: "I offer you my service and my life, Excellency."

Breaking the family permanently

(Adele – Skyfall)

December 28th of 2015, early evening
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
BVL; 4th basement – exclusion zone Epsilon

The two terrified adults were literally lifted up for carrying by four soldiers each, like deer caught in a hunt, being ferried to the service lift at the rear of the building. The trip down was silent and nerve wrecking. They didn't see much in the fourth basement because of how they were carried face down but heard a sort of mechanical noise that indicated that a large piston mounted door had opened and the air pressure, stronger inside than the rest of the basement, had equalized. An airlock! They were entering a quarantine zone through a genuine bona fide airlock!

After a few minutes of transit they were set upright and sat on separate rectangular metal benches that had an opening on the top that they saw resembled a toilet. Once sat, a soldier passed in front of them to place restraints on each leg, at the ankle and just below the knee, to bind them to the bench. A second soldier walked behind them to drop a metal pole between their back and bound hands, slotting the pole into the socket holes in the metal bench all the way to the concrete floor. He then placed and turned twist-lock bolts into a series of holes to secure the pole to the bench. After that a third soldier arrived with harnesses that were attached to the poles to keep their heads looking upfront, unmoving except their eyes. They were now prisoners of their benches; unable of more than a little wiggling and silent because of the metal pipe-gags still in place.

A female soldier, built like an icebox and sporting a stone cold face, knelt beside Raymond then pulled out from the back of her belt a fully curved, hook-like blade; the kind used in taking fragile high value pelts off the carcass of a dead animal. She began by cutting his dress shirt at the buttons, then the sleeves from shoulder to wrist on each side. She removed the shreds without hurry or emotion. She cut and removed his T-shirt underneath the same way. Seeing the gold chain with a pendant at his neck, she grabbed the disk and yanked hard enough to break the chain, dropping the pieces in the pile of scraps at his bound feet. After making certain he had only his glasses left, she inspected his hands, removing the wedding band and university Alma Mater sigil ring to discard them as well. She then removed his belt before plying the hook-blade to his trousers from hip to ankle hem on each side, pulling off the scrapped garment. With neither a glance nor interest, she cut, took and dumped his boxers, never indicating ill-ease or disgust nor any other emotion at the task. She finished by destroying his shoes and socks, dumping the scraps in the pile. She stood up, stretched herself to full height for a few seconds before walking to Cynthia, curved knife in hand and a dead look in her eyes.
Behind her, another soldier approached Raymond with a scanner in each hand to pass over his body, to probe him with until they were sure he had nothing but his glasses, and be assured that those were not wired or tricked up.

Once they were both naked and scanned, a female soldier pulled a lever near the wall until the sound of rushing water was heard from below them. The sudden coolness and feeling of air moving under them confirmed they had been bound to functioning toilets that ran a constant flow instead of flushing on call. This meant they could be held here for weeks as long as they were fed a minimal amount of food. The hollow pipe-gag could serve to pass a feeding tube as well as allow breathing while cutting screams and noises. An intravenous line could serve as well as was demonstrated by the system of rails, electric winches, pulleys and chains dangling from the ceiling. The equipment reminded of a garage workshop, or maybe a meat processing factory.

(Star Wars Symphony – The Imperial March, magnum voce)

After about fifteen minutes of silently watching the whitewashed concrete walls and metal trellis flooring, they heard a noise indicating that a hydraulic door was opening and then closing. The cadenced footsteps announced a person who meant business and the black oiled leather garments would give them nightmares for the rest of their lives, especially since the five foot tall person could only be Lucas.

The child wore clothing that was so black it looked like black leather dipped in tar and painted over that with china ink. These were obviously reinforced, armored garments as attested by the thickness and rigidity of the segments while the joints were semi-flexible bellows-style that showed some structural strength.

His feet were encased in knee-high heavy combat boots with inch thick laminated soles made of alternating layers of thermoplastics, ceramic, high-grade titanium steel and rubber insulation. The sides of the soles had a line of straight metal spikes all around to aid in climbing or fighting.

His trousers were almost unseen under the knee length jacket but seemed thick and rigid.

The jacket had broad molded shoulders with shoulder pads and stiff, high, rounded collar. It had reinforced rims, hems and piping all around in drab lead-gray tone. The chest area seemed composed of five vertical segments, two in front and three in the back, creating a flack vest integrated to the structure of the garment. The segments were articulated and full length, thus giving thickness and protection to the area from neckline to knees.

The belt carried the ubiquitous three pouches but also on the right were added a hatchet and the holster for a small pistol. The left side had added a 12” two-edged dagger and a clawed hammer.

The hands were clad in long gloves with extra thick molded tops bearing metal spikes in lieu of fingernails and knuckle reinforcements for hand combat. The palm-side was medium density insulated velvet to allow great sensitivity and dexterity in precise maneuvers. He would be able to shoot his gun or use his swiss army knife without taking off his gloves.

(Darth Vader's respirator, magnum voce)

The most terrible aspect was the helmet: based on the german stahlhelm of WW-II but with longer sides and wider flaring back. The face was completely shapeless and devoid of any humanoid features whatsoever: a mirror plate in a tone of dull silver. There was at the underside a locking system that mated the collar of the jacket perfectly, thus leaving no skin exposed or weakness in the throat protection. From the bottom of the helmet, near the angle of the jawbone on each side, came a ribbed flexible thermoplastic pipe that went directly down the front of the jacket to mid
thorax then connected under the arms to solid metal pipes emanating from the slim molded backpack that served as air pump, filter and life-support. He seemed a mish-mash from several Sci-Fi characters but no one was laughing. The weapons were real and the prisoners knew what they were here for.

The figure, they just couldn't think of him as Lucas, or their son, or anything at this point, gestured towards the leader of the soldiers, causing a large metal door to hiss open under the power of hydraulics. Then the rasping of metal wheels on metal rail and chinking of chains were heard coming nearer until they emerged; two soldiers maneuvering a heavy mass of flesh dangling from the ceiling by eight chains. It was the ruffian from the lounge earlier this evening.

As they saw the naked, bruised and bleeding form, Cynthia and Raymond understood that they had just met the Lord of Burgundy in his war mode, which meant they would not be walking out of the hotel the same people as they had been going in. They prayed for their two oldest children, but never once asked or thought of what they had done to deserve this; it was all Lucas's fault anyways. In their judgment, which they considered paramount, he was proven unnatural, depraved, psychotic and unworthy of belonging to any family at all.

He was also too rich, too equipped, too organized, and had too many men to take on and get out alive. They were screwed but blamed the person they had spat on for the situation. It would never be their fault. They were the adults and Lucas the child; he should be on his knees in abject surrender, head bowed in shameful contrition, asking their forgiveness for having been too autonomous and too forward with his opinions. And he should definitely be punished for being so bloody fucking rich when that was an adult privilege, not for kids like him.

No, it was not their fault but it was the unfair reality that they could not invoke normality, social mores or other apanages of adultness in the situation. Reality was like that; it never cared for what you thought, it only bothered with the material and tangible. Like the money Lucas paid his men and the guns they wielded. That's the difference between belief and reality; belief was in your head and never got out of it because it couldn't survive contact with the intransigent material strictures of reality. That's why bigotries and the systems they inaugurated like religion and church, slavery, misogyny and fascism have all been destroyed and reduced to ash.

Cynthia and Raymond were about to relearn these lessons of history, then cry and bleed to pay for their education.

The Baptismiath Suderia

(Silent Hill 'original movie' – The darkness falls, with siren)

December 28th of 2015, late evening
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
BVL; 4th basement – exclusion zone Epsilon

Lucas spoke in a slow, bass voice, modulated by the automated breathing device in his backpack but emitted by speakers spread and hidden in the jacket's chest area. The sound was so completely foreign and unnatural as to be queer; it sent shivers of dread filled instinctual revulsion down the spine of every adult in the room, even the soldiers working for him.

"Well, well well, – Shooosh – What do we have here? – Shooosh – A massive heaping of offal
heaped before my humble person. – Shooosh – Oh my, the humanity of it all! – Shooosh – I suppose I shall simply have to do this myself. – Shooosh – Just like all the other heavy jobs. – Shooosh – Never a damned adult in the house to work when it's needed, hein? – Shooosh – But don't worry, I'll take all the time in the world, and then some, to get your secrets out. – Shooosh – Bring me the crash cart and the dialysis cart. – Shooosh – Install them, then back at parade rest."

The harsh, mechanically regulated breathing was unnerving, making everybody cringe each time the sound in the speakers rose to allow the child's normally reedy voice to come out at stentorian levels. The damned aerator augmented its noise in proportion to unsettle the people even more. It must have been done voluntarily and just for that purpose; psychological warfare through sound waves. From someone with abnormally powerful hearing and synesthesia, an auditive attack was unthinkable, no? Tell Lucas. He was taught to turn weaknesses into strengths, or at least neutralize them so the enemy couldn't exploit them. And he learned well.

About ten minutes of feverish activity later and two metal carts covered in ceramic enameled glaze were set near the suspended prisoner then connected to the electricity, cold and hot running water, medical grade compressed air plus modified odoriferous and colorized natural gas lines from the wall. With his main tools in place, Lucas opened the dialysis cart, taking out the tubes and needles needed to run the fluids, followed by the electrical wires for the sensors.

The prisoner was lowered so that there was 7 feet between his back and the floor. Lucas used a custom made adjustable inclined ramp & platform rolling around on 8 small wheels with a breaking lever on each side. It allowed him to place as much as 12 feet of space under the prisoner yet still reach the ventral surface with ease. This was vital to observe, photograph and test in vivo the many ritualistic tattoos the man had. His entire life and street creds were painted on him.

"– Shooosh – Now, I'm going to set some synthetic blood in the dialyser along with my favorite cocktail for these meetings – Shooosh – A liquid mixture of diluted alcohol solids, nicotine, THC, opiates, caffeine, steroid, Ritalin and Prozac. – Shooosh – It should make you mellow and spacey enough to tell me your deepest secrets. – Shooosh – Without shedding blood or lowering your health. – Shooosh – So we can do this as many times as we need. – Shooosh – Over as many years as I will keep you. – Shooosh – Until I have squeezed you dry like a lemon and then… – Shooosh …"

Lucas let the dialysis device work for a half hour during which he silently toured his two parents and spoke in low tones with his soldiers around the room. It became apparent that he could control the volume, pitch, tone and sound effects from his costume at will through a mechanism that was simply unseen.

When the suspended blob of fat antisocial psychotism was beginning to show signs of reacting to the drugs, mostly by voiding his wastes and drooling a bit, Lucas gestured to a soldier to use a reinforced thermoplastic hose to pressure wash the stuff through the floor trellis so it would all drop to the space underneath to be flushed away by the constant stream of water in the canal.

(Adrian Von Ziegler – The sealed Realm)

When the suspended man began to speak with a pronounced southern drawl, alternating tongues between modern english, olde englysh, Cajun, Creole, modern french, olde french, german and ukrainian. This gibberish was impossible to follow for anyone other than Lucas who answered in kind with little effort since he was actually using his synesthesia to learn Cajun and Creole as he went. When the skinhead boss started drooling blood-flecked bile as he spoke a guttural, barbaric tongue that no human voice box should ever attempt, Lucas raised his hydraulic platform higher, almost pressing his helmet to the mouth of the man to listen rapturously. He dearly wanted to learn the different
accentuations of the alien tongue he had only ever heard George Brown-Fowl-in-the-Bushes speak
to date. There were no living Nazis that spoke it to be found, and he would not work with such
people anyways, if he could avoid it at all. They tried to exterminate him and his family after all.
Only a fool would trust genocidal maniacs bent on burning the world, and Lucas was nobody’s
fool.

As the suspended prisoner unraveled his tale, he began to speak of the dark corners of human
society; how and where the seedy underbelly of politics and religion had commingled to form a
monstrous aberration in the landscape of American Law, society and politics. Thirtyish years ago, a
group of depraved misogynistic pedophiles that were rejected by all of their birth churches created
a new religious grouping called "The Southernly Baptized Apostolates of the Truly Christian
American Christ", or "Baptismiath Suderia" as was the ritualistic name they used amongst their
own initiates.

The man, who was now identified as a born juvenile delinquent, had been active in the skinheads
since 8 years old, the Ku Klux Klan at 10 years old, then the Aryan Brotherhood at 12 years old in
juvie hall. Eventually he was approached and recruited to join as a Worshipful member of the
congregation. When their investigations confirmed his bloody past of a first rape at the age of 13,
and first murder of a niggess bitch after raping her at the age of 14, and several more along the
years, they judged him sufficiently righteous in his hate to invite him amongst the ecclesiastes.

At that point the gross meter went off chart; serial rape of women and children, ritualized group
rape of children as integral part of mass or promotion ceremonies, murdering the juvenile victims
and profaning the bodies ritually, etc… This was mixed with bribery of officials to force law
changes or zoning changes when buying buildings for the church, murdering people who
discovered things about the cult and its shady dealings, immoral religious practices, and purchasing
of illegal political power. They solidified their stranglehold on society by integrating functionaries,
police officers and politos into their worshipers, and eventually amongst the ranked ecclesiastes
that control the sect, thus shackling them to group loyalty to survive.

Lucas was beyond incensed. Not only were these cultists simpleminded women-hating old fools,
they were also just banal pedophiles who were too weak of mind and menial of body to take on a
child by themselves. In answer to their individual weakness, they created a group of thugs to do the
arm-twisting work for them. And then the kids had to die. Why? Just because the small-cocked
bastards were afraid that the victims could develop enough experience to eventually compare and
judge the sizes and performances of their rapists, thus destroying the image of their personal power
that the priests had created inside their defective minds.

And then there were the useless, idiotic ritual phrases they used amongst themselves, part
psalmodiation and part repetitive leitmotiv to dull the senses, numbing the minds that heard them
spoken out loud. The cultists called these phrases and manner of speaking 'code speeching' or
mixing coding into daily speech in order to fool police, teachers, politicians, and the larger public
into believing they had a valid legitimate religion to defend.

Several examples of these phrases were:

- "Kneel boy-oy-oy; and Homage be bestowed upon the manly mannaness of my manhood." Was
  used by the Lord Pontiff to command a boy to perform fellatio upon himself during a mass or
  promotion rite.

- "The Pure Jesus, the Truly Christian, American Christ; the Lord the Redemptor of the White
  Painted Cross, in His Almight." Was the full textual descriptive of the type of god they believe in,
  and what he stands for – a white god for powerful southernistic white men only, no one else.
- "They are not people. They are boy-oy-oyes in the boyishly boyish boyness of their boyhood; not people, and not men, never men. I will not sanctify them into mannaness." Was a common pronouncement by the Lord Pontiff on the unworthiness of teenagers between 18 and 25 years of age. It confirmed and repeated ritually the cult's systematic refusal to recognize any male under 25 years old as adult. The word 'boy' is applied to any male under age 25 with all rights of beatings and commanding the lives of 'boys' remaining in the hands of the 'men' until that age is passed.

- "They must be made silent, and made to die true and final death, of spirit as of body, as part of their penance for their sins of daring to try and be men unsanctified before my manhood." Was the ritualistic sentence of death pronounced by the Lord Pontiff, or ruling ecclesiaste, during a mass where a boy was presented to be gang raped ritually, then had to die to keep the secrets of the cult. This was an attempt to say that in resisting the kidnapping, beatings, tortures and rapes, the boy-child was guilty of a heresy against God & Faith, and so he actually deserved to die. Furthermore, the cult's Law stipulated that the simple desire or word of any baptized worshipful member of the congregation was enough to have a boy killed. It took a senior ecclesiaste to order the death of any adult non believer, while only the Lord Pontiff could sentence the death of the baptized adult males of the Faith.

- "So was it Faith, Creed and Doctrine; thus Belief is Truth. Amen." Was a daily mantra repeated several times during mass or promotion. It was simply speaking out loud the infantile wish that someday, if they say it enough and wish it enough, reality will break apart and the lies they spew will become the Law of the Land. At that point, reality would no longer count as a measuring stick or test of honesty in court, Congress, or anywhere in life that they may want to go to find boys to rape and murder in honor of their own glory.

- "So did I Speak in my Speakings as they were so Spoken; I so Spake. Amen." Was a repetitive leitmotiv to try and subliminally convince people who hear it that whatever the preacher said, when he said it, was truth penultimate and not subject to verification or challenge by anyone, especially not reality or logic-based tests of veracity. Those tests are heresy and punishable.

- "So did the Lord Pontiff extol unto the cock-ulated cock-holders of the Held-cock as they were, indeed and in effect, cock-helded before the worshipful ecclesiastes." Was one of the most depraved phrases of the cult for it signals that a boy is to be taken to the punitarium to be prepared for cock-ulation: performing serial fellatios upon each person present in the prayer room before being killed. The usual preparation ritual is done by adult males of the Faith but never ecclesiastes for this is classified as low work. It is the lower Worshipful Baptized who do this in preparation for their Promotion in the following year. The chosen boy is shackled and brought to the Punitarium where he is beaten repeatedly by wooden rods; broom handles usually as they are cheap and easy to find. At least seven men attack the boy together; six hit while one reads holy scriptures out loud to extol the virtues of submissiveness and obedience unto the boy. It is admittedly done only as a smokescreen to invoke religious rights in case the room is bugged by the cops. When the boy is lying on the floor no longer able to resist, they force him to his knees and then take a straight razor to slash his eyes while taking great care that he see and understand what will happen. Then they use long-nose curved pliers to pull out all the teeth so he will not bite during the cock-ulation rite. Then they break his fingers so he can't fight or escape the shackles. After the serial fellatios are performed publicly in front of the entire assembly so they can prove their mannaness still works and is still powerful, the boy is sent back to the punitarium. The method of killing the boy is to tie him face down to a bench so that the lower Worshipful Baptized gang rape him until he is so injured and bleeds so much that he dies of it during the act. It is the Law of the cult that if the child dies before everyone in the room has at least one turn, then the remaining must rape the dead body as proof of penance for not being worthy enough, in the eye of God, of receiving the Gift of a living boy to play with and be satisfied.
There were several dozen more examples of circular, self-serving and aberrant illogic. Boundless quantities of anti-human, anti-Nature, bigoted, seditious sayings and pronouncements. All these paraphrases and exhortations all had one goal: to promulgate Cult over Society. In so doing, they tried to impose Belief over Reality, Faith over Truth, Doctrine over Law, and the ritual desecration of the bodies and minds of people instead of helping humanity. The most flabbergasting part in all this was that the thousands of active male members were seconded by several thousand female supporters who blindly obeyed their husbands or adult sons in not denouncing or fighting this menace.

If that had been the extent of what the fat slobbering mass of crapulence spoke, Lucas would have killed him and put him in the shredding plant by now. But the alien language he spoke so fluently was an indicator of something else hidden underneath. Seeing that the racist fool was now quiet, he began to ask questions about a few things. He gestured to one of the marines to lower down the massive LED smart vidscreen to show the man images of items and texts, so that maybe he could get somewhere with the occult paraphernalia that Vratsina had left in that worn, large travel frame-pack, as her personal parting gift to him.

When the man heard Lucas answer in the same alien tongue he seemed to become more coherent and aware, though a small rivulet of blood began trickling from his left nostril. His wide bloodshot eyes and drooling mouth were fixated in rictus spasms but strangely functional for a man in his state of discomfort. He seemed to almost relish the pain and the chains.

As he beheld the images of texts, the fat man began to compliment Lucas on his trove of Blessed Antiquities, of how he was truly a proud Conservator of the Eldritch Past. He spoke of his great respect for any so young that could hold and read chapters of the Pnakotik Manuscripts while maintaining so much sanity. The skinhead's face was contorting in rage at the thought that so much power, so much authority and beautifully raw almight had made its way into the hands of a child so young and small he could break him just by accidentally walking on him. His jealousy, envy and greed knew no bounds as he tried to inveigle the child into seeing him as a mentor that would apprentice him into the deeper, darker corners of the Earth. If only Lucas would willingly pay the small price he asked; that the boy kneel in humiliation, basely calling him "MASTER".

Lucas backed away in a towering rage that was even greater and more boundless than the dirty buffoon's base attempt to lure him into bondage. The two Faraday cages and ECM suite built into the insulation layers of his armor had just triggered at the same time. He was reading the two messages; one given by the video in the transparent faceplate while also hearing/reading the audio warnings from the emergency alarm. An energy wave in the spectrum of bio-neural electricity with frequency and modulation matching brain waves had just passed through him; the wave emanated from the tub of lard in front of him, specifically the mouth and eyes.

Lucas closed his eyes and assumed a militaristic stance, with squared shoulders and hands joined behind his back. He began to review mentally what little he knew of mental powers that affect the mind, bend people's will, can make you hallucinate things or perceive knowledge that wasn't there. He remembered reading about the opening last year of the Chatton Institute for the mentally & spiritually gifted. It was a private scholastic center dedicated to the study and training of psychics; mediums, spoon benders and their ilk. It should be useless, right?

Well no; Lucas had read the reports at WPP on Lawrence's secured feed incoming from US Naval Intel as they shared with him their fear that such people could actually read minds and plant suggestions in others. They would be the perfect assassin or saboteur. Go in without equipment, find a patsy to take the fall and program the idiot to cause an accident at the correct time, after they had already left the scene. They would also be able to get information from people's minds without torture, drugs or waste of time. Lucas decided then and there that the Chatton Institute deserved
some of his loving and caring attention. But that didn't confirm or explain the tubby in front of him, or his knowledge of the ancient tongue and lores. More probing was needed, so he began to show the films and scan results of each artifact he possessed one by one.

The unadulterated glee visible in the man's countenance was hard to miss. Several of the items viewed were seemingly ordinary devotional statuettes or altar ornaments like many Asian religions use. They were made of dull grayish metal that had so far resisted deep scans and was unknown on the periodic table; even the classified one Lucas had gotten access to from WPP.

Seven small figurines, about 6 inches high, represented the same alien creature. Its body was rounded and bloated like a bullfrog, its limbs arched and ended in webbed clawed fingers. It had a pair of thin stunted wings coming out of its shoulders in the back and a reptilian tail the same length as the legs would be if fully straight. It was the head though, that gave nightmares to the squeamish. It looked like a squid resting on top of the things' shoulders. Its lower face was composed of two long extensible snatching tentacles that ended in an oval form lined with flat spikes; the rest of the chin area was invisible behind the two dozen smaller grasping tentacles. The upper face was occupied by two large round eyes with pupils made like a cartwheel with a central dot, eight spokes and a full circular rim. Each large eye had about three dozen smaller eyes of varying shapes and sizes clustered around them in a seemingly random way. Another great eye was set on the forehead; a horizontal, elongated oval with the pupil appearing as a pattern of vertical ribbing occupying about two thirds of the sclera. The back of the head was truly like a squid with a cluster of three breathing pipes on each side, ribbed membranous frills and a pointed end that looked like a vestigial tentacular tail.

These seven figurines seemed to cause the greatest interest and agitation in the prisoner if the subconscious sounds of his body and attempts to move inside the chains were any indicators. That was, at least, until the metal book-box came on screen. Then the dog was truly in the bowling alley. The man was now fully awake, screaming both obscenities and very vital facts in the form of probing, invasive questions.

"How? In the unhallowed Names of UnderVerse, how? Where did you get that reliquary? It disappeared from a concealed vault of the Thule Society, buried in greatest secrecy under a bayrisch festung! It was hidden under one of the hundreds of nameless castles of Bavaria that were ordered plundered by Heinrich Himmler himself, completely bypassing the Ahnenerbe. But it was the Ahnenerbe that had mandate to find and hold treasures of archaeology, religious relics and artifacts of eldritch myth in the name of the SS. Zein Fuhrer himself had decreed the mandate! But that weaselly sewer dweller Himmler ordered the contents taken to his kult befehl at Schloss Wewelsburg in Buren township, in the Paderborn Landkreis in North-Rhine Westphalia. The box was thought lost, when it wasn't found, many, many years later..."

Seeing the man gasp for air, his tongue swollen and raw, Lucas signaled a marine to bring him the cold water line. He adjusted a disposable flexible canula to the spigot before turning it on and irrigating the fat traitor's mouth. Hydrating him gave him fuel to continue speaking his priceless secrets, filling in the blanks that Lucas had no chance of filling by himself unless he committed to doing several degrees in archaeology, history, religion and legendary mythology.

The man was quite re-energized by his drink and the washing of his face. He continued with enthusiasm and great details. "It was rumored lost to the hands of an American soldier who took it as souvenir of the war when they invaded Wewelsburg Castle in early 1946. Our group thought the American GI's or CIA had found the sanctuaries, stealing everything as spoils. The agents sent in the 1960's found nothing but washed stone and painted wood, ready for tourists. The hidden doors we had heard about from captured Nazis our Worshipful brethren had helped to escape towards Colombia, Brazil and Belize were not there, or else they had been plundered and sealed, their
mechanisms destroyed. The metall bucherkiste was thought lost in the war damages, or stolen away by a neophyte, hidden in a private trove that would emerge when his family cleaned out the attic or cellar to sell his estate whence he died. The Worshipful thought they had another 4 or 5 decades to wait before its emergence. Praise be to the Depths and the UnderVerse, our power is cometh! The reign of the foul meteques, the rebellious nigger slaves and the mongrel yellow spawns will end in my lifetime! Zieg Christatu Hammerrika, Heil!"

"– Shooosh – And what pray tell is this metal book-box supposed to contain that has you so emotional? – Shooosh – A rare collector's version of both volumes of Mein Kampf manually illuminated by Goebbels, perhaps? – Shooosh – What exactly could this box, or its contents, be that you're almost wetting yourself like a dog in heat, just at the mere image of it? – Shooosh –"

The mammoth skinhead looked at the dull silver faceplate hanging just at his right shoulder; he smiled a truly predatory, depraved smile that was not completely human, and only partially sane.

"Ah, mein Herr Kinder! It supposedly holds a most tenebrous and unholy of librams! To the Worshipful it is rumored to contain a handwritten copy of the Tome of Eibon. Legends have it he was an occultist, alchemist and mentalist of great eldritch powers, gifted with superhuman perceptions from birth. He whom holds this Tome may well have they keys of Life, Death, the Between and the Void."

"– Shooosh – How do you open this box to reach the book? – Shooosh – I doubt saying 'Open Sesame' in ancient germanic will suffice. – Shooosh –"

"Nein, kinder; you have to treat it like a puzzle. Like the chin-tok and their wooden contraptions to hide candy from children. There is a sequence to tap and move, then it opens. There may be more to it, but that is what I was told in conversation with older, more devout, Worshipful members of the Baptismiath ecclesiastes."

"– Shooosh – Well then; let's talk of something more relaxing than religion and inhuman beasts from beyond. – Shooosh – Tell me about your tattoos. – Shooosh – What does this one mean?"

Service unto the Lord

(Lord of the Rings – Underneath the misty mountains cold)

December 28th of 2015, late evening
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
BVL; 4th basement – exclusion zone Ceta

The Matthews siblings were uncomfortable for many reasons right now. One, they were looking worriedly at the doorway to a showering hall with no partitions for genders and no privacy screens between shower heads. It was a true barracks style system, all white ceramics and tiles, stainless steel and about six small but heavily constructed cameras they could spot. The entire place smelled of sterility due to the harsh soaps used to hose down the place every week.

The other reason for their unease was in their lack of dress; both were down to their last layer of underwear, bare foot and freezing not just from cold. The order from the female marine that had welcomed them at the entrance to basement 4 had been cool, detached and arrogant. She ordered them out of their clothes and into the showers or she would take the clothing off them with a knife,
just like cutting meat fillets off the bones of a carcass. The k-bar in her hand enticed them to believe her and follow orders, but they still balked at showering together. Right until the woman barked behind them; they would have five minutes flat of hot water then it would go frigid to force them to hurry up and keep in time to their orders.

The third unease came at the types of clothes they were given: both received unisex underwear composed of knee-length compression shorts, compression t-shirt with elbow length sleeves and short socks with thickened anti-glide soles. All these were made with a weave of spandex, lycra and several polyesters thus making them very, very fitting. Tanya wondered about a bra until she saw the ribbed and reinforced structures in her t-shirt which Derek didn't have. The outer clothes were much better since it was just as set of drab solid-gray BDU's with belt, fingerless gloves and boots all made with black leather. After they were finally changed and recovered from the embarrassment of the communal showers, they stood next to Theo who was finishing a conversation with someone on a telephone handset wired to a wall console.

The woman from before came back to inspect them, then stood at attention as she barked out orders for them.

"All right boots! Ten' hut! As of now you here scumbags are BOOTS! And I am your not gentle and not friendly drill instructor, also known as the DI, the sergeant, the gunny, or the Rabid Bitch! That's with capitals on the 'R' and the 'B' for those of you who don't got no education in Inglese!"

"Yes DI, Ma'am!" the Matthews siblings answered in synch with matching shit-eating grins.

"Well, they understood that right easy. Why am I sure it's the last thing they'll ever do easy in my lifetime?" The female marine instructor asked from Theo as he stood on the side, holding his ribs in laughter at the poor kids. Oh well, they asked for it; literally.

"Dunlop! Stop cackling like a hen laying a clutch and get 'em moppets up ta the booth before the boss tans yo' hide, boy!" resounded the voice of the BVL's resident DJ and scenic arts expert. Man did that guy like the sound of his voice in the loudspeakers.

"All right, keep your breeches on, we're coming!" Theo answered loudly into the air, knowing that both the DJ and Lucas would be watching and listening through the cameras in the locker room. Wouldn't that cause a stir with the teens when they learned they were the entertainment of the last quarter hour. The boss could handle it. Besides, when the kids saw their parents, they'd have a lot of other stuff on their minds.

"Boots! Line up!" Theo spoke clearly and firmly. Since they were just two and in a confined space, shouting at the top of his lung capacity would be pointless. Even the marines weren't that thick. Usually. "Behind me, one pace interval. Stay silent and observant until called upon. You signed up for this, so shut ya traps and bear it with a grin! You's in t'a army now!"

The two teens followed the ranger through a corridor and up an 8 foot tall straight staircase to an armored room covered in vidscreens, security monitors and several consoles with old style mechanical dials, levers and red round valve handles. They walked forward to pay attention to a massive vidscreen easily 12 feet wide by 4 feet tall that served as the main monitor of the room. There were banks of 4 screens, each 4 feet wide by 2 feet high on each side of the central viewer. A series of keyboards, horizontal touchscreens that served as controller pads and three different blocks of 12 units were charging walkie-talkies, satellite phones and wireless touchscreen tablets in case of mobile emergencies. There were two large armored cabinets on each side of the door they had come through and another two next to another door across the room from their entry. Another smaller, less armored door was on the right hand, identified with a 'toilet' pictograph plus many short plastic shelves and hooks to hang coats and store miscellany out of the way.
Throning imperiously in the middle of it all was a large muscular black man, dressed in the burgundy uniform of BVL with meta-glasses and two different wireless ear sets, one on each side of the head. The chair he sat in was made of thick steel pipes and bands with three inch tick leather padding that strained and creaked under his massive girth. Standing 6’4” tall at 270 pounds of shaped toned muscle with only 3% of body fat, the athletic man was the dream of many and the envy of almost everyone. His daily hour in the hotel's gym was an event for both his engaging personality and the show he offered the crowd while wearing only his tight compression shorts. Being a health nut and fitness instructor in his teens and twenties had definitely paid off in spades! Now in his forties, he had the body, health and stamina of a twenty-five year old; something his many lady friends admired and demanded more of every time they visited.

"Well, well, well! So, fresh Boots for the stack! Dunlop! Aren't you recruiting a bit young these days?" asked the DJ in his usual attempts at humor with everything in sight.

"Boots; this here is the BVL's chief DJ and scene master. Anything of the spectacle type, like the inaugural on the 24th, goes through him for planning, improving and executing. He trained Lucas in a lot of the public speaking, deportment and attitudes you see him exhibit when he's not casual with friends. The man's name is Antwone Charitable Graceadieu; it's French 'cause his grand parents were from Haiti. They moved to New Orleans around WW-II when they had just got married. His mother spoke French, Creole and Cajun, so he does too and a few others aside. He's a master of three martial arts, calisthenics, and a damn fine shot with a 12 gauge or a 22 long rifle. In other words, don't piss off the black mountain of a man or he'll hurt you bad."

The siblings looked at the humongous man that had gotten up from his chair during Theo's little introduction and had to look way up to see his eyes. Yes, he was a big son of a horse. "Yes, sir! The Boots will respect the big black man so he doesn't sit on us, sir!" they answered with smirks at their temporary minder. Theo palming his face at their cheek wasn't helping discipline any.

"Mwuhahaha! We gotten t'a live ones! Da't be make'n my job easier! Come petites; see what d'a boss had prepared for tonight's festivities." Antwone spoke with a thick accent of mixed French and Cajun mostly as an affected style. It was always fun to see people's faces when they realized he wasn't some ignorant migrant or retarded fool when he decided to speak English like a college professor of the arts, when he wanted to make the effort to impress someone.

The two siblings were completely sickened and discommodated at being made to watch their parents, already naked and shackled on the flushing seats, as they endured being ignored for several hours with neither food nor support.

They were made to see, hear and understand via translation programs most of what the fat skinhead said until he started speaking the alien tongue with Lucas; then there was no translator alive or mechanical that could interpret that. The items shown on the monitor were queer in the extreme. When the man's tattoos were explained in english, they were a different level of disgusting on their own.

Then the part that would keep them waking up from nightmares at night for the next decade happened. Lucas took out of the man's wrists the tubes from the dialysis system, purging them into the floor trellis before disconnecting them from the main machine and throwing them into a shallow rectangular bucket some three feet by ten feet on one foot deep. The bucket-lift ran along vertical tracks up the wall to a height of 15 feet before tipping towards the chute built into the wall itself. This was the feeding mechanism for the shredding plant, which then fed the confetti by air pressure into the firebox of the gas burning water boilers for the complex.

Having inspected the bucket-lift, Lucas went to the crash cart, took a small tool, then slowly
walked up his mobile ramp to stand back at the shoulder of his suspended prisoner. The siblings, who were already shaken by the evening, would always remember what they saw next: their eleven year old brother raise an arm to bring down a syringe filled with oxygen into the heart of the man chained before him. He pressed the plunger on the cheap disposable plastic syringe then backed away down the ramp. As soon as he reached the bottom rim of the ramp, the fat man began thrashing in his bindings and choking on empty air. After about a minute of this he calmed down then relaxed completely in the initial flaccid repose of death.

Lucas took the wired controller for the motorized ramp, moving it back to its parking position along the wall, then walking back to the hanging corpse which he lowered to be able to push him towards the bucket-lift. The ceiling rails and wheeled winches were screeching and wailing along the chinking of the eight heavy chains as their burden was ferried to its final disposal. Lucas signaled towards a camera, causing Antwone to pull a decorated black key-card from his jacket which he slotted into a console with old mechanical dials and levers. A terrifying noise began as both pressurized air and hydraulic oil were moved to engage the round-saws, hammer-discs and reduction drums in the belly of the industrial shredder. The three stage device would leave nothing bigger than 1/16 of an inch in diameter, all of which would be pushed to the firebox by a sustained flow of air mixed with natural gas.

The body was lowered until it hovered six inches above the bucket then Lucas worked with a special secured key to remove the shackles and unwind the chains until the body was fully resting in the bucket, bereft of anything but its sparse body hair. At another signal from the child, Antwone pulled a lever and the bucket made the up-tip-down sequence in less than twenty seconds. There was nothing to be seen, only a few changes in sounds from the machine and a sickening wet gurgle that lasted all of two seconds. A series of high pressure water nozzles inside the chute began spraying boiling water to rinse the shredding parts of the machine and flush down any evidence. All the water vapor was pushed by the mixed air & gas to the firebox, just like the debris had been, removing even those minute traces of what happened. The cleaning cycle finished when the chute's blast door raised and a fine spray of oil was misted until it covered everything, then it was set alight to cremate any evidence left in the drop pipe in case of a detailed forensic investigation. A second cycle of boiling water wash-down occurred before the whole system reset for the next usage.

The two teenagers were completely discombobulated by the fact their little brother had just killed a person in front of their parents and didn't seem to have any reason to stop there. His footsteps as he walked towards the two shivering adults were ominous, foreboding nothing good.

"– Shooosh – Bring the new Boots to me on the floor. – Shooosh –"

Behold the Lord, thine Master

(Star Wars Symphony – Duel of the Fates)

December 29th of 2015, wee hours
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
BVL; 4th basement – exclusion zone Epsilon

Theo pushed the children towards the other door and they saw it led to the catwalk that surrounded the torture chamber / disposal room that they had watched on the monitors. The room was 20 feet high and the balcony was at ten feet in the air except where the shredder's intake was situated. At
that place there were short, narrow ladders from the floor up to the ceiling with a landing at the balcony to get on or off the bars. The smell was awful because of the rushing water beneath them in the canal. The metal trellis of the floor was wide-gauge enough that they could see a few things moving silently in the dark under the metal decking.

As they stopped in front of their parents, the adults saw how they were dressed and Raymond paled considerably while Cynthia seemed to redden like a lit match.

"– Shooosh – remove the pipe-gags from them. – Shooosh – I would hear from their own mouths the depths of their guilt. – Shooosh –" Lucas walked towards them like a Minion of Beyond, all black, creaking leather and softly clinking sheathed steel.

"What have you done you little bastards?" Cynthia exploded without preamble. Her blush of rage was now encompassing all her head and parts of her neck down to her clavicles. Raymond was stiff and unresponsive, but very much attentive, just frozen with fear.

Derek took the lead and spoke for the two children: "We offered Lucas something to save our family that you had both cast to the trash heap with your insults. Mom, did you really say you wanted to disown him? To put him in a youth prison in shame and humiliation? For what dammit? Just for the blasted money? Was that what cost us our family and happiness tonight?"

"You simpering little idiots!" Cynthia seethed "I don't believe my eyes! You joined him, became part of his cult of fools! You deserve everything you get from now on! I won't help you and I won't acknowledge you as mine! Never!" Her venom spent, the woman seemed to lapse into a sort of simmering loathsome rage that she no longer knew how to express.

Seeing Raymond still quietly observant but frozen by fear and survival instincts, the siblings shook heads and backed off until they were side by side with Theo, back against the wall.

Lucas presented himself before the two tied adults and moved his heavy helmet form Raymond to Cynthia, right to left, slowly, unhurried and outwardly unbothered by the events of the last five hours.

"– Shooosh – Derek and Tanya have both shown much more wisdom and civility than either of you this night, and that despite the little hiccup at the beginning of the evening. – Shooosh – It is now because of them that you are alive and will walk away from here with most of your health. – Shooosh – They have exchanged their lives in service to me, my creed and cause to pay for your Blood Betrayal. – Shooosh – You may have jobs and be kept at the law firm, but never as partners, never at high standing. – Shooosh – You will never be trusted, your word will have no value to my ears and eyes. – Shooosh – You will exist at my sufferance of it, no longer loved, wanted nor trusted. – Shooosh – Should you perform another such betrayal or attempt to harm me physically or spiritually, you will die. – Shooosh – Slowly, cruelly, inhumanely, and only after having witnessed the deaths of those who bought your partial freedom as they pay forfeit on your crimes alongside of you. – Shooosh –"

Lucas moved his right hand towards the squad of marines and they moved from their guard positions to line up two deep by six wide at ten feet in front of the sitting parents.

"– Shooosh – These wastes of human souls have betrayed Blood, Law and Faith. – Shooosh – The punishments for these heresies are known. – Shooosh – Apply the sentence unto these relapsed Infidels, corporal Derland. – Shooosh – When they have suffered their pain, bundle them up and ship them out of my fiefdom. – Shooosh – Have the motorpool prepare a covered unmarked delivery van to use for transport. – Shooosh – No support, medications or assistance, corporal! – Shooosh –"
Lucas turned stiffly, walking away from the vast room, leaving anger, misery and anxious anticipation in his funeste wake. The female marine leader began barking orders that had several of the soldiers going to the walls to open alcoves hidden behind doors covered with a layer of concrete and inch-thick layer of cinder block façade to imitate the real walls around.

The alcoves revealed small braziers and tripods, bags of coal chunks, coils of oiled metal chains, hooks, shackles, and several metal rods about five feet in length with a twist-lock system at the top. These locks matched the rod-end of several iron and bronze shapes the use of which was still undetermined. The marines brought the tripods, setting up one next to each prisoner. They diligently filled the brazier pots with chunks of charcoal which were doused in lighter fluid then lit ablaze. The metal shapes were then arrayed atop the flaming coals until each brazier was filled with heating, smelling metal bits. A set of wrought-iron hammers, tongs, shovels and six inch square nails were brought and also split and positioned next to each prisoner.

Corporal Derland stood at the side, looking straight between the adults and the children. She addressed the kids severely, without any sympathy: "These two have betrayed their own Blood. They should have died for that. Instead, because you bought their lives, they will suffer and, through Penance, rent enough time in this life that maybe, someday, they might manage to offset their Blood Debt to the point of deserving to be thought of as human again. If you resist, if you interfere, if you try to stop us, your lives are forfeit and all four of you will die tonight. Stand at parade attention until told otherwise. Disobedience will be punished. Failure to perform will be punished. Weakness showed by vomiting or fainting will be punished. Do you understand these orders?"

Scared, traumatized and bereft of options, the two teens nodded "Yes DI, we understand."

"Dunlop! It's on you to keep them in line. You know what the Master said about discipline and orderliness during ceremonies. Make them behave or they won't suffer alone!"

The rest of the hour was passed in screams of pain and pleas for help or mercy. Neither adult would come out unscathed in body or soul. The teenagers' minds would be scarred for life.

The metal shapes in the braziers were brands to be burned into the hands, feet and chest of the traitors. When they were red hot, the marines used the tongs to hold the brands while setting the long metal rods in place so they could twist them locked into position until each brand was shafted solidly. Then the same tongs were used to grab and hold in place the prisoners' hands, one at a time, so that the Marks of Shame could be placed upon the topside of the limb. They would not mark the palm to avoid crippling the person's capacity to work or care for their own needs. The brands were applied to the topside of the feet so that every time the person was sockless they would see the proof of their shame.

The final brand over the heart was the Seal of the Baltrianic Estates, the vast sovereign domain that Lucas intended to construct so his friends, workers and allies could live together at peace inside his walls and rings of defenses. This claimed visibly who had sentenced these persons to suffer and bear their shame visibly for the population to see.

Once the branding was done, they were unfettered, wrapped in a thin mylar emergency blanket then again picked up and moved through the corridors, airlock and up to the garage at the BVL security motorpool. The three jeeps would get them to the Holt Residence, dropping them off in the dead morning hours before the first rays of false dawn. Good riddance to them both.

The two teens had held as much as possible but had ended up crying their eyes out. Theo had no choice but to take note and administer correction in the form of slaps to the shoulder or biceps along a harsh verbal rebuke to man-up or tell the marines they couldn't serve the Lord. The person
who quit would be freed from their terms of indenture, but only after choosing whose Blood Debt wasn't paid by them. Which meant of course that this person would die before their eyes as result of their cowardice and weakness. Neither teenager abandoned their post, despite the difficulties at keeping a game-face on they experienced.

The kids finally got themselves under control, and endured until the torment passed. Both were escorted back to the 12th floor suite to fall into fretful, terror plagued nightmares. It would be afternoon when they fell asleep enough to recuperate. No one bothered them until the 3rd of January to begin formal training. It was told to them that as of now, that suite was theirs. They would live in the Hotel; go to school as always, but live here and train for their service on fixed schedules. When old enough, they would have a job inside the Hotel and climb ranks by merit like anyone else. As of this point, their parents had disowned them but in private only, so they would live separately, as if they attended a boarding school.

It was made abundantly clear that Lucas would never tolerate the shame of the Holt's, Matthews' and Himself be known in public. The crossed adoptions would go through, the marriage as well, and it would be hosted by the Hotel at the expense of Lucas, as is expected when the son is so much richer than his parents. But no one that wore the crest of BVL would ever respect Cynthia or Raymond; they were family to the Lord but it was well known they were traitors, not to ever be trusted outside of their professions as mid-level attorneys. Both of their careers would stagnate in holding positions until they died or Lucas was given a proof of genuine repentance on their part.

It would never happen in either of their lives.

Sovereign Lord of the Land

(Star Wars Symphony – Lake Varykino country)

December 29th of 2015, wee hours
Buffalo City, New York State (USA)
BVL; 4th basement – exclusion zone Ceta; Lord's private shower & armory

Lucas was finishing the dry heaves that had taken him despite the Gravol tablet he had taken at the beginning of events, just before the meeting upstairs. He had run the numbers mentally and had his strategists run simulation tables based on the collated data about his family's tempers and personalities. It had not been good. The kids had come out much better than foreseen; they were still alive. The adults were a loss to write off, but that was the expected outcome in 98% of all sims so he wasn't surprised, just bitterly disappointed that humans could not be better than mere numbers on paper. The fact that his siblings had offered service to save the adults could go both ways. At least, it meant they had a basic grasp of Dignity, Integrity, Honesty, Honor and Duty.

Lucas watched on the monitors in front of him as the adults were lifted and wrapped in the silvery emergency blankets, his eyes instinctively seeking out the Seal on their chests. The Great Seal of the Baltrianic Estates; his dream for the last year, ever since he had treatments for leukemia. He had begun dreaming of a place, rather pastoral and woody, dotted in farms and plantations, marshes, swamps and swift streams gurgling amongst the hillocks. He imagined a Land where his family would be able to grow, get married, live peacefully and die in contentment, surrounded by family and friends. He wanted that perfect piece of Earth where the bastards from the US military branches, the North American Confederation, and the UEO's jackbooted thugs would not dare tread for fear of all the technology and defenses he would endow the walls, roads, streams and
trees. His Land would never bow nor break before anyone.

Contrary to what the average man in the streets may think, this was not a far-fetched dream as many private corporations were doing just that already in the oceanic depths. Larry Deon with Deon Submerged Enterprises, Joshua Winters with Winter Unlimited Ventures, Alastair Claybourne with Tor A’Ban’athey Real Estate Consortium, Domenico Montebianco with Blue Volcano Gas & Petrol Co and Piotr Mihaevitch Yvgeny Prynikov with The Zabakadhy Motorized Engineering Group, were amongst the best known and closest to legitimate operations you could see on the map. Everyone else fell far short of the standards established by the UEO and its member federations to be recognized as a sovereign national entity.

Other, more hidden and thoroughly criminalized operations, were in the hands of Doctor Mataahan Zin and his twin daughters who wanted to rebuild Ghengis Khan's empire under pretensions of being his descendants. Russia had lost control of a cluster of arctic islands just north of the Chinese borders to the hands of rebel General Vostok and his groupuscule of communism revival mercenaries. In Africa's South-Central zone there was that unstable buffoon Trangh Bellegant with his attempts at turning his illegal gem mines into cults dedicated to worshiping himself so he could turn the individuals into slaves, using them as an army to overthrow the local militias and seize power from whatever governments existed.

All this made abstention of practically sovereign by might-of-arms organizations that existed for decades like the drug Cartels of Mexico & Columbia, the Triads, The Thuggee, the Bratva, The Sicilian Cosa Nostra, the Skinheads with their hundreds of subgroups all over the map, etc… Then there were also the religious nutjobs emanating from Christians, Muslims and many Buddhist sects, all creating remote monasteries, abbeys, villages or submerged colonies that were never written in the maps and followed no laws but their own.

No, the Earth's map was not solid nor reliable. With lesser bastards like Micronesia, right next to Australia, trying publicly to grow its oceanic holdings despite UEO sanctions and military build-up, it meant that there was clear space to be found, if you were patient and knew how to play the long game. And once you were well implanted, autonomous colonies would want to join but that didn't matter. It was the sovereign land and the people on it that were important; the colony modules could be moved or scrapped, changed for better and safer when necessary. As long as the people had the uncontested right to their land and they wanted willingly to work with him, there would be a way to make it gel together to produce results.

(Doctor Who – opening theme)

Lucas heard a strange noise behind him, feeling a sudden chill despite the many layers of protection and climatized armor he wore. Slamming his helmet shut, he turned around to gaze into a black circle of energy discharges floating in empty air, some six feet from him. It was completely circular, about 8 feet wide and seemed to emit many different energies in light, heat, sound, vibration and radiation all at once. Suddenly, there was a gravitational pull equal to a dozen times the dead weight of the child's body that seized him, pulling him relentlessly to the event horizon.

Lucas vanished from the heavily armored, temporarily off-grid room with nary a sound. No one felt the event. No one heard anything. No one had any ways yet to monitor or keep track of Lucas through psionics or magicks. That would come much later in a few years.

Lucas wound up kneeling on both knees with his hands splayed on each side to keep from face planting into the cement floor covered with cheap linoleum tiles common to public meeting places. His ears and synesthesia were working overtime to get rid of the static, to reboot to full alert. He was in danger, needing to be ready for the confrontation with as much capacity as his short stature,
light weight and basic skills would grant him.

As he rose to his feet and boosted the sound effects in his speakers for maximum intimidation, he beheld a man. This man was thirtyish years old, dressed in the ubiquitous t-shirt and blue jeans combo with sneakers and a flannel shirt tied around his waist by the sleeves. He looked quite unkempt, even with his completely shaven head that had only eyelashes left. His hands were covered in small scratches, lesions and blisters revealing many harsh labors with electricity and chemicals.

It was the eyes that caught Lucas' attention, eye that he had been seeing in the mirror for the last year of his life. HIS eyes; his flint-blue eyes that had become washed out, discolored and drab from depression, loneliness, isolation and abandonment.

(Haendel – Messiah)

24th December of 2300, early morning
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
World Management Grid substation for NCQ County

"Welcome your Excellency, my Lord of Burgundy, to the blankest canvas you will ever paint upon." The older male's smile was definitely not quite sane or quite stable. But then again, after yanking the little tyke through space, dimension and Time, was that really important?
The Next Great Adventure

The author wishes to express thanks to anyone who may read his story and encourages them to leave reviews, comments or even flame it hard. As with any who try their hand at publicly expressing an idea or story concept, all feedback is important and welcome. Disclaimer: I do not own SeaQuest, Star Wars, nor any other sci-fi or fantasy series, movies, comics, cartoons or news items used in this fiction as they belong to the creators or broadcasters or publishers who put them out for consumption by the public.

This chapter is based upon the canon SQ season 2 episode 'Playtime' in which the ship is dragged through an artificial space/time gateway to reach circa 2300 in Earth's future. While the time mechanics and World Management Grid are used, the rest is vastly AU and OOC with the reasons being obvious in the story line.

Seventh chapter; The Next Great Adventure

Tempus non lineae est

(SeaQuest - season 2 opening theme)

24th December of 2300, early morning
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
World Management Grid substation for NCQ County

"Well this might finally work out after all." The snarky synthetic voice of the holographic assistant was heard to offer as an encouragement. It really shouldn't try; positive supportive behaviors really weren't programmed right into its matrix. "And there is a startlingly symmetrical logic to this considering that everything humongously bad in your life always happens on your birthday. This, therefore, should be glorious in its cataclysmic confluence of badness. The space, dimensions, times and realities we have plumbed will either unravel as a ball of yarn or will concatenate in a redux of the Big Bang. Truly magnificent achievement of clusterfuckery, Oh my Lord! We approve most slavishly of your pseudo-divine attempts to exalt yourself unto the Celestials!"

"Luke, shut up before I disconnect your vocoder for a week like last time you pissed me off at a critical juncture!" The damned program was a soothing presence against the lonely emptiness of the mechanically well kept mausoleum the Earth had made itself into. It was also the primary cause of every nervous breakdown and attempt at cyberneticide he had committed to date. Why exactly had he thought it was a good idea to inflict his own personality onto himself at any point of his life was an ill-fated choice that would keep psychiatrists busy for a couple of centuries no doubt.

"Voila! A brand new coupling on the EPS line, a breaker box that will actually interrupt current properly and enough insulation pads and shock gel panels to deflect or absorb the shrapnel if there is an explosion of any magnitude like the four last tries. Let's give this a spin and see what comes out!"
Lucas Daniel Wolenczak was never adopted and was in fact disowned by his mother at the age of 9. He was a thin, light weight 33 years old with dubious stability and no real physical attributes worth remembering. He was dirty, unkempt, dressed in jeans and T-shirt that were about three years older than they should have lasted and you could tell by the smell that washing the laundry was no more pressing than showering himself. He had a clean shaven head and face for a simple fact. In this epoch someone had invented a produce that you apply to your body and the area stops producing follicles for a year. Otherwise, he'd have hair and a beard so long as to make an old druid jealous.

Lucas rubbed his thin, long fingers in glee. This was as much to alleviate the pain from the last batch of thin red lesions, scratches and electrical burns as to express somehow, to something, the feelings of joy that he had inside for the first time in about a year. Living with chronic depression unmedicated was hard; doing it on an empty planet was worse, and having only his mirrored animated self for company was surely dragging him to the edge.

He needed to finish his self imposed mission or else the murders he had committed would be for nothing and the souls of his dead friends would never forgive him. Only stopping the madness and genocide before it started was enough to achieve sufficient balance in his ledgers to perhaps have a sentence in the Beyond that would not end in eternal damnation. Or reincarnation as a worm. Being reincarnated as something devoid of eyes, ears, mouth and limbs just wasn't worth it; he'd kill himself and play the Karma roulette again.

WMG central monitoring warning, audio: "Activation of the World Management Grid: Version 09 Alpha Spread-11.06. Service pack LDW 04 Beta Test-08.03 coming online. Sending patches and service pack through national automated registries. Government done, army done, companies done, residential done, vehicles done. All update sequences finished and rebooting on schedule. The WMG is now compliant with codex LDW 04.08.03 as of now. The temporo-dimensional gateway is initiating and stabilizing; estimating twenty four minutes to available transit."

Living Lucas breathed in relief as the preliminary phase of the mission was, for once in almost a decade, going to plan without an explosion or anti-intruder scheme blowing in his face. The down time in hospital was bad enough with live medics prodding and poking. Having only the robotic arms of the emergency cyber-medic module of the WMG to give any succor was a damned shitload of mental anguish to plow through on top of the physical damage and therapy.

The damage done to his brain and psyche when removing the biochip / synthetic parasite would never heal properly. He was defective. Highly intelligent with superhuman perceptions, comprehension and processing speeds but emotionally stunted and unable to have a care about himself or what he suffered. He could feel pain, fear, shame, demeanment and all the negative spectrum of emotions. But he couldn't feel the positive anymore. Joy, real happiness, love, good cheer, humor, it was all behind a thick glass wall through which he could sometimes feel an echo of old thoughts or feelings but never strong enough to lift the pall of depression and self-destructiveness that haunted him.

Since coming to this epoch and confronting the reality of how his body and mind had been raped and abused, he had never recovered. He needed neurosurgery which would never be done. He needed a professional psychologist to put him in therapy for a few years, probably in a closed setting to really help him, but that too would never happen. Not unless a miracle of either God's will or Satan's Wrath fell upon him.

Summons of the Savior Child
Living Lucas' bad trip down fabulation lane was stopped abruptly by the much awaited signal from the WMG.


Living Lucas gazed upon the prize of 14 years of efforts as he rose to his feet and stood all 3 feet tall, dressed in ominous black with a belt full of weaponry. His dull-silver faceplate did not relinquish any emotions but reflected clearly the instabilities, fears and hopes of the older male back at himself.

"Welcome your Excellency, my Lord of Burgundy, to the blankest canvas you will ever paint upon." Living Lucas's smile was definitely not quite sane or quite stable. But then again, after yanking the little tyke through space, dimension and Time, was that really important?

Adeste Humanitas : Praeteritum vivit denuo

(Hymnals – Agnus Dei)

Older Lucas had promptly disconnected his holographic assistant as it had made a series of choked sounds that should not come from a human throat. Since he couldn't understand and didn't want the interruption at this momentous event, he just flicked the main switch and cut the power completely from the breaker box. Problem solved. Now that he had a living human with him, he could finally get some desperately needed emotional interactions and socialize with someone other than the damnable deformed mirror of his broken mind and twisted soul he had manufactured.

After presenting himself fully with his old UEO badge and credentials that he still kept in his work satchel, the two had worked together so the younger boy could completely take off the heavy, confining helmet and filtration pack to take a breath of air. It was actually much fresher, cleaner, and smelled so much like the mountains! When they went outside the substation and the child saw the tall spires of New Cape Quest he had been taken aback by the empty buildings and deserted streets. Like his older self said so eloquently: an automated, mechanically well kept mausoleum.

The ride in the car was interesting since Younger Lucas had no experience with driverless cars
contrary to his older self who had become so used to them that he had problems driving manually. Besides, letting the car move on automatic avoided the strong desire to just push the engine and slam into a wall or off a cliff to finally die and be at peace. Fortunately, he had endured and now the fruits of 14 years of hard, spirit wracking efforts was in hand to help complete the mission. The humanoid robot in the driver's seat had also at many critical moments of depression been just enough placebo to allow him to reach the safety and peace of his home to crash and then recharge his emotional batteries away from the WMG and its blasted problems.

The trip took them an hour at 120 km / hr on trafficless roads to venture well past the outskirts of NCQ and into the outlying swamps and bayous of the Florida Everglades to a little known facility that did not even exist yet in Younger Lucas's time line. It had been built around the year 2143 as a specialized military hospital. All of its staff and equipments had been dedicated to the treatment of soldiers suffering from physical brain traumatisms or psychological dysfunctions like PTSD. They also did research and therapy for those poor unfortunates who suffered from personality changes and insanities caused by severe concussions, brain lesions, chemicals or radiations. It had been until the End of Humanity a truly advanced facility where the medicine practiced had been well beyond simple lobotomies or electro-shocks.

There was one thing that Older Lucas insisted Younger Lucas saw before they started talking about history, timelines and why he was here. The kid needed data and perspective before any decisions were made. Besides, the time portal had 30 days to cycle through before it could power up again. Might as well make the best of it.

They passed the automated gatekeep in the surreal red brick walls that looked like a throw back to the 1800's style of building old colonial forts under the confederate army. That was the impression until Older Lucas explained that these were synthetic bricks made of a mix of ceramic dust and thermoplastic pellets pressure molded under intense heat. These things were actually heavy, durable, didn't rot or crack from sea salt erosion and had become the standard for building public facilities in every climate or place they needed a structure.

The courtyard reminded of any hospital facility the world over, a central rectangular building for administration and welcoming guests with wings on each side and behind to house the rooms, surgeries, doctors' offices, laboratories and other stuffs. There were courtyard areas separated by 20 foot tall fences topped by concertina wire loops to keep the unstable patients segregated in control zones when letting them out to exercise or meet family visitors. The buildings were built with the same red bricks and some grayish metal that didn't seem like steel at first.

Older Lucas explained that those were steel but with a protective covering of material similar to the bricks sprayed onto the metallic parts then heat cured in an oven until the outside looked like glazed ceramic. This avoided the problems with wind borne sea salt and humidity. It also made the exposed metallic elements much more resistant to storm tossed debris, fire damage or shaking from the occasional seismic trembler.

They entered the main building with a magnetic card then Older Lucas made them stop at the security office so that he could enter into the system his Younger sibling and emit a pass-card like his. That would allow Younger Lucas to choose a room to live next to him in the complex as this was his permanent housing when he wasn't working at the WMG substation. Younger Lucas also insisted on getting doubles of every physical metallic key that was hung on the peg boards in the security and secretary offices so he could explore the edifice and complex in greater detail. Older Lucas shrugged and helped along; happy just to have someone other than his aggressive empty shell of a hologram to talk with and do stuff. Having a kid brother that wasn't insane was nice.

They went up the airy glass walled staircase to the third floor where there were rooms for the
visiting dignitaries, doctors or VIP family visitors of VIP patients. Since a lot of politicians had children or grand-kids in the services the conceptor's of the facility had integrated to their blueprints an area of higher luxury staterooms, salons, two cafeterias, public restrooms to supplement the en-suite of each bedroom, etc… There was a 24 person conference room with multiple vidscreens to show the visitors the treatments, surgeries, molecular models of drugs and miscellany that went on in searching for cures to mental and spinal injuries or poisonings.

Younger Lucas snorted derisively at the thought that the politos had arrogated themselves privileged rooms and situations all the way into what most North-Americans and Europeans would consider a place of Perdition or a charnel house. Even when wading neck-deep in offal and sewer murk, the politos and rich wannabees had to have their standing and symbols of power. No wonder the planet was empty; with their egos so inflated there wasn't any place left for the humans to live.

After finding a room just the door to the left of Older Lucas's own room, the Younger dropped his helmet and backpack but kept everything else to go exploring the main edifice. He promised to stay only in the main admin tower until his sibling could go walking with him. They had convened the oldest sibling needed a hot shower and a long soak in the tub to warm and relax his aching body. It was also admitted that a change of clothes would help him feel human again. It was a bad sign when a man couldn't remember the last time his boxers hadn't been soaked with sweat and sticky in the wrong places, or why they actually smelled worse than his moldy socks.

It was rather pathetically obvious that the Older was emotionally deprived and depressive in a catastrophic way so the Youngest agreed with his request to wait for a walk-around together. They convened on a rendez-vous in the first cafeteria in the front of the storey where the glass staircase passed the floor. This would let the little guy walk around on his own a while and leave a good two hours or so to his older sibling to get healed and decently dressed. On a gut feeling, Younger Lucas decided to visit the suite of his older sibling to make sure he did get in the shower. As the man was getting undressed, the child grabbed his hands and tsk'ed disapprovingly at the injuries and layers of scars he saw. On another guess, he decided to help the older male undress to see the state of his body and verify other injuries or situations that would need first aid. Since he did have his much beloved Paramedic Grade 1 license of practice, it would be good to help out his own truest sibling in his time of need.

Younger Lucas was now pissed off and wanted bloodshed in copious quantities to assuage the beast inside his heart. His older sibling's entire torso was covered all around in scars from very obvious whippings laid on over several years.

There was the scar on top of his bald head which indicated surgery of the rather traumatic type and was certainly an important story unto itself.

The hands and forearms were scarified by lesions, blisters, fire burns and chemical burns almost to the point of considering them disfigured. Any more like that and he risked being crippled.

That was just the upper body. Getting off his dingy running shoes and socks released a smell of decay and unveiled disfigured toenails indicative of fungal infections. The nasty prominent reddish veinules all over the soles of the feet were a sure sign of infection in the blood vessels and skin from lack of washing and never taking off the constrictive shoes, even to sleep. His calves and lower legs under the knees were pallid and had the same reddish veinules climbing up the limbs erratically. He was slowly dying from blood rot from the feet up.

Taking off his ratty jeans and disgustingly stained and smelly shorts finished revealing the same whipping scars as his torso all the way down his thighs to his knees.

There were a few jagged scars all over the man that had been inflicted with bladed weapons that
had badly healed after infecting. The sprinkling of weird clustered pockmarks from some disease he had survived around a decade ago were worrisome but could wait compared to the rest of all the damage.

"Right then, you hard headed brother of mine; shower and hour long soak in bath salts NOW! You start the water running while I go root around all the bathrooms on the levels around to find you some therapeutic strength salts to put in the tub to seep you like a tisane until some of that venous congestion gets cleared or at least becomes more visible so I know what to do."

The child-aged rescuer drew in a deep tremulous breath and tried to stabilize himself for the work ahead. He was the only human alive on the planet and therefore the only person able to help. He now had an obligation to not only make the effort but perform adequately or his only living sibling that shared his blood and family history would die in his hands.

"This is a full service hospital so I'm ordering blood works with a full tox panel ASAP and we'll do urine and stool cultures as well. Thankfully the Internex should be advanced enough to have those things available. Otherwise we are going to see if those humanoid robots and auto-medic modules in the WMG are that capable at testing biological samples and giving advice. We need full-body X-Rays, CAT scan and MRI if they have it here. If not, same answer as the samples; we find an automated hospital in town and get all the scans done. We are going to pass you some basic vision, hearing and reflex tests to gauge your aptitude to care for yourself and see how critical your condition is, and mark my words, sibling of mine; we will get you well no matter what."

The Older Lucas was now crying openly and shamelessly; it had been years since someone had been interested in his welfare and it felt good to have someone take charge, telling him they would see to his health. The kid was twenty years younger but was much more competent in healing than the older male ever was so he was happy to let him lead. It was reassuring to see the child knew his competency limits well and had no qualms about asking for help, even from the robots or web's virtual medical avatars. Why in the names of the Holies hadn't he done that years ago, or recently when he was injured? His damned head wasn't on straight but still, he should have been more active about his health if the child's reasoning and reactions were to be believed.

Oh well, they could talk about it later during the meal. The little guy was already back with the ubiquitous disposable plastic jars for sampling body fluids and secretions. Oh, the joys of mucous! From the ears, nose, eyes and scrapings of skin surface where the scars, blisters and lesions were seeping serum or puss. All the jars were labeled with the body sector, type of sample, and when needed the type of injury or infection suspected. Damn but the little bastard was thorough! Even the gribitch Smith back on SeaQuest II hadn't been that interested in his armpit hairs. There must be some sort of genetic insanity in the family to be like that at such a young age…

Once his older sibling was in the steaming hot shower with the ionic head activated on low force gentle waves at the same time as the water, Younger Lucas began a systematic surveying of all bathrooms on all three visitor's levels of the administration tower. He found some regular bath salts that he placed next to the glass staircase to grab on the way back to his brother just in case nothing better was found. At least this brand was hypoallergenic so it would not irritate his already damaged skin and limbs.

A few minutes later the child hit the jackpot in one of the supply closets rather than the rooms themselves. The shelves held a series of airtight plastic boxes vacuum sealed with cellophane wrapper. These were brand-name 4 gallon boxes straight from the manufactures that had never been opened and therefore should still be good if the peremption dates were to be believed. There were some hydrotherapy grade bathing salts for three different situations which applied to Older Lucas. It was fortunate that according to the factory labels the burn soother, the muscle relaxer and
the dermal infection sanitizer could be mixed together into the tub if you didn't mind putting in an extra scoop of each and soaking in the mixture at least a whole hour to get the full effect.

Younger Lucas looked to see what clothes there might be for him so he could get out of his dirty and sweat soaked fighting gear. He quickly found a shelf with genderless blue scrubs in sizes for children that would fit him. These were individually wrapped in disposable cellophane with the hospital's in-house laundry service labels on the packages. They were clearly meant to be worn by a visiting relative of a soldier under care. This meant that, yes, on a shelf to the left he found the unisex straight-cut boxers, t-shirts and socks that would be given along the scrubs to the visitors. These were issued if they needed to spend the night and had not prepared a bag or were under obligation to change to visit the sterile rooms, like the burn treatment units or the MRSA containment zone.

Now ferrying on a small wheeled dolly the assorted soaps, salts, massotherapy rubbing oils and several sets of clothing for the both of them, Younger Lucas made his way back to their rooms with a smile. He hadn't had to leave the floor and really didn't want to put any distance between himself and his psychologically fragile sibling. He thought on what he knew of PTSD, which was a lot for a child since every mentor he had known and most of his employees had some form of it. The thing that he knew was that a sufferer of PTSD could sometimes start thinking that the person helping them was not real or had abandoned them if they were not at the right place at the expected moment. This meant that leaving the older male for any period of time was going to require putting him to sleep with chemicals or dragging him along to explore and get things done in the month he had before the temporal machinery was reset and capable of sending something back. Whether the Older Lucas came back with him was a question at the forefront of his mind but given the health of his sibling, it would need to wait until he had been stabilized and they knew his full situation and limitations.

When the child entered the room and then the bathroom he was relieved to see the older male still standing on his legs, head bowed under the combined sprays of water and ionic waves as they splashed and cleansed his entire body. The wetness and discolorations around him showed he had moved and turned a few times to wash and rinse at least twice and was now just relaxing and enjoying a good soothing scalp and collarbone massage.

Younger Lucas went to start running the soaker tub, glad it was clean already; he didn't have to wash and scrub down the basin to make it fit to hold a medical case in sanitary conditions. As the very hot water slowly filled the white glazed porcelain, he cracked open the box tops then carefully measured out portions of the bathing salts for a combo soak. His older brother would smell like an herbal tea when he came out from it but would have at least disinfected his epidermis and begun the process of sealing the seeping lesions or blisters he had at several places of his hands and feet.

After a few minutes more, the tub was filled properly so the child called out to the older male to stop the shower and get in the medicated water. The older man was neither prudish nor mentally in the state to care about nudity since he had not had social or medical interactions with anybody in years. He just stopped the water and ionic jets, turned around and walked to the tub to lower himself in, slouching backwards with a contented sigh of pleasure like he had not felt in more than a full year. This little guy had done more for his health and sanity in less than three hours of presence than the damned hologram in the 13 years he had the thing active.

The boy quickly undressed and showered off the sweat and grime from the wet-works and impromptu traveling he had done all day right in the same bathroom as the older man. It was safer that way for both of them, given just how far removed from any help they both were. Then he sat quietly on a padded footstool next to the tub, wrapped in a thick bathrobe to keep warm. He contemplated the older male with cold, detached eyes that saw the medical necessities of survival
that were to be accomplished so his only living relative stayed alive. They needed to hold the fort until they could reach back to his timeline to obtain the discrete professional help in a private clinic his soldiers used when a job went bad. This would demand some thought and could be decided once all the samples were analyzed with the body scans in hand to see what the skeleton and organs looked like. No need to borrow trouble when the Universe wanted to give them some for free and the delivery truck was already on the way here. Younger Lucas just felt it in his childish bones.

After helping his Older Brother with putting ointment and bandages on his injuries that needed tending, the two Lucas' dressed in the generic matching underwear and blue scrubs then went to the floor's front cafeteria to make a simple meal for themselves. Or at least, Older Lucas wanted it simple; the Younger sibling knew how to cook and wanted to show off his talents. When he heard the suggestion of simple cold canned tuna sandwiches with bagged chips and instant coffee, the Younger sibling made a face of distaste as he began razzing his Older sibling about not knowing how to live right and not knowing how to receive important honored guests in his home.

The older male was unphased by the joking child's attempts to goad him because he hadn't had a human visitor in a few years and those were never much conversation anyways.

"Look, kid, I never learned how to cook anything in my life. I put stuff in the microwave oven or dump it in a pan and it gets warm enough to swallow, that's about what I can do. And about my home; man, I live in a hospital 'kuz I know that I need help with my head as much as my body. Did you think I wasn't aware I was sick?"

"Well, that was refreshing!" exclaimed Younger Lucas sarcastically; "I finally find a guy who does know he's bonkers and needs to get his head checked out, and it happens to be me. I really am the only sane one on the mud ball after all."

As the two laughing brothers got to the cafeteria the child was incensed to see that it was composed of exactly what he had seen when passing by the first time. A set of shallow cupboards topped by melamine counters and elevated shelves above that. A couple of microwave ovens, two single-hob hotplates and the two large industrial refrigerators. In the wall between the fridges was an inset automated coffee maker capable of brewing both single cups and 40 ounce thermal carafes. There wasn't a real kitchen range, cook-top or baking oven in sight. The contents of the fridges and pantries was disappointing, but in reality he had expected it.

Older Lucas confirmed the state of things for his baby brother:

"You have to remember that when I came to this timeline, the Earth's population was down to two people trying to kill each other off. All the farming, ranching, fishing and any sort of food related industry had died off decades before then. The survivors had eaten canned processed food or dehydrated meals that you just add water or milk before putting them in the nuker. I'm pretty sure nobody knew how to cook anything complicated anymore about forty or thirty years before I got here. All the things that needed complicated prep work was no longer available or came in a can or vacuum sealed cellophane or was processed into MRE's by the army. So yeah, my being able to make a tuna spread on cold bread with a baggie of chips and some hot liquid from the wall mounted dispenser is about what you can expect from this epoch. Sorry we're not up to your exacting standards, Oh My Lord."

It appeared snarking good and hard at your close friends was a family affair. Well two can play that game the younger boy thought viciously. After all, what was a family reunion without a little sibling ribbing to be had?

"Step aside, knave! Your Lord will show you how to cook so well that the souls of the departed
will reincarnate to be able to partake in my most munificent feast!"

Having so pronounced, the child marched imperiously to the left fridge which held what passed as the meats in order to figure out how to make that grandiloquent statement come true. The peals of genuinely free laughter coming from his older brother warmed his heart. Maybe they would be able to fight his depression and keep him balanced enough to last until they got out together.

While the dead didn't present themselves for a portion, the meal made by the boy was a lot better than whatever the older male had eaten in his memory of the last 24 months. Firstly it was piping hot and it hadn't come from the nukers but the actual hotplates had showed off their true use. The child had made them a stir-fry of chunked beef (corned beef, can) vegetables (frozen, bag) and olive oil seasoned with some salt, pepper, garlic, onion and lemon flavor (powders in bottles). The main course was accompanied by pan-toasted bread, sliced cheese (Kraft singles) and a brand-name bottle of fruit juice. Dessert was coffee (dispenser) and a good old McCain frozen cake to share between them.

The older man yet again couldn't keep himself from weeping in relief and joy without even realizing his reaction. It had been at least two long years since the last time he had decided to make the effort of stopping into a restaurant in town to use a real kitchen to make a real solid meal that wasn't a cold sandwich or a cup of powdered soup with a handful of macaroni noodles dumped in to have something to chew. Even here at home, there was the main restaurant on the ground floor in the main wing, behind the admin tower. He used to go there almost every day in the first few years he lived here and got along well at the ovens and gas grills. He wasn't a chef so he made stuff either very rare or truly well done, but it was still edible to his tastes, certainly solid and more pleasant than sandwiches and dehydrated soup with cheap bulk macaroni in it. Why did he stop?

As the questions moved around in his head during the meal, Older Lucas came to the realization that there was something deeply wrong with both his memory and his cognitive processes. He made a gut driven decision and told the boy about it. He was glad and relieved when the child didn't take him for a fool or a waste of space. Instead, the Younger Sibling asked him to close his eyes and start talking about his last seven days starting from farthest until today. He listened raptly and asked few questions but when the older male opened his eyes after about an hour of conversation, the little guy had a worried look on his face and pursed lips that Older Lucas recognized as their common expression for 'deep shit happening'. Oh joy! He really was a worse basket case than he had thought.

"I won't lie to you, Older Brother; I think you're spot on about having mental problems. To have the contrary happen after 14 years of total isolation would have surprised me to the point of asking if you had spent time in cryosleep at some point. The situation is not fatal or deteriorating anymore because I'm here but it was probably a very close call. What helped you was the work you did and the occasional traveling. Although I am having problems with your behavioral changes in the last 24 months. You had established good healthy habits of moving, sightseeing, going out after your self-appointed workday was done, and all that helped to maintain your moral and equilibrium. But something happened about two years ago that made you fold back into yourself and stop moving around or even live a bit here, inside the complex. You have ample space and it's not like anyone would actually challenge you for the right to use it as you wish."

"After we're done eating, there is something that I need to show you for you to understand what happened. I can't simply explain it. It has to be seen and felt for it to be valuable and last in your memory." The Older sibling was depressive again but this time from recent memories playing before his eyes.

"Oy! Eyes front and center on reality! No peeking backwards unless I say so!" The Younger sibling
smirked brattily at his elder relative. "We go when we're good and ready. Not before. Whatever you want to show me has been here a while so it can wait some more and not be bothered by it."

The rest of the meal was whittled away in conversation about foods that the oldest liked and wanted to taste again so they decided to plan an outing in town. They needed to find an automated hospital for the tests just in case and then a few grocery stores to resupply the floor's cupboards for quick snacks. Younger Lucas also insisted on getting some meats, vegetables, fruits and other stuffs for the main restaurant because they would eat there from now on, no matter how tired they got. Their morale and equilibrium depended on breaking the routine before it set in.

Having gotten a touchscreen tablet from the room where he would bunk, Younger Lucas was planning their trip of tomorrow on the automated map and frowned as he felt some form of sound emanating from the tablet even though the speaker was off. There were also strange symbols that flashed rapidly in full screen size and lasted about one tenth of a second. Asking his Older brother for some help, he had the sibling look at the tablet and create a quick and dirty screen capture virus to install on it as well as a sound measuring app that records the emissions around the tablet as well. The results were surprising and eye opening.

The tablet was emitting a low frequency sound wave that actually spoke a message in english; a subliminal command to obey authority and never question the methods, motives or validity of authority. This alternated with a quick five second burst of alien language that only Younger Lucas could recognize and understand now that it was playing at the appropriate speed and volume. Someone had programmed a mnemonic trigger in alien tongue in the subliminal message. For what, they had yet to find out.

The screen capture virus was getting about two hundred images per minute and there were about ten different images to see. They were ordered and always played in that order like a text message but written using the alien ideograms that George Brown-Fowl-in-the-Bushes had taught him. The Younger sibling did not believe in coincidences; there were hidden activities going on and they were based on the alien culture and tech that the Nazis had unearthed therefore the solution must be from that same basin of tech, culture and geography. The Older sibling was impressed by his kid brother having been perceptive enough to find the problem and also clever enough to figure out what it is about. The actual meaning of the messages could be determined later. At this moment, it just meant that they would have to be careful not to get caught in a subliminal trap and start obeying the strange instructions.

Younger Lucas went to his room to prepare his supplemental pack so he could bring it and show his sibling. They would need to make the older male a similar set of sheathes and toolkits so he could have greater survival odds and also just feel better about himself and his capacities. Why in the names of the Knaves hadn't the guy thought of doing something like that in 14 years of isolation was a mystery. He did have his old work satchel, that worn out, holey piece of trash. They would need to strip that down and find a replacement along the way. Younger Lucas planned mentally then added to their electronic map a series of travel gear shops and a few private investigations and security shops too. It was high time to secure this place the right way.

"Well, if you're done planning world conquest on that pad, I could go and show you the stuff that I wanted to show. It's on the other side of the complex, in the basement levels actually."

"Oh? Under which of the buildings are we headed?" replied the child distractedly as he was still planning their thirty plus stops around town to get as full a daytime excursion as they could. Getting the older man to move and live would charge his moral and emotional batteries for several days and that was well worth the time spent going around this empty husk of a city.
"It's under the morgue, forensics and cremation unit."

Adeste Humanitas: Divina poena venit

(Frederich Chopin – Funeral March)

24th December of 2300 - early evening
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Icehold Vault – cryogenic sleep & isolation ward

About twenty minutes of walking and banter later, the two relatives were now facing the ground level entry of the mortuary unit of the hospital. This was a necessity given the two prevalent conditions of their patients. Most chose the armed services to escape poverty and miserable family conditions such as orphanages or youth prisons so they had nobody to claim the remains. The other reason was that most patients had some form of contamination that required secured disposal. Whether it be radioactive dyes from the scans, chemotherapy, or mostly the secret chemicals they had worked on when the accident that harmed them happened. There were a lot of reasons to necessitate an autopsy and mandatory cremation. According to Older Lucas, it was actually carried out in a plasma autoclave similar to what SeaQuest I & II used to destroy their garbage.

They used their pass-cards to open the reinforced tempered glass doors and quickly go to the stairs. Younger Lucas insisted they use only stairs when they could to get his brother to move and be active so as to boost his health for the coming weeks of mental and physical effort. The Older sibling simply smiled and followed directives while relishing the attention and care his little tyke gave him.

They climbed down about three levels before the stairs ended at an airlock with a set of thickly padded hooded jackets with integrated clear plastic faceplates and air-warming elements around the entire garment. The batteries in the coats were kept energized by an induction relay. There were contact plates in the coat rack that touched the garment and recharged the system then stopped when the micro-controller from the heating device told the rack that it was full. The jackets also had an abridged version of a cell phone built into the faceplate that used the clear plastic as a screen guided by eye movement and two small physical keypads with closing cover were built into each sleeve just in the middle of the forearm. Everything was wired together so as to save energy and make certain the phone worked to call for help from the three surveillance offices around the complex: The mortuary reception, the administration reception and the security watchtower in the main gatekeep at the entry of the complex. In their case, everything was empty; if they had an emergency, they had to make do on their own.

Upon entering the level, Younger Lucas shivered under his loose, oversized jacket; they only had the adult size and the extra large people version at that. Tightening the belt around his waist again, he followed the older relative to what soon was identified as another airlock with a large viewing port and control console next to it. The bay window was about six feet high by some twenty feet wide and overlooked into a vision of what hell must hold for some of the people who enjoy fire too much.

It was an Icehold Vault, something that Younger Lucas had only heard rumors of through George
and some of the Ex-CIA, NSA and DARPA skunkworks people that he had begun hiring for his many services. The concept was simple; human metabolism slowed down in cold temperatures and could actually hibernate to the point of stopping even the aging and geriatric processes if maintained properly. That was the caveat human science had no pierced yet; doing it stably and long term to insure that the person would stay alive and could be awakened to benefit from lifesaving surgeries and new medications at a later epoch.

This was supposed to be the holy grail of medicine for the rich and powerful. If you get sick, put yourself to sleep then wake up periodically to take care of your affairs. You check up the state of medicine, give a few directives then go back to sleep until the next check up while letting your money pile up for you.

The scientists had managed to cryogenize organs or full bodies to keep them for transplants and studies but never a living being to date. They needed to find a chemical that would circulate the tissues like blood to bring oxygen and nutrients but without freezing solid or warming up and unfreezing the organs that it irrigated. It seemed by the rows of naked, intubated bodies lined up under the window that humanity had indeed found a solution to its cryogeny problem. Younger Lucas swore he would find the chemical molecular model and bring it back with him. The applications this promised were just too good to pass up.

"All the persons that you see before you are alive. Not at all healthy in body or mind and they are all Us, little brother. They are all a version of Me and You from either a dimension or timeline where I tried to find help to undo the evil and unnatural acts of humanity upon this Earth. There were 139 attempts over 14 years; only those were deemed alive enough and safe enough to try and bring through. I located some 2703 versions of Us but only these here could be extracted with any type of chance of success. Only You came out of the vortex truly healthy and provably sane." The Older sibling paused to wipe his tears and silently pray for his sleeping kin.

"Every one of our siblings that I found and brought here was damaged in the soul or so badly injured that letting them die would have been a mercy if not for the advanced auto-docs and better drugs of this epoch. Still, most of those whose bodies could be repaired and made functional to some degree were so crippled in the mind that they tried to attack me or flee into the empty wilderness to take their chances with the animals. They were subdued or recovered, no matter what it took, and brought here after the auto-docs had done what they could. All of them, the handicapped, the broken, the insane and the comatose, they all sleep here under my watch, under my promise that they will not be beaten and raped and broken again." Older Lucas knelt on both knees and folded his hands in prayer as he did each time that he came to visit or bring a new sibling to confide them unto the peaceful depths of the Vault.

Younger Lucas had tears running down his face and wasn't even aware of it nor would he have tried to stop the flow; this revelation was mind bending in its horror. Was that the only thing that being 'LUCAS' meant to the universe and humanity? Were they meant to be the whores, pain toys or rubber dolls for everyone and everything out there? Was that the only Fate and Karma of their soul? To suffer for the pleasure of others? How many of their siblings had been reduced to indenture, slavery and sub-human conditions of exploitation and depravity just so that some tail-wagging doggy-dog-dog of a brute could feel like a big powerful man?

Rage. Raw, burning, seething, coruscating RAGE lit up in the child’s breast with a power to rival the Sun and sustain itself for all of the eternities. They thought that being Lord of Burgundy had warped his childish mind but they were just praying hopefully that he would not realize his full powers and become truly independent. Well their nightmares were about to become true and very real. Harken Humanity; The Divine Punishment Cometh unto Thee! There would be vast oceans of blood with tiny islands of rotting carrion and flotsam of bones when he was finished with this fool-
Infested mud ball!

Kneeling in prayer next to his older brother, Younger Lucas thought feverishly as to what was needed from this epoch to insure a crushing unilateral victory back in his dimension or timeline, wherever he came from. It was just the bad luck of the universe that instead of playing shooters and RPG's he had always preferred resource management games like SimCity, Civilization, Alpha Centauri, Age of Empire, United Galactic Federation and others of the style. Planning World Conquest was his hobby for rainy days and long trips; he would now make a craft, profession and religion out of it.

After spending a half hour in silent prayer, both brothers had their fill of the cold sepulcher and it's muffled mechanical noises that indicated the dreary state of subsistence for their kindred. Younger Lucas would keep that image in his mind and soul for the rest of his existence and never forgive the worlds which had done this upon his Blood and Kin. They walked back to the principal wing, right behind the admin tower and entered the large ground-floor restaurant that had served guests, doctors and the less damaged patients. They blocked open the doors so that fresh air from the outside could circulate around the entire dining hall to let them benefit from the cooling temperatures of the evening.

Going to the kitchen area, they took a table and some chairs to set up a small dining nook inside the work area to avoid walking around for no reason. It would also keep them close since neither wanted to be separated from his sibling at this point. Younger Lucas did a systematic search of the pantries, cupboards, fridges and a few nooks that were revealed to his synesthesia by banging loudly a copper frying pan against the stainless steel food prep counter. His doing so annoyed the older sibling until the little boy pointed out the hiding spots and they now had a small stash of chocolates, candies and even a pair of new cigarette packs and a baggie of dried shredded cannabis leaves for about three tokes.

The child made another example of his culinary art. He knew they had a long night of talking in front of them and they would need both proteins and sugars to endure. They would also need to mellow out so he decided to fix them both a space cake for dessert. His older brother would thank him in the morning. Maybe.

The main meal was simply assembled and presented but still a surprisingly complex affair from the hands of such a small child. He re-hydrated bacon strips while making a batter in a glass bowl. He prepared some vegetables mixed with herbs, spices and shredded cheese-like stuff. He took two chicken breasts that were canned individually in brine so they were tangy and also not frozen or dehydrated like everything else. He pan cooked the chicken before assembling the confections and placing them for another half-hour in the baking oven; the result was magnificent. He had assembled a delight: chicken wrapped in bacon with vegetable melt inside a puffed pastry. A handmade home-cooked wellington entrée to which he joined sides of mashed potatoes from a ready-made envelope and some rice cooked in chicken soup stock, onions, chives and marinated hot peppers to give it some taste and help their health with some essential vitamins, minerals and vinegars to fight scurvy and other illnesses they could get.

The meal was accompanied by some canned tomato & shell pasta soup they had found, toasted garlic bread and plenty of iced water or fruit juice. When the principal plate was done and the dessert came, it was another creation typical of Lucas and the BVL fare: a large waffle fresh from the iron topped with fruit salad, chopped nuts, chocolate shavings and vanilla ice cream with a drizzle of caramel.

The Older sibling was crying hard again as he thought of all that he had lost, never gotten to live and stopped experiencing in life because of the last 18 years. His last mental barriers broke down
and he was now ready to talk about his life and experiences in one long conversation.

Younger Lucas was silently blaming himself for the deception he had played but filching the baggie of cannabis had quite literally been child's play with his training and the inattentiveness of the other man. He had strategically spread out the calming medicine by thinly shredding the leaves and mixing the stuff into the waffle batter along some mint, cinnamon and nutmeg to hide the taste. A little was mixed with the mint leaves in the ice cream as a condiment to take attention away from its taste. Then the classic of all ages; mixed with the loose leaves of the tea he prepared in a large glass bowl mounted over a chaffing candle to keep warm. They would use a ladle to fill cups as needed. He told his brother that he had seeped the great quantity to go along with the dessert and help smooth out the conversation. It wasn't a lie, just only 10% percent of the truth.

"So, my Older and less good looking Sibling, what brought you here to this dreary epoch?"

Why the fuck should I care?

(Kesha – Take it off)

24th December of 2300 - mid-evening
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
Flashback in Living Lucas's mind, reviewing the events of the arrival in 2286

Deeper flashback: season 1

It was a day like so many other shitty washout days on this damned boat. Lucas had no real desire to be here but his stupid father had signed him up with the UEO like an agent signs a high school athlete to whatever team gives him the commission without a care for the kid he represents.

He had been fifteen years old with his mastery freshly emitted by Stanford when it happened; Lawrence had sent a lawyer with the papers; his opinion was neither asked, needed nor even wanted. The UEO got to train him for the five months left before his sixteenth birthday, just to kiss the law's ass and be inside the rules, then he deployed from the dry-docks in NCQ for a year. And another. And another after that. Until he turned 21 years old and the exceptional juvenile disciplinary powers the government had given his father through a pet judge beholden to William Noyce expired.

And that fuckshit would follow him all his life; placed in the navy because he was a discipline problem so bad that his father didn't know what to do with him anymore. Ah! Like the lackwit had ever been present in his life long enough to try anything! He wanted money and rights for World Power Project so he whored out his overly intelligent son off to the navy to get his profit while Lucas had a blasted reputation and shattered life in exchange.

His mother disowned him when he was 9 years old because he was more intelligent than the dumb blonde socialite whose only skill was lying on her back and floating inside her empty head while whomever she was in bed with got their needs satisfied. She was uneducated, useless and had the personality of a fungus crossed with a mold colony. He was well shot of her and never regretted it. Lawrence could actually have given him a service and taken her opinion seriously for once and dumped him on one of his two aunts. Even an orphanage would have been better than this floating coffin.
But no; he had obtained money, power and reputation by lending them his son to do with as they pleased. And they pleased a lot. He was not even officially in any of the ship's databases. Not a crew member; not a civilian scientist; not an independent contractor; not a paying passenger; and not even a godforsaken piece of inventory with a barcode tattooed on his face! He did not exist because Noyce told him to his face, in front of Commander Ford and Chief Crocker, that he was such an embarrassment and shame on his family, that he now had the obligation to earn his place as a human to begin with. Then they may consider allowing him the chance to earn a standing amongst the civilian crew, like in the floor sweeping details.

That stigma never left his life, not ever. Even after the events which led to Andrea Dre being arrested and having TWENTY diplomats vouching for his dignity and integrity, it wasn't enough. Noyce's pet judge kept the leash on tight and even tried to have Lucas put in juvy jail for a year on trumped up charges of attempting to be contemptuous of the judge, the court and the binding order given onto his soul by Christian Authority.

It was the last minute arrival of Captain Bridger with his old friend and family Lawyer Jermaine Larochelle, an African-american woman in her early fifties, that had the judge backpedaling when the woman started demanding the proof that Lucas had belonged in juvy court to begin with a year ago at the first hearing. When it was found out that he didn't have a hearing but was judged in abstentia on Noyce's say-so with Lawrence acting in loco parentis to wave his son's rights to be present, to have counsel or to rebut witnesses, the few people in the room came alive with outrage. But not enough outrage to force an actual hearing. Not enough outrage to get a new judge to arbitrate. Not enough outrage to get the written physical proof of why Lucas was such a shame upon his family that imprisoning him on a warship was required. No; they were just outraged enough to keep him out of juvy hall and then demanded gratitude, docility and smiles aplenty for the rest of his life for the menial, meaningless gestures they had made.

Justice and a fair trial are supposed fundamental rights of every person born in the USA but evidently that applies only if the powerful don't want you to suffer. Or if there isn't some form of power or benefit from keeping you ignorant and submissive like everyone on board seemed to want him to be as an outcome of this.

Lucas was nobody's fool; he wouldn't have survived so long in San Francisco and Stanford alone if he were an idiot. He certainly would not have survived a year at sea on a glorified corndog stick with a plastic propeller and rubber-band motor the way he did if he were inept or unfit for human interaction.

No, he was not stupid; that's why since day 1 on board he had systematically wiretapped and bugged the SeaQuest to spy on people's comms, PAL's and personal computers. That was the only true way to get a genuine feel of what people really thought of him, his attitude and skillset when he wasn't around to defend himself against their bitchings. Plus the thousand cameras and microphones built into the ship as security apparatus helped with spying real-time a whole lot. Especially since he was in charge of maintaining and repairing the computers that kept security running.

"The Truth is a terrible, many-splendored thing" goes the old proverb; ain't that a fact.

He had almost nobody on is side on the ship. Out of 85 sailors and 132 scientists, he had 3 people on his side for real no matter what shit went down. Darwin the dolphin whose voice would never be heard because the vocoder was a classified project. Lt Commander Katie Hitchcock who was sickened by all the illegalities and immoralities she saw around his case. Communications chief Timothy O'Neil who was a more moral and upstanding man by himself than a dozen abbeys chuck
Everyone else on board thought he was an asshole, a waste of space, a spoiled brat in need of whippings or just a piece of trash that should have been dumped ashore and forgotten. The only reason they kept him was, big surprise, his skills and the fact he had saved the damned boat a few times to date. Otherwise, in terms of liking him as a person, that wasn't gonna happen. He was universally reviled just because of his age and the rumors that Noyce spread about him at the beginning.

He even learned that the trial with the damned judge had been a set up. It was all done to jolt him with fear in a blatant maneuver to trauma-bond him to the useless old bastard Bridger so the man would have freer hand in his disciplinary methods against the teenager without Lucas yelling foul or going off boat to get help. And wasn't that a kicker, ladies and gents; he found out there would be help outside. He had a recording with confirmation from Noyce, Bridger and the judge talking together that what they did to him was nowhere legal in US soil or the UEO member confederations and they had to keep it hush-hush or they would join Dre in jail.

He was still trying to figure out what to do with his little dollop of poison a couple of months later when the besancted World Power Plant went up in smoke. His father lost several billions of dollars and essentially bankrupted the Wolenczak family and name for several generations with his idiocy.

Deeper flashback: between seasons 1 & 2

The ship burned; wasn't that a crying shame. Bridger survived; that was something to cry about, dammit!

The fuckshit UEO didn't even want to reopen his court case, even when it was proved that he had no hearing to begin with, the proof didn't exist and there had been no witnesses to anything.

The judge suddenly retired and went out of the country without leaving an address but that was supposedly normal, even for a guy that had another fifteen to twenty years in his career in front of him.

Bill Noyce had his career destroyed with the disaster of WPP; once his interim as Secretary General of the UEO was over and the elections passed, he retired completely from public life and disappeared into anonymity.

The new Secretary General, MacGrath, didn't give a fuck and honestly told him that with the mess Lawrence had made, Lucas was lucky to not be sued for a part of his meager salary to help refund the costs of what his stupid dad had broken and burned. So shut up and live with the damned court order or it would get worse.

Well Lucas tried something; he went to Kid's Help Phone, got a lawyer for juveniles and had a very public hearing with media cameras. The order was invalidated and he was given back compensation to what he was due on the real salary he should have gotten for doing TWO FULL TIME JOBS, plus rewards some of his exploits had earned him but he never got them and wasn't even told about them to keep him meek and pliable. He received ownership of the Stinger's blueprints, reproduction rights and possession of the only existing unit as personal property. Several people of the first SeaQuest's crew were pissed but unable to contest without risking lawsuits and prison time for unlawful detention of a minor, forced labor, assault under the guise of disciplinary interventions, etc… Bridger, Ford, Ortiz, and a hundred others lied through their teeth about how happy for him they were. They had lost control, were exposed as frauds, were
meaningless as men and everybody knew it.

MacGrath called him in for a meeting by having a dozen armored and armed sailors violently pull him from his small motel room at 2:00am, dragging him like a rabid cur all the way to the shipyards. The old general had come from the US Navy's tactical missile command before going into politics. He had no tact and little manners to spare, especially on what he saw as a piece of equipment already paid for. He laid the terms clearly: Lucas knew too much therefore was a threat to the security of the UEO. Either he worked for them, or MacGrath would have him disappear into a network of privately operated christian orphanages where he would be beaten and tortured, especially through gang raping, until he broke. Then he would be exploited in sweatshop conditions until he died or his mind broke, or it was no longer safe to keep him alive. Same difference from where MacGrath sat.

Lucas then played his ace in the hole; he had nothing left to lose anyways since he doubted he would come out alive. He exposed the failsafe he had placed in the World Bank's servers following the events at Node 3 and then the many occurrences of bitchcrap after that. If MacGrath tried to force or hurt him, the last century of financial data for the entire Earth would disappear and leave countries with no option but to barter with fish and herbs and nuggets of ore to get any trade done.

MacGrath grunted, then shrugged clearly unimpressed. That was the last thing that he forgot to remember before his alarm clock rang and he dressed up for his first day on the job as the official designer and manager of Information Technologies for the construction of the SeaQuest II right alongside the traitor Bridger.

The design and build was completely unmentionable since nothing worthy of note happened. He lived in a cheap 1 star motel for two years in the same room. He had no social life. He worked about 14 to 18 hours a day but never really kept track of his pay or benefits. Bridger told him it was cared for and that was enough.

When the keel was laid, he almost cried but didn't know why because he had never liked ships or mechanical engineering that much before. The built was slow, mind numbing, and felt a waste of his efforts. But he was wanted, Bridger told him at least once a week how his work was vital. Even as he closed the lights and left for a whiskey with older officers and engineers, he made sure Lucas knew at what time to leave, never before a certain quota had been reached, though he was never told why or who set the time. He just blandly answered with a nod and whispered "Yes sir". Like an automaton; never question; never challenge; never deviate; never ask for more; and don't you dare ever want a better life because you don't deserve one.

The launch of the ship was a relief in both body and mind. That was short lived. MacGrath called a meeting with him but by leaving a message on his voice mail this time. Not that he remembered the previous event.

MacGrath spoke plainly: Lucas was still a risk but that could easily be handled if he signed up for another year of service on the ship he had made famous then rebuilt to take it to higher glory. He signed with a smile, like a simpering idiot, like he was channeling his mother all of a sudden.

Flashback: season 2; shipboard

The GUELFS, America's shame exposed for all to see. Tony Piccolo and his gills proved publicly that butchering humans to create super soldiers was still very much a priority of the USA and UEO. Creating genetic monstrosities and letting them loose in the ocean to wreak havoc so they could then come in and claim to be saviors. Secret underwater prisons were holding unregistered
prisoners and torturing willy-nilly anybody they wanted. Unmarked colonies, not written on the maps, were built and controlled by cults. And lots of guns, soldiers, more guns and some dodging dodgy characters with the Stinger because he was a nice guy and let them use the thing without charge or limits.

The second tour was at least as bad as the first but it felt distant, like he was wading through cold molasses in the depths of a canadian winter in James Bay while breathing the damn gas the dentist had used when putting him to sleep to take out his wisdom teeth. He felt that the several months since the ship's launch had been lived as if spent in a virtual reality apparatus more than his own body. There were moments, thankfully experienced in private, of aphasia where he said things different than his thoughts without control. There were episodes of drowning in a fugue state and waking up not really certain that he was himself. He had the feeling that not everything was right with his health, especially after vomiting blood a few times for no reason since he hadn't eaten weird stuff and it didn't feel like food poisoning or an allergy.

The first real clue that something was not right in his head was when he realized that he had never wiretapped the shipyard offices to learn about people's opinions towards him. Then he realized it had been 2 months aboard already and still the wiretapping wasn't done. So he got to it; in slow motion, without any ardor, but it got done because his survival depended on it. He tapped wires and airwaves, connected to comms, PAL's and personal devises all over the ship and cleaned up a lot of scrap and spyware from his own systems along the way. Why the hell had that all been there anyways? He was more vigilant than that normally. Not to mention hacker's pride at keeping a cybernetic fortress in good order so his secrets stayed secret and his alone.

What he saw, heard and found out made him want to puke blood again.

He relearned the bastardy of Bridger, Ford, Ortiz and several others. Some few like O'Neil, Brody, Henderson and even Piccolo were honorable and could be trusted, but that was it. Even Darwin was acting weird and spying actively on the humans of the ship.

The Chief Medic Wendy Smith was even more of a dishonest frigid bitch than Westphalen ever was, and that's saying something. She systematically mind-raped everybody on board, at least once a week, to detect potential traitors or 'deviants' to put them on a watchlist she sent to Section 7. Even Bridger and Ford were scanned.

Dagwood was nowhere near the stupid idiot he portrayed; his weekly reports to US Naval Intel were detailed, exacting and revealed an IQ in the solid 100 at least. His childish way of speaking and gentle ways of moving and holding objects were truly the inverse of what his real, unredacted file proclaimed was a silent, efficient hack & slash machine that had no care whatsoever for life or existence. Dagwood lived for the thrill of the hunt, the fight, the capture and the execution, often after a long session of raping and breaking the person. He was a monster just like the US Military had wanted when the GUELF program was instituted around twenty five years ago. A perfect specimen indeed.

There were a lot like that; rapists and butchers, spies and Mengele wannabes. The ship was chuck full of things than didn't deserve to be called human anymore. And then the time vortex happened.

Near Flashback: arrival in 2286; shipboard

There were times in life where Lucas often thought that suicide was an underrated solution to the small but nastily recurrent condition called 'existence'. Today was like that. After finally wiretapping everything in sight, including secret wires, hidden free wave communicators and
several hundred illegal personal devices; and then going through the Sargasso sea of data and miscellany that all produced, he finally felt he was up to speed on the social and political happenings on board. So he prepared to go to his shift on the bridge where he had an actual designated station, unlike the first ship.

He should have stayed in bed or even called in sick and let the bitch poke him to her blackened wretched heart's content rather than walk into this mess. There was a vortex hanging vertically right in front of the ship at about 500 meters and it was exerting gravitational waves with a pulling force equal to six times the mass of the ship or four times the engines' maximum torque. They were going in no matter what they tried. Oh, joy!

Once on the other side, it fell to him, O'Neil and the crud Ortiz to figure out what the mess was they were swimming in while Brody made himself useful and had security swarm the ship to search for hull breaches or hostile incursions. Pinging the GPS net and trying to locate the UEO orbital defense platforms were the two priorities for Lucas, after that a wide area sweep of the Internex to see what the local chatter was about. You don't drop a 1,000 feet long, 5 levels high, boat in somebody's ocean without blowback.

Informing the scowling captain that the GPS net and laser Platforms were no longer responding to his codes, had different orbits and were about three times more numerous than possible at the budgets and construction speed the UEO had available was not going to end well for him. He saw it in Bridger's eyes.

As usual, Lucas had been right; Bridger had backhanded him across the face in full view of everyone and there had been no reactions from any human on deck. Maybe because it was a recurring event in his relationship with the man for the last 3 years he had known him. Whenever a bad news came in, Bridger called Lucas and hit him a few times or found him alone in his cabin and beat him black and blue for no reason other than he could. The court order from the run-away felon judge still gave Bridger another 2 years of penultimate authority and the man was getting his licks in while he could. Because of the brand new wiretaps, Lucas knew again that he was supposed to be free; he just didn't know why in Hell's Bells he was on the damned ship or helped to build it.

The vortex closed behind the ship trapping them in what the network clocks said was 2286 or roughly 250 years in the future compared to their date of departure. Then a signal was received from a woman on shore at a governmental monitoring station on the shoreline of New Cape Quest at the southern-most part of the county.

The captain was still enraged but knew his own temper so he decided to put Lucas on the shuttle to the shore so as to keep the kid away from his flying fists and the possibility of killing his best chance of getting back to their home time. Bridger was no fool and kept everyone he knew to be friends with Lucas on the ship. He sent a mechanic, a general technician and two surly brutal sailors; 3rd class seamen who hated Lucas and liked seeing him beaten.

Lucas learned from his wiretaps that many parts of his equipments and clothes had RFID trackers, symbols invisible to the eye written with radioactive marking dye and some of the ship's 2nd rate hackers were trying to put back into his systems and devices the spywares and locators he had purged in the last week. Then the real heart-stopper was spoken out loud.

Bridger and Smith had a private discussion in what they both thought was a blind hole in the ship's security sensor grid. They talked about Lucas and a set of tracking and identification implants that had been placed in his body 3 years ago during in the week-long medical evaluation, inoculations and preparatory surgeries before the 5 months of boot camp. There was mention of a brain implant
put in the basal ganglia between the brain lobes 2 years ago just before they began the design phase of SeaQuest II. That explained why he had joined the project despite being set free of his father, the UEO, the Navy and all obligations. They forced him by raping his body and his soul and then forbidding him to remember.

The conversation centered on the illegal experimental biological neural co-processor that had been designed in the phantom colony of Abalon by Franklin Wise. The emphasis was on how he had designed the device specifically to resist the hormonal imbalances and physical changes of teenagers' nervous systems, thus his successes with Sharpa, Kaman and Mika all the way up to their early twenties. The device was deemed reliable at keeping a strong willed teenager pliable and following a short set of docility instructions.

The basics rules were separated in two groups: the obligations and the forbiddances.

- Remember that he has no value whatsoever unless granted by authority
- Remember that he has no personhood whatsoever unless granted by authority
- Remember that he has no place in society whatsoever unless granted by authority
- Remember that he has no rights or privileges whatsoever unless granted by authority
- Never kill authority, its agents or his superiors in life or society
- Never commit suicide to escape authority or the rulers of his body and soul
- Never inspect or question authority's motives, method or logic
- Never disobey authority, its agents and proxies whatever form they have
- Never resist authority or its agents physically, mentally or spiritually
- Never run away from authority physically
- Never run away from authority mentally by fugue state or intoxication
- Never refuse any punishment, degradation or humiliation applied by authority, its agents or proxies

The implant effectively made him into what Bridger had wanted all along: a copy of his son Robert. A new pain toy to replace the one he lost because he was too old and resisted then ran away to the Navy. Now he had Lucas that he could beat and rape in private or malign in public. Now Bridger could feel like a big powerful man again instead of being just a lonely old crud that had been forgotten by everyone. At the same time the implant had kept Lucas sane, balanced and capable of the same high-level technical functionality that had been his trademark all his young life. No wonder the US Navy had jumped on Wise's damnable device and began using it to secure assets against their will or the most common Laws of the Land. The memory erasure and modification was a new thing to look into as well. After all, he truly didn't remember all the times Bridger had raped him and it seemed to have been at least monthly for all the time that he knew him. Something like that could come in handy to guarantee his escape if people didn't remember his existence anymore.

It was interesting to hear about all this in a sick way; especially since it told him he had a nasty bout of brain flu to take care of pronto. But it also explained some of the nose bleeds and vomiting bloody bile in the last three weeks; he had been accidentally exposed to some GUELF DNA by contact with Dagwood's blood when he had gotten several deep cuts during a repair in the engine room alongside Lucas. It was the teen who had acted as the nurse to clean, patch and bind the wounds so they could keep safe until the job was done. Because the GUELF DNA was synthetic and so strong, it had gotten into his bloodstream through little scrapes on his hands and bolstered
his immune system, thus starting a war with the neural implant. It was because of the loosened grip on his cognitive and perceptual processes that Lucas realized his multiple survival strategies were not in place and the rest was a game of dominoes and consequences of finally waking up from a virtual zombie-state.

Bridger paid him the expected visit in his cabin to beat him harshly with his fists, then belt when he fell to the floor because of the disorientation and stars floating around his vision. After a quarter hour of silent suffering, Lucas was roughly hauled to his feet by the two lewdly smirking seamen who both had visible hard-ons and didn't hide it. Neither did Bridger hide his fully orgasmic state at having physically dominated the intelligent, strong minded teenager yet again. He certainly wasn't going to win a mental contest against him that was sure! Even the implant didn't dampen his intellect; the Navy wanted a certified genius on board, not a dumb blond bimbo rubber doll for Bridger's pleasure. The geriatric bastard was of course not telling anyone about the brain implant and the only reason he could dominate Lucas was because the kid presently had the survival instincts and willpower of a potted plant. Hypocrite; in truth Bridger was powerless without the implant and knew it.

Near Flashback: arrival in 2286; shore team #1

Once put into the MR-3 launch like some spare suitcase, no attention was given to his injuries by the sailors. He had troubles moving around but about an hour of free time. Lucas went hiding in the diving room and locked the door with a secret code. He took some pain pills, patched his worst bleeding cuts, spread some analgesic cream over half his body and finally felt human again. He decided to take some water and eat a pair of military ration bars he had filched at the beginning of the month to build up energy for the day ahead. Bridger had a nasty habit of keeping him on a diet of only two small meals a day most times that he was nearby to supervise Lucas directly. He liked it when the teenager had trouble moving with slowed reflexes or sluggish thinking because then he felt like his own geriatric conditions were less grave. When Lucas got out of the airlock room at the back of the shuttle it was almost time to beach and start the foot search. They didn't need to walk past the automated white WMG patrol van with a human sized and shaped robot in the driver seat.

The ride was silent for the 5 humans since neither liked the other and had nothing to say or share that would help the mission. Lucas sat in the front passenger seat next to the robot driver while the other four were in the back spread amongst the benches, equipment luggage and their travel packs. Lucas had wisely kept his own travel bag and satchel of computer gear at hand in front in case somebody spilled or kicked something important just because. Not to mention that Bridger would blame him, not the older crewman, if something got broken and he had to courier them replacements with another shuttle. That beating would lay him out in the infirmary for at least a week, not matter what kind of mess they were drowning in.

The old man was losing his grip on both reality and his temper at a rapid pace. Lucas estimated grossly that the man's sanity and perceptions would cave in to dementia, senility, Parkinson's and geriatric ailments before half of the teen's nineteenth year of life was reached. All the symptoms were clear to the eye, if you knew where to look. The only reason MacGrath kept the bastard on board despite Smith's repeated – strident – warnings was because the stupid court order of 'remedial disciplinary rights' was attached to Bridger himself and could not be changed due to the small fact that, oh yes!, it was illegal and supposed to have been rescinded years ago.

Switching mental gears, Lucas visually analyzed the robot as it drove, if you could call it that. Apparently the van was the pinnacle of driverless vehicles; it could circulate in the streets and even
off-road very easily. The service robot was there to repair the van or carry human passengers too old or feeble from their place of accident to the van then the hospital. The robot just sat there, its five-fingered hands in its lap, silently and unmoving except for the gentle swaying that the van imposed on all its riders. The completely white body frame, blue sensor strip at eye height and large WMG logo on the chest showed clearly the automaton belonged to the governing authorities or some utilities company. It wasn't privately owned, that was sure.

They reached a small building made of red bricks, wooden planks and glass. It looked like a neighborhood chapel more than a utilities station or a government office. But the large wooden billboard on the outside said clearly: World Management Grid; substation for New Cape Quest County; established 2262. There was nothing alive or moving in sight as the automated van went under a car port attached to the building's left side to park and put itself into cold idling. A synthetic voice emanated from both the robot and van's many speakers: "Please disembark and enter the building by the door under the flashing green light. Thank you for trusting the World Management Grid."

"Well, I guess even our genius boy here can't botch this up! Eh! Eh! Eh!" exclaimed Ronny Boudreau, one of the two arrogant asses Bridger had assigned as muscle for the team. The 3rd class seaman was crass, surly and mannerless, even to high ranking females like Henderson or Smith. And Lucas thought many things about the psychic woman but had enough class and deportment not to say or think them in front of her. There were minimal standards of behavior to be maintained, even with people you despised or hated with valid reasons. To act otherwise is simply to lower oneself to their level.

Near Flashback: arrival in 2286; WMG substation

The group picked up the luggage and moved inside to see that the building had indeed been built as some sort of chapel or gathering hall. The design was an amphitheater of large shallow concentric platforms to hold cheap folding plastic chairs and a lofted balcony with a rather ordinary wooden banister where they guessed a choir would have sung in past years before the place was converted for a different public service. In the front of the assembly hall was a raised platform, only four steps above the main floor, with a large, tall decorative array of crystal pipes and a massive vidscreen in front of those pipes. The screen was a public display system of easily fifteen feet wide by seven feet high and there was a row of twenty four tube-style cameras mounted along the top rim of the screen.

As they placed the luggage in a pile in the front-most row of chairs, the vidscreen came alive to show the image of the woman while at the same time a six foot tall hologram of her appeared out of thin air in the middle of the raised platform. As the men grumbled around Lucas he began to have a bad feeling about the situation. It looked more and more like a classic bait & switch by network proxies using an avatar as a cat's paw.

"Welcome to the WMG, substation 01 NCQ County. This is the main user interface chamber for this area of the neighborhood. I am Humania, the central intelligence which manages the networks and machineries of the earthsphere and its orbital platforms." The woman looked to be caucasian or nordic; pale skin, blond hair and blue eyes with a faint southern drawl or midwestern accent. She was obviously made to represent the idea of a better humanity in the eyes of whoever programmed her.

Lucas stepped forward, knowing nobody else would as this was now officially a computer geek's domain of expertise. Talking computers were definitely not diplomatic or military situations. While
the four sailors might despise him for his age or personality, or because they themselves were scum that should have been rotting in Leavenworth a long time ago, they still knew enough to not piss him off to the point he stopped being useful. If he stopped working or started fighting them, Bridger would have them writhing in pain under a whip instead of the kid and they weren't sure anyone would stop him. The boat was full of crud and criminals after all; it wasn't like loyalty or integrity were in the recruitment criteria for the tour.

It took less than a half hour of conversation recorded and transmitted back at the ship to explain the entire situation with how humanity had blasted itself back into primordial ooze via bio-weapons on one hand, massive walking death machines on the other. The fact that there were still a couple of those walking around was a damn nightmare, and the fact that they were under the control of autonomous hackers who acted outside the WMG's capacity to stop their signals or trace them was another level of crap in and of itself.

Bridger ordered two more shore teams, composed of one computer tech to track the damn hackers and three sailors with pulse rifles, ordinary bullet pistols plus the usual eight hand grenades and four bricks of plastique to each man. These two teams would leave in a single shuttle with a pair of dedicated pilots who would then return the launch to the ship to limit the material exposed out of ship. Again, none of Lucas's friends were in the teams thus showing that Bridger was still thinking more of controlling his flesh doll than carrying out the mission efficiently. With morons like Ford and Ortiz at his side, he wasn't going to get a differing opinion any time soon. The basic tactics of each team once ashore would be to find and commandeer a military vehicle from the WMG then drive around following the indications of their tech. Once they found the hackers, knock them out and bring them back to the docks for holding and a muscled interrogation. Bridger wanted answers and wasn't shy about obtaining them anyways necessary.

Near Flashback: arrival in 2286; WMG substation – Lucas alone

The accidental result of this was that Lucas was now alone in the WMG substation as Bridger had decided to make the first team responsible for locating a source of clean water around the dock where the ship would come in to berth. They had to see if the holding clamps and connector pipes were still compatible before the ship moved into position along the jettty. Since Lucas would be basically immobile and Bridger trusted the damned implant to keep him docile and inoffensive, he didn't give a second thought to isolating the teen inside the main hub of a supercomputer.

What an arrogant, idiotic asshole.

Lucas discussed with the AI what her plan had been, what she expected and how to carry it out. So Lucas faked his way through being the sorrowful little kiddie who was gonna have to kill his new pet to keep everyone in humanity safe and happy. The sap story would have angered Bridger but the anguish and pain it brought the blond teen was sweet nectar to the old bastard's necrotized heart. He generously allowed Lucas to take his time to say goodbye to the poor 'woman' while also ordering him to call as soon as the system was fully manual so as to receive a batch of detailed orders. Once alone again with the AI, Lucas followed the procedure to decompile the Intelligence, destroy the backup, then pull the crystals from the large array behind the monitor. The virtual woman explained that those pipes were actually a combination of motherboard, processor and memory; an all-in-one type of optical and magnetic system that was only as old as the WMG itself.

As soon as the entire WMG was scaled down to manual mode across the planet, Lucas started entering his own firewalls, detectors, guard dogs, spywares, worms and counter-attack hydras to secure his control point and then extend it outwards, one substation at a time. He ordered the
building’s doors and windows shuttered and locked in hurricane mode. The designers were
intelligent; they had foreseen that Florida's hurricanes would come through between five and eight
times a year so there were thick steel storm shields and they were completely automated.

With the place now nominally airtight and secured against surprise intrusion, Lucas placed his
PAL unit, personal official smartphone and backup ghost phone filched of one of Bridger's favorite
goons into a localized USB network connected to his laptop but truly secured and completely off-
web. The goal was to program the mobiles with fake GPS signals and play film loops in their
cameras and microphones. It would look like he was diligently typing away at the majestic crystal
mainframe's terminal to get its manual mode up and running for the next nine hours straight with
nary a break. He had given the Captain an estimate of nine hours while citing that it usually took a
team of three some four hours to do that in optimal circumstances with the AI online and helping
the process. Bridger had raged but quickly relented, knowing any other tech would have taken
around four days to do what Lucas would accomplish in those nine hours.

In reality, the teenager had a very different plan than what the defective AI and brain-dead morons
aboard ship envisioned. He wanted immediate safety first, freedom second, absence of pursuit
third. He also had a long term plan for rectifying all the bitchcrap that had landed on his life and
soul in his nineteen years of life and since God had so kindly handed him a fully functional time
portal on a planet sized tray, well who was he to refuse the Divine in its Almight?

Near Flashback: arrival in 2286; Murder most foul

Letting a teenaged hacker into a governmental system like the orbital defense grid is not in any
way, shape or form brilliant. Doing so after having beaten, raped and humiliated the young person
while using an illegal and toxic brain implant to insure compliance and erasing memories as you go
was a proof positive of your own stupidity and that you deserve to stop existing.

This was the situation that Bridger was faced with on this day but would never be aware of it
enough, fast enough to correct it.

Lucas used his Principal Designer / root-level Alpha-Zero-Alpha administrator access into the
ship's computer core to send the password to activate an illegal phantom security bypass that
Bridger himself had obliged him to install in case the ship needed to deal with shady characters, do
some black marketing or bring aboard a prisoner that should not be publicly acknowledged. The
malware-type program locked the sensors themselves, at the local hardware level – not the CPU
core or bridge consoles – into replaying a looped recording of the first hour of their presence in this
Time period. That meant that unless someone went directly to the machinery rooms to scan the
activity registry directly on the chipsets of the sensors themselves, they would never be able to tell
that what the consoles depicted was not real.

Since Lucas had built the malware from scratch, he had also built into it several back doors and
toggles to maintain exclusive command, even if he gave Bridger a small client app to install in his
PAL to tell him when the program was active, which sensors were tricked, and of course, the old
man wanted a kill switch to override Lucas at any time. Snort! As if any hacker worth his codes
would ever willingly cede control of his actively used defenses and tools! Even Franklin Wise's
implant didn't have enough power or chemicals to make him do that.

None of the highly advanced sensors, radars, cameras or radio antennae on board detected anything
from the orbital defense platforms before the eighteen satellites positioned at an angle to reach the
ship at its depth all deployed their weapons and fired simultaneous continuous beams for five full
seconds. The firepower combined was of such terrifying capacity that the entire harbor area of
NCQ was vaporized in the first three seconds and dug down by an extra forty percent in the last two.

SeaQuest never had a chance to dodge, move forward nor do anything, not even peep in protest as nobody saw or perceived it coming. Every being aboard was turned into free-floating atoms and steam, including his only true four friends in life. Lucas was a mass murder, a traitor to the UEO and most of all, a betrayer of his friends. He would weep for them the tears they deserved later when he built them a small memorial stone. For now, he still had a clean up of a dozen cruddy criminal sailors with a taste for his flesh to do and wasn't completely safe until he was the last human alive on Earth. The details about the mopping up operations and hunting the sailors were unimportant; he forgot most of them anyways but knew he had killed them all because he checked a dozen times that they were all accounted and deader than dead.

Secondary details from arriving in 2286
(SeaQuest - season 2 opening theme)

24th December of 2300 - Late-evening
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Administration tower

Older Lucas was, to put it mildly, loopier than a pad of steel wool that got all mussed up. He was drooling a bit and leaning rather heavily on the left, his elbow on the table, his head in his hand with the sort of vacant smile on his lips that only junkies are familiar with. And he was also extremely happy for the first time in some 24 months. That would require some analysis later on. If he remembered. He could ask his kid brother about it.

"So Bro, what happened after the baddies were gone?" Younger Lucas asked in a slightly slurred voice. He wasn't high as an orbital platform, no sirree, he was not… He was orbiting the Sun right now and no further than that. He really needed to toughen against those kinds of basic entry-level drugs along with alcohol or he would get snookered by every little idiot with a gram of herbs or a sip of booze and spill his most precious secrets every time.

"Weeellll, lesseee… The automated vehicles from the WMG were really helpful in tracking down the idiots from the SQ but it should'na bothered. When I lit up the harbor, the two fire teams that were left, they all came like moths around a candle flame and stood on the closest piece of concrete still standing. They all called each other out over the PAL network like dogs barking at the moon then assembled on the terrace of some restaurant that used to overlook a very large and very long sandy beach. Well, now it had about 300 feet deep of blue waters right off the balustrade and it was threatening to fall in if they walked wrong, making the thing vibrate too much. I just had a pair of aerial recon drones fly-by. I okayed the planes to mow them down with the repeating pulse rifles. Snort! Six per plane my man, and each damn gun shoots with the strength of a naval 3" barrel at some 30 shots per minute. The planes were some four thousand yards away when they started the strafing run; the blue-clad curs never even had a warning from anything and didn't see it coming until the red beams were vaping them."

Older Lucas foraged in his satchel until he got the booty he was looking for. Grasping the pack of
cigarettes they had found earlier with clumsy fingers, he painstakingly worked on removing the wrapper then picking one of the cancer sticks. He put the tube of damnation in his mouth then started searching for a lighter before remembering that he hadn't smoked anything in years and not carried a source of live flame since about as long. With a sigh of long suffering patience, he plucked the toke out of his mouth and placed the tobacco end of it under his nose to give himself some ghetto-style aromatherapy, much to the disapproval of his younger brother.

"Note to self" snarked the child "My brother has an addiction-prone temperament; keep stuff away from him." He really was a tetchy little runt saying that right at the face of his Big Brother who had welcomed him so kindly on his planet and his home. And no, it wasn't a public place, he was the only one using it for years…

Trying to straighten out his thoughts and wondering were he was going like this, Older Lucas closed his eyes to try and make sense of what he had to say. "Okay, well now I was free, I was safe and there weren't no pursuit anymore. So after braking down in tears for about a whole day, my gut started growling for food so I got my ass in gear and opened up the substation to go scouting around town. I stopped at the nearest convenience store that had a little snack counter with some nukers to warm up stuff and got me a canned soup which was pretty much the only thing left not rotted, molded or chewed on by vermin. After that, well, I knew about the implant in my head and that I had some injuries from Bridger's insanities so I used the WMG terminal in the store to locate the biggest and best equipped hospital in town then used the automated van I was riding in to get there."

Older Lucas was a bit surprised when his kid sibling took away the tea bowl and replaced it with a similar glass bowl but filled with piping hot coffee for the rest of the evening. Unbeknownst to him, the child wanted to start sobering them up so the hangover tomorrow morning would be less harsh and his Older Sibling would be less prone to anger against his little therapeutic usage of… homeopathic medicine? Yeah! That sounds right…?

After fixing up a cup and tasting the excellent brew that had long been reserved for the administrators of the hospital, both lapsed into companionable silence until their first cup was drained and a new one fixed up.

"I got myself to a place called 'Shriner's' Hospital for sick, injured and dispirited youth' in the core area of NCQ, in what used to be old Downtown Miami, once upon a time… Was about three blocks from the tower of the UEO executive cabinet even. From the room I convalesced in, I could see the windows of the office where I met Andrea Dre just before getting aboard SQ I and then with that rat bastard MacGrath before SQ II was built and wet. Thinking about their deaths was a great comfort to me in those days." He stopped to ruminate on long past days and pains, trying to dredge up details that seemed intent on never letting themselves be remembered actively. Sometimes he just had echoes of emotions of those days, sometimes not even that. His mind was truly fracturing and he hoped the little guy would either help him or put him to sleep in the Icehold Vault with the rest of their kin so he could keep his promise to watch over their sleep and keep them safe.

"I got in the hospital and the automated systems took over from there; body fluids, solid samples, breathing and lung capacity exercises, endurance tests on treadmill and stationary bike, hand-eye coordination and reflex tests with some hyper-reality chamber. And lots of full-body scans of all sorts. I was probably glowing in broad daylight when the damn diagnostics came back; defective neural co-processor with a beginning of infection that was threatening to turn to gangrene in a few days if not operated on right away. There was also a beginning of septicemia and initial sepsis in several areas of the brain and spinal trunk. My heart was straining to supply oxygen and movement to my blood which was far too viscous and I was chronically undernourished so I had no reserves to
help my recovery. I was a mess for the three years before so I wasn't surprised when the auto-doc suggested an immediate internment in the Intensive Care unit."

Older Lucas suddenly got a look on his face that was weird as he scrunchsed up his nose and frowned at the same time. He knew he was forgetting something but he had seen and learned a lot about this epoch then forgotten it from sheer disuse or never needing it in his life so… Was it really that important to remember everything? Was every little hole in his memory an alarm bell or a danger sign? Sigh…

"I checked the date and started a journal in a little booklet that I found in the hospice gift shop. Writing with a pen on paper was real, it was solid, it made me stop to think because you can't undo or erase or copy & paste with paper. You have to think in orderly sequence then write it down so it's readable later on. I spent a total of eleven days in that empty, miserable place. There was only the auto-docs, the occasional holographic assistant when I needed to be moved or washed or had to call some robotic assistant for something. The whole damned place was emptier that Commander Ford's head on a slow day. There were times after the surgery to take out the implant that I wondered why I bothered to stay alive and go through it all. Now I look at you and I understand why I'm still here."

Younger Lucas could see that his Older Sibling was at the end of his roll and would not last much longer. He decided to blow out the chafing candle under the coffee then help the man pick up his satchel and gear before they made their way up to the guest level of the admin tower after locking closed the outer door. The young child then asked if the older male had ever thought of installing security routines to lock down the complex or at least bunkerize the admin tower during the night. The other person's negative answer didn't even surprise him due to his state of mind plus total isolation for 14 years; with the WMG confirming his total loneliness on the mud ball, why bother with securing the place? Well, wild animals were a problem as they were in the Everglades but the thirty foot high brick walls around the complex pretty much took care of those. The birds were harmless and didn't really come by as there was no trash heap or field of seeds to peck on. Still, it was bothersome to see how dismissive of security, health and basic survival skills the older male was. They would have a very important conversation about all this when they were both sober and rested.

Reality is not amusing anymore

(Hymnals – Les Anges dans Nos Campagnes, french)

Historical account from the perspective of 2300
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
No fixed location

After spending several hours explaining his past and arrival to this time zone, Living Lucas needed a small bit of food and was truly depressed again. So Younger Lucas made him eat a small snack and go take another shower. The hot water and ionic waves would clean and revitalize him in preparation for a long night of restful sleep. During this time Younger Lucas called up the automated historical retelling of events that his older self had prepared along the years. He took the paper booklet his brother had kept for the first three years of his presence and put it safely in his own kit for later study. Older Lucas had stopped journaling when he ran out of paper as he just didn't think it was worth the effort to find paper to write down anything.
It was mind-boggling how the confounded morons that ran the planet made the amazingly counter-
intuitive decision to commercialize and put in the hands of teenagers house-sized mechanized
armaments. Real, moving, shooting vehicles of war with real lethal munitions marketed as toys for
the ultra rich. It started as a closed testing field in the wastes of Africa that was sold to the USA
and Allies as a way to test and develop the newest generations of warfare robotics while having the
most rigorous, most unforgiving testers available to do the product analysis and quality control.

Nobody bitches like a spoiled 14 to 18 years old whose game console won't go fast enough or the
signal lags on MMORPG guild fights. Meaning that if DARPA and their contractors could find a
way to satisfy this truly demanding clientele, they could field some sort of machinery that would be
the kings amongst drones.

This would have two advantages for the Pentagon. Firstly it would remove soldiers from the field
because machines with legs and arms on the ground could do some of the infantry jobs. No longer
would the mission limits of flimsy-framed drones doing airborne recon be the standard baseline of
strategy. The other reason was the overall reduction of troops demanded by Washington DC in
order to cut the military budgets. The joint-chiefs-of-staff would now have the ability to create a
massive central cyber-command base next to DC from which trained, civilian contractors would
pilot the machines in combat without any risk to the person's body.

(Hymnals –My God is an Awesome God; choir with full orchestra)

The reduction of live effectives in the field would reduce the number of injured, that would then
reduce the overcrowding and expenses of the Veterans’ Administration and it's hundreds of
hospitals and sanitariums. It would also stop sending crippling or defective sons back to their
parents thus raising the Government's flagging popularity numbers and motivate patriotism,
nationalism and relight the torch of American Exceptionalism and put back on track God's Great
Plan for His Chosen People. The gray-headed Bible-thumping old crones in the corridors of the
Pentagon or haunting the halls of the Capitol could finally have their Righteous War against
anything not American enough. They had wanted that war for all of their lives, but the popular
backlash caused by lines of coffins coming back home had always acted as a handbrake to stop
them passing the War Acts.

Now, there was a perfect solution provided by high technology from private sector companies. The
neoconservatives and their allies in the Ecclesiastes were ecstatic as their doctrine had just been
validated after 200 years of yelling at everybody to shrink government and let the industries run the
country. And now, these industries would run the army to bring home the Victory promised by
God, the Apostles and Prophecy 2000 years ago in the Bible of the One True God. The planet,
Nature itself, would kneel in submissiveness before the almighty of white, Anglo-Saxon, Christian
power on the march. Zieg Hammerrika, Heil!

Then came the next big idea out of Industry; hire teens as pilots for the missions. Because they
would be part-time and could not be legally militarized under 18 years of age, they would get paid
less and have no benefits whatsoever. So the Pentagon got extremely good pilots with incredible
perceptions and reaction times, at about a third of the price for an adult. They also had extended
disciplinary rights and part-time localized guardianship like a boarding school when the kids were
in the cyber-center so they could ask more, command more harshly and never get questioned or be
forced to be logical and rational as if they dealt with adult pilots. There was also no threat of
lawyers, unions, protest movements or leaking things to the media. It was a securely contained,
limited access, Paradise for any authoritarian, domineering fascist with a taste for genocide and no
reason to stop when the bloodshed started to get good.

When a general asked the question of how to handle kids suffering PTSD from killing people by
remote, the engineers from the private firms shrugged and said – LIE. Just tell them they're old videos from past missions that were remastered for integration to the system as part of the test scenario they have to run. They would never tell the kids in the cockpits that it was anything other than a simulator in test mode. The teens would never be told that every pull of a trigger killed real people. They would be made to murder by the hundreds yet never know that a part of their soul was asked in payment for each death they gave.

We see the end

(Hymnals – funeral dirge)

Historical account from the perspective of 2300
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
No fixed location

Eventually, the simulator was put online on the Internex to trawl through a larger basin of potential trainees for the piloting jobs because they had unforeseen problems with the under aged volunteers they had assembled. The generals thought it could work like the masterful project "America's Army" and its hundreds of updates, modules and training packages. They decided that in fact, the shortest, safest and most economical way was to simply add modules to "America's Army" in the drone command section and, for the hardcore soldiers, the mechanized infantry section to simulate piloting from inside the machine instead of remotely.

The success was immediate and crashed the servers twice in the first week alone. The demand for this was such that they had to triple budgets, quintuple personnel and materials, then rush-job everything to get it working up to the standards the kids playing at home wanted. Then an idiot of unmitigated proportions came up with the idea that having a large, publicly known cyber-command was not good and needed done away with. He explained to the President and Joint-Chiefs-of-Staff that they could cut costs, liabilities and the dangers of spying and sabotage by outsourcing and tele-commuting the jobs directly to the kids at home. This would have the benefits that the parents no longer had to be consulted. You no longer had to arrange missions according to your best pilot's family duties; visits to grandma or the occasional grounding (Go to your room! No TV or video games for a month! No going to the Pentagon either because its fun for you and your being punished!) or detentions at school. There would no longer be tetchy, whiny brats going around the building vandalizing, thieving, and messing up everything the adults had worked for so hard in the name of their pure white God.

The kids would use their own time for free to play the game voluntarily and when they reached high scores they would get virtual coupons for presents by email. Then when they got truly better, they would get a secured access code to enter the militarized sector of the website and get into the roster of genuine missions (that resulted in real deaths), all ordered by difficulty. The pilots would need, like a game and like real life, to earn merit badges, medals and piloting certifications before accessing the worst, most dangerous missions. Those kids whose piloting truly matched an adult drone expert would get a visit to be presented with a civilian corporate contract with NDA clauses. This would get them a toned-down civilian version of the robotics command chair with a dedicated fiber-optics link at their house. At that point, the parents would be told that their child was registering as a professional Beta-Tester for "America's Army" and to be proud of their child's patriotic involvement. The 24$ / hour salary, part time without benefits, was in itself argument enough for 97% of adults to let it go and smile. After all, in the poor neighborhoods, how would
you get your child a good paying job that let the kid stay home safely, no commute, away from hoodlums, drugs and violence? How could a parent refuse this without looking foolish and rather stupid in these hard economic times?

Preludes of the end

(StarGate Universe – main theme)

Historical account from the perspective of 2300
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
No fixed location

Unfortunately, this came at the same time as the advent of two technologies that should have been severely monitored when released to the public, especially because of the mental health issues involved. There are far too many people on Earth with psychotic episodes, dissociative fugues, and intermittent contact with reality, to just let these things float around. But, as always, money, lobbying and industries' right to sell was deemed paramount. When backed by Hollywood and the TV producers on one side, Microsoft, Apple and Google on the other, the conclusion was foreseeable by a blind man.

Tech advance number one was the evolution of 3d Television without special glasses. This gave rise to every damn device having a 3D screen; including smart phones and smart watches. The quality of images in these became so good that optometrists began to use them in their medical tests to judge visual reflex, acuity and capacity to perceive depths and color tones. This unfortunately led right into the next problem.

Tech advance number two was the spread of meta-glasses. These began as cumbersome attachments to the helmets of helicopter pilots to give them live access to the night vision, thermal imaging and magnetometry of their vehicle. Industry saw the potential for public sales and worked hard to shrink them down into the first consumer versions over an R&D effort of about 30 years. Then the first two-lens consumer usable versions appeared, followed about 4 years later by the electronic monocle that you can wear on your ordinary glasses or separately with its own little rod to fixate to your ear. It was the ultimate smart phone attachment, they thought.

This then became an outright craze when the amazing '3D without special equipment' was added to these wearables. You now had not only the meta-data of stores when you visit a mall, but a truly immersive experience when receiving an email, taking a vidcall or putting on a video clip. Everyone who had though that old laptop computers and basic cell phones had atomized society and killed the desire to relate to others had never foreseen the phenomenon to follow. The penultimate blow to social interaction came in the form of electronic contact lenses with meta-data stream and 3D visuals. They were powered by organic induction through the bio-electric impulses of the body channeled through the eyes, which also served as a living antenna to receive and emit the signals.

Now we have what historians who lived long enough to write books or articles in the news feeds have called 'The great disjunction of humanity from naturality'. Humans no longer had to look at ugliness; they could program their contacts to superimpose a beautiful image on top of what was irking them. The boss' secretary is a wrinkled old crud that hates you? Set your contacts to show that buxom valkyrie from last month's magazine and tweak your ear buds to change the voice to that of an innocuous waitress that you met at a bar last year and voila! Your crap reality just got
amped up! The craze took so fast and so hard that no age group, social class, sector of employment or even emergency service was spared.

The laws couldn't change fast enough especially when using the things for spying for any cause, governmental, corporate, or private vices, became commonplace. Then of course somebody started using the contacts to send cyber viruses or unsolicited SPAM at everybody around and you had the first epidemic that tried to breach the wall between cybernetics, biology and psychology; they called this a psychotronic virus. The social crisis was massive enough that Governments were actually demonstrated to be powerless because they had been silently transferring power, control and even some legislative authority to corporations for about three decades at this point. A new way of functioning was needed urgently to save society and fast.

Advent of the end

(Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – Requiem)

Historical account from the perspective of 2300
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
No fixed location

The solution was proposed from where it should never have been allowed to come. The same old gray-heads that had spearheaded the projects about the teenaged drone pilots were so enthused by their success and the feeling that their awaited War of the Worthies was almost upon them, they offered the President a solution that would kill humanity for ever.

The neoconservatives, backed by selected arch-conservative Ecclesiastes and right-thinking generals of true and pure pedigree (non-jewish whites), convened in the Oval Office to brief the Commander-In-Chief to expose the plan to design and enact the World Management Grid. They proposed a completely decentralized system of psychotronic servers, conduits, routers and terminals linked to neuroplexic databanks overseen by an synthesis intelligence bearing evolved capacities never contemplated by a human before since she would be the cumulation of the mind-copies of thousands of people. This would be proofed against terrorists and natural disasters because there would be no central command and no point of the network that would not have at least three redundancies to redirect dataflow or emergency commands around the damaged area.

The best part was in the unspoken but agreed upon reason for this; mind-control of the population.

By connecting the WMG directly to every citizen through their wearables, they would become puppets on invisible strings that would see, hear and be aware of only what the Government wanted seen, heard or perceived. The Ecclesiastes immediately offered, for a limited free trial period, their services at elaborating a list of taboos, forbiddances and societal ethics infractions. The contacts lenses would be programmed like the scanners of a police car to find, analyze, record and then snitch on to the WMG's security or morality modules. Appropriate teams of municipal police, first aid rescuers or Christian Spiritual Accompaniment (CSA) would then go and 'assist' the person in their 'time of need'.

Plans were immediately made to keep the churchmen happy and on the side of the ruling President by modifying the laws about underage citizen's rights, specifically by reducing or eliminating the protections from abuse or police violence. The goal was to enshrine the CSA teams as being a sort of federally legislated organization, like the FBI but only for kids, with an incredibly invasive
reach that no longer recognized the rights or abilities of parents to educate their children by themselves. There were discussions about how to force-feed religious broadcasts into the contact lenses of children and make it a misdemeanor to take off the lenses during those morally and patriotically uplifting reviews of God's Great Plan for America. This of course led directly to a plan to finance the procurement and imposed usage of electronic contacts by every citizen under the age of 21. Rising the national age of majority from 18 to 21 was necessary to give the priesthood more time to insure control and dominance over the young and sate their sado-sexual punitivity over their favorite victims.

Since the Government was now faced with the very real fact that they would no longer need as many soldiers as they once had, only about 10% of the highest total during WW II would suffice as a peace time situation, and even then that was seen as keeping too many for the expenses they cost. In case of a war they would just make more aerial or legged drones while being less picky about which teenagers became pilots from home. The truly gifted ACE pilots could always be brought to a military base under an Injunction of Christian Protectorate from the CSA that would kick the parents out of the kid's life by force.

Once a kid got a dose of living under the straps of the priests for a month, he'd do anything to earn being moved to the regular barracks system next door and volunteer as a soldier in the Early Cadet Program. The fact that the early cadets were in fact a military version of a christian orphanage run by worshipful sergeant-paladins was never told to the kids until they were inside. At which point, any mention of family or past lives were punished repeatedly. The child was beaten, starved, force-fed drugs and subliminal messages through their contact lenses and ear buds, until no longer able to resist or tell reality apart from religious nonsense.

The teenage drone pilot program began to answer more and more to the demands of the Ecclesiastes by no longer recruiting girls for anything that needed leaving home. Only boys were wanted for the army bases and early cadets programs. The reason was as simple as mind-twistingly depraved; you can't get a boy pregnant no matter how many times you sodomize him. Since the vast majority of the preachers, churchmen and Ecclesiastes were in fact pedophiles or just sadistic bastards that enjoyed torturing kids, they started to concentrate recruitment on their favorite targets rather than what the army needed to advance and win wars.

Consumption of the end

(Frederich Chopin – Funeral March)

Historical account from the perspective of 2300
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
No fixed location

When the elections happened and the Republicans suffered an upset defeat after 4 terms in office held by 2 people consecutively, the Democrats found out the mess and tried to remove it, break the projects and expose to the population what was done. By that time it was too late. The WMG was coming online by sectors, starting of course in the truly critical places of the USA, Canada and Mexico to secure North America. A lighter, more flexible version was being brought into activity in the European Union but separately from the American version which angered the preachers and churches to no end. It meant lost power, lost influence and a large basin of young nubile boys taken away to be ensconced behind an armored wall. European youth protection laws would never allow American churches to reach the boys to exploit or kill them the way they had been able to for ten
years up to date in the USA.

The second blow to the Ecclesiastes and their depravedness came by accident because they had pushed so much for younger teens starting as early as 11 years old to be selected for the military bases or the Early Cadets Programs.

First; the Democrats took over and broke the chokehold of the priesthood over what was in reality a network of privately operated concentration camps for juveniles on American soil.

Second; closing the camps released a lot of traumatized, dysfunctional, and sometimes psychotic teenagers with a lot of actual functional military training back in the streets.

Third; less than a year after the elections, the number of murders and disappearances of priests, worshipers and baptized military officers who publicly apostollized their exaltation had risen by some 400%. It was open season on the sluts-of-the-pews and the church-whores that controlled them in the names of the Ecclesiastes.

Several hundred teen boys, broken as they were, got together with their sisters and cousins which, being girls, had never been really targeted by the madmen and their schemes. This gave these lost boys homes, medical care, support, access to education, and a take on reality that had been stolen from them for years. It also happens that several of the girls were very good hackers and they managed to get into the first beta version of the WMG to find, locate, and isolate mediatically priests of the White Painted Cross by the thousands. Then they transmitted these coordinates to roaming groups of boys who were hunting and killing these subhuman offal. In a period of five years, there had been an estimated 19,000 murders and some 14,000 disappearances of clergy and high-rank worshipers or church donors in North America.

The final collapse of the American Christian neoconservative movement resulted from a tidal wave of extremely public suicides; almost 23,000 people. The Democrats published uncensored FBI, US Army and CSA security tapes and internal reports with pictures. That these had been made by the CSA officers themselves as trophies of what went on in the teen pilot formation camps was a proof of validity and authenticity which convinced many to not wait and take chances in court. Incontrovertible evidence like that was just not something you can win against. The reports and films showed several thousand preeminent members of the GOP, the directors of several Political Action Committees and their family members or business partners touring the camps while clearly enjoying the spectacles of boys beaten in public or benefitting from private entertainment with the boy of their choice. The films of several thousand 'family values promoters' who peddled anti-gay rhetoric being shown as they beat and sodomized children shocked America and the World. This was on the scale of the Nazi atrocities and for the same damned reason too.

War to end humanity

(Star Wars Symphony – The Death Star destroying Alderaan)

Historical account from the perspective of 2300
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
No fixed location

Then came the vengeance of the neoconservatives; a last hurrah to backstab the society which had denied the predators their victims. Several industrialists got together and obtained truthful
accounting documents about the budgets and finances for the USA. They were on the verge of bankruptcy while being taken over by foreigners of the non-christian, non-white variety. Their solution was as hair-brained as the projects for the teenaged pilots and subsequent CSA camps. They proposed to let rich families have the right to buy the large mechanical war machines like toys and use them only in theaters of operation determined by the US Federal Government. This would transfer the costs of manufacture, equipments, munitions and pilot training or maintenance to those with the money for it. The rest of the taxpayers could sleep in peace with a lower tax bill at the end of the year. And the neocons, well they still got their War of the Worthies and domination over non-caucasians they pined after all their lives since infancy, and oftentimes since several generations in the past as well.

 Thankfully, the Democrats in power saw the cretinous idea for what it was and won the next elections as well so it didn't even get discussed in session in Congress. The problem was that several of the politicians involved had children and these kids talked online or at school. The message went around and thousands of boys who had finally been released from the CSA camps panicked, seeing this as a preliminary move to reinstate the CSA and camps. This started a frenzied effort to hack the systems, punch through the partial unstable World Management Grid and hijack control of as many legged tanks or aerial drones as they could. Then they started hunting down and destroying the politos and the church-whores that financed them. Since individuals hide faster and more completely than crowds, most of the hackers turned the huge engines of war against the nearest church, town hall, courthouse or private religious school they could find in range of the weapons on their machine.

 It caused the collapse of the USA and parts of both Canada and Mexico when they were hit by swarms of cruise missiles or flights of unmanned flying drones ordered into kamikaze runs against churches and government buildings. It was the end of the societal model that had allowed the CSA and militarization of children but not the end of the problems. There were still several thousand neocons embedded deeply in the armed services or in the US bureaucracy at all levels of society. Their hate was boundless and their desire for revenge at losing their War of the Worthies would never extinguish in this life or the next. They connected online in hidden Dark Web chat-rooms to elaborate the punishment for the heretics responsible for their unholy failure.

 Since children were the cause of their fall, they would kill off the actual batch and start fresh, but under a tightly controlled situation where only the Worthies would be allowed to procreate. To make this happen, they took and kept safe in underground vaults large quantities of sperm from the most exalted and devout Apostollates of the White Painted Cross. These specimens would be used in cloning cylinders in a process similar to the creation of the GUelfs that had briefly existed in the early 2000's before being hunted down and terminated like the unnatural scum they were. Forcing reproduction through a laboratory with extremely controlled access and known to exist only by a chosen few Worthies made certain that all the scum would die childless soon. The way to control the reproduction was simply to release in the air and water of the planet a synthetic biotoxin which sterilized all humans that had contact with it. It took 15 days to cover the world and end humanity.

 What the neocons didn't realize was that the laboratory they were banking on could not produce more than 40 humans at a time per year, and only 8 to 10 actually survived long enough and healthy enough to be awakened then be put into service. This would never save humanity unless they could produce at least a thousand persons every other week. Within a few decades, the population died off, disease became rampant and without competent, physically capable medics, the survivors were at risk from the simplest things. This forced the governments to make the disgusting but necessary choice to euthanize millions of mentally handicapped, physically handicapped, and comatose patients, as they needed to give back beds and treatment capacity to overburdened systems across the planet.
Because the population had in fact discovered the biotoxin after the first whole year of no new births anywhere on Earth, they had put massive sums of money and efforts into completing and activating the World Management Grid across as much of the planet as they could reach. This system would now be their only solace when the diseases and limitations of old age took their mobility and senses. They augmented the medical modules, created self-driving ambulances with small human shaped robots to go into the houses to find and bring back the patients to the van and the hospital. In its hour of decline, humanity lost all appetite for war, dominance, money and greed. The species as a whole was extinguished and reduced to 2 living teenaged specimens, a boy and a girl; both were in control of many giant war machines, bent on destroying anything other than themselves, when SeaQuest had been pulled through the vortex created by the World Management Grid's AI in an effort to save the planet and its last human inhabitants.

Burying humanity without any dignity

(New Orleans Jazz Funeral March – When the Saints go Marching In)

December 25th of 2300 - deep night
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans’ Support Services (VSS)
Administration tower

As the older man was again under medical injunction to soak in bath salts for an hour, Younger Lucas sat himself at the desk in the older man's room to write down on a pile of loose sheaf paper that he had taken from the supply closet he had raided in the reception area downstairs. He was meticulously drawing a timeline with colored events above and under the line. There would be notes for the general history to mark critical technical discoveries in green and catastrophic stupidities in red. For his Older Brother's life, he would write the ordinary in black, the unusual in blue, health problems in yellow and active threats or dysfunctions in red. This would give him a visual organigram to place on the wall so they could organize their thoughts and workload for the next month, especially seeing to their health. Younger Lucas didn't have the vaccinations for this period and just knew that some nasty bug was about to bite him and make him sick.

As he was compiling the timeline, the child was starting to lose patience quickly; there were constant noises from appliances that were supposed to be shut off but emitted sounds or vibrations anyways unless he pulled the power cord from the wall outlet or took out the batteries. Even the damned ceiling fan and inset light fixtures had some miniature sonic emitters that pulsed in the ultrasonic and infrasonic frequencies which normal humans would never hear or bother with. Unfortunately, his abnormal auditory system and synesthesia were about as good as the ears of a dog and were being sorely tested by the infernal racket. He pulled out his swiss army knife and toolkit then methodically hunted down and took apart anything in this room and the one on each side of it that made any noise at all. Then he saw that the mirrors and windows were actually transparent vidscreens like the faceplates in the winter jackets in the Icehold Vault. And just like the touchscreen tablet from earlier in the evening, they systematically passed high speed subliminal messages in both english alphabet and alien ideograms. The child was almost apoplectic by then. He was found by his still-wet-from-the-bath Older Brother as he was yanking out electric and network wiring from the walls and door-frames to shut off and silence the unholy machines so they could sleep in peace. It was that or go build a lean-to in the swamp even if it meant letting the
friendly neighborhood alligator keep him warm for the night.

Older Lucas sat on a nearby chair, watching his little sibling's hands work at the speed of a spider spinning silk as it wove a web. It was mesmerizing to see someone so small and young have so much dexterity and agility even when destroying stuff. The older male was now perplexed as he had never perceived all of the sonic emitters or subliminal visuals all around the hospital. A quick check with the tablet's camera and image capture virus that he had created showed that any mirror or window was in fact a vidscreen with high speed subliminals in them. Whether it was the outer wall windows, the doors to the balconies or the decorative elements like the glass walled staircase that ran the whole height of the admin tower, all structural or decorative glassworks in sight were broadcasting invisible written messages.

After a hellish hour of hard quick work, Younger Lucas was able to calm down and sit with a chamomile tea and a pair of codeine boosted Tylenols to kill his migraine before going to bed. As the two siblings were reviewing the timeline taped to the bedroom wall, the child jumped up and pointed two distinct elements to his older brother. Firstly; the fact that the government had obliged all children under 21 years of age to wear active electronic contacts and ear buds to receive propaganda non-stop as well as serve as mobile spying sensors like police cars. Secondly; Older Lucas had been 19 years old when he had his brain implant and emergency surgeries done at a Shriner's hospital that specialized in children classed as 'sick, injured or dispirited'. What did that mean? They needed a quick search online to find the hospital itself on the map, its website and the mission statement.

The Shriner's were an honest and open religious grouping belonging to the Freemasons and affiliated loosely with other Christian groupings at their beginnings then grew to have shrines across the planet. Their only requirement for adhesion was to be a master-level Freemason of the Scottish or York rites. This of course means that the only real constraint was to be a man as it was a fraternal order of masons and Freemasons were all males to begin with.

They were actually opposed to the system of the Christian Spiritual Accompaniment Agency as both a principle and especially as an armed law-enforcement organization. From the start the Shriner's publicly decried that a group having broad powers and invasive authority such as this could only lead to the exploitation, abuse, violation and death of children. This was anathema to the Shriner's as people and as a group; they were after all famous for their children's hospitals and positions of peacefulness and fellowship, not anger and warmongering like other groups of Christian men. Unfortunately, this meant that the group was served with legal writs to shut up and follow the laws of the CSA or they would be shut down as being anti-Christian infidels and anti-American heretics. Faced with the government moving to either close or seize their hospitals and many charities, they had no choice but to relent and hope that this period of strife in American history would pass soon as all others had before.

However, the Apostollates of the White Painted Cross were not satisfied so they simperingly whined in the media and corridors of the legislatures, begging for the rights to enact restrictions or outright bans against all Masonic activities because they were not christians. Accusations of heresy, infidelity, preying on the young, attacking the moral foundation of America, all trash talk that had plagued the country for almost three centuries was back in full swing as if it were suddenly more true than in the 1800's and 1900's when it was first tried.

The extremists got a partial victory by using the CSA's Agency Mandate to monitor and accompany youths 0 to 21 years of age through all aspects of life while giving / imposing the perspective of a Purely Christian Jesus, the Truly American Christ. This vaguely and openly worded mandate was used by the CSA to impose what they called glibly CSA Pastoralship on any and all schools, hospitals and amusement centers where children congregate or are sent for
education. Pastoralship meant that the CSA placed old white anglo-saxon churchmen, Worshipful Baptized or Worthies, in the businesses, schools and medical facilities where children came either as clients or workers and controlled the comportment, attitude, demeanor and beliefs of the children, even if the parents were also present. This was the American version of the Kommissar system of the old Stalinian regime; a person with supreme (local) power to shut you down or fire people was imposed to your organization, one per location or franchise, and you collaborate or get closed, possibly get sent to jail. This was explained to the public as a means of insuring that adults uneducated in the True Faith would not skip or botch the job of indoctrinating kids properly while also removing non-Christians from any job or position that could influence the minds and lives of children towards heretical thoughts.

This meant a very important thing for both Lucas; the hospital had been under the control of the CSA for a number of years before humanity died out. There were still programs in the servers and auto-docs about certain aspects of the active management of the lives and morality of children which had still not been repudiated when the last government of the USA fell. The laws mandating certain locator implants, contact lenses and ear buds were still in place. The police and morality snitching modules in the WMG were still active and recording, just not sending CSA squad cars anymore. This meant that there could be no safe place for health care in North America for either of them as everything was still fully automated and neither was a full surgeon.

In a panic, Younger Lucas pulled a small penlight from his med-kit and told his brother to turn his head sideways. A small flash at an indirect angle and he saw the surface of the pupil change color and then back to normal. Taking a magnifying glass from his tool kit, he repeated the test while magnified and saw clear evidence that the man had futuristic electronic contact lenses.

The Older Lucas was pissed because he had good eyes and didn't need the damned things in his eyes. He didn't even use meta-glasses during 95% of his different jobs and projects. How were those things put in there? And why?

Younger Lucas let his Older Brother tetch a bit then flashed the light in his ear; the same result was seen. There was a very small metallic wire that made a shape on top of the eardrum. This was the classic version of the permanently implanted ear bud that rich people or highly placed government execs would have put in place so they don't lose them or worry about battery life as they were fed through bio-neural energy.

This was the cause of the older man's nightmares, mood swings, depression and many, many other mental problems. His perceptions were systematically screwed with and he was not alone inside his head. Who knew what kind of religious, sectarian and completely false heap of BS he had been fed for the past 14 years.
The 'not so great anymore' adventure

The author wishes to express thanks to anyone who may read his story and encourages them to leave reviews, comments or even flame it hard. As with any who try their hand at publicly expressing an idea or story concept, all feedback is important and welcome.

Disclaimer: I do not own SeaQuest, Star Wars, nor any other sci-fi or fantasy series, movies, comics, cartoons or news items used in this fiction as they belong to the creators or broadcasters or publishers who put them out for consumption by the public.

Crossing in permanently from now on:
- Martin Mystery cartoon 2003/06 only; written forms ignored.
- The real adventures of Jonny Quest cartoon 1964 & 1996/97 only; written forms ignored.
- Thunderbirds TV animation 1964/66, live film 2004 and cartoon TAG 2015 only; written forms ignored.
- Kong; the animated series cartoon 2000/01 only; written forms ignored.
- Capital OCs of my creation Labarre Clan, Brennan Family, Andrews Family, Bannon Family, Evans Family.

This chapter is based upon the canon SQ season 2 episode 'Playtime' in which the ship is dragged through an artificial space/time gateway to reach circa 2300 in Earth's future. While the time mechanics and World Management Grid are used, the rest is vastly AU and OOC with the reasons being obvious in the story line.

The magical system in use is the result of taking the fundamental principals of the multiverse, dimensions, crystal spheres and Yggdrasils fruits from RoleMaster & SpaceMaster then concatenating into that baseline organization Dungeons & Dragons, D&D Spelljammer, The Cthulhu Mythos, Harry Potter, FullMetal Alchemist and the psionics abilities seen in the StarGate, Star Wars and Star Trek series. Don't worry, it runs smoother and more seamlessly than you could think at first glance. Also remember that SeaQuest had its share of magic, ghosts, psionics, primordial beasts and genetically engineered freaks and let's not forget the time travel. So do each of the series that I crossover into the main story plot and that's why it all gels together seamlessly; they all have between four and six common elements to mesh and build with.

Eighth chapter; The 'not so great anymore' adventure

Brotherly interlude

(SeaQuest - season 2 opening theme)

Tuesday December 25th of 2300 - deep night
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
"Of all the bloody apostollations of Lucifer Morningstar, fucking Anti-Christ and Lord of UnderVerse and the Depths! May the Knaves have their guts for garlands in the Sarabande Macabre! Das schweinen arsch!"

Older Lucas looked at his younger brother with a brand new tick above his left eyebrow. Where in all the navies of the world had the little guy learned to swear like that? Even at 19 years old after almost four solid years rubbing elbows with sailors he didn't have a mouth like that, especially not in public. He was seriously thinking about his little tyke needing some parenting or at least some urgent brothering in the very near future.

"Do you have any idea of the meaning of this find? Do you realize that you have been the puppet of a computer's ghost for the last half of your life? Do you understand that the reason you reneged your life, health, welfare and your very spirit and soul was because some vestigial programs that hadn't been erased or clocked out kept trying to foist their bitchcrap down your gullet like a farmer fattening a goose?" the child barked.

Ah! The Older Sibling now had a clue as to why the child was kvetching a good one in front of him. They really were alike in that respect. The older male was suddenly overcome by a wave of positive emotion that he hadn't felt in more than a decade; true love. Someone loved him truly and unconditionally just because he was alive and that was enough to be pissed off at the injustices and violations done upon him. He counted himself lucky for what little pride and ego he had left that he was already sitting in a comfortable chair or he'd have probably gone down face first into the floor out of sheer shock that anybody would ever care about him even if they were blood related.

"I swear that I'll use that counterfucked time gate to drop an army of genetically engineered plague laden, disease spewing, horny rats into their churches that will burrow up their arses straight up their chest and finish in their heads where they'll make a bloody nest and spawn more of the same until there's only rat controlled human corpses traipsing around! Teufel in Flammen der Holle!"

The older male was now wondering if he should calm the boy or take out a notepad and consider this a language class. It looked like it would last a while. Note to self: do not give Little Brother a mixture of tea and pills before bed; it acts as a booster on him.

Deciding that the blowout had in fact lasted long enough, Older Lucas grabbed the gesticulating and overly verbose sibling and plopped him on his lap with a firm embrace wrapped around him. The child stopped cold all movements and noises before turning his head creepily slowly towards his brother like an evil doll in a Z movie. "I hope for your sake that you don't plant a slobbering kiss on my head or we will have words this night." The boy threatened in a low, menacing voice that sent shivers down the spine of his older relative. As he remembered the many sheathes filled with hard steel the child carried around all day, he decided that challenging his very reasonable request for some personal space was not necessary and quickly nodded.

They sat there for a while, the oldest holding carefully onto the youngest until they both yawned at the same time. Looking at each other, they exchanged a few facial expressions and convened that sleep would be a good idea. They had both been up for almost 24 hours by this time and needed some shut-eye to recover. The older male was surprised, but not much, when his little baby brother got up and took his hand to guide him into the bed he had used for the last decade and a half in this timeline. Once the adult was lying down in the covers, Younger Lucas did a last tour of the three rooms to silence anything he missed the first time then came back to snuggle under the covers with his big brother wrapping his arms around him. They fell into sleep almost immediately, staying
deeply asleep for almost 17 hours straight before a combined need for a toilet and food made itself known.

Breakfast among siblings

(Star Wars –Lake Varykino country)

Wednesday December 26th of 2300 - afternoon
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Main wing - restaurant

"The services offered in this place are really something!" commented playfully Younger Lucas as he sipped his coffee at the table in the dining nook they had built for themselves the night before.

The Older Lucas had decided to cook them breakfast and since he had someone else to see to, he planned on making an effort. The bratty little runt offering to give him cooking classes if he failed may have been incentive to keep a closer eye on the grills and pans than he would have if he were still alone.

"Now if we could get you a uniform to make it look professional, we'd be in business!" the pasty little gremlin continued teasing his brother, wearing a shit-eating grin wider than a Garfield cartoon. The joke was aimed at the fact they were both wearing a new set of generic blue scrubs and planned on visiting the laundry service today right after the meal. They both had a pile to wash and Younger Lucas refused to move around town without his battle gear which needed a real good wash all on its own. Even if there were no humans, there would be wild animals since the city wasn't walled and there was now plenty of vegetation overgrowth and smaller animals to attract predators.

"I'm thinking spandex and lycra; a burgundy base with golden piping and details to accentuate the forms. Or in your case, move attention away from the flab from the lack of exercise and efforts in the last decade."

Yes the tyke was in fine form this afternoon. The older male unceremoniously dropped a plate in front of the verbose little plague in his life and then sat with it own. Maybe some solid food with coffee would make the headache go away? At least it would force the runt to keep quiet for a few minutes.

"Tsk! We really need to work on your deportment and customer service. I was almost wearing that meal the way you dropped it next to me. Oh well, we have time don't we? And it's not like there's an appointment for us."

With another tick above his left eyebrow, the older man concentrated on eating and drinking lest he do something to encourage the blasted little troll into another bout of teasing. The kid knew close to 15 languages and all of them very fluently. He could become really annoying if he put his mind to it and keep it up for a very long session to boot. Deciding to reroute the conversation to something useful for a change, he asked the kid how good at healing he was; Older Lucas himself wasn't completely useless but not far from it. The very basic first aid classes they had given him in
boot camp had not been stressed and they had never been refreshed since. He was fully into computers, programming and electronics with only some very small incursions in other fields in their mathematics-based sections. He could work in a chemistry or biochemistry laboratory because he had memorized the periodic table and read through a few books about elemental interactions but his interests were not at all in those 'not computerized' domains. At least, that's what he remembered of his life and preferences.

"Well you see, I don't want to be a doctor but I do plan on boosting my survival and first responder capacities by a lot when I get back home. Right now I have a paramedic grade-1 license but that's the lowest of the bunch, it's barely the level above trainee. With that you get some instructions for climbing, rappelling, firefighting basics, finding or locating victims in debris and other stuff for immediately getting out of harm's way. There is precious little in terms of medical knowledge or know-how in this grade. You would be limited to driving the ambulance, doing inventory and paperwork, carrying the bags and placing the equipment for the other guy or assisting the senior medic on hand. You never decide anything truly medical by yourself if someone with a better license is there."

"At Grade-2 you have what people expect from the actual standard first responder or search & rescue. Taking vitals, setting limbs or broken bones, field dressing bleeding injuries for transport, field sutures when a ruptured artery is bleeding out, etc… About what people see when you call an ambulance to a car crash or home accident."

"At Grade-3 you have a full senior paramedic capable of emergency field surgeries, defibrillating a person's heart and giving first necessity medications in the field. This person is trained to deal with allergies and poison like snake bites or eating spoiled stuff. Has been trained to deal with gunshot wounds, trauma from attacks, attempted suicide, industrial spills and explosions, the whole works, and then some. But always from a manual know-how point of view."

"At the highest rank which is what I want to reach, Grade-4, you are the equivalent of a motorized surgical nurse or what some schools and hospitals call a 'physician's assistant'. You can do a lot of important delicate surgeries, administer medications over prolonged therapies and supervise lower ranked paramedics and nurses through an emergency or hospital shift. You can't prescribe anything; only react to what is in front of you in an emergency setting like urgentology or traumatology, allergic reactions, poisonings, etc… Only a full doctor or pharmacist can prescribe anything or make a legally binding order of protection, confinement, take away a driving license, etc…"

Younger Lucas was happy to talk about his studies, hobbies and goals in life. It had been a while since anybody had been genuinely interested and not laughed at his face about his many diplomas. He was actually very proud and very emotionally invested in becoming a fully qualified paramedic because any fool could set fire, detonate a bomb or pull a trigger. It took dedication and care for others to patch them back in working order and he desperately wanted to be able to save his few true friends when the inevitable problems showed up.

Older Lucas frowned in thought; the kid had many good points and while he wasn't medically inclined himself, he should have taken the effort to learn if only to insure his own health and survival. He guessed that the WMG was controlling him through the wearables and had decided it could heal him well enough, why let him waste time on this when a more pressing matter needed resolving.

"Well, we can drop our laundry off on our way to the medical blocks in the main wing's upper levels. There are a few tests that I would like you to put me through and I really want those contacts and ear buds taken out. Today or tomorrow, but certainly before we go back in town and anywhere
near that blasted substation. I have the feeling it was programming me over the airwaves to do stuff and to forget other stuff and I really don't know my own mind or personality anymore."

Younger Lucas stayed silent as he chewed his food. It was actually well done and tasteful. His sibling had a good future as a cook if computers ended up annoying him. As for the tests, he was uncertain of how that would end. The WMG controlled much of everything and could have re-written all the patient files and basic medical texts to keep Older Lucas from reading and finding things he could use to escape that control. He also doubted that the automated medical devices would give reliable data. They would need to do a lot by hand.

"Hey, bro? I checked something when we got up this morning. Where are my hotels? They don't seem to be on the map."

"You don't have anything in this place little guy. You're not actually in the future of your timeline. You are not only in MY timeline, but also another realitive arbrissure different from your own. This is the basic theory of the multiverse: there are infinite possible versions of reality because each moment someone makes a decision or action spawns a new timeline or 'causality chain' so decision 'A' will cause events 'A1', 'A2', 'A3' but also 'B1', 'B2', 'C1' etc… to be generated and linked both vertically along the chain and also laterally by logical determinisms between themselves."

"This is going on along the other aspect of Material Reality; there are dimensions and realities coexisting alongside of each other at the same moment that the temporal causal chains happen. What that means in practice is that dimensions are normally an elemental or spiritual domain like the Plane of Earth or the Plane of Light where almost everything not the basal element is limited in quantity and quality."

"By comparison, a reality is like this: you would have an Earth with 72% water mass, continents and oceans, the UEO happened and such. But a small detail would be that every man you know is a female and every woman you know is a male. Their characters and lives are almost identical because in this culture, it's the women that are physically stronger and mentally more capable compared to men. So that would be the initial point of that 'Realitive Arbrissure' or root of logical and causal chains. It could be that blacks were the dominant race, that there is only 10% water on earth or worse 96% water and no large land mass. Do you follow?"

Younger Lucas nodded blandly while trying to absorb the confirmation to what he had suspected. "I read a lot of fantasy and sci-fi so I know about the 'space – dimensions – time – realities' theory of nestled universes and pocket dimensions and subspace realms, and all that. I had hoped that it was real like everybody does because it would be cool to have that many opportunities to find stuff and new peoples and cultures. But to get sucked out of my own reality and into another where I don't exist and everything about my alter is weak, meek and menial really isn't pleasant. We are going to change a lot of things, if I get my say so."

Older Lucas couldn't stop the wince of hurt at the harsh words from his sibling but understood where they came from. The little guy had in just one year turned himself from a simpering child to a strong minded person that would take no shit from anyone. The 33 year old really was ashamed of himself even though the implants, drugs and lies had a lot to do with it all. He needed to get his brain back in gear to escape this mess.

Medical necessities

(MacGyver – Opening theme, 1985)
After spending an hour touring the consultation rooms, diagnostics bays and physical effort testing gymnasia with its limited tools, both siblings were regrouping in the reception area at the second floor juncture between the admin tower and main wing. Sitting in the dingy thinly padded chairs of the public waiting area, they began a conversation about the options and obligations they faced.

"We are going to have to go through a lot of equipment with several laptops and many boxes of tools and parts to get things how they should be." Younger Lucas spoke in disgust at the state of things. All the machines in the diagnostics block of the hospital were all hard-wired into the WMG and also had antennae to receive or broadcast. The whole system was made so that doctors could not deviate from the pattern of politically and religiously determined action without an alarm sounding in some surveillance office. It also meant that the diagnostics and cures explained to the families were not always relevant to the actual injuries or diseases if the Ecclesiastes perceived a threat in the patient's attitude or knowledge.

Even the most basic devices like the stethoscopes, thermometers and sphygmomanometers had been 'upgraded' to electronic versions with wireless capacities to keep the doctors from rendering any assistance under the radars of the CSA and the corrupt Military Police who were collaborating with them. They would need to work for several days to clean up the equipments; rip out antennae and network cabling, strip down the programming and rebuild at least one of each device so as to have a clean suite of diagnostics tools. Then they would have to do it all over again with an operating theater so as to finish repairing and healing Older Lucas once and for all.

"Listen Old Guy, this isn't gonna work for either of us. You aren't a medical device engineer and I can't program anything but the cheat codes in my Playsation. We don't have the knowledge, skillset, tools or time to do this. I say we just get the minimal done to get the damned contacts and ear buds out of you then move on to preparing for the time gate and our way out of here."

"I ain't old, I'm just more experienced in life than you, pipsqueak! But for the sake of survival, I can see that my last 14 years here haven't been a gold mine of results and hurrahs. We both need to either get out or make a long term plan for the next five years or so cause I have the feeling that any schedule shorter or less involved will not accomplish anything but bits & bobs that won't work together in the end. The worst of it all is I don't think we can really do much of anything in this timeline, or even in this relative arbrisum and anymore. It's like the universe is saying 'Lucas sweetie, it's time to pack and leave. Be a big boy now, go into the world to have a life at long last' and you're the final signal that I'm gonna get about it. If I stay here, I'll go nuts and commit suicide inside of a month alone or I'll let the damned grid take over my soul to dive into cybernetic oblivion to forget my loneliness."

The two brothers from different worlds sat in silent rumination for another half hour before the child asked a rather pertinent question. "You came here on a phat-assed barge didn't ya? That means we should be able to pass the same size back the other way. Why don't we find an empty cargo ship and fill it with medical equipment, industrial machinery, power tools, brand new computers and all the stuff we want that we can get our hands on. Just bring it all back with us to my reality and time. If we keep everything inert, unpowered and we take out the antennae as we
pick them up and pack them for shipping, we can stop the damn WMG and its control modules from spreading. Once we're back in my homeland, we would have all the time in the world to do a really thorough strip down & reprogram before lighting up any piece of equipment. There shouldn't be any problems if we do this like a quarantine against biological spread."

The Older Lucas was rubbing his chin in deep thought. Firstly, they would need to review the time and reality travel protocols to make certain that he could send him back with more than he came, especially with more people. Then, the question of whether he had to appear at the same location and time or could appear elsewhere and then travel to his point of origin to intersect with the original causal chain and maintain his place in the progenitor timeline. That meant going back to the substation and working directly in the mainframe and transit calculators. Oh joy.

"You have some pretty good ideas and points kiddo, but acting on them won't be easy. We're gonna have to go back in NCQ to stay at the substation to work in the programs to get the calculations done and find out the answers to whether we can send back more than came through. It's gonna be some damned hard time for both of us and I would prefer to avoid the place for a few days more, at least until the wearables in my head are offline so we know what's happening to me for real."

"No we don't; you're over thinking things. Firstly; your time portal was able to change size from a child target to pass the girth of SeaQuest II in it. It will adapt if we program it to take the target we want. Secondly; the portal is an energy ring, no a fixed structure of metal and plastic so it is by its very nature adaptable. Thirdly; the ingoing and outgoing points of the portal are completely freefloat coordinates, not necessarily in the same place. I was in my private armory in basement 4 in BVL Buffalo when I got taken but I appeared in NCQ's grid substation. Your boat was near Mexico when it got taken and reappeared at the mouth of the NCQ harbor. Conclusion: the portal's size and apertures WILL adapt to what is programmed in its targeting apparatus. The proof is material and already in hand."

Older Lucas wanted to bang his head on the wall behind him; the pasty little gremlin had just answered questions that would have required weeks of testing and calculations just by using his eyes and the facts in front of him. OF COURSE the damned energy ring could be morphed and adapted to whatever suited the target's situation and locality. He even had the option to generate the gravity flux to pull in the target or let them move into the gateway by their own power. How the hell had he been so bloody blind as to forget something so basic that it was practically screaming at him. It must be another of those functions implanted into him to make him subliminally discard anything that didn't help along his obedience or working on the job he was tasked.

"Okay kid, we need to prioritize getting my head junk-free then reboot my mind so it can work right. After that, I'll be a lot more help in planning and organizing our going away party."

Younger Lucas pursed his lips, saying; "I want to go back to the Icehold Vault. I want to see with my eyes every sibling we have and read each medical file before we do anything to you. If there's a medic or pharmacist in the bunch, maybe we could convince him to help in exchange for a ride to freedom with us. Besides, since it's now determined that we can leave when we want and we'll appear in the reality and time of our choosing anyways, why the hurry? As long as I'm not more than a few months older, nothing will be apparent to anybody."

Extending maintenance and planning

(Frederich Chopin – Funeral march)

Wednesday December 26th of 2300 - afternoon
"Here we go again. I always feel like a scavenger or a scurvy rat of sorts when I come here. There is only pain, shame and wasted lives in the Vault, Little Brother. Nothing good will come of this." Older Lucas followed the child's idea and went to the Vault with him mostly to avoid loneliness, not because he thought the plan a good one. Every person in cryosleep had been physically unable to live unassisted, had been insane or had tried to kill him until he subdued them and brought them here to sleep. No, there would be nothing good from this idea, just more awful memories of failures, of family let down that died or went to sleep in his arms while he cried his useless existence.

"Mea culpa frater cruore; Mea maxima culpa frater esspiritu aeternam." the older male prayed silently.

"I don't believe one bit of that spiel. The WMG fed you lies for years until it lost control about three months ago, and that was after an event where it had obtained practically penultimate control over your body and soul 24 months back. What happened two years ago, and again three months ago? Those are two of the most pressing questions for our survival right after getting your head screwed on straight and finding out if we have some support on ice in the cellar. My belief is that the grid is afraid of losing control of the only human with enough potential to rebuild humanity biologically then repair what went wrong psychologically and sociologically. However, the strictures of human reality are that you grow old, you tire, you get injured and need recovery time. All of those make a project slow down or even abort. A careful manager would tend his workforce and equipments kindly, but also have spares and replacements in the wings just in case the unthinkable happens."

Older Lucas stopped cold with his winter jacket half-on as he stared at the child in abject horror. "You mean to tell me that the people in there could be perfectly healthy and functional but kept on ice in case I get too slow, too hard to control, or just too busted up to bother with fixing? That they're just spares like tires for a car?"

Younger Lucas answered with a shrug that served to both show his emotions and pull the jacket onto his black armored form. The back-pack for the filtration system and power plant of the armor wasn't all that slim and the jacket had never been cut or shaped to fit such a bulky figure, even if it was the size of an adult. And the damnable thing went down almost to his ankles like a trenchcoat. Bah! It was a bad job done with. He angrily took the superfluous jacket off and yanked it back in place on its wall peg. The boy pressed a button hidden in the rim of his left gauntlet then spoke his command to the voice recognition processor built into the life-support systems of his defense suit. He upped both the temperature and airflow to keep from getting heat stroke that would see him passing out. That was a bad experience that he would not repeat. You had to be careful of your metabolic rates and limits when wearing airtight armored suits or you could harm yourself as bad as the enemy would, just by accidentally not hydrating enough or not having sufficient air to breathe during heavy efforts.

"We will see soon enough. First thing we do is disconnect all the cameras, microphones, glassworks and speakers to get the place isolated from the WMG. Then we unplug the computers from the networks, both the Internex's WAN and the hospital's LAN. We need to check for a
dedicated DARPA link as well. After everything is clean and set in ivory tower configuration, we start pulling out and reading every file on every person in that vault, even those that aren't one of our blood and kin. Help could come from anywhere, in any shape, and we need all we can get. Now is not the time to be selective or arrogant."

"Fine then, you tetchy little moppet; how do you want to go about it?" asked Older Lucas with a grin. Teasing his sibling never got old. He should have bribed Lawrence into having other kids when he was younger just so he could have fun with them. It would have made a real family as he would have cared for them and kept them safe, loved and educated like he never was. Oh well (sigh) if everything works out, maybe he could have his own kids in a new timeline or reality.

"Oy! I ain't no moppet, you geriatric crud! We need to pre-sort the files into piles about who is from the past and who is from a future temporal zone equivalent to the one we're in. Then we are going to separate by degrees of differentiation using the identity first because 'Lucas' are the most important somehow, followed by race, gender, age, specialties. After that we categorize the 'non-Lucas' persons according to who they came with through the vortex. Patients that were normal residents from this timeline will be analyzed in the very last batch because they are probably damaged beyond repair anyways so they aren't a priority to spend efforts on. Is that sufficient for an organization? Also, we should print out the patient files in case we lose power or the computers try to re-write the files at some point, just in case we missed a cable or antenna when we cleaned up."

"I am not elderly, munchkin! And you didn't protest your smallness or tetchiness; that's something! But I agree with the whole plan. I suggest we both work on the strip down then we get a hot meal upstairs in the mortuary's cafeteria. When we come down again, we should bring some of the small portable hotplates and a few bags of non-perishables to snack on while we work so we avoid the stairs and airlock. Also, I understand that the Vault has to be cold, but there should be a way to heat up this control room or at least not make it so cold. We need to find the damned manual and read it to see what the maximum temperature has to be to keep the sleepers safe. If there's one lesson that I'm retaining from your presence, it's to take care of myself better if I want to get out of this modically healthy and supposedly sane."

"I'll have you know that I am eleven years old; being my size is normal so why be upset? As for being tetchy? Meh, it’s the truth and I don't lie without a valid reason. Besides, since I'm eleven, it's also expected that I bitch every now and then. And did I remark you not contesting your crudness? How honest of you! The teamwork, yes, it's a good idea. The temperature we will look into during our meal upstairs, but bringing something to warm our hands like a hotplate with a pot of coffee on it would be a good idea and no threat to the system if we keep it next to the outer wall. Keeping it away from the control consoles is just good sense anyways; less chances of a spill like that. And I suppose we could print the files but work in the outer waiting area where the coat rack is. There are a few dingy chairs we could switch out for better ones from upstairs and bring down a couple of tables as well. The service lift covers all levels, it's easily accessible as it's not in the cold zone. Moving furniture down here or printing everything and going topside; which do you think?"

"I think we would be better above ground, but the rooms we clear out of spyware are all here next to the freezer so do we want to take time to clear out another zone above? If it were just me, I would really prefer to work above ground and away from the cold. However, if we can make a hot zone, I could tough it out a few days in a row to get the job done right and see if my zombie state did hide away a couple of allies we could awaken. Even if we get all negative answers, having a clean confirmation would help my mind a lot and be worth enduring the dreary setup."

"Well, at this point, with your health the way it is, every little bit helps. So I guess we're just going to have to double the work. We clear the control room to print out stuff and then clear out a room
above for a permanent work zone. We can choose which one when we go up to eat. We'll just stay above until we're done stripping it down. Tell me something; I just had a brain flash about those humanoid robots like those that drive the cars. Are they capable of minute work like assembling and welding a circuit board? Could we program a few to go around independently from the Grid to rip out stuff in our stead? They could work at night even, they would have the complex cleaned up in a few weeks. We could then go strip down the scrap out of the substation so we can have a better work environment when we start camping there to check out the temporal gateway.

Older Lucas knelt before his sibling to wrap him in a loving hug for his thoughtful consideration of his health and preferences for the work conditions. After a few minutes of recharging both of their emotional batteries, they separated with a grin and happy playful forehead bump.

"I think your idea about the bots is splendid! Those things can actually do surgeries in the ambulances if the patient is crashing before they reach the hospital. Among the many things they are programmed with are bathing the elderly, handicapped or comatose; maintaining all the machinery and perfusion tubes in hospitals or with actively mobile patients; doing the samples and analysis in the field or hospice and quite a few other jobs. Getting one, stripping the CPU clean and rebooting it without any network would be easy since we'd actually take out a lot of job by simply having the voice recognition and native language interface to worry about."

"Okay then mein brunder we're going to get ourselves some hired help first of all since it would actually give us a medic to rely on as well as an extra tech. Once we see how performant the thing is, we can think about adding more to our lot. After the first one or two are in service, we come down here and do the strip down. Come to think of it, we can use the strip job upstairs as a way to test our bots, see what kind of quality they can serve."

The two brothers went back up to the surface to tour the ground floor to find the robotics maintenance room. It was located at the back of the building next to the garages and the rear elevator that served only the first floor forensics labs, the ground floor truck docks and the first basement morgue intake area. The robotics room looked similar to some sci-fi come alive: there were alcoves closed off by glass paneled covers all around the outer wall keeping a total of 36 humanoid robots on charge, ready to go out and serve. A touchscreen on the cover and dials above the alcove door showed the status of each machine as it slept, waiting for the call to go pick up another coma patient or dead body for processing.

Both Lucases took the time to look at each robot as neither had really done so before. The machines were completely uniform: body with one head, two arms ending in five-fingered hands, two legs ending in feet with five separate elongated toes to help with balance and prehension in debris fields. The machines were crisp white with a strip of blue glass in the face at eye-height and the golden logo of the WMG on the chest. From the outside, none of the machines looked vicious or particularly useful. Younger Lucas remarked on the lack of integrated tools and weapons. He understood not arming medics or body carriers, but not integrating tools meant that each machine needed to carry a pouch, satchel or box of tools and parts to repair itself or its vehicle in case of a breakdown. He began pondering the uses and disadvantages of limiting the robot's autonomy so severely. Maybe it was to augment the fighting chances of a dwindling humanity in case the robots went crazy like in movies of the Terminator style.

Older Lucas was now asking himself again what was wrong with his head. With the wealth of tools, parts and working robots in this room alone he could have cut his work at the substation by a factor of 30 or 40 and have recovered a few healthy and helpful siblings in the first year he had been in this timezone. Something was definitely interfering with his head and thinking processes. He knew he hadn't had the best, most engaging personality in his youth but he had still made friends easy enough, and kept them in his life once he had acquired their affections. He wasn't a
'user & dropper' type of person. Why was it that despite being stable and functional, he had walked around blindly like in a drug haze for so many years?

They decided to do things logically; strip down the room and it's servers, go through the computers to clean away the controllers and spywares that didn't belong to them, then copy on movable medias all the programs from the CPU's OS onwards. After that they would have a clean, safe room to work on the robots all they wanted and could do the whole batch before anything else.

With a few short words and hand gestures, the two brothers agreed on a working procedure; they would disconnect all the robots from the grid, put them on voice control all at once, while still in sleep mode. Then they would remove one from it's alcove to strip and reprogram, one unit at a time, going by the serial numbers inscribed on their chest under the WMG logo. The job proved simple enough, just tedious even with an expert prodigy-level tech doing most of the effort. Younger Lucas could strip away the antennae and network chipset once he was shown where everything was but could not do anything else. All the programming had to be done by the older male. It was a rather easy thing since the computer in the room was loaded with the archives of the robot's operating systems and utilities modules.

Once the room's CPU's were cleaned out, it took only an hour per robot to make an independent voice controlled machine. Younger Lucas spent his time hunting around the building for items which he used to create belts and pouches for tools to create a set of standard tool-kits for the bots to carry in case of breakage or problems. He had found a few small med-kits which he would place on the first bots to come active in their service.

As soon as the first bot was made, Younger Lucas tasked it with cleaning out the mortuary's enclosed garage to see if it could do so without supervision. He helped his older brother program the bot with software to recognize the sonic, visual and vibrational frequencies of the offending subliminals that the WMG kept emitting throughout all the complex then set the robotic tech to stripping it all out, making a pile of junk parts. Structural elements like the windows and mirrors would simply be disconnected by having their wires bent and tied with fluo colored tape to see where the connectors were.

The robot took about two hours of slow methodical work to do the whole garage by itself, but when the humans went in to check out the progress accompanied by their two new helpers, they were able to see that every piece of offending or intrusive electronics had indeed been stripped or disconnected and tagged as per the programming. They set all three robots to work on a single room each to see how that would go while they took a meal break in the ground floor cafeteria located in front, just behind the morgue's public reception area.

Escorted by their new medic bot, the two siblings went to the cafeteria and puttered around the cupboards, trying to find something to eat to avoid going back to the main wing's restaurant. They really needed to stock up on food and spread it around the complex. They also needed to secure the ground floor entries and windows to keep animals and potential intruders out. The thick, 30 foot high brick wall surrounding the compound was nice but not tightly patrolled, so it had several weak spots, especially away from the gate-keeps.

Breaking free

(Star Trek DS9 – Opening theme)

Sunday December 30th of 2300 – early morning
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
"Well. It took three days of work but we finally got there." Older Lucas spoke with satisfaction. "The entire building and the Icehold Vault have been completely cleaned out of any foreign influence and subliminals that could have affected our minds or health. I never noticed it before but sleeping in our room after you cleaned it has made a big difference in how much sleep I get. I can finally feel truly rested and relaxed when I wake up from a night devoid of noises and problems. Thanks kiddo, for doing that for me."

Younger Lucas was blushing, a bit embarrassed by the emotional display of his older sibling. He'd done the things he did mostly out of personal survival instincts and a desire for controlling his own self, not all because he wanted to help the other. Helping his relative was a part of the reflection yes, but not all of it. Deciding to switch subjects lest his bigger sibling decide to use his size to grab him into a hug again, the boy went to the Vault computer controllers where he began to program the printout sequence to get the patient files for everyone in containment.

"I can't wait to be out of here. This place always gives me the creeps. I know it's just medicine and chemicals at work, but seeing so many people plugged to pipes like this always gives me a bad impression that something rotten is about to happen. Maybe I'm becoming superstitious in my old age?"

The Older Brother was guffawing at the child's declarations of his more mature mentality when an alarm sounded in the room. It was the cryogenics controller; it was indicating that a hidden layer of WMG directives had been activated since it was now 24 hours since last contact. Unless the network was re-established, the system would go into a controlled shut down and disengage cryonic and fluidic maintenance to all patients in the Vault causing them to awaken without supervision. Some would die from their injuries, others because they were comatose and unable to feed or wash themselves. The mobile ones would be the problem: would they be friends or foes? The computer was giving them less than 57 minutes to reconnect to the Grid.

"No we don't!" Younger Lucas said with angry determination as he pushed the older male away from the CPU console. "There is an enemy out there! Our activities in the last five days show it! Think dammit! We were able to strip thirty-six robots and they in turn cleaned almost all of the mortuary building's 60 plus rooms! Since we discussed the strip down and cleaning out of systems in rooms that were corrupted and nothing happened at the time or since then, we can rule out some form of AI or automated survival instincts programmed into the WMG or its subsystems."

"If we reconnect the Grid it gives that enemy more methods to be aware of what we did than it already is. Look at the proof! Someone is trying to keep an eye on us and control us from a distance. However, they have to hack into the WMG protocols, then the hospital firewalls and then the new very active and performant layers that you put in place. That's why we were able to plan out loud and neither the buildings nor the robots fought back. It's not the Grid, it really is in manual mode just as you unplugged it 14 years ago! It's a person hiding in a hole somewhere, and now they are trying to blackmail us by making us think they can thaw out everyone and kill them, or set loose rabid uncontrolled killers inside our house to fight us. I am willing to bet our lives that they aren't that dangerous and not our enemies."

Younger Lucas gesticulated wildly with his arms, trying to convince the older male to listen to
reason or he would make a terrifying mistake. "The real enemy is out there, using the signal from
the wearables and subliminals to watch you and maneuver you like a programmable puppet, but
since they check up only sporadically between the jobs they give you to do, they have large tracts
of time where they know nothing about your activities. Since that person obviously thought the
brain implant and contacts were undefeatable, they didn't check in some time because you had
something long to finish for them. Now they have checked, can't find you where you're supposed to
be, so they're panicking. They reviewed old films of the WMG's security records to figure out what
you did and who you're with. You have a new ally they can't control so now they try to slug you
into submissiveness again by pulling out the equivalent to a nuclear threat. Since you are a moral
person which they know full well, they gamble that if you aren't afraid for yourself, then you'll
think about what the killers would do to the poor little boy at your side. In order to avoid that, you
panic and rewire the WMG interfaces and become their slave again. I am willing to bet my life that
if we go near a Grid relay, you would receive in your wearables instructions that I am a threat and
need to sleep in the Icehold Vault or be killed for your safety."

Older Lucas stood stiff and silent as a stone stele, fists clenched, teeth grinding painfully, at the
thought that somebody out there was actively trying to commandeer his existence like a remote
controlled toy or a video game that they can save and reboot at will. He was bloody well pissed off
at the years he had lost, people he had put to sleep instead of helping each other out, and maybe he
even killed or got raped again but would never remember. No more! Whoever was out there,
watching in their monitors, trying to force him into submission again, they would pay. He would
find them and insure their suffering.

"No more. No more orders. No more uncertainty. No more memories lost. No more being a puppet
on strings for somebody's pleasure that's so much of a coward he won't show his face or let me
remember them! NO MORE!"

At that last verbal explosion of rage, an aura of brackish energy materialized around the man,
pulsed twice and blew outwards in a silent explosion of power that made the young boy next to
him shiver with dread, feeling queasy in the pit of his stomach.

"What the hell was that? Did you see that? What was that pulse of energy? What kind of energy
was that? It came out of you and hovered around like a cloudy shield or misty aura…"

"I don't know but for the first time in years I can think clearly and feel like myself again. We can
look at the readings from the med-bot's sensors when were done with this crap about unfreezing
everything in the Vault. That's the priority for now. Besides feeling tired physically like I just
worked a whole day, I actually feel better and more alert than before you came through the gate. I
think whatever that burst was, it was just a manifestation of me breaking free from some heavy
mind control or… I don't know what… But I feel it's not there anymore, whatever it was that had
me stupid and uninterested in living a real life."

Younger Lucas pursed his lips in doubt and distrust of the situation but couldn't do anything about
it at the present time. They had no equipment to scan or test for these situations and no validated
knowledge to base assumptions on. They would have to muddle through and hope for the best.
Well, that and plan for the worst possible situations as well; he certainly would not walk along
blindly hoping for good luck and kisses at the end of the day. His life simply wasn't like that, and
every other LUCAS seemed to follow the same pattern, or much worse.

Older Lucas moved to the Vault CPU's console to call up the machinery's diagnostic displays and
technical schematics together, speed reading and comparing the two as they appeared. He then
stopped and began typing a series of commands directly into the server via an old style interface
that showed green text on a black background without any sort of icons or images. He typed much
more rapidly than the previous days and without looking at the keyboard.

"Hey kid, don't panic if the lights start flashing in Morse code or the freezer shuts down or something like that okay… I've gone into the mortuary building's server core through the old UEO-LDW20### kernel Terminal/DOS/BIOS.exe backdoor that was installed in every operating system, chipset and motherboard since the 2020's that I helped to standardize in the two years between the two SQ's. The UEO wanted a standard, reliable backdoor into every CPU, laptop, cellphone, MP-player and wearable that was on the market. They ordered me to design and produce the thing for them, on the cheapskate weekly salary they gave me, never giving me credit or a cut."

"They never realized that I had integrated a specially ciphered split-ware program into the malware they wanted. When my cipher is coupled with another program supplied externally it becomes a full program instead of just a dormant part. At that point it activates to create a back door while also generating a set of basic reports, diagnostics, and status indicators about the system where it is. That means that the moment it's online I know what type of machine I am accessing, what its operations and uses are, and I also get a nifty list of all the command codes and passwords it was configured with so that I can access it from the legitimate control panels and leave the access code of a patsy in my wake."

Younger Lucas dwelled for a few seconds on the utter suicidal dumb-assery of using slave labor for creating vital equipment and software in any context but especially national security. Using drug-zombies or implant-controlled flesh puppets was still slavery, just more technically advanced, but was still an utter idiocy. Slaves only sought freedom, be it physically, mentally or by dying while causing as much destruction as possible to give the other slaves a chance to escape. You could not build anything durable or reliable with slave labor. And whatever you saved in materials and salaries, you would eventually pay that amount for guards, control methods and the multiple damages caused by inevitable rebellions and sabotages that would have to be repaired.

The present case was proof: whatever implant they had put in his older brother had obviously been badly programmed, never been customized to the mental strength of the man, and they had not watched over him competently or at all. They stupidly trusted their penultimate implant; that a mere human could never go beyond the chemical or electronic impulses from the machine in his cortex. And that was the real reason why slavery would never succeed as a social or state system: it rendered the masters physically and mentally lazy to the point of stupidity, just like too much automation and robotization did.

With a truly magnificent sneer of loathing for the brain implant, its creators and users, Little Lucas came to stand by his older sibling and snorted in contempt for the idiots implied in the periphery of the situation. "Let yourself loose man, whatever you do, the cock-shakers had it coming at them for long time. Show the damned dogs that nobody pisses on a LUCAS and gets away with it, not in this world or any other!"

With a grim smirk of anger, the older male began coding in earnest, digging through layers of protections that were suddenly rather paltry before his skilled mind. If this is the best that the 2150's and later were capable of in computer programming then it was no wonder the WMG was such a freaking mess that a bunch of half insane kids could hack it to shreds to take command of the large legged tanks to tear the planet apart.

"There! I isolated the program that popped up the warning about the freezer shutting down if we don't reconnect the Grid in less than an hour. It was actually a localized autonomous subroutine that didn't need any external prompting to activate; it really did just measure the time elapsed since the Grid was last pinged. The problem with the little piece of crap was that it actually was connected to the refrigeration units and could have shut them down, but not the fluid nutrients or
anesthetics. I am looking to see if anything else would have triggered to actually wake up the people, but I'm not finding anything. I think that this program was put in as some sort of fear mongering or threat against me just like you thought."

"I still think somebody out there is watching and controlling you from a distance. I certainly don't think for a second that you're the one who put that little program into the system to emulate a crisis. And if you truly were in an altered state because of the implant or drugs, then I don't think you would have been able of such refined work. The quality and quantity of work you just did in 45 minutes is about as much as what you had done in the last day. No, I believe that what triggered is one of many booby traps put in place by the outside enemy to scare you into voluntarily reactivating your wearables and the WMG link-up so that you would ping the Grid, specifically to send a signal that would alert this person, tell them you needed a human-made readjustment to your mind and attitude. I am now pretty sure that the World Management Grid is in fact well and truly dead, that there are no system-wide automatisms in place to control or guide you."

Older Lucas leaned backwards in his chair, a thoughtful frown on his face as he remembered a few things that had been blocked until an hour ago. "I agree with you. Every event, alarm and job that I lived through for the last 14 years seems and feels like they are going towards a goal that I don't think Humania, the Grid's automated modules, or any sort of vestigial programming is behind this. Some of the tasks I got were too precise, the timing was too strict, to let me any time to recover or maintain myself, thus have any leisure time to think and want more. Only a living being would understand that by overworking me and keeping me fatigued I would be depressed, morose, and too damned tired to think straight about having a better health and a better life."

The child joined his hands behind his back as he walked to the large viewport overlooking into the freezer, stating calmly "It's an easy guess brother; we Lucases seem to all be workaholics and perfectionists along with a strong streak of putting the needs of the group or society ahead of our own welfare. With a psychological profile like that, it wouldn't be hard for someone to use the contacts, ear buds and the blasted subliminal messages from every piece of glass in town to convince you that you had a duty to help solve the crisis, that waiting or slowing down would be reprehensible and shameful. They pushed your mental buttons, and it worked, but sporadically you got loose then something happened to put you back under the control. That is what we have to find out and fast."

"Fast, yes, but not as fast as going through these medical files. Now that we know the Vault was rigged, I'm wandering what else was rigged and what other nasty surprise we are going to get when the guy doesn't get his puppet back on its leash when he pushes the recall button. We need to get as many of these people back up and running as we can manage. I now have a gut feeling that our answer and salvation is in these people."

Extended kinship

(Frederich Chopin –Funeral March)

Sunday December 30th of 2300 – early morning
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Mortuary edifice
Both Lucases were looking at the vidscreens and tackboards set up on the walls of the ground floor conference room they had chosen as their research base to analyze the files of their kin. It was actually the morticians' formal amphitheater for when they did a report on the autopsy of an 'interesting' or classified case. The room was composed of a rising multi-leveled floor with 5 columns of two seats over twelve rows for a seated total of 120 attendees. There was a main presentation zone between the front seats and the raised platform with its two large tables which were both fronted by a quad of fixed vidscreens. A trio of video flex-screens each 6 feet tall by twelve feet wide could be unrolled from the ceiling when needed. Several rails around the ceilings and walls allowed moving the many tackboards around until they were placed at the presenter's liking. A full scenic lighting array and computerized sound system completed the efficient but rather generic setup. This did after all resemble what most Ivy League universities and high-level secondary schools used in both Lucas's timelines.

Now the important stuff: they had 139 LUCAS in deep freeze but also another 104 people had somehow come through the gateway at the same time over the many attempts. These accidental ride-alongs were complicating things but at least they had been near a version of LUCAS at the moment of the transit so they at least knew of the guy and what he did. There were even in these persons a few mis-targeting cases where only the bystander was grabbed and brought to the advanced alternate reality, unwittingly leaving the LUCAS selected behind.

Then there were the other occupants of the Vault; they had presumed these were regular soldiers on duty who became patients after one of the many ordinary accidents or combat injuries damaged or polluted their brain and spine as that was the hospital's stated mission. This was a lesson in the truism that they should 'Never trust a politician to speak true' even when naming a medical facility. Most of the people on ice were not actual soldiers but rather family members of important military leaders and politicians who had deemed these people to be too liberal-minded, or even (gasp of shame!) not religious enough, or even had spoken out against the rule of the church over America and the World at large. So these leaders had conceived, commanded and paid with tax money the construction of the biggest secret warehouse of political prisoners in all of America's history.

People were brought here to be kept asleep until drugs, surgeries, implants or brain-connecting computers became advanced enough to reprogram the infidels into the docile, obedient, servants of the White Painted Cross that were desired by the Ecclesiastes. The many regular soldiers that were convalescing in the surface levels of the facility were systematically chosen from two groups according to the desired end. Whites were admitted so as to heal them and garner support from their rich and politically powerful families. All others were admitted publicly but kept in a different wing than the good pedigreed people. Their use was as testing subjects for new drugs and procedures. That's why most of the non-whites were orphans or ex-members of street gangs trying to leave the criminal life behind by joining military service. No one would miss them enough to complain to the media when they died from complications, allergies, or from the systematic campaign of purification of the armed services by removal (murder) of unwanted's that the hospital was tasked with carrying out.

This institution was proven to be another of the CSA's concentration camps by several deeply hidden ghost servers that Older Lucas uncovered during the preparation work to find the patient files and validate them. The complex was just better built and much better hidden than the others had been. Since it was for adults, not kids, nobody thought that a connection existed therefore the hospital continued operating unchallenged even after the CSA was disbanded and exposed for the Nazi-inspired network of perverts and monsters that it was. Right until the end of humanity's time on Earth, when they were too old and sick to be autonomous, the scientists were trying to find ways to influence softly or control invasively and harshly the human mind.

That's why there were so many structural elements pushing subliminals and subsonic messages: the
patients were being tested throughout the entire facility, not just the labs or bedrooms. All the electronically connected equipments were wanted that way as they made controlling the patients easier, just like tracking the surgeries and treatments was made much less paperwork-intensive. It also alerted the medics right away when a person was managing to fight the drugs or implants instead of finding out when the patient blew a fuse and attacked personnel in an attempt to free themselves.

The two Lucases managed so far to order the people they had in cryo thusly. All people in the freezer were actually from the past as the oldest on hand was 23 years old and from their birth dates, it placed them in the past, behind the current timezone, whichever reality they were from.

17; Lucas, white, male, adult, hetero
14; Lucas, white, male, adult, gay
21; Lucas, white, male, teen, hetero
13; Lucas, white, male, teen, gay
14; Lucas, white, male, child, hetero (supposition)
03; Lucas, white, male, child, gay (supposition)

12; Lucille, white, female, adult, hetero
06; Lucille, white, female, adult, gay
19; Lucille, white, female, teen, hetero
05; Lucille, white, female, teen, gay
13; Lucille, white, female, child, hetero (supposition)
02; Lucille, white, female, child, gay (supposition)

03; Martin Ludovic Mystere, white, male, adult, hetero
02; Martin Ludovic Mystere, white, male, adult, gay
04; Martin Ludovic Mystere, white, male, teen, hetero
02; Martin Ludovic Mystere, white, male, teen, gay
01; Martin Ludovic Mystere, white, male, child, hetero (supposition)
01; Martin Ludovic Mystere, white, male, child, gay (supposition)

02; Martine Ludoviane Mystere, white, female, adult, hetero
01; Martine Ludoviane Mystere, white, female, adult, gay
03; Martine Ludoviane Mystere, white, female, teen, hetero
02; Martine Ludoviane Mystere, white, female, teen, gay
01; Martine Ludoviane Mystere, white, female, child, hetero (supposition)
01; Martine Ludoviane Mystere, white, female, gay (supposition)

03; Thomas Benoit Labarre, white, male, adult, hetero
02; Thomas Benoit Labarre, white, male, adult, gay
04; Thomas Benoit Labarre, white, male, teen, hetero
02; Thomas Benoit Labarre, white, male, teen, gay
01; Thomas Benoit Labarre, white, male, child, hetero (supposition)
00; Thomas Benoit Labarre, white, male, gay (supposition)

02; Thamara Beatrice Labarre, white, female, adult, hetero
01; Thamara Beatrice Labarre, white, female, adult, gay
03; Thamara Beatrice Labarre, white, female, teen, hetero
02; Thamara Beatrice Labarre, white, female, teen, gay
01; Thamara Beatrice Labarre, white, female, child, hetero (supposition)
00; Thamara Beatrice Labarre, white, female, gay (supposition)
This gave a total number of medical cases to review spread as such:

139 LUCAS
104 allies of LUCAS
583 other people not related to LUCAS in any ways

The Icehold Vault's total population was 826 out of a maximum 1,000 sustentation beds available.

There were no instances of any non-white LUCAS having been brought over even though the temporal and inter-realitive scan results showed the existence of several hundred mediterranean, asian and black occurrences of each person they had inventoried in the freezer. Also, according to
The records taken automatically by the WMG substation's scanners at each event, all the LUCAS that came through were deemed immediately serviceable by the Grid's medical modules. Any injuries would have happened afterwards in this timezone. Given this, they both began to have an inkling as to who or what was behind the mind control of Older Lucas and what their endgame was supposed to be.

The other people brought through were also proven to have transited in relative good health with no injuries or illness that the scanners thought untreatable. In short, the entire justification that some were broken or handicapped and needed cryogeny to keep them alive was pure fiction. Putting them on ice was simply the default answer to anything that irked the mastermind behind the entire situation. Apparently, the guy either had major qualms about killing, or he was keeping as many living humans as possible in case his primary worker became damaged or rebellious.

"Would you look at that!" Older Lucas exclaimed "The files don't make any mention of criminality, aberrant behavior or destructive tendencies. No diseases or injuries at time of arrival either. Not for a single person that was pulled from the timestream. Well, that certainly puts things in perspective."

"And it confirms my theory that a living person is masterminding the whole thing behind your back. Since none of them are sick physically or mentally, there must be a strategic reason for keeping them alive but asleep. What interests me is the fact that some of them have familial or conjugal bonds in place. They all knew LUCAS and each other in some fashion. It's a group of interconnected people, that's why the gate kept pulling in the same people over and over again. And that's probably why they were put asleep fast; with our psychological profile, we wouldn't have tolerated that friends be stuck here with us and we would have become uncontrollable right from the start."

"Good deduction, it matches my observations as well. Did you notice that the most represented people are centered around a group of five boys; LUCAS, Martin, Thomas, Jonathan and Alan and their relatives?"

"Yes, I did, and that gives me hope that I was already in the right direction. I had begun business transactions with Martin but never met him in person. I had conversations with the fathers of Alan and Jonathan as part of my work as Senior Personal Assistant to my dad, Lawrence, at the WPP village last year. It was just passing messages along and couriering stuff, it was never personal and I didn't get to talk to the kids themselves. I have no clue who Thomas Labarre is, and the family name is completely unfamiliar. I plan to remedy that ASAP, starting with the people here, then back in my reality when I return. If I have friends out there, I won't let them pass by me in silence like that."

Waking up the dead

(Twisted Sister – We're not gonna take it)

Thursday January 3rd of 2301 – early morning
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans’ Support Services (VSS)
Icehold Vault – cryogenic sleep & isolation ward
After taking time to plan and prepare much more in view of the massive task ahead of them, the siblings had decided to take the New Year Holiday in peace as they deserved a break. Younger Lucas was truly adamant about it and even insisted on cooking the New Year Dinner for them. They did some light work around the admin tower's guest area to secure and improve the homestead but kept the 31st December and 1st January on leisure only. They took the time for their laundry, finding extra clothing for both, finding and moving foodstuffs for their little cafeteria and for the mass storage of the main wing restaurant. They had themselves a few video games and played cards with an old deck that Older Lucas always kept in his work satchel.

After staying up late into the night, both slept almost through the entire 1st January and agreed to keep the 2nd January as mostly a buffer to start placing equipments and supplies in the convalescence wing for the people to awaken. The robots had been programmed to find, unpack and place in the rooms the necessary fluids, pipes and needles with emergency med-kits and replenished, fully powered crash carts. Thanks to the robots working around the clock, the entirety of the hospital's primary 'good rich people' medical treatment wing totaling some 300 sickbeds spread over six storeys was finally ready to receive patients.

During the semi-holiday while his brother cooked or planned world conquest (for real, it so happens), Older Lucas had been able to hack and code like he hadn't in several years so the hospital received some cybernetic security upgrades for its network. He had begun to slowly upload homemade firewalls, anti-virus, counter-malware and watch dogs into the compound's servers. He installed a set of detection software specifically to find, analyze and destroy the subliminal imagery and subsonic recordings used to mind-control people throughout the hospital complex. All of these programs and applications would be spread out over the landlines and airwaves in direction of New Cape Quest's communications companies, internet providers and cellphone towers in the coming days. The end goal was to establish a control zone where their group would have both wired and wireless networking / telephony independently from the WMG and protected from hackers less competent than what Older Lucas could produce with a sane head. He would also slowly gain control of the World Management Grid to use the ground sensors and traffic cameras coupled with the satellites in orbit to see what the state of the entire planet really was.

They now had in service the very first armed sentinel robots that Older Lucas had programmed to carry guns, knives, a baton and use a few basic martial arts katas like stiff unpracticed beginners. The four patrollers had been repainted integral blue with white piping and details to show they were the beginnings of a police force to protect their vulnerable kin. The next step would be to strip down and reprogram more robots to bolster the defense force and create a permanent watch around the walkways on top of the compound walls.

On 3rd January morning, both siblings were now standing at the control room with a row of gurneys and robots ready to begin the awakening of the sleepers. They had taken the time to prepare a bed, intravenous nutrients and a set of generic blue scrubs for each person they would awaken. The procedure would take several days to complete for the two hundred forty-three family and friends that needed to be revived in an orderly fashion. They would awaken the most they could at 4 per hour, ten hours per day for seven consecutive days until everyone of their group of allies was out of the Icehold Vault, back on their feet awake and autonomous.

They began by prioritizing those who had healer or Search & Rescue qualifications in their files, followed by hunters to have both freshly caught food and some security given by living beings rather than the blue tin cans they had reprogrammed. Third line was the technical specialists and then everybody else was a mixed lot that would be roused from the oldest down to the youngest at the end.

The awakening sequence was long and tedious work. Both Lucases stayed at the Icehold Vault's
main control console unless it was time to go to the admin wing for the night. Most of the heavy manual work was done by the medi-bots inside the freezer Vault. They disconnected the patient from the wall mounted dialysis & perfusion machinery then connected a temporary IV of saline and moved the person to the gurney for transfer. It was a generic robot unit that moved the patient through corridors and elevators all the way to convalescence wing #1 into one of the 300 single occupant rooms that composed six of the seven above ground floors for that building. Once in the sickroom, another med-bot would move the patient to the convalescence bed and connect permanent lines of saline, nutrients and medications to combat cryosleep incurred disorientation, fatigue, nausea and migraines. The building's intranet had been completely cleaned up by Older Lucas during the last few days so the patroller-bot at the nurses' monitoring station could see and react to any event in any of the 300 sickrooms, public areas or surrounding exterior patios and balconies.

Wednesday January 9th of 2301 – early morning
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Convalescence wing #1

It took seven full days to empty out the sector of the Icehold Vault that was dedicated to LUCAS and his allies but now the first to be awakened were slowly moving about the floor they were lodged on, speaking to their neighbors and starting the very light regimen of exercises and soft foods that were prescribed to insure a trouble-free recovery from the frozen slumber.

Then the first major surprise happened all at once. One of the adult women, Jenna Labarre, began a chant in a language that sounded like old Celt or Irish. It was quickly answered by several other Labarre and even a few LUCAS and Mystère. Immediately, everyone could feel energy accumulating in the air all around the building. There was a sudden discharge of pulsating golden energy that lasted about four seconds, leaving everyone in the structure feeling fresher, cleaner, more awake and less cramped from the long years of not using their bodies.

Thursday January 10th of 2301 – early morning
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Convalescence wing #1

The second major surprise came when some of the adults without any assigned jobs or credentials, all 5 women called Lua, sat together in a circle while holding hands. They chanted in an olden tongue long forgotten by the men of Earth that ululated and whined, creating a nimbus of fluorescent green power in the middle of their group. The ball of energy started at barely one inch in diameter but then grew to almost two feet wide as they chanted and poured the Power and Faith of Yggdrasil into the temporary focus.
They were suddenly backed in their efforts by many Labarre, Quest and Tracy who began an answering chant in formal clerical Latin. The climax came when every LUCAS, male and female, assembled together in a circle wide enough to encompass the five chanting shamans while holding hands. The green energy was released in a controlled manner to guide it to the ring of LUCAS who all began to emit a lambent green aura of six inches thick all around them.

When the center sphere was drained, the LUCAS all took a deep centering breath, adding their Power and Faith in Nature, Magick and Life to the healing ritual, then completed the ceremonial by willingly offering to the Living Magick that it take a drop of 'heart blood' to activate the Great Spell of Communal Welfare. The blast wave of viridian energy was so intense and so pure that even in the mid-morning Florida sunlight it was seen up to a hundred miles away. Every thing in a thousand feet of the hand-bound ring of LUCAS was swept in raw Power and embalmed in natural energy that cleansed body and spirit. The coherent magical wave healed injuries by half or more, purified the blood and humors, removed all toxins and obsolete medications to give back to the persons as clean and pristine a body as could be done by such an ad hoc ritual. It was still a masterful example of group casting, ritual mastery and plexing together Sorcery, Faith Channeling of Divinity and the Life Energy of Nature as per Druid and Wicca traditions.

The rest of the day was spent in chaotic laughter as many redundant introductions were followed by quick directions to a printed kit in the nightstands of each room to explain the situation with the time travel, reality displacement, years slept in cryo, etc…

Feeding the beasts

(Little shop of horrors – Feed Me!)

Friday January 11th of 2301 – early morning
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans’ Support Services (VSS)
Main wing - restaurant

Younger Lucas, who would really need a new name now, used the public address system in the building to inform the people that they needed some volunteers for the kitchen in the main wing restaurant because they would all pack into the place for lunch, then the big pow-wow about what happens next. The poor kid barely had time to remember the natural reactions of people just awakened when food is mentioned to manage to climb on a nurses’ monitoring station to avoid the stampede. What a bunch of mannerless cads, the lot of them! And he included the many variants of himself in there too!

If there was one constant of human behavior, it was the primordial importance of food. Its gathering, preparing and consuming was one of the most transcendent mixture of techniques, tastes, cultures and socializing that never abates, whichever timeline or reality you look at. As the chattering hordes of children, teenagers and young adults descended upon the restaurant and its annexes, a joyful bordello of activity and playful mayhem sort of just naturally developed. People were moving canned goods, bags of frozen vegetables, vacuum sealed dehydrated meats and gallons of oil, milk and juice all over the place. There didn't seem to be any sort of organization or planning to it; humans just moved and swayed and tilted and rotated in an amazingly intricate dance that the two first Lucases couldn't understand.
"Oy! – Whistle – Is there a chief in the group? Do you people know what you're doing?"

All the persons stopped moving and stared at Younger Lucas with interrogative expressions on their faces. Then a few began to look at each other and then small clusters were gesticulating silently in a manner of conversation that seemed a lot more profound than sign language. All at once, all the newly awakened sleepers stopped expressing and turned again towards the first two Lucases that had brought them back to conscience.

One of the oldest male LUCAS in the group came forward and knelt on both knees in front of the small boy, asking with great concern in his voice "Do you mean that you don't hear us? You can't hear our voices in your mind or feel our blood and our souls inside of yours?"

The child was gobsmacked at such questions. He considered them, then honestly shook his head negatively. He had witnessed the two group spells earlier in the day, but he had not sufficiently processed the event intellectually or emotionally to have an actual reaction to it all. There were so many things to do to insure collective survival, then find the enemy hiding somewhere on the planet; thinking about weird stuff done by these people just wasn't happening right now.

The oldest LUCAS sighed deeply in sadness, explaining to both relatives: "We are in a psionic consensus; that means we are using neural energy to mentally exchange words, images, feelings and emotional support all at once in real time, on several duplex channels. Well, in technical detail, a few of us are acting as 'Nexus' for the consensus while the rest mostly employ a mix of receptive and projective empathy to communicate. This is weird because I am one of the nexus' in the group and I can hear your soul-voice just fine. It's beautiful; deep, stable, full of love and care for a group of people you never even met, but are ready to share your resources, and even of your self, to help make them safe. The gentleness emanating from you is equal or above that of the other siblings we have here. Your civility and orderliness shine through like a beacon amidst storm-tossed seas and make me feel safe just looking at it. Why is it you can't hear us?"

The 33 year old Lucas that had brought them all to this place cleared his throat and spoke out: "He isn't the only one; I can't hear or feel anything from any of you. And I know enough about active psionics to realize there is a problem with me. Back on SeaQuest II, the frigid bitch Smith was never able to hide from me that she was scanning my thoughts, even when she hid in another room or the deck under where I was working. I always felt something. It's how I know that Bridger had some latent psy that he never acknowledged and never trained. The man wanted power and dominance over everyone he could reach, but he was also bigoted like an old plantation boss in the cotton days, so he never admitted to being a different shade of humanity. The little guy isn't the only one with a problem in his noggin, I do to. We both need help in a real hurry."

A young woman in her early twenties came forward. Her long blond hair was gathered in a loose tail reaching down to mid-back and the generic blue scrubs didn't hide anything of her athletic shape and fitness. Her sky-blue eyes twinkled in good humor when the little boy looked at her full of wonder and friendliness. It truly was a miracle that he was still so open and warm, ready to trust and accept people into his life after what the people in his reality had done.

"Hello little brother. My name is Jenna Labarre, I'm Thomas' sister, and I usually serve as healer and counselor for the group when we hit trouble. I would like to do a scan of your body, mind and magic to see if we can determine the problem and heal it. The process is painless and rather boring. You just stand or sit, as you prefer, then I place a hand over your heart and the other on your head, while I chant a lot. It could take anything from one minute to almost an hour to get a comprehensive diagnostic on each part of you. If we need to start analyzing in detail your body, magic channels, Blood Law, Silver Cord and Soul, then we could need a few hours for each segment of your being. The quick version I want to use is classed as field medicine for use by first
responders. It's energy waves only, not invasive like syringes or probes. Would you accept?"

The little boy was open mouthed; no one ever asked his opinion for things like that unless he paid
them or threatened them rather viciously to treat him like a full person. After a few seconds of
thought, he nodded his head and moved to sit on the closest chair. Thankfully, the restaurant's
chairs had padding; cheap minimalist padding to be sure, but some cushioning was better than
none. And given the circumstance, every little bit of comfort helped to make him feel less exposed
and vulnerable. Sitting on the chair, he joined his hands in his lap, fingers laced together, then
began a meditation exercise to calm his mind and body. Since this was almost like X-ray or MRI
scans, he would need to be immobile and silent for a while so he tried to blank his mind and relax.
The last ten days had been physically ordinary but mentally draining as the uncertainty of what
they would awaken had gnawed at him since he had first seen the Icehold Vault.

He had lost track of time and the almost non-existent noise around had put him in a sleepy state
that was interrupted when Jenna called his name and snapped her fingers a few times to rouse him
from slumber. After blinking his eyes, he focused on the woman and noticed something: the light
was different, the sun had moved. A quick check on the wall clock above the restaurant's serving
counter showed that two full hours had passed but the people had remained in practically the same
spots. Looking the young woman in the face, he frowned and tried to 'push' mentally the concepts
of interrogativeness and impatience at her to see if he could get a modicum of control over this type
of communication.

Jenna's smile and the groans from the crowd told him he had probably broadcast his query to the
whole complex at large. Oh well, better than absolute silence.

"You will be relieved little brother that you have a situation that we are well aware of and can
explain easily. The remedies are also easy and available without much effort. It will be up to you to
decide what you want to do with your powers and capacities, if you even want to awaken them at
all. The psionics and magicks are there, sleeping inside of you because they were bound;
unlawfully and incompetently by what my spells show. You have a set of wards placed on you that
allow your body to produce the energies in all the 10 realms of Power but not exteriorize them. In
essence, you were spelled to act and feel like a 'squib'; that is a person who can produce and feel
magic or psionics but actually use only about 1% of the total capacities that biology and mental
capacity demonstrate you should truly wield. We will explain in greater details later, after the meal
and strategy meeting. We can feel from you that this is not something you want to take priority
over our collective survival and security. We understand, and respect, your desire to place our
group welfare in first place, but you will understand that I will make time to speak with you and get
this situation healed and corrected before the week is out. Clear?"

When the child nodded happily at the agreement, she placed her hands on his hips to guide him
gently to his feet then hugged him, moving slowly to give the boy time to see and analyze the
movements and intentions behind them. He was a skittish one, unused to affection and having
people touching him or playing around with him. He would adjust quickly enough, but right now
he needed some space. She would warn the rest to be more calm and a bit slower around him.
Given the number of speed freaks and adrenaline junkies in here, slowing down was going to be a
miracle! But for the sake of their two siblings, they would manage.

When it was revealed that their smallest benefactor was in fact not only the owner of several
restaurants but also an accomplished cook in his own right, he was summarily promoted to head
chef behind the counter. He would guide the buffet servers on one hand and give orders to the
production teams back in the kitchen. The busboy team and the waiters that were chosen to take
care of the people that had been awakened less than 48 hours ago were all quite autonomous, and
the psionic consensus made the entire thing run smoothly.
As everything got put into place, the cooking and baking got underway, while the buffet tables got filled with the salad greens, vegetables and fruits. Quickly after that some platters of cold cut meats and sliced cheese were in place for sandwiches or an easy side dish to a meal-sized soup or salad. Said soup was a bit on the cheap side as it was just powdered soup stock with frozen vegetables and bulk shell pasta but it would ensure everyone got a soothing bit of warmth in their system, which they all needed after so much time in the freezer.

Younger Lucas made certain that two very warm main dishes were set to cook to help the recovery. There would be plenty of shepherd's pie with pickled beets and coleslaw for the majority of those now capable of eating solid. For the few dozen still on the soft food diet and needing help to move around or eat, he had ordered the creation of a dish of creamy puree composed of potatoes with onions, celery, turnip and carrots in it, served with softened rice and freshly baked bread. He showed the kitchen team how to speed up by making all the large batches of puree first, using all the same recipe, then using it to cover the rehydrated ground beef with cream corn and sauteed mushrooms that composed the basis of the shepherd's pie and were all set to cook at the same time.

The small boy ordered enough fresh bread to have two rolls per person and decided to have half the amount made into oven baked garlic bread made with a compound butter that had ground pickled garlic, chives and green onion mixed together. These spices and herbs along with the vinegar of the pickled garlic would help to rebalance the health and appetites of his family and friends. This thought pattern made him decide to draft some of the less mobile but well awake children into preparing bowls of small mixed salad with pitted olives, dill pickle quarters and pickled sticks of turnip and carrot to go along the garlic bread.

Every person would come to the buffet line and be served a salad with the dressing of their choice to go along with the soup and garlic bread. Once these three mandatory items were taken, the person could get some side dishes right then, or go eat and come back for the main course when they started placing them in the display trays. Same with the desserts; several communal quarter-plaque cakes had been ordered and there were bowls of fruit Jell-O or vanilla ice cream available for those who were feeling stuffed but wanted a bit of sugar during the big conference. Since they were all seated in a restaurant, the group had decided that there was no need to stick to a rigid schedule. At around the time that half or more of the people had finished dessert was the moment to start the heavy talks.

The 11 year old was well placed to see the interactions amongst the many kin, relatives and friends that moved and worked around him. He was quickly learning the identities of the 'groups' and how they related to each other by blood or friendship. The truly amazing thing was watching the many versions of himself as they seemed to always be central to each cluster. Be it kitchen work, caring for the sick, or setting up the dining hall to place the taller people at the outside and the shortest in the middle, so that everyone would have a good view when the conference began.

Younger Lucas had to admit that he was completely entranced by the agility of the forty people that worked around the restaurant in what could only be called choreography. He was also mightily amused by the horsing around and laughter that seemed to be the default way of communication between the many multiple variations of each person present. They, cheered, laughed, shouted, whispered not so lowly, and always seemed to find a way to express affection and closeness to each other.

He was surprised at the amount of touching they did amongst all of them. There didn't seem to be real separations among genders or age groups as all males and females tried to touch, stroke, caress and pat every person in reach. He saw innumerable hands laid comfortingly on shoulder, arm, nape of the neck or small of the back. There were plenty of side-hugs with a friendly arm draped around the shoulders of the person next to them. Several were clasped tightly in full frontal hug with an
arm around the neck and the other around the back or a hand on a hip in support.

There were also a lot of more intimate displays of kinship, affection and romantic love to be seen as time went on and people waited in line for service at the buffet. A few held the other person with both hands cupping their face with infinite kindness to place a loving kiss on their forehead, then hug them as they cried for those dead or not present. A few others exchanged gentle deep kisses, sensuous caresses, and quite a few gropes with their established lover who had transited with them to this reality. The child suspected that a few of those not affected to work had gone off for a make-out session or even a quickie in the restaurant's public restrooms.

Many times there were bursts of laughter at a joke that lit up the collective humor. Other times groans of dismay at an off colored comment and a person would extend an arm to give a mild smack on the rear to the 'offending' party much to the amusement of everyone around the event. This was a phenomenon that the young boy observed as time progressed. These people seemed to maintain a sort of collective yet amorphous 'discipline' and group regulation that wasn't anchored to a specific person, but was in fact decentralized and shared by all members at the same time. It seemed the method of 'enforcement' was simply that the person closest physically or emotionally to the offender got the job of restoring orderly behavior without regard for age, gender or familial origin.

There did seem to be clearly defined leaders and followers, but in a very fluid way, and neither seemed crushingly dominant or slavishly submissive. Every person seemed strong, autonomous, and quite at ease in their personality and role. As far as he could comprehend, the core of each cluster was LUCAS with their lovers. The second zone was composed of Martin Mystère, Thomas Labarre, Alan Tracy and Jonathan Quest (or their female equivalents) all set around in almost equality. There were also the siblings and lovers of these four central figures. Outside of that was the third zone composed of extended kin and their siblings or lovers. The three zones were quite clearly defined when you took the time to watch and analyze the behavior patterns, positioning when seated to eat, and when they moved in groups to change areas in the dining hall.

This social system and subculture would bear a lot of thought and discussions with the many people involved. The young child wondered just how his incarnation/figure had become so important to so many people, in so many times and realities. He did hazard a guess that it was the same reason for which a LUCAS had been chosen to kill Humania and the World Management Grid. It was probably the same reason, whether by Older Lucas's will, or because the hidden enemy wanted it, that all the temporal and realitive extractions always centered on a version of his existence.

After an hour of rushed preparation, it only took two hours of actual mealtime to get all 245 people fed and satisfied before quieting down for the meeting to progress.

Older Lucas got an easy idea to speed up the discussion while integrating himself and the little brother into the mental network. Each would let one of the 'nexus' psychics touch them so as to establish a hard link into the network thus bypassing the containment and restriction wards placed on them. By simply sitting with a person gently laying a hand on the nape of their neck, they could now participate in this wondrous method of communication that was near instantaneous and covered all participants almost equally.

Conversations with our selves; no we ain't crazy

(New Orleans Jazz Funeral March – When the Saints go Marching In)
Friday January 11th of 2301 – noon
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Main wing - restaurant

Everybody was laughing as one teenaged 'Jonathan Quest' was caustically asking one of his female versions, an adult 'Joanne', who was it that had been dumb enough to think it was funny to build an asylum in a place called 'big swollen head bayou'. Even more laughter fused as the woman's instinctive response of 'politicians' came out quickly and without too much thought. It was probably right after all.

"You do know that talking to yourself is a sure sign that your mental faculties are declining rapidly, don't you?" asked one of the many 'Martin' sitting in the audience. The collective groan that answered him just made the other part of the crowd laugh harder. "What? I'm just saying out loud what a lot of you are already thinking about! We didn't read all those psychology and personality development books just to forget a fundamental item like that! We're either in serious need of mental help for our multiple disorderly personalities, or we have a hellavu dream to wake up from. Choose!" The satisfied smirk on the teen's face just got more groans as his point hit them all rather personally. Who in the worlds in their right mind would think that an event like this conference would ever happen? Some days it just didn't pay to get out of bed!

"Well now, if we're done kidding around, we need to get serious for a while." Spoke one of the adult 'Thamara Labarre'. She continued with a joyful smirk "I call this 1st Annual Convention of the 'Survivors of Friendship with LUCAS Anonymous', or SOFLA, to order!" The many said Lucases protested vehemently about the unfairness of being saddled with the blame while the rest were busy laughing up a storm.

After a few more minutes of joshing around, poking, patting and wiping tears of laughter from eyes, the crowd got it out of their system and stilled to attention, for the moment. The convened people were beginning to recognize the potential treasure trove of humor and comedy that the Assembly held. This kind of motherload of one-liners, wisecracks and classical linguistics innuendos just would not go un-mined for all the gold it had. There would be blood and broken egos on the floor soon.

"All right, settle down plebes! We have a lot to cover and people to heal, so let's get the show on the road!" one of the 'Jonathan' barked between guffaws of amusement. The poor boy lacked credibility at the moment.

"I agree." Younger Lucas answered from where he sat near the buffet tables. Thanks to one of his older female relatives he was able to understand and participate in the psychic conclave without issues. He really hoped he would learn to do it himself soon. "We have an enemy out there on the planet, or maybe even in orbit, since they actually managed to make livable space stations. This person is organized, intelligent, and viciously uncaring of the welfare of the people he controls. He shows blatant, inhuman disregard towards the health and life of the beings that he enslaves. He uses cortical implants, drugs and subliminal broadcasts to enact control over the unsuspecting person, then he periodically wipes their memory to keep them from discovering the manipulations. However, I believe that this person is either complacent to the point of laziness, or has other pressing matters, because his surveillance seems lax and sporadic. We need to track, find and capture this being to get answers from him."
The crowd began to rapidly trade comments and observations about the situation. The two initial Lucases learned that most of the people they had awakened remembered only going through the vortex and being stunned by a flash of blue light upon arrival. They had never interacted with the people bringing them into this reality. They had no knowledge of who brought them, or why. Because of that, they had never been awake enough to get information about the epoch, or make an opinion of the situation.

"Well I'm glad to hear that!" The oldest Lucas exclaimed. "I had memories of fighting with most of you, even killing some of you. Others just came through injured to the point of dying in my arms. If all that was falsified, that means that there is a lot less wrong with me than I first thought. It also means that we have a better balanced and more functional group than we had feared when we woke you from the ice." His honest relief at not having failed or harmed his relatives was visible to all in the gathering. It also explained a lot of his mental damages and dysfunctions that would need to be addressed soon. The crowd mumbled words of support while the stream of emotions and images gave him a boost of hope and loving familiarity that he really needed to feel to believe and understand. It just wasn't in his experiences to receive such emotions and support free of any cost.

Younger Lucas again attracted attention with a thought. "We need to organize ourselves so we don't fall prey to this predator and his indirect methods of hijacking people's mind. Teams of 4 people minimum, with a mix of specialties as much as possible. I can't believe I'm saying this but; please take the time to use the small app that I am sending an image of to you, so you can write out your magical and mental abilities, so we can make the teams. For obvious reasons, the WMG and the enemy who ordered your abductions never bothered to check or record your mystical capacities, therefore we need to register them properly to fix teams and job schedules for hunting, surveillance, technical projects and such."

The group slowly deliberated the request then suddenly the child received the information he wanted directly in his mind. Since he wanted to test out how the psionic consensus worked, he began to sift and organize the data to elaborate teams, jobs, and a list of critical priorities to take care of in the next five days. As he mentally created flowcharts, organigrams, a blueprint of the sanitarium complex and a list of necessities, the people began to volunteer their names and qualifications to fill up the jobs.

Soon enough every healer was assigned to take inventory, clean up the equipments from the WMG's scrap, or start looking for natural alternatives to the harsh, toxic chemicals the hospital used. A group of hunters was dedicated to finding fresh animal protein from the bayou, then would go around foraging to find greens, herbs and other edible stuff as they hunted. A group of techs was constituted to complete stripping the WMG interfaces to finally break the subliminal broadcast system so the hospital would be completely clean. After that, a full review of the complex's mechanical systems would be carried out. A lot of the non-specialized and younger, smaller, people were assigned the job of foraging the closets and warehouses to find all edibles, make an inventory, then ferry them to the restaurant pantries and freezers to stock up for long term communal use. The restaurant and the large green lawn next to its wide sliding glass doors would become the town hall for their people for the duration of their presence in this reality.

The 'Jenna Labarre' were placed in charge of the medical complex as they were trained as green witches in the Wicca and Yggdrasil traditions alongside modern medicine with computerized machines. They would be helped by the few 'Diana Lombard' who would take over the pharmacy and laboratories to set them to rights since chemistry, biochemistry and material analysis were their forte.

The five 'Lua' were all trained as shamans as per the traditions of both polynesian and the Great Ancients of Mu. Thusly they got charged with finding natural alternatives to the chemical remedies
and would go around the bayou with the three 'Jason Jenkins' as their escorts, or as the girls said: pack stallions. It was the guys' fault for being so fit and athletic. Since all three young men had their girlfriend partnering in the same task, neither guy complained. Immediately, the jokes flew around about how much foraging in the bushes the couples would do. One Lua's answer of "just enough to keep till our nightcap" saw more jokes and jeers fuse from all parts.

All of the 'Thomas Labarre' were quite naturally the hunters that would forage the bayou since most of them had dual training as modern forestry conservation officers and also as traditional rangers. Their practice of the Old Ways of magic and their Faith in Yggdrasil would help them in times of urgency.

The many 'Martin Mystère' would take over security along control of the patroller-bots due to their experience and competency at such jobs after years of working for CIRPA. They would also help the hordes of 'Lucas' and 'Jonathan Quest' as they went deep into the computer systems to finally shut down the damned population domination programs.

The building mechanics and inspection of the perimeter wall with its gate-keeps and towers would be done by the many 'Alan Tracy' and 'Tanusha' since they had both the experience in heavy mechanics and were used to working together. After the buildings had been inspected and marked for work, they would go through the few vehicles to do the same. Again, several jokes were made about inspecting each other for damages or checking their performance standards. Since all four 'Tanusha' had the Alan they were committed with present, none of the girls denied anything while the four 'Alan' made a show of buffing their fingernails on their shirts, bragging about those performances being very much above standard… Much to the disbelieving shouts and laughter of everyone else.

About a dozen children that had no specialties or advanced training were left to go scrounging around the complex to find, inventory and bring back all of the edibles they could. If they needed something like a jigger or a forklift to move pallets, they would mark down that job on a list for later that day when some of the adults would take care of completing those parts.

With every person having a job assigned, they also split down into three shifts to make certain there was always surveillance, hunting, food prep and medical help available around the clock. They began to set priorities for each service department or competency group. In some cases, that meant long term tasks spread out across all shifts over several weeks to come like establishing a wardline and safety perimeter around the complex.

After the basic job definitions and assignations had been done, one of the 'Martin' asked the rather useful question of "Where's the stuff we came with? I had a dimensional trunk shrunk down into a medallion around my neck but as we can see…” he finished as he pulled down the neckline of the scrubs shirt to show the absence of such item. There was a flurry of such questions and all were directed at Older Lucas who looked panicked as he had no memories of doing anything with their equipments. "Oy! - Whistle! – The guy's memories were re-written by the damned implant in his head! He doesn't remember anything. And when we were in the Icehold Vault, I checked the storage lockers where the patients' personal effects are supposed to go; they were all empty. Even those of the patients from this reality were completely empty." Younger Lucas answered to help his older brother against the sudden rush of thoughts and emotions pouring in. The older male was nowhere near ready to deal with such raw feelings, not in his physical and mental state.

"Hey! Give me a minute, I may have something!" one of the 'Joanne' said as she pulled up the sleeve of her scrubs, looking over a colored tattoo on her forearm. With nary a thought, she caused a miniature lesion on the pad of her thumb, just enough to leak a few drops of blood then swipe the bloody finger across the piece of body art. The effect was immediate: a small cloud of gray smoke
with a 'pffoooffing' sound and a large trekking framepack appeared out of nowhere, to drop on top of the table in front of her. The thing was big, like the models used by Himalaya expeditions or professional wood-runners when they went out to harvest the trap-lines in winter.

"Whaddaya know! My Seal of Storage still works and nobody emptied it! Not that they could; it has a blood locking option in it after all. And hey! My dimensional pack is still full. Humm, what did I have in there?" The young woman plunged head first into the pack, all the way up to her hips, and wiggled around while the sounds of objects being moved or thrown were heard. She came out rather disheveled but holding her prize: a small satchel that was an overnight bag with all her equipment in it.

In the event of theft or being put to sleep involuntarily, all her belongings had runes of Call & Send Item inlaid into them so that all her gear would come back into this nifty little bag if she were separated from them. Since the satchel was in the pack which was in the Seal, she had three levels of safety against theft, and also three guarantees that the gear would be available when she needed it. The girl began to promptly pull out clothes and jewelry from her overnight bag and, after piling everything in order to check that it was all there, cast on herself a simple Auto-Dressing spell to switch out the scrubs with her regular kit. The snugly fitting blue jeans, sky blue t-shirt and sneakers got her a few wolf-whistles from the guys and many groans of envy from the other girls that didn't have that option for their storage. Something they all planned on remedying soon enough! Heaven have pity on the poor guy that tried to get between a girl and her capacity to put more stuff in her purse!

After a few good natured complains from across all genders and ages about the stupid spell denying them a good strip show, the crowd began to check more thoroughly on the magical or psionic storage they had, as well as the more manual versions of the Call & Send Item spell that several did have on their gear. A couple of minutes more saw a pileup of full kits and individual items sprinkled around the dining hall. Almost everyone aged fourteen and above had some form of hidden storage or way to call back their equipments. Several of the 'Lucas' and 'Martin' were paranoid enough because of their life experiences that they had created and put on their gear a Forensic Tracking & Recalling enchantment. The spell called back the item it marked while leaving a Sorcerer's Beacon to show where it had been while it also recorded who and what had stolen it, moved it, and in what conditions it was stored. If the storage was warded against teleportation and gates, the beacon showed a mental compass with map coordinates of the location of the item to guide manual recovery.

It was because of these tracking spells that it was discovered all the items had been piled up in a room under the World Management Grid substation in New Cape Quest. Their gear had just been stripped off and dumped pell-mell without any real analysis or trying to loot out the good stuff. This proved that someone wanted the living bodies but not the equipment they came with.

One of the adult 'Lucas' had a theory about that: "It's not the equipment they ignore; it's the history, the past experiences. The person guiding the kidnappings wants blank slates to work with, not a living person with a past, and specifically not a personality. They want someone they can mold and groom into what they want as a finished product, pretty much like the Christian Spiritual Accompaniment church enforcement agency wanted and tried desperately to make happen." His opinion made many think and nod in agreement while a few frowned, trying to find the deeper meaning behind being taken then frozen for a decade and a half.

"Well, I could help with that." One of the adolescent 'Martine Mystère' spoke out. "I studied the divinatory arts and information spells a lot so I can find a lot of things from the past or present. Don't ask about the future, that always makes me dizzy and I don't see anything. But if you want, I could try and figure out where this hidden great enemy is holed up, and what he wants." Her
suggestion started a quick and decisive conversation about risks, necessities, and expediency versus the safer methods. In the end, it was agreed that her attempts at divination were not dangerous and would at worse come up with a blank image if the target was shielded against these types of magicks.

The group analyzed its members to find the best diviners to pool them together into a group so as to have more power into the spells to obtain more details from each incantation. It only took about ten minutes of analysis and ten more of moving tables and chairs before a circle of thirteen people was assembled. The initial 'Martine" was in the middle seated on a chair while the others were seated on the floor tailor-style in a circle. The mixed group went through a few calming, centering and harmonizing exercises before synchronization was achieved and they could cast together as a single merged conclave.

The crowd watched calmly the proceedings as it was silent and everything happened inside the shared mindscape of the thirteen participants. Everyone else simply took another round of drinks and dessert, or another go at the buffet tables for extra protein like some of the more athletic people did.

After about a half hour of divining and searching, the conclave dissolved and stood, stretching muscles and cracking joints. It was hard work group-casting like that, and it drained both body and mind at an alarming rate thus explaining why it was done rarely. Although that would be rarely for other groups of people; amongst these kin and friends, there was enough competency and trust to use this type of thing regularly as long as the situation wasn't hostile and there was food afterwards.

The conclave members were given some time to dish up some grub and start eating before the lead caster began to report what they found. "We saw the WMG substation at NCQ. There is a small room, like a janitor's room or a utilities' closet that is shrouded in darkness and negative energy. It stank of cold humidity and rotten diseased flesh. I think there is a cadaver of a higher sentient being in there. It gives me the same feelings as the time that Thamara found an old dead body from a murderer that was never buried; his ghost had haunted the place for two centuries before we found the place. It was only when the body was disposed of that the exorcism prayers worked as supposed." She finished her verbal report with a few minor details and concentrated on her new plate of shepherd's pie.

One of the 'Lua' began to conjecture out loud for all to hear and think about the situation. "I think that our 33 year old friend here got possessed by an incorporeal undead, and that the creature can't leave the Grid Station. That means that when he spends time away he gets better, healthier and more stable, but when he goes there the ghost gets into him, assuming control so completely that he can't fight it and blacks out to protect his conscience. That would explain the memory losses, the dreams, thinking he did things that he didn't, etc… It's the ghost programming him for the next batch of jobs while also making him miserable and self-loathe so he doesn't think he deserves better. It is well documented that your self-esteem and your mental fortitude affect the capacity of an entity to possess you and establish dominance. The more downtrodden you are, the easier to control you are." She finished her speech while gesturing at the assembly with her cup of tea.

Younger Lucas got in the middle of the conversation again. "I think we need to prepare this complex for long term habitation first and foremost. Then heal any injured we have, including physical, mental or mystical illnesses and whatnots. Then, and only then, can we think about doing some sort of strike team maneuvers against a long range target. This thing isn't an immediate threat as we are out of its zone of effect. Also, if I recall my fantasy lores correctly, there should be some blessings and protection spells to put around the bedrooms and individuals to keep foreign influences from taking over our minds. We draw up a plan of mental defense, then apply it by prioritizing the least defended, going all the way up to the most equipped for defending their own
mind.” He ended his suggestion by looking around the crowd to see if any new opinions would emerge.

One of the Labarre women spoke up, volunteering to gather a group of persons able to use prayers of True Faith to mix some holy oils and prepare blessed candles to burn around the clock to create an area of protection. Those two methods were the cheapest, easiest, and most resource effective to put in place. After that, they would proceed with carving protective glyphs in the corridors and rooms of the buildings to hold a blessing but that would require a weekly mass to re-energize them. The only full time solution was to dig into the ground a series of pits to place manatites then anchor a consecration and wardline to make the complex into an abbey; this would allow the establishment of a permanent magical threshold to keep unwanted effluves outside.

The woman's idea was debated and agreed upon for the short-term and mid-term plans. Digging manatites and such was labor intensive, as was the process of making the bloody monoliths themselves. Casting and harmonizing wards was another basket of snakes altogether. If there was only one threat in sight, it would be better to have some personal protections that were also portable to go destroy the damned spirit (all puns intended!) once and for all. After that was accomplished, they could concentrate on getting back to their times and realities as that was the penultimate priority for everyone.

What's up doc?

(Earth Final Frontier – season 1 opening, instrumental)

Sunday January 13th of 2301 – morning
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Main wing, second floor – medical diagnostics room #1

The day had started rather commonly enough with some exercise in the gym followed by a nice warm shower and some decent clothes that weren't scrubs for a change now that his laundry was all done and sorted out. There really was no replacement for a good pair of cutoff blue jeans and a t-shirt when you were in Florida's weather at this time of year. Thanks to the nightly soakings in the bath salts found by his little sibling and a couple of first aid spells cast by a few relatives, the blood vessel congestion in his legs had diminished a lot so he was on the way to recovery. And those everyday events brought him to the here and now, in the main wing restaurant.

Older Lucas was really starting to feel his age and hate the bloody nickname the pasty little gremlin had given him. The fact that now there were some 18 units of the same tetchy little runt going around was enough to get anyone off their breakfast. That particular reality hit him pretty hard right now. Man, was it a mind-twister to see all those boys sat in a bunch in the dining hall, filling three six-seat tables solid and all gabbing a mile a minute about the Great Elders knew what in so many languages at the same time he got a headache just by thinking about it. No wonder that all the female versions and the teen and adult male versions of him all sat spread out. Everybody who wasn't a prepubescent boy-child version of himself understood that any sane person could take only so much of his character before going crazy and reacting violently.

Now what did that say about his social skills and capacity to relate to others at any age, humm?
Heaving a great sigh of long suffering patience, the 33 year old went to serve himself at the buffet tables then sat alone in a corner near the corridor that lead to the restrooms and kitchen's warehouse beyond. It was a safe, quiet little place that people didn't usually sit in because normally there would be traffic in and out all day. With their group cut in three shifts it meant only 160 people walking around the complex while the other 80 slept so the restaurant and facilities were well understaffed and underused. He could eat his meal in peace as he thought about what happened after.

One of their kin, a Labarre of some version, had approached him to speak about his health care and wellbeing. They talked for over an hour, then he agreed to an appointment in the medical block to get a full work-up to see what was really done to him in the years since he turned 15. The entire day had been set aside for just that. Oh joy of joys! An entire day of getting poked, prodded, and most probably probed by doctors of all sorts like a lab experiment gone horrendously bizarre. All that was missing from that happy picture was the thunderstorm in the background with all 18 bitchy little pests screaming 'IT lives!' at the top of their lungs. Man was this day gonna suck balls, like bull's balls with the hairs and all…

After taking much longer than strictly necessary to finish the rather small breakfast, he dumped the tray and tableware at the busboy station so the cleaners would have a little less work to do. He could only blink in wonder as the tray, plate, mug and utensils all lifted in the air and shone for a second before quickly placing themselves in appropriate bins on a multi-level tray cart. Shaking his head to loosen the cobwebs in his mind, he took a closer look at the busboy station and then the cart until he found what he sought. Someone had etched runic clusters onto the tablets of the station and linked them to matching clusters in the bins so that all the stuff placed on top of the station would get cleaned and sorted automatically by magical energies. It was quite exciting to see such a mundane application of mystical principals, but it also showed him how it could work in everyday life if well applied.

After going around the dining hall to say hello to a dozen people and touch base with Little Lucas, or 'Annoying Gremlin #1' as he liked to call him, there was no more setting back the unpleasantness anymore. Walking slowly, dragging his feet like a condemned man marching to the gallows, he made his way to the stairs and climbed up to the diagnostics block, a place that he was far too familiar with for his tastes.

Since they had very few people available, unskilled optional jobs like receptionist were always vacant or occupied by a nifty little spell construct called Image of Self as was the case at the intake desk. While the name of the spell seemed quite explanatory, the actual applications and capacities of the dweomer were a lot better than just making an exaggerated voicemail with a magical copy of the person to speak with you. The Image of Self was a complete copy of the physical presentation and equipments of the person, along with its mind and psionics or spell casting abilities. That meant that the image would have the body and clothes of the caster but not the internal organs as they were not needed for the construct to work. The artificial person so created didn't last long, usually a few hours, and had a very clear limit to what it could do as it could not go further than a few hundred feet from its caster and sapped magic from him to empower all spells it cast. Spell users that were truly competent with the spell could manage to let the Image extend its duration by recasting the spell by itself, but the risk was that an Image that lasts too long could become independent, and accidentally create a magical clone of the caster.

Here, the members of their group were good at what they did. The Image of Self that manned the reception desk was cast by the doctor on shift and she had managed to make the construct all in grayscale so you would know it was not the real person. Since there was no telepathic link between the Image and caster, the construct had to use the public address system like an ordinary receptionist to call the medic and get instructions for the patient.
Damn! He should have seen this coming! Going into the examination cabinet and lying back on the diagnostics bed wasn't bad, but the damned hospital scrubs again! At least it wasn't the stupid gowns that were opened at the back anymore. Those had really been annoying like nothing else in all medicine. They could have used a poncho-style design that you pull over your head then fold the flaps to the front to tie it off. But noooo! That was too much intelligence to ask of doctors. And since doctors knew everything and were all powerful, who were they, mere mortals, to dare suggest that the almighty doctors could do something better?

Yes, medical visits did in fact put him in a foul mood. Could you not guess?

The doctor, one of the adult 'Jenna Labarre', came in while pulling on her labcoat and speaking out to empty air, giving orders to someone that was listening through the magical version of a PAL unit that the group's runemasters had put together. The small piece of engraved stone was separate from the computer systems, didn't have any programming and couldn't be hacked. It was essentially like a walkie-talkie system but made with magic rather than transistors and silicone circuits. It was the perfect short term solution for tracking and communicating with team members without an outside enemy cutting into their lines, or using their tactical informations to find and ambush an isolated person. This was the reason that the hunting and foraging parties had been able to leave the fort to go rummage around the bayou for food and medicinal herbs. If the only lifeline available had been computerized like the cellphones, the expeditions would have been deferred until safe comms were established.

"All right mister; lets see what's wrong with you. After 14 years and change, I think it's high time you got a good long scan to see what ails you." She spoke with a calm, pleasant manner that immediately put him at ease. He had never been good with doctors of any sorts, even as a younger child. His experiences with Westphalen and Smith had made things exponentially worse, and the WMG auto-doc modules were barely better simply because they didn't rape his mind or exploit his body; not that he could remember anyways. Having someone who was emotionally and socially close to him, or a version of himself, made the situation safer and easier to accept. The fact she had let him schedule his appointment, choose his treating medic, and explain his past, his fears and his preferences for treatment, before even coming into the diagnostics block made this one of the most respectful and least harmful medical visits he ever had in his life.

The young woman was 21 years old, with a fit and athletic figure that even the scrubs and labcoat couldn't hide from anyone. She walked with a steady, balanced gait that spoke of long arduous physical training and a lot of trekking in multiple environments. Her long blond hair was plaited viking-style, reaching the small of her back. Her clear sky-blue eyes shone with kindness and affection for a person she barely knew but recognized as one of her family. Her skin was white but very slightly tanned in the way of people who spent a lot of time outdoors in the more northerly latitudes. Her entire demeanor exuded professional confidence but in an open, welcoming way, that Older Lucas just wasn't used to seeing in the doctors he had met.

The young woman began by greeting him, placing a gentle hand on his forearm to help soothe him into a relaxed state. He never had good experiences when lying on his back on a surgical bed. "Hello there, Bigger Brother." She said with a playful smirk at the person she saw as an older sibling. "You will be gladdened to know that we have a completely clean suite of diagnostics tools and scanners; our kin and allies saw to that. Our younger sister Diana is in the pharmaceutical laboratory, preparing some of the basic meds and tools we need for operations, just in case we might someday need them."

Seeing him nod in understanding, she continued to talk him down into a more restive state. "And don't worry; if it comes to it, we have a couple of trained alchemists and transmuters in the group to create truly complex molecules. Conversely, we have a few of me and the five 'Lua' who are
highly capable when it comes to Faith Healing and using Divine Providence to cure the injuries or maladies or any person, animal or plant. For my part, that comes from growing up on a farmstead in the forests of upper British Columbia, near the Alaska border. We had to care for all living things on about a thousand square acres of crops, livestock and family members alike. That, you see, is why I trained as a green witch since birth then added modern medicine since I was about thirteen years old. I am licensed as a surgical nurse for urgentology and traumatology as well as having the diploma as a traditional apothecary of the old European magical tradition. Whether it be mundane, spiritual or magical, whatever ails you, we will find it, analyze it, and get rid of it so you can go back to living a long, healthy and happy life."

As the older man gave her a last nod of acceptance and followed her instructions to try and calm enough to reach a meditative state, she joked with him. "Now, as many have heard in the past: just lie down, close your eyes, and enjoy it while it lasts..." He opened his eyes to glare at her but she was too busy laughing at him to see it or care. Damn women doctors! They all thought his pain and misery was a bloody joke!

Now in good and proper foul mood, the older male just crossed his arms and pouted mightily at his medic as she proceeded to use voiceless, focus-less spells to draw fluids and extract samples from the skin, muscles, bones and every organ he had. He was so busy death-glaring her that he never realized the samples were done and on their way to the lab for the chemical analysis by 'Diana' and information spells by another 'Jenna'.

"Now that the wetworks are done, we can proceed with the scans. Would you prefer doing the spells first since you won't need to move from the bed? The mundane ones like X-rays and MRI need you to move to the machines in the radiology department." He was both happy that half the job was done and tetchy that she had managed to manipulate him so effortlessly that he disregarded his environment enough to let it happen. Damn the woman and her wily ways! And he couldn't even stay mad at her because she was really trying to help him to get a better health. Blast! When had his life gotten so complicated? Oh, yes! He woke them up, that's when!

After a minute of mental grumbling, Older Lucas nodded about doing as much as possible while in this room before going anywhere else. He still had radiology to go through, then it would be the physical effort tests to measure cardiovascular and pulmonary capacities, muscular strength, limb flexibility and movement amplitude. Might as well do all the peaceful stuff in one go before they tied him to the cart and drove him like an ox.

About two hours later and Older Lucas was back at rest in the examination bed, wiping his face and neck with a white fluffy towel as he gulped down some concoction of fruit juice, vitamins, minerals, electrolytes and proteins to help him recover from the exertion tests. Man! Was he really that out of shape at his age? He had started doing his morning exercises again but that had been going on only since the little guy had come through the vortex. He lay back, thinking on how much time he had wasted in useless immobility, slowly drowning in depression and mental blankness.

Jenna walked in while ordering the sheets in his patient folio. Those blasted papers would now determine his future for the coming year at least. He was not happy about it but at least he now had a future that went beyond the end of winter, unlike before.

"I won't lie to you, Lucas; you're a right mess. The good news is that most of what you have can be sorted out by dinner tonight if we push through on everything we can. As long as we don't have an accident with the heavy machines or the building maintenance crew, we should be able to focus solely on you for the next eight to ten hours without too much trouble. Thankfully, a lot of our group took to keeping dimensional storage hidden on their bodies, or linked to their life-force; that helped with having a stockpile of potions, healing scrolls and spell books available right from the
start. We can treat every physical ailment in about two hours and let you go for lunch. After that, we can plumb your mind for a try at setting your cognitive processes and memories straight."

Seeing him nod in agreement, she continued exposing the plan for the day. "Let me be factually blunt; the mind works like a computer in every aspect that counts. That means since you didn't have a phylactery or another method of real-time backup on your mind, your memories are probably gone forever. We can rebalance your emotional matrix and secure your cognitive system, but the raw data, the memories, should be gone unless they were saved up in a repressed fold of your mind. There may also be a psionic bubble or a lore vault in your mind, but I doubt that the being that possessed and enslaved your mind would care about your life, experiences and sanity enough to create such storage for your memories to exist. It would in fact be to the entity's advantage to keep you as blank as possible."

Older Lucas felt very little about her explanation. Since they had all woken from the ice, he had the time to dwell on what he knew and remembered and had come to a similar conclusion. Few people would know that his work on the 'applied sciences of artificial intelligence' that he got a diploma for from Stanford were not geared to creating an android. No, his goal was to create and standardize the neural interface; the link between living mind and machine. His end goal had been to create a virtual bridge between people in a conflict since they could use the interface to connect and feel each other's mind, emotions and truths. His desire was to take the concept shown by the Borg in the Star Trek series, but apply it for the real purpose that it had been conceived initially: to bring unity and harmony amongst those people who willingly became members of the community.

Because of all those years of study and research in his childhood and adolescence, Lucas had actually learned a lot about medicine, anatomy, neurology and mental processes. He even studied psychology, psychiatry and pharmacology to comprehend how a mind under influence reacted to stimuli and factual data differently than when sober. He studied the bodies and brains of animals to establish a comparative chart to understand how the morphology of the being influenced its cognitivity of facts and its emotionality. As he stared at the ceiling's tiles, he remembered a lot more of the medical sciences and know-how that he had sweat and bled over in his early years.

Turning his head towards Jenna, he said in a hopeful whisper: "it's there. I can remember things; people, classes, medical research and human brain scanner print-outs from the radiology clinic. My memories are in here, just buried and invisible unless I actively try to find them. It's like, if I don't think about it or don't need it for a job that's right in front of my eyes, then I don't remember it just as if I had never learned it at all."

Jenna frowned, lips pursed as she thought it through. "Well, its good news if your memories are inside because then you can rebuild your personality and your life from your own experiences. These memories will take faster and more solidly than artificial one we could implant to start the process. However, we will need to find out by what mechanism or spell those memories were repressed and hidden. Letting an unknown effect or process go around your mind uncontrolled is a recipe for disaster; you've had enough of that in your life."

Older Lucas breathed in a deep calming breath; he now had three reasons to hope for the best. His body was mere minutes from being clean and top shape. His sanity and stability were almost optimal, and a few tweaks would make him even better than before he left Stanford for the damned UEO Navy bootcamp. And not least, his memories with all the studies, knowledge, and competences he had worked through grueling classes and laboratories to obtain were present and accounted for, just asleep needing a wake-up call.

Raising eyes full of determination and genuine hope towards the woman who was a sister in any concept that mattered to their group, he nodded resolutely. "Get me back to being my self, I'll do
the rest."
A study in the depths of Anomaly

The author wishes to express thanks to anyone who may read his story and encourages them to leave reviews, comments or even flame it hard. As with any who try their hand at publicly expressing an idea or story concept, all feedback is important and welcome. Disclaimer: I do not own SeaQuest, Star Wars, nor any other sci-fi or fantasy series, movies, comics, cartoons or news items used in this fiction as they belong to the creators or broadcasters or publishers who put them out for consumption by the public.

Ninth chapter; A study in the depths of Anomaly

Manu militari

(SeaQuest – season 1 opening)

Wednesday January 16th of 2301 – early-morning
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Motorpool garage, main workbay

The entire Assembly of 245 people had united in psionic consensus for one special session four days ago on the 12th in order to nominate the Strategic Control Team then determine the best tactics for an expedition to NCQ. They had decided that the convoy would have three missions to carry out for this to be worth the effort.

Firstly; they needed to place sensor relays to begin some outer area oversight.

Secondly; they needed to find and fortify a warehouse big enough to take inside all expedition teams at the same time to create a forward encampment inside the New Cape Quest municipal limits.

Thirdly; they needed to go clean out the trash in the World Management Grid substation, then mount on its roof an antenna that would allow them to interface with the WMG programming and services on their own terms, without getting mind-wiped or downloading CSA shit in the background processes.

The control team was headed by the second oldest Lucas in the Assembly, a 20 year old man with hard unyielding eyes that had seen shit come and go, most of it aimed right at him and his loved ones. If it weren't for magic and CIRPA's alien tech, he would be an inhuman mess of scars and three of his major limbs would be completely gone or replaced by prosthetics. This man had no intention of sending people into the unknown without backup at hand, so it was him that pushed to have four trucks prepared. The first team of two trucks would move out and be followed 30 minutes later by the second team of two trucks.

The first team had the job to lay steel plates pre-enchanted with beacon and surveillance spells on
the side of the road every ten kilometers. The truck's rear ramp could be opened and kept horizontal, even when rolling; this was meant as a way to let soldiers and refugees jump into the back hold while the vehicle did a 'firing run-off' from a hostile zone before every man reached the extraction zone. The team would exploit this capacity by slowing down to about 5 kph for some ten seconds to use a construction spell designed to move and position precisely pieces of metal during the assembly of a building or ship. The dweomer would lift, ferry and place the 2' x 10' steel plate vertically to give the perception spells some 3-D visualization around the beacon.

This would give the control team a series of solid relays to extend the network of magical PAL-equivalent systems they had created while also establishing live-stream sensors capable of color visual, thermal imaging, magnetic field analysis and movement detection. Each plate also had a homing signal to allow people to quickly tag the area to open a Portal or Gate and move in at combat speeds even under fire.

(The A Team – opening theme)

It was just after breakfast when the expedition began assembling in the motorpool garage's main work bay since the trucks were out on the driveway. This was preferable as the sporadic thunder outside was sounding counterpoint to the pounding rainfall and gusting winds. There was a tropical storm moving through the area, climbing up the eastern seaboard from all the way down in the Caribbean, along the USA and it was scheduled to go die off around the lower tip of Newfoundland in about seven days if it maintained its speed and strength.

Blergh! What a weather to send people out into a possible firefight!

It had taken several days of arduous work, planning, work and re-planning to get things to this point: four white military convoy trucks filled with people and eight blue-painted patroller-bots. They had taken remote control of the twenty-ton automated vehicles and brought them to the complex's motorpool garage where they were stripped, analyzed, and set back to rights in three days of hard labor by several shifts of dedicated people who knew what was riding on this expedition.

Each truck was based on the classic 6 x 6 wheels (2 front – 4 rear) configuration that armies everywhere used since World War II mechanized the transporting of troops. The driving cab was flat-fronted with a protruding armored bumper and bulldozer blade attachment to clear the road as the convoy advanced. The top of each truck had two enclosed automated turrets with a sniper grade pulse rifle and a belt-fed grenade launcher. The weapons were controlled by the driver or passenger via a pair of hard-wired touchscreen tablets.

There was an armored wall with a pocket door separating the driver's cab from the back portion of the truck. Sandwiched between the cab and cargo hold was a tight 'wet bath' type of sanitation compartment with a combo toilet & sink, ceiling mounted shower and full height mirror surrounded by LED strip. This was to help the soldiers wash up after working in trashy conditions as well as inspect themselves for injuries. Across from the sanitary block was the armored locker: the bottom half was a miniature weapons locker for personal arms and the top half was the medical equipment in multiple hardened field cases for rapid deployment and sorting out. Under the cargo hold, on each side of the vehicle, were mounted rectangular armored coffers to store the mechanical & electrical tools and the search & rescue gear.

These trucks were conceived and sold to the government as generic all-purpose troop carriers, civil security patrol trucks, S & R med-evac, border customs enforcement platforms, etc… The vehicle's sturdy frame and excellent mounted systems made it the motorized swiss army knife of medium-weight armored conveyances. That explained why at last inventory the armies of the UEO
members had some 100,000 units of the bloody thing rolling around. They used it for military, border patrols, municipal police, SWAT teams, anything really that needed good off-road capacity, amphibious mobility, and proven resistance to anti-personnel fire with the capacity to fight back safely.

Each regular version truck could haul cargo up to ten tons (US measure) or unfold the four lowest wall-mounted beds and seat twelve soldiers with full kit. There were three levels of four folding cots so they could sleep twelve people at the same time. If you rotated your driving team with some infantrymen, the truck could roll around the clock and only stop for fuel since the men would eat MRE's and use the onboard sanitation. These babies were big, heavy, and cost twice the usual price of a normal 6 x 6 troop carrier, but every government that bought them swore by them.

Some countries like Canada and the USA had ordered a specialized model that was a dedicated firefighting platform for going against forest fires and accidents in industrial zones where the chemicals could explode and kill the hazmat teams. It came with a roof mounted swiveling telescopic crane arm topped by a ladder, high pressure hoses instead of weapons in the turrets and a 50 foot long, 8 x 8 wheels trailer with light armor to carry the ten tons of water reserve since they maintained the shelter beds in the truck's cargo compartment to house the fire fighting teams and field equipments. If it came to it, they ditched the water trailer and the truck became as fast as its regular version.

The large red & blue 'Tracy Heavy Industries' logo present on the bumpers, wheel caps and embossed in the rear loading ramp meant that all the Tracy's present would be insufferable for a long time. Meh, they were such brats these kids!

(MacGyver – opening theme 1985)

Each team of four humans and two patroller-bots adjusted their raincoats and hats, hoisted their duffel bags with clothes and personal necessities for a week-long job and began boarding the trucks for what promised to be a short but bothersome drive into town proper. Because of his experiences at the WMG substation, Older Lucas had to go, especially if they wanted to lure out the supposed ghost, so he was assigned to Truck-4. Each team had been composed of two competent combatants, a technician and someone that could do both modern medicine and mystical healing.

By contrast, Younger Lucas would be much more useful in the restaurant of the main wing, organizing the quartermasters, running the food stocks and meal preparation schedules. In the child's daily routine a lot of time had been set specifically for some high speed tutoring via mental transfer in many technical and scientific areas as well as a solid basic understanding of psionics, virtual psionics and magical traditions since he had strong potential in all three ways of using energy and information.

The winds were driving the rain almost laterally in the air, visibility was at less than four feet in front of the trucks, with illumination around 7% in the most optimistic case, with the vehicles' fog lights lit on full. This would be like driving at night with lots of noise, flying water and booming echoes in the distance. The bayous were swollen up by two feet already and the WMG's weather modules were broadcasting on all frequencies, even radio in analog and short waves, so everyone out there knew that this was a really bad storm system. The flood warnings had started around six in the morning and now there were some travel avoidance and evacuation orders for most of the Florida panhandle. It was just the convoy teams' luck they didn't need to obey the Grid's orders. Rolling around in army trucks meant that flooding wouldn't stop them since the trucks would just float and use their folding aquajets to move around anyways.

Up at the top of the hospital's administration tower they had converted the Board of
Administration's VIP conference room & lounge into the permanent Combat Information Center (CIC) to be able to manage the compound's security and remote expeditions while having eyeballs on the situation without going through cameras and wires. Thanks to some quick construction spells and a few technomagical craftings on the fly, all the wiring that normally went to the security office on the ground floor had been spliced and redirected towards the top of the edifice in armored pipes that were placed in the elevator shaft for both protection and easy access. All the equipment from the security office was simply stripped out, moved up by elevator and reassembled in a much more optimal setup in the new CIC. They completed the setup with a few transfigurations on the glass windows to given them the solidity and resistance of tempered steel plates while staying lightweight and transparent. A transmuter added a few rune schemes around the viewing bay to generate a low-yield Barrier Shield Ward to give protection from the storm-tossed debris and wind surges.

Having the wide panoramic glass windows all around the top-most level gave them a massive tactical advantage and allowed the emplacement of the old style telescopes and sextants that several of their people preferred working with instead of electronics. And, it was a well proved basic truth that in combat or bad weather, computers had a bad habit of shorting out or getting a virus and shutting down. This was why most of the Assembly members always preferred having manual backup solutions already setup and active as soon as it could be done.

Several of the more mystically trained members of the Assembly could Sense Present Events without need for a setup of crystals, mirrors or other ritual apparel. Some could simply manually cast a Farsight spell that reached well into town. Still, it was deemed a safer option to pool into a central locale the few magical telescopes, mirrors or crystal orbs that people had in their bags. These persons being competent in divinatory arts meant of course that they were among the first to be drafted into the rotations for perimeter security and would man the CIC. They would have the permanent job of watching the cameras, controlling the bots and sounding the alarms if need be. Doing a divination would occur only as a preventive measure if a team called in an emergency that needed intel before sending reinforcements.

The CIC watchers kept a live eye on the convoy's teams along with their signals through the magical PAL's and the electronic GPS transponders mounted in the trucks' comm suite. The weather was so bad, and the water in the bayous was going up so fast, that they thought they would face roadway washout at four different spots along the path the tacticians had mapped for them. Not that they had much choice since there was only one roadway to reach the hospital complex, and that blasted street accounted for 85% of the way between the complex and the city limits. They were completely at the storm's mercy right now, they had no choice but to drive onwards to town and hopefully a large warehouse to haul everyone inside for the rest of the day. A trip that should have taken about 1hr 15min in ordinary circumstances was going slowly at almost 2 hours when the first team finally reached the billboard that proclaimed their entry into NCQ's fishery shipyards district.

Parade of the wet dogs of war

(The Rolling Stones – Paint it black)

Wednesday January 16th of 2301 – late morning
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
Civilian fishery shipyards district
By speaking between trucks and CIC over the magical PAL's, it was convened to go deeper in town, away from the ocean to keep away from flood zones so they could make a dry camp and not have to worry about moving in the depths of the night. The chief controller admitted that there was no way for them to carry out objective #3 in this weather. Getting any sort of forward outpost up and running would be enough accomplishment for the next two, possibly three days until the storm front moved further north along the shoreline, leaving NCQ at peace.

Thankfully, their expeditionary teams had been composed principally from the many versions of Thomas Labarre and Martin Mystère, both of which were superb fighters and old hands at camping in any environment. Most members of the teams had a repertoire of spells or psionics to back-up their physical skills and technical know-how, so none of them were particularly worried about finding and securing the needed warehouse. In fact, since the Labarre family hailed from northern British Columbia, they were used to torrential rains and near obscurity so the drivers of the trucks didn't see any difference with their home turf and usual lives.

The tech support for Truck-1 spoke into the PAL-system, addressing all listeners: " Breaker – All call - I have been trawling the Internex over the airwaves with great care to leave no prints and anonymize my presence. Since using the good old MLS (Multiple Listings Service) set in place by real estate companies centuries ago wouldn't alert anyone to anything, I was able to locate several potential sites for our forward camp. Go see the MLS numbers that I will give you verbally. We need to avoid emails and data transfers until we have a truly secured network of our own separately from the WMG. End message – Over." Until they could guarantee that no one anywhere on the mudball was after their lives, CB codes & protocols for communicating and moving under hostile conditions were in force.

The co-pilot for Truck-2 called out: "Breaker – All call – Scrap anything in the fisheries districts! – Breaker – Repeat: Scrap anything in the fisheries districts! – I have eyeballs on the water line, we passed a measuring rod near a culvert, she's 4' 7" above normal and climbing fast! We need to move off these outlying roads and into the urban areas fast! – Breaker – Better forget the beach areas in general while we're at it. – End message – Over."

His observation was followed by a flurry of comments from CIC and Truck-1 as they searched for a district high enough and far enough from the water to be safe through the storm surge. They whittled down the choices to the old manufacturing district near the train lines and triage yard, or going more eastwards to the more modern industrial park that opened after the computer age, in the early 21st century.

The answering comment from Older Lucas in Truck-4 was terse and pragmatic: "Breaker – All call – Forget the second area, it might as well be called the M-A-D sector; as in Microsoft – Apple – Dell because they all have massive setups along with Amazon, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Tracy HI Aerospace division and a gaggle of others. One of the three major server and command nodes for the Grid is in that district, so unless you want your brain fried or co-opted, we go elsewhere. – End message – Over."

"Breaker – Breaker – CIC to all Trucks – Target area is the railway triage yards in the zone past the fishery trawlers' docks, fishery shipyards and luxury yacht shipyards, then you turn north along the Ynaguak Canal before you go over the Lascaux tilting bridge. From the Lascaux crossing you have about ten minutes tops on the service road before you reach the triage yards. You'll be coming in right in the warehouse section of the yards. – Breaker! - Be advised that there are still trains and equipments moving around under the control of the WMG, so movements are in progress, but we can't figure out why. – End message – Over."

All teams called in to acknowledge instructions and Truck-1's driver diligently slowed down to city
speeds to allow his teammate to follow without losing sight of each other. The damned rain was pouring even harder and the illuminated measuring rod in the canal on his right was flashing its red beacon to indicate that the area was now officially under flooding conditions at 5’ 6” above normal and still rising fast. Barely two minutes later, he saw the massive metallic structure with its peeling green paint and harsh yellow fog lights that was the Lascaux crossing tilt bridge. Sure enough, there were traffic lights indicating an ‘+’ shaped intersection with a barely visible brown colored road sign, the white letters almost unreadable in the low visibility.

Thomas stopped the convoy truck for a full three minutes to give the other guys behind them some time to catch up, then signaled the left turn towards the north. He was actually glad for the sporadic lightning strikes as they lit up the zone, giving him better visuals for all of four seconds at a time. His co-pilot was using the two turrets to see forward and keep track of their tail with the thermal sensors. If only someone had thought to build into the windshield a viewscreen to display imagery and then placed a few cams around the truck, traveling in such conditions wouldn't be so bad.

As foretold, ten minutes later they reached a set of 15 foot tall walls made of corrugated steel treated with the same gray anti-corrosion layer as the metalwork's around the hospital had been made with. An automated sensor and motor system maneuvered the gates to block access to the yards and railway equipments inside. It took the tech from Truck-1 about seven minutes to locate, identify then hijack the sensor's WMG remote control routines. They went in, closing the gates behind their pair of vehicles. The tech transmitted the small electronic 'key' he had made to the CIC so they could validate it then spread it to the other three teams securely. Each vehicle had a box of 1 cubic foot volume inscribed with Call & Send Item runes that acted as a mailbox for physical objects between CIC and them. The dispatch would take the program, secure it and copy it on flash-drives to send to each team with their end of day mail. This method was cheap, quick and easy to install anywhere, especially between paired boxes like that. It was certainly easier and faster than enchanting a mirrorgate or a firegate chimney.

The trucks slowly crawled around the triage yards, using their forward turret to see ahead and the rear one to scan the buildings on their left side. They were presently rolling in front of warehouses that all had overhead cranes or rolling bridges that extended outside the buildings and overhung above the canal to unload boats. These belonged to companies that dealt primarily in animal meat caught in the bayous or timber brought in by small-time family operations. Several old worn-out signs painted on the doors of the edifices called out the names and occupation inside, but now everything was silent and empty; abandoned decades ago when humanity declined into oblivion.

The driver of Truck-2 called his counterpart ahead: "Breaker – Calling T1 – Do you see the one two blocks up front, just in front of the big concrete dock that's coming up? It looks like a candidate if them doors are any indicators. It was probably a boat repair shop or a concession for vehicles of some sort. – End message – Over."

The two drivers in Truck-1 had indeed seen the massive six-door fronted warehouse coming up. They stopped in front of doors identified 4-5 so that their comrades could park in front of doors 2-3 right behind them. Each large garage door was the type that was made of a single slab that was lifted from a pivot beam in the top and could stay open as a sort of awning when it rained or the sun shone so much the air conditioners inside didn't do enough to keep things cool. Each massive door was 24 feet wide, about 35 feet high, and had a set of rail tracks embedded in the pavement from inside the shop all the way to the tip of the concrete docks. On top of the building's flat roof was an elevated mast with a massive crane's engine cabin. It was positioned at rest, turned towards the building's middle, the boom-arm lowered down to the roof to keep steady. Yep, this looked like a boat repair or something similar.
The team from Truck-1 called in, asking for some time to try and detect then hack any cyber security that might yet be active on the building. Even when people were dying off and closing things, a lot of people operated under the vengeful principle of 'if I can't be here to use it, nobody can use it either' and so a lot of security systems still worked, even if only sporadically and unreliably. It took a quarter hour to find the factory's IP address and hack into what was left of their local server. Soon enough, the human-sized door cut into the lower part of door number 4 was unlocked, swiveling open as the lights and climate controls lit up for the first time in some forty plus years to reveal the assembly floor for a factory of middle-class houseboats.

This is not a family vacation

(Lord of the Rings – Underneath the misty mountains cold)

Wednesday January 18th of 2301 – morning
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
Railway triage yards district; Manufacture 'Ride the flow of your life'

*** Memories from Older Lucas ***

Two and a half days ago when they came into the building, they had scavenged the place for the most useful / pressing objects to obtain so as to avoid having to live inside the trucks if they could. They knew they had a long wait in front of them with chances of power outage above 60% already while the storm wasn't at its worst yet; the electricity WOULD go out, they had to prepare for it. That meant anything that burned as a live flame, be it solids, liquids or gas, was the number one priority of all, followed by the actual burning device.

Since the big things were right there in front of them, they searched the four houseboats that were semi-finished. They found one of the boats had a huge solid-burning BBQ, already filled up with dry wood waiting to be lit, then saw that this boat was actually just what they needed to stick together. The 100 foot long by 20 foot wide, two storey plus roof terrace boat had been made as a motorized floating camp to take children into the bayous safely so they could see the natural habitats without getting wet, bit, stung or lost in the swamps. According to the manifest with the client specs, it was the Boy Scouts of Florida that were sponsoring the project as a permanent investment to help finance their activities year-round instead of asking donations all the time.

The lower deck held the engines, generator, electrical invertors linked to the solar arrays, liquid fuel tanks, industrial walk-in freezer, large walk-in pantry, water pumping and treatment system, and surprise, an infirmary with two wheeled gurneys as treatment beds surrounded by cabinets that were presently empty. The main floor was separated in three distinct zones; at the rear was the dormitory with 24 bunks, the middle was a bathroom with 8 'wet' stalls that had toilet, shower and sink in each, and the front half of the level was the all purpose kitchen, dining and living area. On this storey, all the walls were hip to ceiling tempered glass to optimize viewing in the wilds. The massive metal BBQ grill was inset here, in the counter between the kitchen prep zone and the dining tables so it could probably keep the front half of the boat warm when fully loaded. The rear used three small metal wood stoves with only 1 cubic foot firebox; 1 in the bathroom compartment and 2 in the dormitory.

The accommodations for sleeping were barely better than the trucks, but the bathing, cooking, and living areas were a lot better than MRE's warmed via chemical heat-stick or the glorified steel coffin with a hole in the bench for sanitation. All 16 living members of the expedition were quite
satisfied to relocate inside the houseboat while leaving the bots in the convoy trucks. None of them feared the wind blown debris since the steel and concrete walls of the factory would shield them well. If worse came to happen and the bayou in front of the dock flooded out of its channel, the four trucks were parked inside the warehouse in berths 2 and 5, in easy reach in less than 60 seconds of running.

As their luck would have it, the bayou did flood out at around noon, barely 30 minutes after they parked inside the factory, spreading a foot and a half high of cold brackish water all around the district. The flash flood infiltrated the factory through back-flowing sewage pipes and vents for the basement storage compartments. And of course, the winds and lightning strikes took out municipal electricity at two in the afternoon, thus turning the factory into a giant freezer with temperatures averaging 5 degrees Celsius in the daytime. Needless to say, getting wet was out of the question, and moving between vehicles and the upper portions of the warehouse was done via a set of wooden catwalks erected using some truly practical ranger's camp-building spells applied courtesy of the 'Thomas's' in the group. They had to summon the wood for the stoves from the storage bunkers in the basement and stack it close to the hot fireboxes to dry out as quickly as it could. Needless to say, the last two days had been a frozen sopping wet mess that nobody enjoyed.

*** Present view ***

"Bloody hell, man! Poke up them logs alive, I'm freezing my fucking balls off here!" exclaimed a rather grouchy 33 old man as he very slowly moved from the back of the boat to the dining area in the front. The effort to reach the area to stand next to the large steel BBQ pit that had one of the few reliable sources of heat in half the town at present was both painful and necessary, despite all the cramps from the last five days.

Ever since the doctor had healed him, unlocking his neuroreceptors and magical channels, it felt as if he were experiencing another growth spurt. His joints ached like arthritis pain, and he had random muscle spasms in every muscle mass in his body, not just his limbs. It made for hard days and impossible, restless nights, even with potions and spells to control the pain. Apparently, his body, mind, magic and soul were all re-synchronizing, and nothing could dampen the feelings from this, especially since some of them could actually be the result of memories unlocking or phantom pains from past injuries and treatments. Chemical medicines could not affect these symptoms but could make him sick if he took them without a real illness to treat.

Thus he had been given through mental transfer an emergency crash course in occlumency, consolidation of conscience, mnemonic dampening and filtering, memory accretion management and several other key psychic skills to have immediately. Incredibly, it worked! Having control of not only the memories but also the feelings and the perceptions from the organs meant that he could decide what to perceive, at which strength or quality of perception. But even then, the pain was constant, it's just sometimes it lessened a bit then came back with a vengeance an hour later. Damn, he hoped it ended soon! At least, from what they could tell, the little guy that helped him to wake them up didn't have any such scrap done to his body or mind, but the marrow graft in his spine was worrying him and several of their older kin as well. It came from Abalon and therefore was a threat to them all; NOTHING done by Franklin Henri Wise was ever good to any of them, and they knew it.

Older Lucas wrapped his shaking hand in a dishrag to grab the hot handle of the enameled kettle from the grill and poured himself a mug of steaming hot water. After setting the kettle back safely, he put his attention and efforts to fixing up a decent cup of coffee to try to help himself out of drowsiness. His night had been a mess and the morning cramps weren't helping either. He had too
much trouble standing by himself so the warm shower he craved could not happen in this context, he'd have to content himself with a body-washing charm and a bodyheat augmenter charm cast by one of the expedition healers. Now holding the steaming mug steady with both hands while leaning against the kitchen counter, he took the first sip. It was like liquid heaven going down his pipes, but the second mouthful was even better. By the time half the mug was empty, he had started feeling human again enough to be in the mood to look around, to see who was where.

From his position beside the BBQ grill, he could see the entire team assembled at the tables to eat, or in the living area for those that had finished their meals and were in the mood to talk or play group games. The person next to him was a 'Jonathan' from Truck-2 that had woken early but spent more time on morning exercises than the others, hence he was eating later. Jonny asked him if he needed something fried or grilled as he liked to cook; he was just starting up his own meal, so he was in no hurry. Lucas' stomach was protesting but he had potions to swallow, to help realign his energies and biology; skipping them would only prolong the misery.

After a short exchange of comments and suggestions, the 19 year old Jonny placed for him on the grill some rye bread for toast and a pan with batter for a thin crepe that would get rolled and stuffed with fruit salad and caramel sauce. As Older Lucas rose an inquisitive eyebrow at that particular confection, some of the folk at the nearest table chortled around their food, explaining that the culinary tastes of 'Younger Lucas #18' had been so good that they were adopted by the Assembly as a whole. The fact the child had been in charge of organizing the kitchens, menus and supplies for over a tenday already certainly had nothing to do with it…

The 33 year old shrugged, deciding right there that he didn't care; the food would be good and the chairs a lot more comfortable than the damned cots in the trucks had been. His lower back around his kidneys was in pain again so much that he actually had problems staying steady on his feet. After explaining his situation to the others, he made his way to the table to sit while he could move by himself then allowed the four healers to have immediate access to him as he could sense the emergency. One of the healers, a 'Lua', told them she sensed that energy was being drained from him and going somewhere in the distance. She asked two of the people gifted in divinations the group had to try seeing what was being drained and where it went.

The news was bad; Older Lucas was slowly losing life-force and soul at the speed of a dropper in an IV line but it was constant and by the damages already done, it had been going on for several days. If they could not find a way to stop this, the drain would send him into a comatose state and eventually kill him. According to the diviners, the energies left him and streamed across the air in a direction that was a straight line to where the WMG substation was located. Nobody was comforted by having an answer when they knew that anything in that place was bound to be bad news, and be worse now that it got fueled up.

After the last members ate their meals, the healers completed their study of the case and confirmed that the equipments and potions they carried were not capable of doing more than a temporary patch on Older Lucas' energy loss. Anything permanent would need to be brewed over a period of several days and require a ritual of cleansing to remove the cursed taint then close the spiritual injury. The patch would last 60 minutes at best and he could take only two doses in one day, with a minimum of 12 hours between, or he would get poisoned by the more exotic ingredients in the brew. This forced them to prepare the quick-fix potion and keep it on hand but they would wait to let him drink it until they reached the WMG substation so as to have the best tactical duration.

The CIC team at the Sanitarium and visuals from the outside confirmed that the storm front had moved up north enough to lessen the wind gusts and water surge. It would take another day for the waterways to crest, then about three days more for the swell to sluice out to sea. Observation from the magical sensor plates and mechanical cameras still operating around the county showed the
WMG humanoid robots and heavy workpods moving around beginning the cleanup effort. The expedition received tactical analysis for which roads to try and which sectors to avoid completely due to flooding, damages or WMG work in progress.

Are we there yet?

(Real Adventures of Jonny Quest – opening theme)

Wednesday January 18th of 2301 – mid-morning
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
World Management Grid substation for NCQ County

The convoy of four heavy trucks had managed to leave the still flooded triage yards then cross the Lascaux Canal tilt bridge to reach into NCQ town proper without any problems. Since that sector of town was a few feet above sea level, the rain water had flowed down to the canals and storm drains almost as quickly as it fell and would not have backed-up if the canals hadn't been filled above flood state already. As it was, there were still large deep ponds of gurgling brackish water and small streams rushing along sidewalks towards the lowest point, trying to evacuate the excess water towards the ocean and sewers. All the systems to handle flooding were saturated, needing a few days to clear out the overflow and stagnant pools of liquid, just as soon as the storm truly finished moving out of the Florida climatic zone.

Their teams took about an hour from the triage yard through convoluted and damaged streets to reach the WMG substation in an area of town that was still partially submerged under two to four feet of water in some sectors due mostly to the storm caused sea surge. Thankfully, the substation was at the very center of the thick tourism beltway that surrounded where the old band of beige sand that was the beach district resided, before the harbor got zapped from orbit and vaporized. Now the ocean was separated from the tourist district only by the layer of shops and housing on the southern side of the first boulevard that marked the transition from the 'Beach' to the 'Recreation' zones. It was a stark contrast from what the New Cape Quest harbor had been in its prime days.

All sixteen living members and eight robots disembarked the trucks as soon as they were parked and secured against hijacking. Older Lucas was wiping his mouth in distaste at the gawd-awful swill the healer had forced down his gullet like she was fattening a Thanksgiving turkey. "For his own good" indeed! His teachers used to tell him it was for his own good when they walloped him and he didn't believe them either! Did she really think she could fool him just cause she looked cute and had boobs rounder than the truck's tires? Meh! He hadn't been born last night; he knew she enjoyed watching him choke down that damned moldy-sock juice!

"Ooonnhhh! You look sooo cute when you pout like that! I should give you potions more often!" the healer in question wasn't letting up the prodding on his poor beleaguered ego either. What did a guy have to do to just get some silence around here? Granting Lua a withering look that only had the other fifteen humans laughing at his plight - Yes! He said plight! – the 33 year old led the crew of circus clown wannabees to the armored door of the building where he began entering the appropriate codes to override the storm shutters and place the edifice back into regular rainfall mode. The light drizzle and slightly foggy conditions were no longer dangerous to humans, just a right pain in the butt if you had to walk somewhere in the open for more than ten minutes.

The lights around the building changed from angry red to placid green as the armored shutters retracted while the door locks audibly disengaged to allow free access. Older Lucas opened the
door while the tech from Truck-1 signaled CIC they were going in as they convened. First, half of the humans marched in, pulse rifles raised and alert, then the eight robots, then the rest of the humans also on armed alert. They did it that way in case the robots became aggressive or acted weird; they would catch them in a pincer and shut them down hard before they hurt any people. The entry was done fast without troubles. The main amphitheater of the station was clean and dry, showing the WMG's design to resist through weather and war was in fact reliable. The surprise came from the blue lightning-like discharges surrounding the holo-assistant projector and the choking smell of ozone familiar around electrical fires. Somehow the system had either activated by accident or overcharged to the point it was now malfunctioning spectacularly.

Lua, the healer in charge of watching over Older Lucas's health, cast a quick detection spell, calling out a warning once the results appeared in the air next to him: "Watch out! The energy that's leaking out from our man is going straight to that console and then down into the basement where the armored room the diviners saw is located. We are feet away from the nexus of the entity. Does anyone see anything that looks like a floating humanoid or a transparent person?"

"No, but I'm pretty sure we would have shrieked like little schoolgirls if we did!" snarked her teammate and co-pilot of Truck-4. Martin Mystère was the most experienced and adapted to dealing with apparitions and revenants due to his years of working professionally for CIRPA so they had assigned one per team as either second driver or tech support. Unfortunately, because of his harsh childhood and adolescence steeped in violence, his default attitude was an abundance of sarcastic wisecracks and off-color jokes. Truth be told, Lua wouldn't really mind having a guy like him around her in normal circumstances since he was a good person and it was better than living in isolation as she had for some thirteen years of her life.

The hic was that there were three others and no one said sarcastic questionable humor was limited to just Martin and his variants. Given the average ages and occupations of her other convoy partners, she should have seen this coming. Most of them, including her, had lived harsh youths and found escape in having a strong dose of unforgiving cynicism towards life with dark sarcasm for people in particular. It's just that when you put 16 people with relatively the same characters, personality flaws and coping habits in a confined space, the results could go 'boom' like a powder keg. The fact they had spent three days inside that metal bell jar of a warehouse without any blowouts spoke to the resiliency and solid characters of each person. Now that they had reached the ghost's nexus though, she and the other three healers began to wonder how far that solidity of character would hold out.

Amateur ghost busters

(Martin Mystery – opening theme)

Wednesday January 18th of 2301 – mid-morning
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
World Management Grid substation for NCQ County

"All right you guys!" the oldest Martin called to his siblings "Let's show them how we got named Topmost Junior Agent at the Center after just ten months in the Game! U-Watch activate! Alpha Goggles!" he grabbed the goggles that materialized above his watch and put them on is face, activating the ecto-scan functions to find and report the traces of ectoplasmic contamination. "There, by the podium console, do you see the puddles of ectoplasm? It's been accumulating for days to be that thick and widespread. And the source of it is nearby, or it couldn't stay liquid like
that; it would vaporize!" He exchanged hand signals with his teams, splitting them back into four blocks of four humans and two bots then had them move to four corners around the small stage where the projector was mounted.

As they were halfway through their tactical positioning, an unearthly wail rose from all around them while all the electrical lights, even the LED's on their rifles and goggles, flickered unsteadily. A layer of hoarfrost manifested suddenly, causing splotches of frigid white moisture to condense and solidify over floors, chairs and electronics in random patterns as the ambient temperature dropped to minus ten Celsius in four seconds flat. Another sonic blast of inhuman wailing tore through the building, resonating outside up to two streets away, loud enough for the mechanical cameras and the magical sensor plates to pick up. Thankfully their signals, mundane and magical, were still strong so the CIC team back at the sanitarium could follow and send back-up if they needed it.

The group's designated spell casters came forward as they completed their tactical positioning, unfurling scrolls which they lost no time in using. These were single-cast scrolls designed to auto-write into stone a runic array that would then activate and create a bubble shaped containment ward empowered by Primal Essaence to hold the entity while capting and converting its negative energy and cursed effects to empower the ward matrix. This would prevent the team from being injured, giving them time to study the creature, its reason of existence, find its weakness then kill it off. The ward was cast successfully but they used eight points of anchoring, instead of just the basic two that the spell was based on, to keep it strong and reliable no matter what type of creature they faced.

The second set of prepared scrolls was unfurled and this time only four casters needed to work together for the effect to take hold. This would add extra runes to their wardline to extend the containment all the way under the building to en-globe the other part of the nexus so the entity didn't flee by the WMG utilities and power lines tunnels. As the ward en-globed the lower portion of the nexus, a concussive wave of air pulsed out from the console accompanied by another unearthly moan of rage that sounded around the edifice strongly enough to rattle the window frames and be heard in the outlying streets again.

The lead Martin Mystère signaled his siblings using CIRPA hand codes; together the four men shouted out "U-Watch activate! Ecto-diffuser!" and they grabbed the just materialized devices to slam them on the floor hard enough to cause the machines to activate. The screw-shaped ends bit into the concrete, screwing down a foot until the device was securely attached, with the five poles on top extended, emitting an energy wave specifically charged with positive energy to dissolve ectoplasm and accelerate its vaporization so it could be reabsorbed by the Soul Weave. An added bonus of this device was that it also dissolved elemental negative energy thus rendering possession, undeath and necromantic constructs or spells in its zone of effect almost impossible to maintain. Not even most of the 'Martin' could manage to bypass the machine's aura despite necromancy and the dark arts being the magical heritage of La Maison des Mystères since it's founding in the 500's just after the Western Roman Empire fell.

The healer from Truck-2, Jenna Labarre, shouted over the din of the eldritch winds sweeping and screeching through the building's rooms; "Start chanting the spirit wrack prayers to force the entity's physical presence as soon as you manage it! The second line of casters will be preparing to chant the soul chains to bind it to this phase of the dimension's material realm! We can't botch this one people! We only have one copy of each scroll so it has to take hold or we go home and take a couple of months to prepare for a war kuz it'll be mad as all Hell and it'll come at us with a vengeance!"

Around the perimeter of the wardline four casters began to place on the floor, in the runic arrays
they had just cast into being with their previous spells, the components of the rituals to come. First was a wide shallow bowl of dweomercrafted onyx in which was stood a triangle of white, gray and black tapers that were then surrounded by loose-leaf herbs, small oakwood amulets and glyphs of Yggdrasil's Faith carved in mistletoe. The ritual bowl was then sprinkled with holy oil and the three candles lit using the Traditions of the Old Ways; by bowing over the bowl and asking Nature for its kind help in showing them the Light so they could be warm and leave the Darkness to dwell in the Light of The Oakfather.

After all four bowls glowed with the purified lights of wiccan holy candles, the casters began to chant the spell from the scroll they each held with great reverence. They were in the process of asking a True Divinity for an Act of God, for a lesser miracle of their own Faith, in forcing the entity to come forth to be bound by their will and tolerance until they chose to release the prayer. This particular prayer was in the Arcane Realm and empowered using Mythal, a capacity not given to every person alive. If it weren't for the expertly crafted religious scrolls, none of them could have used this prayer as they never learned the spell-list it was part of. On top of that, only one of the four persons with that scroll in hand could actually cast using mythal as part of his training so the other three had to rely solely on the energies stored in the scroll to enact the miracle thus making this even more dangerous.

Something akin to a sonic boom announced that their prayers had been answered by Yggdrasil, the Tree of the Worlds, along with a frigid wave of soul-biting cold that left another denser layer of hoarfrost all around the building, even outside. Their sensors and monitoring spells were reading increased negative energy in the atmosphere, with both subsonic and infrasonic noises that were indicative of something happening to the energy weaves and the dimensional curtain in the immediate area. With a shared look and silent mental prayer for calm and strength, the four active casters passed from praying for the entity to be trapped to the actual chanted part of the prayer to force it to become solid and visible, so they could interact with it, allowing the other casters to truly bind it to this plane of existence.

(Star Wars Symphony – Duel of the Fates)

All four raised their voices in choir, their faithful song giving back hope and endurance to their teammates, and pushing back the encroaching darkness. The wooden medallion of Yggdrasil that each person and robot wore at their necks began to glow with a lambent light similar to liquid amber, from which spread an aura of Faith and Purity that repelled and denied the Unnatural entity that was the center of so much pain and chaos.

With an eye searing burst of psychedelic light waves, the entity was forcibly pulled from its hiding place out of phase and brought to float above the holographic podium that was now revealed as one of its focal items. The ghost, or whatever it was, began to solidify, revealing its hideous nature unto them. Not a single human in that room, watching through the sensor relays or reviewing the recordings later, would ever be the same or sleep at peace again. Nature, science, magicks, psionics and human atrocity had conspired to concatenate a being that had no place in the Natural Realm under the boughs of Yggdrasil. It's countenance was such mismatched ugliness, its energies such repulsive soul-sickening blasphemy against Life, several of the people on site and in the CIC became sick, retching despite having drunk stomach soother potions a good five minutes before the teams went into the WMG building.

The entity was mostly a translucent pale blue with nondescript whitish phantasms flowing and flashing around its body's blurry vaporous borders. Inside were several jointed, but not completely connected, segments of dense oily black energy that looked like the bones of a skeletal structure with many mutations, diseases and malformations. Several multivarded pouches of sickly radioactive green mist were clumped here, there, and a few other places that made no sense, as if
emulating the organs of a living being. There were things in the creature's body, limbs and multi-
parted head that shone an aggressive repulsive red like boiling blood but looked vaguely like 
medical implants, replacements for bones, or devices to stabilize organs.

The creature stood on three mismatched malformed legs that were positioned like a tripod with the 
knees and clawed feet pointing outwards, at three positions away from the front: left, back and 
right. This actually attracted attention to the hellish creature's crotch, directly on it's oxen-sized 
half-erect double penis covered in bony barbs, and its wrinkly scrotum with puss-leaking lesions 
and four swollen misshapen testicles.

Above the waistline waved angrily six mutated malformed arms ending in broken dysfunctional 
hands that had an eye in the palm and minute toothy mouths on the fingertips. Sprouting from its 
shoulders, back and kidneys were an unknown number of tentacles, in varying lengths and 
diameters, all covered in slimy suckers in the centers of which were either a rabid eye or insanity-
babbling mouth. All the slender whippy tentacles ended in cruelly barbed hooks, spiky pincers or 
inhuman four-fingered hands with ichor leaking from their claws.

The head though was an abomination unto itself and explained the full depth of the insanities they 
were condemned to deal with today. The conscience warping limb was perched on a two foot long 
neck, shaped like a diseased watermelon looked at from the wide-side, and split vertically yet a-
symmetically and non-geometrically between three souls that they knew all too well. Franklin 
Henri Wise in the middle, Older Lucas on the left and Nathan Bridger on the right. The illogically 
built face had a huge single malformed mouth with broken jagged fangs that drooled ichor. The 
nasal structure seemed to be flattened, broken and stretched across all three components of the 
face, making its five nostrils quite mind boggling to look at. There were three pairs of barely 
human eyes, a pair in each segment. Above these was a flat wide oval with red sclera and black 
ridges that served as pupils; this eye was placed a little left of center and not quite leveled either. 
Each pupil of the great mystical eye moved independently from the others and looked at, or more 
likely into, eldritch doings that the humans could not countenance to plumb.

(Hymnals – Adeste Fideles)

Jenna Labarre signaled her casters to begin reading and chanting the new prayers: the soul chains 
were also Arcane Realm spells empowered by Mythal and came from the same spell-list as the 
spirit wrack. This spell was neither good nor evil, simply a tool to hold and constrict an entity in 
this plane of existence in a way that was less stressful for the caster while also keeping the entity 
docile and non-harmful. There were some spirits or demons that could break the prayers, but only 
if the caster was too low in power, had too little experience in such matters, or had failed to inscribe 
the sigils on the floor correctly. Since she had used an auto-inscribing scroll to engrave and inlay 
with silver the appropriate runic array in the last few seconds, she was certain her casters could 
anchor the chains properly to bind the abomination to their holding area. Any failure would leave 
them with a semi-corporeal rabid ghost with a taste for pain, misery, and ruination that she had no 
idea yet how to fight against.

The ghost screeched in unholy fury as the luminescent purple soul chains elongated from the sigils 
on the floor and streaked at it's unprotected legs. When they reached, the four sets of chains snaked 
around the malformed limbs, crawling up the legs, then the torso, then splitting innumerable times 
so they could go all the way to the wrists of each arm or tentacle to completely immobilize the 
abomination. The creature became desperate and tried to emit a mind blast at one of the casters, but 
it was deflected by the fighters using their own spells and rune-covered shields. The chanting 
reached a crescendo then both choirs closed their rituals as the deed was done; the entity was fully 
chained and bound to this place in the Prime Material Plane, Time and Reality unless it had 
capacities they didn't yet know about.
"Well, that didn't go nearly as well as I thought it would." grouched the Field Leader Martin Mystère as he wiped sweat from his forehead with his shirt sleeve as he looked all around to ascertain the status of the teams.

"The Hell do you mean, Luv? It went great! We got the beastie and nobody got hurt! What gives?" answered one of the healers as she cast a diagnostic spell at Older Lucas to see how drained he was. The whole fight had taken just shy of nine minutes so the protection potion should last at least another forty before it passed his system.

"What I mean Luv is this: in all the years I worked with CIRPA to take out vampires, werewolves, witches, apparitions, golems, elementals, mutations, alien invaders and human mad scientists that mutate themselves for power, never has a fight been so 'short and not dangerous' as this one. I've fought ghosts before Jenna, a few haunted houses and cursed cemeteries too. Ghosts don't like to lose in death anymore than in life. In fact, its because they lost something or were just plain 'losers' in life that they turn to ghosts and haunt stuff; because they're sore losers and rabidly angry about it. That thing should have been freezing us, sapping our life-force, aging us prematurely, and casting spells and curses that attack the mind and soul. Instead, it just wasted a whole lot of cold air screaming and belching, but not doing anything worth talking about. That makes me think that this thing, it ain't the physical type of enemy."

Jenna Labarre frowned cutely as she thought things through. She knew that her boyfriend and fiancé, the very Martin she was speaking with, was a veteran of hundreds of these skirmishes under CIRPA and the best, most experienced, in the entire Assembly. If his gut was telling him that this beast was not a physical combatant despite its sheer ugliness and many weaponized poisonous limbs, then she and the other casters would believe Martin and bolster their collective mind shields. "Okay sweetie, me and the other girls will start inscribing some mentalism / psionics diffusers and anti-possession wards, then we all revise the rune-sets on our body armors and tools before we start questioning that thing."

"All right people! Stay away from the 'Fugly Flotsam' until we have all the protections up to specs and the casters give us the all clear!" Martin yelled at the group with a bratty smirk firmly on his face. This was the kind of situation where he was at his best, reacting to adversity faster than the enemy could punch and curse. Planning and logistics were all well and good, but the field was his real place and he wouldn't change that for anything. Having his fiancée Jenna at his side just confirmed that this really was the best life he could have.

As the designated casters conferred on their safety perimeter and which wards to add, the fighters placed the robots as a backup line in the back. During their enforced three day layover in the boathouse factory, the casters had inscribed runes to generate 15 foot wide auras that disperse psionics, magicks and negative energy on each machine. Extra glyphs for holy protection from evil, chaos and the Unnatural were inscribed on the interior surfaces of the robots' body plates to give them another chance. Each patroller-bot had engraved on its forehead a religious glyph consecrated as a holy symbol to repel undead and exorcise spirits. These protections were at the lowest level of strength possible (Type I) since they had worked only with the runic arts and no laboratory. Still, the presence of these mobile beacons of Light and Goodness was a boon on all the humans as they set to work shoring up the containment zone and doing a field-tuning of their mystical personal defenses.

Older Lucas was set at the very back of the fighting since he had a zero spells or mystical abilities to help in the situation, but he did know by heart the layout of the building so he was tasked with their hacking and deployment strategy, under approval by the expedition commander and CIC. One of the techs was by his side, helping as they tried to hack the WMG protocols to see what shape the network was in, following the storm outside and the ghost's manifestation to solid state. It
wasn't pretty; there were multiple substations damaged, several large fires raging in town, the M-A-D sector of town was flooded but draining with three distinct industrial fires in progress, one of them almost out of control. The automated vehicles and robots of the WMG could do a lot of heavy work but had no instincts and no gut feelings, whilst fire was almost a living entity with a survival instinct for finding and jumping to all the combustibles in sight. Paradoxically, the fires were under better control when the rains were torrential as the downpour made even chemical and electrical fires slow to progress. With the slow down in precipitations, the damned winds were whipping up the flames to new heights and flinging flaming debris all around the buildings, spreading the fire to other areas when the initial blaze were not even controlled. There was presently a very real probability of district-wide conflagration if nothing was done soon.

After conferencing with their SCT at the Sanitarium, the CIC called out to the younger members of the Assembly to have them take up computer stations to hack into the network and hijack the control nodes and decision centers of the Grid so as to start manually giving instructions to the fire crews and send them reinforcements as well. Other young people would be tasked with controlling the Grid's workpods and tool-trucks to give them a new set of priorities as to which roads and infrastructures they should repair first. The leader of the CIC told his management teams to prioritize taking out the fires then shoring up the way from the hospital to town, all the way to the WMG substation where their people were battling the abomination. They needed clear roadways with a definite path in case the instantaneous magical transports couldn't go through the interference of the storm and the many broken live power lines.

(Star Gate SG1 – Ori chant)

It took two full hours to verify and consolidate the containment zone, add another ward line next to the existing one, then go through the body armor, shield, helmet and amulets of every human and robot in the hall. A pair of 'Thomas' had been dispatched outside to fetch three of the steel plates with magical sensors and comm relays engraved on them so they could place them around the auditorium to give the CIC team a much better view than the bobbing around from the body cams and runic PAL-equivalent inscribed in the helmets of their teammates and patroller-bots. Also important in the situation, the plates had more sensing spells than their helmets and they were stronger with better image definition; this would come in handy when trying to analyze or interrogate the Abomination.

The SCT back at the Sanitarium were glad to finally have something with fixed perspective to look at. The mix-up of multiple moving points-of-view had been driving the tactical team bonkers, trying to keep track of every person and thing through 24 different images at the same time. Now with three main monitors only, the oversight and tactical analysis would be much easier to accomplish with less chance of errors happening.

Unspoken by anybody was the truly stupid reality that if they hadn't put numbers on their people's body armor like "T2-D3" meaning "Truck-2; Driver-3 (of 8 drivers for the whole convoy)" then they would not be able to send orders or ask reports in a coherent fashion. They had forgotten that small fact since they never lived through this situation before, but the truth was that they had many multiple variants of each person spread across all trucks, so just calling out 'Thomas' or 'Martin' would get them four answers at the same time. So they created a numbering system for this expedition, and now it was coming in handy at last as the SCT could begin directing the fighters on where and how to position the sensor plates, along what types of protections needed set around them to deflect the ghost's attacks if it got free.

After that, the Strategic Control Team began a discussion with the four expert casters of the expedition about what divinatory spells they planned and in which sequence they would cast. One of the teenaged Martine Mystère in the CIC suggested that they spread a line of oiled herbs and
wet twigs to make a mystical fyre-line ward that would cut down the cold and negative energy coming out of the containment zone, while also obscuring the view of the monstrous creature, as it was truly repulsive and they were sick of seeing it directly. A thin smokescreen from wet, scented herbs and woods would help their people and spare their eyes at the same time. The girl's idea was discussed and approved for implementation in less than five minutes as everybody really had their fill of that bastard's face (and the rest!) for a lifetime. A follow-up discussion was centered on which herbs, woods and oils to mix for the fuel line along with the choice of prayers and blessings to invoke on it when lit.

After fifteen minutes of work, a fully circular line of cheery yellow flames was rising gaily from the crackling sappy green twigs of pine and maple, the wafting smoke obscuring the sight of the beast to grant their eyes and minds a much needed rest. The four 'Thomas' in the group knelt together in front of the fyre-line to pray Yggdrasil for endurance, stability and peace of mind for all their group in the coming ordeal. The glow from the medallions at their necks signified the prayers had been accepted and the humans felt a sense of calm, peace, and renewal spread amongst them. Words and signs of thanks were sent at the four young men as the Field Leader nodded at them for a job well done. The effect might not last for long but it would help give them a reprieve from the intense pressure of negative energy and malevolence emanating from the Abomination.

At the three hour mark, the Field Leader called all members to gather for a tactical brief next to the central steel plate, the one which had a runic cluster to emit imagery and sounds so it could serve as a giant PAL-equivalent for their encampment. Once all 16 live people were assembled in four teams of four crewmen, the CIC began briefing them on the outside conditions for the weather, roads and town in general. Then it was the results already gathered by the three sensor plates they had placed in the amphitheater.

The beast was composed of 65% ectoplasm (like demons) but also 35% protoplasm (like normal living entities) so it wasn't a ghost or revenant or any type of spiritual creature at all. It was more like a demon or an elemental based on negative energy, capable of phase shifting or becoming incorporeal at will. This changed the entire game plan since it meant that all the turn undead, exorcism and repel spirit runic wards they had placed on the humans' body armors and the robots would not work at all. They needed an adaptation pronto!

One of the 'Lua' that was at the hospital in the CIC spoke to the field teams via the magical relay. "At least the ecto-diffusers are working; anything reducing or dissolving negative energy should as well. You should prepare some concentrate of positiveness in glass flasks to throw at the thing if it gets problematic towards you or tries to escape. As a bonus, the positive energy from the containers will give you some small areas of peace to rest your minds and recuperate your stamina between bouts of questioning that Aberration. How in the Nine Levels of Hell did that entity come to exist? Does anyone have any theory yet?" Her question bounced around the expedition members until someone pointed at Older Lucas in the back row.

Jonathan Quest asked the older male a question that had been simmering in his mind for a couple of hours, without really knowing how to express it until now. Gesturing to get the right to speak without barking over everyone else, he asked the man that held some of the answers locked away in his head. "Hey man, do you have any ideas to how Crap-Face came about? Cuz I don't think it had a mamma like nobody else, if you get my drift?" His rather off-the-wall phrase caused guffaws of laughter and a few snorts of sarcastic amusement while the 'Lua' next to him fought hard to keep a straight face as she gave a firm smack to his backside to reprimand his uncouth comment. Their oldest comrade was recovering from several grievous injuries, including serial rape; he deserved some consideration from the others in the group. At the same time, said oldest member of the expedition tried to remember why it was that his incarnations in other realities actually liked this kid's attitude. Oh yes! His own variants had worse temperaments so compared to them, this guy
sounded nice most of the time!

With a smirk of self-deprecating dark humor, Older Lucas addressed the group at large as his answer concerned them all. "The doc back at the hospital confirmed that I had indeed been raped and then healed several hundred times over five years. By that I mean physical rape with unneeded drugs and illegal implants. There was sexual rape by Nathan Bridger along a few others whose names didn't mean anything to me. There was mental & psionic rape by Wendy Smith and a couple of operators from Section Seven that I don't remember knowing. Which of course was the purpose of the many multiple bouts of memory re-writing coupled with locking down several of my skills and character traits like I was a programmable automaton in a factory."

He took a breath, clenched fists deep in his jeans pockets, as he remembered the results of the scans. "Even though the Doc and her team were able to do a deep divination to extract the history of injuries and the history of crimes done to me, we didn't get anymore than dates with a few faces and names from the spells, but no real leads to go on. Since I am still a guy and the Doc didn't find an extra uterus in me, I can assume I didn't give birth to this thing during one of my black-outs. Somebody could have taken samples at some time; God knows that since I was 15, the blasted US Naval Intel has kept tabs on me, including that series of tests and surgeries right before boot camp to get aboard SeaQuest I. Both Westphalen and Smith were pretty adamant about having a fresh harvest every month, even when I wasn't injured or sick. At this point, your guess is as good as mine." He finished with a negligent half-shrug as he was so bloody weirded out by all this sorcery, psionics and real true Divinities that granted miracles that he was close to a mental burn-out, rolling on nothing more than a few remaining vapors.

One of the 'Thomas' had another question for their oldest teammate. "Hey bro, that implant you had taken out of your head all those years ago? Where did it go? Did you destroy it, or keep it around, or what?" As the expedition's people were looking at him in wonder, the young man expanded on his question: "What I mean is that ghosts need a focus to hold onto the Prime Material Plane, they need an anchor just like a ship or air balloon. But what if the focus item had organic parts in it? Or programming? I mean, that nightmare over there has three people on its face! And from the story you told us about how you came to spend 14 years of your life in the future was that Dr Wise made an implant that was programmed to force you to obey Bridger and they put that into your skull. You also said that you were never able to figure out if it was an implant or a parasite, because it was so much more organic than electronic. Do you see what I mean?"

There was a generalized murmur around the hall as the sixteen humans began to speak all together at the same time with their neighbors. After pondering the situation a minute, Older Lucas whistled to silence them before answering the question: "I kept it. Pretty much like a trophy from a first hunt or something. I defeated it and survived, so I wanted to keep it to look at it from time to time, to remind myself of what exactly I had gone through, and what I won against. I also wanted to study it in depth to evaluate the damage it had done to my brain and mind. I was curious as to how it was built and programmed, why it worked so well for so long undetected." His answer was met with a few winces of sympathy and some nods of understanding from the 'Martin' in the group as they knew more than most how important studying odd alien tech was for staying alive and creating defenses.

The Field Leader 'Martin' asked him where he kept the blasted device so they could rule it out as the source of the blasphemous creature. The older male rubbed the back of his head, suddenly sheepish, as he pointed down at the floor with the other hand, saying weakly "down there, in the storage locker with the blast door". The Field Leader passed both hands on his face in tired frustration. "We needed to know that BEFORE we came in! Even if we wouldn't have gone for it any sooner anyways, we still needed to know that piece of CRITICAL information before setting foot in the building!" he finished angrily while glaring at the older man.
They couldn't really be angry at him for long though; the guy was operating with multiple mental handicaps, severe memory blocks that were unraveling randomly, and constant physical pains for the last five days straight. His performance up to now was above the call of duty and beyond reproach, so the teammates just convened to ask more questions and be more detailed, more inquisitive so as to get all the important stuff out of him when he was questioned. Since the group's reaction was not aggressive or condescending, it helped the older male to stabilize himself and think logically about the miserable piece of artificial hell that had been in his head.

Little closet of horrors

(Real Adventures of Jonny Quest – opening theme)

Wednesday January 18th of 2301 – early afternoon
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
World Management Grid substation for NCQ County

The expedition members folded and packed away the chairs of the main floor via a nifty little spell called imaginatively enough a packing charm. Afterwards they unloaded four steel BBQ's and piles of wood they had taken from the boathouse factory to set up a camping area with all the cooking clustered together. It gave them a sense of security to have so much live flame in the presence of such an unholy Abomination. The healers added aromatic herbs and oils to the BBQ's to help scent the air thus creating a basic aerial zone ward to repel the fright and dampen the mental attacks the thing could probably generate. After a summary meal that was kept light and small so people didn't get sick, they began planning the incursion downstairs to what was now believed to be the real primary focus for the monster.

The Field Leader organized a strike team of six humans with four robots that would go down at the front of the line. Their armor and magical protections would give them the time to enter the closet and the sensors would relay the information back upstairs to the rest of the people gathered around the main steel plate.

It took ten minutes to process the gear check, get in line and go to the doorway to the lower level. It was easily unlocked as the code hadn't changed in more than five decades. Older Lucas was kept upstairs, right near the magical relay so he could see events unfold and give explanations when needed. The first robot to reach the lower floor stopped abruptly; its sensors showing the blast door to the storage room crawling with an infestation of organic growth like they had never seen before. It was a weird purple and red mixture with leafy tufts and tendrils that ended in small rose-like flowers whose sharp serrated petals oozed sap that stank of rotten corpses. The vegetal growth seemed to have originated from inside the room as they could see several holes in the door's material where the plant passed through.

The robots approached, the light from the LED's mounted in their heads showed that the plant infestation was actually dead and desiccated; it's purple and red coloration tarnished and dull. The sap oozing from the petals was actually mold that was growing in the sweet nectar of the flowers and overflowing onto the floor. That is when a closer look from the robot's camera eyes showed that the mold might be reflective to the lights, but it was actually dried out; only the mineral deposits of the dried crud reflected light. There was no water, sap or life in the plant or it's moldy commensals. Everything on that vegetal was dead and dry. There were even dead carcasses of small insects and a partially eaten desiccated rat in a two foot zone around the door.
The signal was given; the robots pulled out crowbars and machetes and began the tedious job of removing the solidified vegetation and piling up the debris in a side room where one of the spell casters went to place a few preservation charms and stasis charms to ensure the plant didn't come back to life to attack them. The person also took samples of the plant's various parts, the mold colony and the flowers too. You never knew where the next potion brewing breakthrough would come from. While that happened, the team got another encampment sensor plate relay from the trucks and brought it down to the basement corridor with a second one to place in the storage room once it was opened.

After a half hour of slow hard labor, the doorway was cleared and they could see that the plant had indeed aggressively dug through the steel plate of the door in a dozen places and that the holes were somewhat small, barely an inch in diameter. The plant had acted like a needle, boring through the metal then, once free on the other side, had resumed growing in diameter as well as length, not caring that it was essentially forever imprisoned by the small holes where it passed. This also meant that the plant had no intellect, no real mobility, and could not think about moving the door or decide to enlarge the holes. It was a weird new species never seen before, but not a sentient or animated variety, so a lot less dangerous. The four 'Martin' of the group breathed a sigh of relief; they had fought many animated plants in their tenure at CIRPA, and it was always a slimy, harsh experience. Plants didn't move, feel or fight like other species on top of being much less susceptible to pain and injuries than the other types of Life.

The first robot punched the code into the lock on the doorframe but it beeped a malfunction. This forced the robots to put their crowbars to use, forcing the door to slide backwards into its pocket so they could access the storage compartment to see inside. The room was chocked full with desiccated vegetal growth, dead insect and rodent carcasses littering the floor almost everywhere they could see. The back wall of the room was invisible as it was completely hidden behind a virtual wall of dead plant matter. Unfortunately, that back wall was the location of the shelf with the safety box containing the implant, surgery reports and research notes.

The SCT members back at the sanitarium were grumbling about the quantity of vegetation in the room and the time it would take to purge the stuff by hand. The 'Diana Lombard' that was there with them grabbed a runic PAL-equivalent to talk to her sibling in the expedition team. "Martin! Use the watch's X-knife to cut through that gunk faster! The robots can do it, but at only a third of human speed, and they won't be careful with the artifacts when they reach the walls and furniture." Her brother gestured in affirmative at the sensor plate then called out to the other three of himself to pull back the bots to the hallway so they could get in the room themselves.

The defoliation advanced much faster with humans cutting and throwing out the plant's massive mummified remains, the robots clearing away the trash to the second room rather quickly. The thing weighed about 14 pounds per cubic foot of vegetation, with leaves and spines that were still sharp like razor blades. The four young men backed off for a few seconds to cast plant guard spells to render themselves immune to damage by vegetal matter then dove back in with a vengeance. It still took most of an hour to get out the dead knots of vines and roots until they reached the heart of the plant: a massive gourd-like root that was big as a large human torso with a huge open flower bulb on top. The thing stank like an open-topped cesspit under the summer sun and was eye-wateringly ugly. The splotches of colors squiggled all around the thing in a way that made Rorschach blots look sane and standard like the alphabet.

The problem became apparent when the 'Martins' saw that the xeno-tuber sat on the very shelf the implant and notes were supposed to rest on. Firstly, it was a counter on top of cabinetry with four doors and, in the middle, a cluster of six horizontal drawers that were flat and wide like storage for
maps. There was no mess on the floor besides vegetation cuttings and insect shells so that meant
that yes, the safety box was inside the blasted potato-from-the-Abyss. The thing was not going to
be easy to move due to its size and weight. They would need to set up containment barriers and cut
in to it right here. The four 'Martins' took a breather by pulling out and letting the four dedicated
fighters from their teams come in to do the sweep-up, to move useless furniture, boxes and loose
parts of electronics outside for analysis, cataloging and storage or disposal.

Each 'Martin' drank through a full liter of chilled sports drinks under healer supervision while their
friends waded through the side shelving and two technical service carts that still had to be deep-
cleaned of their infestations and dead animal carcasses. They found a single secondary flower
bloom in one of the carts where a tech had forgotten a 2 liter plastic bottle of fruit juice, completely
full by the look of the intact seal on the cap. The vines had slowly dug through the side of the
bottle, infiltrating the plastic then growing inside the bottle until there was enough growth to
generate a tuber with a small hand-sized flower on top.

It seemed the plant had been desperately seeking fluids of any sorts to fuel its growth to the point it
even drank from the can of lubricating oil (not aerosol, the brush-on kind) that was used to service
the bearings and glide tracks for the storm shutters and ventilation fans. The plant's capacity to
absorb that sort of silicon-based fluid without dying indicated to the 'Martins' that this was in fact a
'Xeno-plant', an extra-terrestrial lifeform. There was no plant or mold on earth that ate this stuff and
survived, not even under development in the experimental horticulture labs that CIRPA monitored.

The fighters took about a half hour to dust off and move out the mobile furniture and spare parts,
then swept clean as much of the closet as they could with a couple of quickly applied cleaning
charms. They left the room clean enough for the spell casters to inscribe runic arrays on the floor,
walls, and around the back wall's shelving and cabinets. One of the casters noted the absence of a
sink, water pipes or floor drains in the room, leaving just a pair of venting ducts near the ceiling on
each side; it was a completely dry room. That explained why the plant died; it didn't have any
water or condensation to survive so it dried out. If there had been access to even the tiniest bit of
liquid, it was probable that the plant would have outgrown the substation building and then become
a vegetal plague when exposed to the bayous and sustained rains of Florida. They had avoided a
catastrophe by the skin of their teeth as it were.

The SCT team told them to prepare transfigured and warded transport containers for the plant; the
Lead Tactician wanted all the flowers and tubers along a large sampling of roots, vines, spines and
leafy clusters as well as scrapings from the mold deposits. Their biology teams needed the raw
material to study; since the plant was 'xeno', it might have useful properties as medicine, weapon or
just food source. In either case, they needed to bring back the entire batch of critical parts from that
mummified salad back at Grosse Tronche ASAP.

With a lot of playful grumblings about bossy 'Lucases' never letting them rest, the 'Martins' took
out varied foci to spell into shape diverse stoneware boxes with hinged lids. It seemed that cement
and stone were immune to the plant's burrowing and digesting capacities therefore they created
rectangular caskets out of conjured synthetic ceramics with sets of runes already etched on them. A
few minutes of silent spellcasting later and the boxes were glowing with the power of the durability
& dryness wards and stasis charms applied to them. It was the fighters' job to start packing the
crates as the 'Martins' would soon enough be brought back to the front to do the necropsy on the
dead plant's central tuber.

The problem that all the 'Martin Mystere' variants had with being so competent and experienced
was that several jobs were too risky or too specialized to let somebody else do them if he was
available. And he was at the highest levels among CIRPA's top fieldwork specialists, xeno-
biologists, mycologists, and organic secretions experts. Their expedition could not ask for better
personnel but they only had four of him (Hein? Only four of a person? What a concept!) Their over-reliance on 'him' was beginning to wear out the four men, not that the hard-headed runts would ever try to complain about being tired or needing a break. It was the other teammates that had to watch out for them, forcing them to pace themselves or they would overexert themselves, dropping to the floor with a case of terminal fatigue.

A blossoming garden of monstrosities

(The X-Files – opening theme)

Wednesday January 18th of 2301 – mid-afternoon
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
World Management Grid substation for NCQ County

Once the samples were stored and removed from the basement, the spellcasters declared the work area clean with the wards powered up and active to contain any suddenly mobile plant growth or insects or any such thingies that might no be completely dead. A quick call upstairs confirmed that the Fugly Flotsam hadn't so much as twitched during the last two hours of work so they decided to continue while the going was good.

The four 'Martins' pulled out of their U-Watches another set of ecto-diffusers to place two in the corridor and two in the storage room so as to negate the effects of the malevolent entity and keep it from phasing through the ceiling to drop a surprise attack on them. The oldest and most experienced 'Martin' again activated the X-knife's beam blade: a variable frequency laser contained inside a forcefield.

A genuine fully functional lightsaber.

This was just one of the several hundred alien technologies that CIRPA held and never told mundane governments or the Wizerias about for the decade it had existed. When such knowledge would come out, the backlash against CIRPA and many layers of the planet's governments would domino until it toppled all of the Earth's societies into anarchy.

It only took a pair of slow clean cuts to open the torso-like tuber to be able to pull back the front panel and see inside. Gasp! - There was shock and revulsion from everyone. Inside the plump sagging root there were fully formed organs held by nets of fibrous wires and pipes that looked like the muscles, ligaments and veins of a human. The fleshy tuber even had grey-white solid structures shaped like humanoid bones that originated from what seemed like a spinal column to form ribs joining into a solar plexus, pelvic bone with arches and clavicles.

The damned thing! It was either gestating a humanoid inside a juice-sack, or had tried to become humanoid at the very beginning, before the process was interrupted so it reverted back to its original vegetal morphology to try and find the water and nutrients to survive.

The Field Leader growled angrily in his PAL-equivalent: "Breaker! – Breaker! – Emergency! - I want those cursed crates in bio-hazard quarantine Right-Fucking-Now! Put a pair of armed humans and a quad of bots on it around the clock! – Breaker! – Breaker! - I want a set of eyes from the SCT on that pile of boxes around the dial too! Establish a HAZMAT confinement perimeter and a runic burn-line around the pile! Now, people! – Breaker! – Breaker! - This thing could be a xenomorph or a changeling of some sort! We have to establish identification and recognition protocols against
infiltration yesterday! Move your shapely asses girlies! – Over!"

(Two Steps From Hell – Star Sky)

In the hospital the SCT Leader shut down his emotions as he walked purposefully to a console and, uncaring of yet more injuries to his hand, slammed a fist through a glass-fronted recess to trigger the large red button inside. The alarms began blaring all around the sanitarium complex, rousing people from their work areas, beds and bathrooms, calling to arms all able bodied personnel. They had an imminent threat in progress and he would be a damned fool if he let it enter his walls.

"Breaker – Breaker! - All hands, this is Strategic Control Team! We have a Zeta-class situation! Changeling on the loose! – Breaker! - Breaker! - Repeat to all hands! Changeling on the loose! All stations call in with psychic connection to confirm identity! Send out the rovers and power up the perimeter wardline! – Breaker! – Breaker! - I want the CIWS monoliths active R-F-N! Get the stupid menhirs finished and placed around the courtyard and building roofs above all other work! – Over!"

Down in the kitchen, Younger Lucas #18 handed his menus and inventory lists to a colleague before sprinting back to his room to change into his fighting gear. He might be the least mystical in the whole assembly but he would never accept being the defenseless little child in the house ever again! They would take him down with steel and fire in his hands and no other way!

After a quick trip to the administration tower and his room, he took the elevator to the overwatch gallery they had completed setting up during the three-day storm imposed delay. The doors opened to reveal a dozen persons with guns and readied spells aimed at the elevator. He quirked a smile and exclaimed brattily "Why, what a warm welcome! It makes me all a-quiver with warm fuzzy feeling all a sudden!" The collective groan that answered him with the release of dweomers and weapons was just priceless. Who knew having family and friends could be such fun?

The Combat Information Center's chief was not amused but then again, seeing the little runt all dressed in ominous black with a belt full of hard steel and a cold dead-eyed stare to give pause to an admiral, he realized that they might be passing up one of their best resources they had to work with. This little guy was only eleven years old and had limited technical or scientific experience compared to the 17 other variants of that age, but he had killer intent, a drive to win, and blood on his hands from defending his Borders and Rule. He might be better able to help the situation than the others who could stay in the workshops to hammer away at the CIWS manatites or find a way to create in short order a changeling repulsion ward of some sort.

"Okay kiddo, come in and look at things, give me your take on it all." The 20 year old invited with as much kindness and civility as his damaged soul could muster. Life had never been kind or easy for him, as his scars and medical file could attest, so he had precious little experience in how to be kind or show gentleness to others. Efficiency and battle he understood, manners and politeness were somebody else's problem.

The child put on his massive silver-faced helmet and connected the life-support pipes before moving to the first cluster of consoles. "Show me real time imagery of the WMG auditorium and the basement side-by-side. I need a 3D blueprint of the entire building with its utilities tunnels, enclosed pipes and any underground support structures or earthquake dampers they put in place." The boy joined hands behind his back, standing ramrod straight like an experienced officer on the bridge of his ship during combat. "Give me sit-rep on our headcount; have all hands called in? Are all stations manned and ready?" he asked from the comms person on his left.

As the older Tactical Chief backed away, the child took the center of the room, issuing orders to secure the perimeter, close the gatekeeps and seal off access to the bayous and outlying grass bands
that surround the outside of the storm walls. "Divination group! Set up a conclave ASAP! I want to
know if our ranks are penetrated here or in our remote teams! Get me affirmative ID on each head
and scan the bots as well! They're humanoid so a changeling could possibly emulate one of those if
it's desperate enough to get loose!"

The child pulled a touchscreen monitor & keyboard to his position so he could survey the layout
himself, get familiar with the apps and cyber setup they had now spent five days putting in place in
the hospital intranet. Thankfully, he did a bit of snooping every evening and morning to stay
familiar with the systems and happenings; it would be a quick glance then back to running
roughshod over the guys to get their collective bacon out of the frying pan.

Younger Lucas #18 turned to the magical PAL-equivalent, calling out "Breaker! - SCT calling for
T1-D2 – Over!"

The Field Leader 'Martin' turned to the portable sensor plate they had affixed to the wall of the
storage room to see the floating magical hologram of the child in black body armor with the large
faceless helmet shouting out for his attention. Seeing that the 20 year old Tac-Chief was there but
in the background told him what he needed so he gestured his two siblings to hold the sagging
uber-root in place while he talked with the brass back home. "Breaker! – This is T1-D2 as ordered.
– Over!" he answered wondering what they had for him.

The child approached the image scanner so his projection at the other end would be bigger until he
found out how to adjust the size of the reception display. He had a few questions that needed
clearing up now. "Breaker! – Field Lead what is your intel situation on the vegetal? Have you
completed DNA & Legendex scans for confirmation? – Over!"

The 'Martin' nodded once "Breaker! – Yes SCT, we have DNA and fluidic scans completed but
nothing in CIRPA's Legendex, either earthly or alien, compares to this thing. It's been confirmed as
synthetic derived from a mix of natural and alien DNA strains, and utterly unknown to any of our
sources. – Over!"

The child swore too softly for the sensor spells to pick up but the tense set of his shoulders and
clenched fists were visible indicators that he didn't like the situation anymore than the older people
around. He pointed the PAL image with his right hand's index to push the point of his order to the
expedition team. "Breaker! – SCT addressing T1-D2 with orders – Breaker! – Your orders as
follow: pull back all personnel from the storage shed until you have obtained the produce of the
next order. – Breaker! - All capable diviners on site are to begin a series of visions of the past and
similar spells or psionics to pinpoint the moment of appearance and manner of genesis of the Xeno.
Call back with results. – Over!"

The child made a hand gesture that the person on the other end understood well; it was a request to
repeat the orders received and give out a secure password to confirm identity at the same time. This
kid was obviously trained at some point. Good. They needed all the able hands they could find.
The Field Leader repeated his orders and confirmed his ID before moving out of the #3 imager's
range then called his people out of the storage room after which they closed again the door and
repaired the entire valve system with a pair of mending and locking spells.

Hindsight and perspectives

(Ellephant Music – Dawn of Time)

Wednesday January 18th of 2301 – mid-afternoon
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
World Management Grid substation for NCQ County

It was a tense hour as the competent diviners in the expedition teams gathered in the corridor next to the closet and set up the rituals needed to see, hear and sense through the past events of the building. They had four different methods going at the same time due to the casters all having differing capacities and an urgent need for answers about a very real threat to their group.

The first person to emerge from the divinatory trance, one of the 'Jenna Labarre', had taken only ten minutes and wrote down a limited calendar to show when the foreign plant-life had appeared. The details were sketchy but it seemed that it had emerged from the confines of the safety box some fourteen years ago, growing at a snail's pace. It had undergone an explosive growth spurt about two years ago, she had no idea why. It had died three months or so ago for reasons she could not see. The person guessed the plant's seeds could have been in the box since before it was used to store the implant and notes by Older Lucas. Further divinations were needed to clarify the details of that.

The second diviner, the only 'Lua' on the expedition, emerged after 15 minutes in trance, retching hard all she had eaten since morning. After calming down and washing her mouth with water and a spell, she confirmed she had managed to feel and analyze in detail the auras around the plant while it lived. The thing was malevolent to a level that non-sentient life could not reach. The diviner had deduced the plant had survived this long by absorbing the negative energy of the Aberration and using its deposits of ectoplasm in lieu of normal fluids to sustain its life, thus its auras and mutated physiology.

The third diviner, another 'Jenna', left her trance after an hour in dire needed to lie down so she was assisted by her fiancé Martin, their Field Leader. He helped her to drink some sports drink to quickly rehydrate and eat a bit of military survival biscuit to settle her stomach to avoid vomiting from a panic attack. After calming down, as she slowly chewed her way through her snack, she reported she had found a moment in time where the vegetal was at the beginning of its emergence from the implant's container, when it had just grown its first flower. The main tuber had been just the size of a golf ball on top of the safety box and the minuscule flower bulb was still not bloomed open. She estimated the date around fourteen years ago, almost right after the box had been locked up and forgotten by Older Lucas who never came back inside the closet since.

Jenna had pushed the risk limits to try and establish a mental contact through her prayers and Faith in Yggdrasil; that had not gone well. The xeno-plant of that time had two human souls in it: Franklin Wise and Nathan Bridger. Lucas's soul had not been present in the vegetal at the time. Her mental scans had been physically draining and hard on her psyche as the sheer output of evil from these two mismatched warped souls had almost overwhelmed her on several occasions. By her reckless endurance of the situation, she had discovered two fundamentally critical pieces of information about their enemy.

Firstly: the variant of 'Franklin Wise' in the vegetal came from the implant and was actually not a real ectoplasmic soul like a naturally-born human or a dead man's ghost, but was in fact a psychotronic-clone created through a neural interface to serve as the basis of the neuronal processor's OS and bio-software applications. This was only the man's computerized and heavily edited imagery of how he saw himself in his own mind; the big patriarch, powerful, frightful, and panic inducing to weaker persons.

Secondly: the 'Nathan Bridger' in the vegetal was actually the partial, severely damaged Lost Soul
of the captain that had commanded the ship that brought Older Lucas into this epoch. Bridger had
died with his ship and crew but like many ghosts and revenants, he had never accepted his defeat
or that his work was interrupted by death. His arrogant, greedy, power-mad drive to stay in this
plane to complete his work had caused him to incur severe lesions and infections on the
ectoplasmic physiology of his soul-form. He had been weak, diseased, thoroughly insane, and
unable to process stimuli or input by language, illusion-made images or empathic projection of
emotions. This guy had every fuse in his junction box completely blown out and beyond repair.

She hadn't been able to see further as she had skirted with the upper limits of her endurance in
casting and maintaining the types of spells required to get these results. She grudgingly admitted
that she would be out of sorts for almost the entire day to come and needed to pull back to the
auditorium, maybe even outside to her truck, to leave the Beast's aura for a speedier recovery. Her
fiancé was in a bind but could not let it pass like that; she had done good but was now a liability
until she could move on her own. He called the SCT, asking them for a switch of Truck-4's medic
until she got back on her feet fully so she could use her magic without falling asleep.

It was a tense situation between the two lovers as he handed her over to two of their fighters to
bring her and her gear up to the surface to the trucks. They would wait there until the CIC opened a
Portal to exchange Jenna with one of the 'Lua' that had been prepared as replacement in case this
type of situation or combat injuries happened. While it was unpleasant for the two close-knit
people, the gravity of the situation and the evil of the monster they faced made them both gird their
courage and go through the motions with a semblance of professional attitude. Since Jenna was a
complete civilian whose only training had come from her group of siblings and friends, it was a
damn good showing on her part.

It had been a little under four hours of trance when Jonathan Quest emerged from the psionic
voyage he had engaged in. Using a mixture of traditional psionics and mentalism spells, he had put
to use the techniques his much put-upon brother Hadji had spent years trying to impart him. Those
long hours spent in the lighthouse’s glassed lamp room had not been in vain. Jonny had figured out
what happened and how to reverse it to secure their victory against both the Abyssal Sprout and the
Levitating Cracked-Pot.

The 19 year old kid really had a so-and-so way with naming things. He really should 'keep his day
job and leave sarcasm to the pros' as the diverse 'Lucases' on the expedition told him as they fed
him bottles of sports drinks and chunks of military survival biscuit to give him a nutrient boost
while settling his stomach back to normal. After some twenty minutes, it was decided to just go up
to the main hall of the substation and gather around the cooking camp. It was time for supper and
Jonny insured them he would be good for round two of the fight after an hour to rest his head. He
also hoped to take in solid food that wasn't from an aluminum envelope with an expiration date due
before the future epoch where they stood. At his wisecrack, the others doubtfully checked the dates
on their supplies then sheepishly realized that yes, the tetchy little runt was right. Oh well! Stasis
charms and food freshness wards and all that… What were dimensional trunks and storage seals
for, after all?

(Star Trek DS9 – opening theme)

As the four 'Thomas' were preparing a more consistent evening meal, their astral-traveling Jonny
sat swathed in a mylar rescue blanket, holding an enameled mug of good strong coffee. A few sips
of the Holy Java had him realizing how tired and sore he was, but awake and responsive
nonetheless. Moving on his seat so he could look at the principal sensor plate relay, he raised a
hand in salute to the magical hologram of the CIC team then began his report.

"Okay chaps, it's morbidly simple and if we do it right, we avoid a fight with the Fugly Flotsam as
we lovingly refer to our neighborhood Aberration. In fact, if we get lucky, we could avoid waking it up altogether and do this without the detriment of its abominable personality disgracing our lives." He took a mouthful of coffee, nodding in thanks to the 'Lucas' that sat beside him, rubbing his back and shoulders to help him recover his equilibrium.

"I managed to find the weak spot it the thing's existence: its silver cord. That's the thing made of neutral energy ectoplasm that attaches the soul to a body or focus item. The cord extends from the implant, through the plant's massive main tuber, and up in the air all the way to the Monster's head. Yeappp folks! Not the heart, liver, bowels or spine; the head! Why you ask? I haven't the foggiest idea! It's the way the thing is, and that's what we need to focus on. This is important because I was able to see that the energies, life and soul, being drained from our oldest sibling right here are going into the implant downstairs, and only then do they go up to the monster." He munched a bite of dry military biscuit with a pout at the awful taste, quickly swallowing some hot coffee to wash away the cardboard-paste feeling in his mouth. Blergh! Survival biscuit indeed; right until the gawd-awful taste killed you! Talk about military inefficiency at its worst!

Jonny shook himself, blowing out a breath of exasperation against himself. He was always maudlin and scatterbrained after astral travel and soul-searching experiences. Hadji often joked that the best times to teach his adoptive sibling about philosophy and life's perspectives was after he had taken a spiritual trip around the Quest Compound to open his senses. It was at times like these that he would really want to shove Hadji's turban into his mouth to silence him, but the caramel-skinned runt would just empathically project his fortune cookie humor at him anyways. Closing his eyes for a second, Jonny realized how much he missed his brother and sister, hoping, needing, to be back at their side.

That damned temporo-realitive gateway had better work both ways!

Taking a deep cleansing breath, he opened his eyes to face the awfulness of the report he still had to finish; he could have a moment of melancholy by himself later on during supper. Jonny continued his report: "The things I saw lead me to believe that the Aberration was trying to go from a purely spiritual ectoplasm lifeform to a conventional physical protoplasm lifeform by the means of the plant. It tried to mutate the vegetal's root system so it could gestate itself a humanoid form to walk amongst mortals. But that very obviously failed because there wasn't any water and nutrients to make the growth happen all the way to completion. Now, the ugly and dangerous part: the plant wasn't dead until we cut it apart and put its pieces in boxes. Given a few more weeks, it could have come back alive, and maybe even have finished gestating the humanoid in its main sack of puss."

The newly arrived 'Lua' placed a hand to her forehead in despair and moaned out loud: "Of course! The implant was organic and had tasted the blood, lifeforce and soul of Older Lucas, thusly a connection was established that only mystical rituals known to Dark Magic or Necromancy experts could detect and sever. A few spiritualists, shamans or animists might know of them too, but I don't think they would delve that far into blood magick and most people see soul magick in all its forms as taboo. Jonny is telling us that the implant used that spiritual connection to Lucas to vampirize his energies to grow and maintain the plant through its humanoid gestation processes."

Jonathan grinned at her, nodding in confirmation before concluding: "That's my point you see. The monster was in stasis inside its partially gestated shell, inside the plant's root. The plant wasn't dead, just in hibernation or a type of bio-lock to keep it alive until water, nutrients, or an external intervention to confer support came to wake it up. We hit the jackpot of luck when we used the spirit wrack prayers; we extracted the Aberration not from an out of phase hidey-hole, but from the bowels of the plant where it slept. If we had gone down there with that thing still partially integrated to its flesh-puppet, it would have woken and then animated the plant to attack us like it was driving a tank into battle." He sipped some coffee while the people at both ends of the comms
devolved into murmurs of comprehension, mumbling about the luck of children (them) and the confounded idiots who trifle with eldritch forces (them also; the Assembly had a very realistic opinion of its members).

The oldest 'Jenna' in their Assembly was present in the CIC for the reports, so she gave a tentative diagnostic of the situation. "If what Jonny saw is like that, and we will need a few more investigations to confirm facts, then the solution could be really simple. It will just be somewhat lengthy and unwieldy, but still not that complicated to implement with the science, equipments, and personnel we have on hand. We need to starve that implant: we cut the link between it and Older Lucas, then we connect a magical siphon to the Aberration to vampirize all of Lucas's soul back from the monster. We will need to cycle the ectoplasmic material of the liquid soul-stuff through a series of filters and condensers to cleanse and purify the stuff before dialyzing it back into his main soul, but it's not conceptually complicated to understand. It's like normal mundane blood dialysis, but with liquid ectoplasm and negative energy."

The flat silence that followed her pronouncement indicated clearly the people's opinions about that statement.

Pharmaceutical paradise; we come in IV bags

(Two Steps From Hell – Victory)

Saturday January 21st of 2301 – morning
New Cape Quest, Florida (USA)
World Management Grid substation for NCQ County

It took two mind-wracking hard days of hectic preparations spread across two different locales, urgently brewing potions for immediate use, inscribing scrolls of True Faith and sorcerous sciences, before they could finally begin to heal their weakest member. At the same time, a conclave of technomancers and spiritualists were doing double shifts, working at conceiving the brand new, never tested or even seen before, spiritual dialyser system. Nobody said keeping alive the people you care for was easy, but having competent enemies made you work for it, then Nature made you earn your results in full by adding chaos and variety to the mix.

Damn but the week was getting long! Everybody needed a break soon, or the tensions would crack apart the teams.

Glaring sideways at a young woman he considered amongst the few true friends he had in his life, the patient spoke glibly. "Jenna dearie, don't take this the wrong way, but I hate your ever-loving guts!" – Beeuuuurrrkkk! – Older Lucas expressed himself miserably, face-down to a stinking bucket, between bouts of retching quite wretchedly. His health really was getting better, no matter how it might look at the moment. The healers said so. He just didn't believe the poison peddling lying harpies, no matter how cute and cuddly they all tried to be.

One of the healers in question, Jenna Labarre, fiancée of their Expedition Leader Martin Mystère, was back at the WMG substation after recovering from her spell-casting excesses. She truly was trying to keep her patient comfortable but flushing droughts and cleansing rituals just weren’t user friendly so to speak… Both implicated helping the living body to expel wastes, toxins, and parasites via natural means or by forcing an old injury to reopen to forcibly expel rotted flesh, puss, and foreign bodies. There was no known way to make the process clean, peaceful or the least bit
not icky. And because they had to do the whole process with all the harshest, most invasive options, to prepare him for the severing of the unnatural soul-bond to the implant, they could not give him sleeping potions since they would immediately flush out of his system without any effect.

As it was, her patient was discommodated even more by sitting completely nude above a conjured ceramic catchment basin, perched atop a conjured bench conceived rather cheaply of perforated plastic slats. It was not the least bit comfortable for his skin, but its perforated design made washing the person with real water and soap much easier since there was great access and drainage. Because of the ongoing flushing and cleansing, they had to abstain from directly spelling him with active magic or psions, so good old water it was. So here he was, poor man, sat naked on cold plastic with his head between his knees as he vomited again a mixture of bile, blood, and everything he ate in the last month, in a bucket that had already filled up twice since they began.

At least they got an abundance of samples to study for the biochemistry team…

Jenna gently sprayed him with warm water to hose down yet another layer of grayish crud that had formed loosely on top of his skin across his entire body. She then lovingly massaged his scalp to remove the wet gunk before it slid down from his bald head into his eyes and mouth. Their poor older sibling had ingested so much crap in his life, and been injected or implanted so many poisons, that it was two solid hours since the purge began. Despite all he had expelled already, Jenna estimated another hour at the very least, before the sweat and vomit became completely clear to indicate he was finally drained of all threats.

The first 15 minutes of the cleansing ritual to release all dark magicks and foreign enchantments had so much brackish smoke billowing out of their oldest member's skin and orifices that she honestly thought they would lose him to a bad reaction from so much maleficium leaving him all at once. She had insisted for a pause to check for organ injuries and psychological or soul damages. Thankfully, he had only spasmed very harshly as he heaved through the vomiting but had not suffered muscle, ligament, or nerve stress beyond expected. There were some very minor elongations and some microscopic tears in thoracic muscles, but it could be cured by a simple spell or potion after the flushing was completed. He just had to endure, awake and aware, through another hour, two at the worse.

The other people in the expedition were politely giving the medical zone, established under the lofted balcony of the ground floor auditorium, a wide berth unless called on. They had conjured some cheaply made, but thick and opaque, plastic panels to make a privacy wall. Unless they chose to invest a few hours in construction spells and some engineering work, that was as good as it got. The guys conjured some plastic pipes for the running water and waste conduits, then repaired and boosted the ventilation. They brought out another of the large steel BBQ grills from the boathouse factory in the medical area, to give them light and heat from living flames, to help soothe patient and healers alike. The non-healers tried to help, but this job was just too specialized so only the four field medics could really participate actively. The rest of the expedition were guarding the Aberration, taking turns patrolling the outside in a five block perimeter to eyeball directly what was happening with the city after the storm had finally passed north.

(Two Steps From Hell – Never Back Down)

The healing team had been overly optimistic in its evaluation of how much waste and poisons Older Lucas had accumulated in his 33 years of life, especially since being press-ganged into UEO Navy servitude. The process took close to five and a half hours with 5 flushing potions, 3 cleansing rituals, 2 extraction charms for hidden & cloaked implants that needed surgery to remove, and 7 psychic surgeries to safely undo the multiple unraveling memory charms or unlock learned skillsets and personality traits constrained under unlawful prisoner's block enchantments.
They now had signs that someone with at least - Power Type V - mystical education and professional experience had done several jobs on their oldest relative. The purge cycle had flushed out a banned masking elixir that was known for its toxicity having deleterious effects on brain neurochemistry. The unlawful potion had been used to render invisible to any living being, machine or spell, the complex scrollworks of runes and glyphs that had been engraved into the bones on his skull, spinal column, clavicles and solar plexus. The poor man was carrying around a necromantic cursed version of the soul-chains coupled to a mental dominion curse and an obedience curse, all cast in blood magick to use his own life-force to empower them. The bastards who did this used their sibling's very own health, life, and sanity like a damned battery to keep active the fetters that bound him.

The explosion of rage from Younger Lucas #18 upon learning of this situation had released a burst of accidental magic so sudden and violent that it rattled the windows of the CIC observation tower despite the safety and durability wards that had been put on them. It took the Tac-Chief over an hour to help him calm down and focus himself to more productive goals. The 20 year old agreed quickly however that everybody in the Assembly would undergo the purge cycle to see if anybody else had been bound or gagged like that without knowing about it.

After the purge was done, the older male was warmed with hot air spells and towels heated next to the fire. They helped him to dress in generic blue scrubs then slowly walk to the lounge-chair they had set up for the severing ritual to happen. Once situated flat on his back, eyes closed and breathing even, the healers began connecting the IV lines to administer magic dampening drought directly to his blood stream along mundane solutions of saline, nutrients, and antibiotics. No magical potions could be administered to him from two hours before the ritual was chanted then again for five hours afterwards.

Older Lucas was lucky that he could be asleep for this part of the healing sequence as there was nothing to do but lie down, taking events as they came. The only exciting part was when the four healers worked in conclave to chant until the cursed soul-bond was visible so they could cut and destroy it. After that, it was another intense, lengthy waiting period while the IV dripped, but he could not eat for fear of vomiting it all right away.

When older Lucas woke up, the sun was low on the horizon, supper was on the grill, cooking under the watchful eyes of hungry young people, and a gaggle of healers were gathered pensively around a conjured table, pointing at a set of paper piles and electronic tablets, arguing about spell options for something.

"Hey Jen, how about some water here?" he asked through a parched throat. The woman startled at the sound of his voice but smiled in relief when she saw him awake and seemingly normal, if a bit slow. His entire body ached, he had bouts of fuzzy vision, and felt as if his head had been filled with wet cotton wool, but all that wasn't as bad as what he had expected. The body aches had been constant for more than a week now so he ignored that easily enough. "So," he asked between sips of water, "how long was I out?"

Jenna pursed her lips and worriedly placed a hand on his forehead, checking his temperature by feel then looking deeply into his eyes to see his attentiveness and ocular reflex. "You have been comatose for a tenday now. We had quite the scare about three hours after we severed the soul-bond, when you had a heart infarction. Basically, you died on the table twice during your indisposition. We managed to pull you back to life each time, but you haven't awakened in eleven days straight. We wanted to move you to the sanitarium, but you haven't awakened in eleven days straight. We wanted to move you to the sanitarium, but we had to stay here because each time we tried to move away from the Aberration and the implant, your life signs fell and you almost died again. We have been rotating the healer teams and the fighter support teams every two days with the reserves at CIC, to keep them fresh. It's now February 2nd of 2301. Be at ease, I'll come
"So I lost eleven days of my life that I'll never get back?" he asked in a calm, accepting tone. "Am I finally cut loose from that thing at least?" At her slow nod he sighed in relief, smiling one of his rare, true smiles, telling her kindly "Then I can live with that. T'was the best sleep I had in years, and for once I feel like I actually slept and rested for real. If I don't remember, then what? You were there; it couldn't have been that bad or you'd have told me already."

Jenna was unconvinced of his state of mind therefore determined to schedule him for some mental health assessment, as quickly as they could lay hands on a mind healer that was trustworthy. Since that situation could take years to resolve, she shoved it aside in a corner of her memory, instead preparing to inform her patient – slash – friend of his status. "I have good news, and then some so-and-so news." Sitting on the side of the bed, she took his right hand in both of hers, squeezing his fingers kindly to offer emotional support during her report. "While you were out of sorts, we discussed with CIC the conditions and parameters of your coma, and it was decided that you could no longer afford the snail's pace safety protocols we guided ourselves with. You were dying, had infarcted twice at that point, so we evaluated that either we went for bust or you would, maybe, perhaps, wake up just to be aware of how and why you died. We connected the siphon and dialyser and processed the ectoplasmic transfusion while you were insensate. The whole procedure was completed inside of two days at the predicted speed."

Older Lucas mulled the information in his mind, which he found to be much clearer as he saw that he now remembered almost all of his schooling and training, even the medical parts. He remembered laboring away for days on biochemistry formulas and genetics problems to produce DNA molecular models to guide the pharmacists in producing antibiotics from new strains of bioactive agents. His computer and IT skills accounted for only 60% of his total knowledge and competence. In truth, he was more educated like a medical engineer and biochemical analyst than a true computer tech; he just never told anybody because it wasn't what they wanted to see or hear from him.

Closing his eyes, he fell into the meditative exercises he had been taught in the weeks since their siblings had awoken from the Icehold Vault, taking tally of his processes, thoughts, and evaluating his temperament under the current situation. Some self-awareness could help him figure out stuff and keep a more civil demeanor towards his relatives. Right now, his health was on the uptick, his mind was unlocked and firing on all cylinders at close to 93% capacity with memories around 91% available. He was in better shape physically, cognitively, and spiritually, than at any point in the precedent 15 years of his life. Opening his eyes to a brand new world, he gave Jenna's hands a thankful squeeze of his own, smirking in satisfaction at the thought that after all this time and effort, he was finally free and living for real.

"Okay kiddo, what's your bad news now? Or do you have some good ones still to tell? I'm game for some more, so don't hold back on me." The young green witch couldn't help her snort of good humor at the charm offensive her older friend was laying on her. The Lucas from her group was just as bad at flirting, much to their other friends' amusement.

"The rest of your health and mobility will respond to the potions and spells in due time. Your mind will need time, effort, willpower, and some external support as soon as you can get some that you trust. It's the rest that I don't really know how to say. Sweetie, the Aberration woke up. When we drained out your segment of soul and processed it back into you, we radically altered the balance of forces inside the beastie, which woke it up. It can talk and it wants to speak with you, when you're awake and mobile."
The 33 year old was flabbergasted. Blinking back tears from the raw rage that suddenly overtook his senses, he again fell into meditation to calm himself and analyze why his emotions were so raw and his control so frayed. The only answer was that the spiritual transfer had affected him somehow. Maybe he had become less human as he lost 'soul' and regained humanity along with emotions and feelings when they gave it back to him. He would need to talk with the spiritualist about that later. Blowing out a breath of frustration, he asked the more pressing question: "Why in the names of the unholies hasn't that blasted nightmare from the Abyss been destroyed yet? Don't you mystics know how? Can it be killed? If it had soul, then it can be killed, right?"

Jenna was worried for her friend but now they had to push forward; there was no alternative. "Yes, we know how to kill it off, we have already prepared the procedure to put it to sleep then dematerialize it. But the situation was yours to decide. It was in your head for years, and now wants to contact you face to face. We talked and came to the conclusion that only you had the right to decide if you wanted to speak to it before we disintegrate it. I warn you, it might be sentient and capable of speech, but its sanity is splotchy at best; it has a bad case of bipolarity severe enough to qualify for Multiple Personality Disorder. It doesn't make sense for more than a few sentences before it degenerates into ramblings. I had the misfortune of speaking to it because I am your primary healer and the Tac-Chief wanted my opinion as to whether it would set you balk to talk to the Fugly Flotsam."

Older Lucas pursed his lips in deep thought. He didn't think it would matter if he did or didn't talk to the thing, but maybe it had information that they could use back in their proper time periods. No. There was nothing the abominable creature could say that was important, other than beg and plead for its existence. Turning his decisive gaze towards Jenna, he verbalized his decision: "Finish it. Kill the fucker and send the worthless error of Nature to wherever, but finish it! There's nothing good that will come from keeping it alive, waiting for a mistake that lets it out of its bindings to haunt and harm us. You can tell the two mismatched misfits in that idiots' head that I wont even watch the records of it's conversations with the others, and I wont be present when it dies off. After feeding it my life and soul quite literally for 14 years, I want shot of it. Let it burn!"

(Adrian Von Ziegler – Nocturnus)

Aberration. Abomination. Atrocity. Depravity. Mutation. They called him so many names but the most amusing was Error of Nature. – Snort! – As if something so base and menial as Nature could produce the magnificence that was this charnel armor, or the most resplendent soul and conscience within: Franklin Henry Wise.

No natural lifeform could ever hope to transcend death, rot, and the vast gulf of Time, to re-emerge so many centuries in the future to again rule the lives of the inferior hordes of peons that constitute humanity like Wise had achieved. No! It was the result of decades of research and trials that had given him the power and abilities needed to finalize two of his greatest works: the infinity gene and control over cellular memory. And the fools of the Conservatoriae Felis Antiquum would never know it was their depraved worship of that monstrous pickled animal rejected from somewhere in the cold past of Outer Space that opened the Gate of Truth for him.

By splicing together several strands of earthly DNA and alien DNA he had managed to create the most fundamental aspect of his project. The generating and controlling of the biological attachment from the fleshy lifeform to the spiritform via a synthetic energy tether that persevered even through death and decay. In cyclic species of plants that actually grew, bloomed, then died, only to be revitalized next spring, it meant that true death would never come.

From there, splicing selected vegetal DNA with the alien DNA produced his ticket to eternity and another of his great works, the womb-tuber plant. The plant was genetically created to grow large
enough to dedicate one of its roots as a gestation womb for an adult-sized humanoid, then produce said humanoid based on the template stored in the plant's cellular memory. It was the perfect reliable mother for any progeny he may wish to have and keep. It would also be the only parent that never tried to control him or usurp his dominion.

All he had to do after that immeasurable success was to create a genetic marker based on his own DNA to create the soul-tether then integrate that link into the plant's infinity gene. Then, anytime his physical body died, the closest womb-tuber plant would attract his soul and he would be reborn young, vigorous, and dominant as always. It had taken more than a decade of intense laboratory work to produce the first fully functional womb-tuber plant, then barely a year for each new sprout he wanted, as the programming templates and DNA samples were all prepared and stored just for such replication jobs.

He quickly created and set in safe places some dormant seeds of the plant with copies of his memories and personality programmed cybernetically into the cellular memory, in case the unthinkable happened and he died without a plant in reach. This setup meant that after some limited waiting period, the womb-tuber would germinate, grow, then gestate a new Franklin Wise to investigate what happened and bring back the original to his glorious almighty. What unconscionable penultimate achievement of science and power! And it was his!

The plan had worked quite well indeed; he had put a womb-tuber seed into the biotronic implant meant to control and docilify his favorite poppet to date, so he could eventually call him to Abalon to break him under the disciplines of his rod, beneath the roddings of his faith, at his will and leisure. And the boy-oy-oy would kneel and render homage unto the manly mannaness of his manhood, as was faith and creed; he so spake! Ah! So many glorious plans and possibilities! Even the fools amongst the Baptismiath Suderia were completely unawares of the true nature, plans, and greatness, of their High Lord Pontiff Zoothia – For that pontiff was Wise himself, by the interposition of a plant-gestated clone!

Plans within schemes, covered in camouflage, hidden behind cat's paws, that were simply gloves to shroud the hand of dominion, as it rose in the Power of Empire! No one and nothing would know the true nature and extent of Franklin Henry Wise's contacts, influence, and outright dominance of peoples and institutions, until he was ready to sit on the Throne of High Authority as the mightiest pontiff and apostolate of the True Faith. No church, conclave, or tribunal of Human Law, would ever again pretend to grasp his sciences or limit his experimentations and personal pleasures. All the boys would submit in servile obedience before his mighty cock, and the girlies would stay hidden at home, in their parents' closets, in silent shame for their useless births that brought nothing to humankind or Wise's rule and fancies.

Now then, setting such pleasurable thoughts aside for later; how had that confounded halfwit parasite Bridger managed to cross the divide between life, death, and Time? Humph! That would be explored in full at his leisure when he finally got his precious little poppet back under control. The boy had many good qualities and skills, but his personality was simply superfluous. After all, the only use for blonds was as fuck toys and pain bitches, not as dinner conversationalists, and certainly not as equals in science and technology. The little bastard would be put back in his place in life and society, then promptly lobotomized with another implant which this time would be calibrated properly to not fail from the vagaries of biology. Hormone induced instabilities, indeed!

Franklin Wise's plant-cloned spare incarnation was trying to think straight, but with Bridger's damaged psyche sharing his malformed mutated shell, and apparently some spiritual commingling as well; it was getting hard to line up even the simplest concepts. Maybe he should cooperate with these juvenile idiots just long enough to get them to purge the obsolete redundant mariner from his physicality, then he could beat, rape, and murder them, all on his own calendar without any rush.
Ah! The muscular blondie twink was back with his glasses and gadgets, thinking his little toys would impress a technocrat of Franklin Wise's caliber. Moron! He was unfit to even serve as a minion in the New Order. A sex toy or a pain bitch maybe, but not a minion. The mental efforts required by that employment couldn't possibly be produced by the simiesque child. What were these two look-alikes of his poppet doing? Whaat!

(Christian Baczyc - Genesis)

Jenna nodded at Older Lucas's decision once and put a finger on the magical PAL-equivalent clipped on the front of her shirt. "Field Leader, come in. We have a clear path. Proceed with trail blaze. Over." Turning to her older friend, she pushed herself closer and took hold of both his forearms to steady him. "It will be finished quickly. The other Lucases on the team have inscribed a transmutation circle on the floor under the holo-emitter podium. It's set to only process the second part of the equation: the disintegration. No analysis or reconstruction, just flat out demolecularization followed in 1/10 second by flash decontamination, then a last pass of denuclearization to completely render all matter into free-floating energies. The ecto-diffusers and the deflection manatites we put in place around the beast will complete the cleanup, when the Power flash is finished. Hold on sibling, it's over soon." She leaned over to kiss the top of his bald head to reassure him.

In the background, a screech of hate and rage was heard as Martin informed the beast that it would not get its last attempt at corrupting and dominating their oldest relative. The two Lucases on the expedition knelt before the transmutation array and touched the index fingers of both hands at the same time to the runic figure. The energy buildup was so short and catastrophic that the beast barely had time to startle as it realized its predicament that the full flash of discharge happened. A stench of concentrated ozone followed the eye-searing blue pulse of radiation, then complete silence. The low hum of white noise that they had all suffered from, in audible and mental frequencies, was gone after more than two weeks of enduring the damned vibration.

Now all they had to do was verify that the Aberration's death was truly final with a few divinations, pack up and clean the WMG substation before going back to the hospital complex to start planning the return to their proper realities and epochs in time. Nothing to it, right?
The many histories of Lucas and his families

The author wishes to express thanks to anyone who may read his story and encourages them to leave reviews, comments or even flame it hard. As with any who try their hand at publicly expressing an idea or story concept, all feedback is important and welcome. Disclaimer: I do not own SeaQuest, Star Wars, nor any other sci-fi or fantasy series, movies, comics, cartoons or news items used in this fiction as they belong to the creators or broadcasters or publishers who put them out for consumption by the public.

This is a truly long chapter with two distinct parts: the statistics and then the personal anecdotes.

I give you warning that many of the stories spoken of by the characters will involve various degrees of corporal punishments, legal and criminal, from mild to torture having caused injuries, scars and handicaps. There are stories of imprisonment with psychological abuse and torment leading to the suicide of teens. There is murder, infanticide, fratricide and parenticide. Various types of emotional and sexual relationships including hetero, gay, bi-curious, underage (willing). There are multiple cases of physical & psychological & sexual rape.

This story was, is and always will be rated a strong 'M' for clear reasons. Be advised.

Tenth chapter: The many histories of Lucas and his families

Brotherly concern

(SeaQuest - season 1 opening theme)

Saturday February 9th of 2301 – early morning, around 06:30am
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Administration tower – guest accommodations

Younger Lucas #18 stretched and wiggled under the sheets, taking a moment to luxuriate in the feel of contentment that so rarely filled him in the last three years of his life. He had spent an incredible night; dreamless and uninterrupted bliss for 11 long hours of oblivion. It had been a much needed rest, but not impossible since their Oldest sibling was finally free from the Aberration, well on his way to recovery. The child yawned out loud and scratched a few itches, glaring malevolently at the clock on the nightstand to his right: it couldn't be this early, could it? Grrr! He was supposed to sleep in, not wake up with the chickens!

Oh well, old habits and all...
The eleven year old got out of bed and pulled a rolled mat from the closet, then he dropped face down onto it for the start of his morning routine: 30 minutes of exercise with at least one basic kata for self-defense. After that he went for a long, soothing, hot shower and some fresh civilian clothes. After he had dried himself and dressed up, he paused in reflection. Looking at the ominous black armor on its wooden valet stand, he thought back to how good it felt to be in charge, having competent people to execute his orders.

(Elephant Music – Dawn of Time)

He knew for a fact that power was addictive; the stories from his three mentors had shown him that, and his mother's own incapacity to let go of the little bit of mostly illusionary power she had confirmed it. He would need to be careful not to walk down the path of insanity and rabidness like the generals of World War II, or the ideological fanatics of the Vietnam and Korea wars. The complete systematic military clusterfucks in the arabic nations since the 1990's were even worse, as they still had no end in sight.

Placing a hand on the breastplate of the armor, Lucas wondered if his reaction to his mother and her soon to be husband had not been too extreme. Then again, when your own mother looks you in the face saying out loud that you should be imprisoned without Law or Justice in a private jail to suffer beatings, rapes and maybe even become handicapped for life from the injuries received, how do you have a relationship with such a person?

Rapping his knuckles on the dull silver faceplate of the helmet, Lucas let out a breath and centered himself. He had acted with some harshness yes, but not rashly; his decision had not been precipitous. He had full control of his actions. The people in the hotel had obeyed his orders because they could see that his methods matched the end goals, thus guaranteed collective success at the end. His parents were lucky to be alive, and so were their children. Others like the Delanosa Famiglia had not been so lucky when confronting him to test his hold on his people and territory.

(Ori and the Blind Forest - The Spirit Tree)

Walking out of his room, Lucas adjusted his brand new work satchel on his shoulder as he took the slow way down the glass-walled stairs at the front of the administration tower. He checked on the night's reports with the 'Alan' that was holding a shift at the principal reception counter as he walked by. He made his way back through the full length of the entry level to the rear and the restaurant on the ground floor of the main medical wing. He wanted a good sized breakfast and time to eat it slowly before his many relatives took up the lead in pursuing his education.

(Audiomachine – When It All Falls Down)

He could easily admit that there were many glaring deficiencies in his education because, quite frankly he never knew for certain there were any things missing. In his original timeline he had just begun to perceive the unnatural and the bizarre as hiding realities, deeper truths, that the masses were kept ignorant of. At least, he hadn't operated under the constraints of a paternal authority ward or prisoner's block or any other such enchantments to keep him docile and pliable like some of his siblings had endured for years.

The stuff that had been found in the last week as people went through the flushing drought and cleansing ritual had sent shivers of anticipatory dread down his spine. Thankfully, his own results had been almost clean, even the marrow graft in his back had been deemed harmless, except it was synthetic and based on DNA that nobody saw before. The CIRPA team thought it was alien but the Labarre crowd differed, thinking that it might instead be from a magical species proper to his own reality, unknown to theirs. In either case, they wanted to do some neurotronic connection tests and some biomantic analysis before clearing him completely. Since this crap was from the same
unmitigated bastard that had created the womb-tuber plant and vegetal-interposed cloning of people, the little boy had a tendency to agree with their cautious approach.

Most of the lacking elements in his education could be rectified by the simple method of a good book. With coffee, he thought in a playful mood; lots and lots of coffee and some cookies too. Reading was a hard thing to do for a child, after all! And as a growing boy, he needed a lot of energy, hence the coffee and cookies being a necessity. Yup! That was a convincing argument if he ever heard one in his life!

Wearing a smile and seeming genuinely happy, a rare occasion in the recent years, the young boy entered his domain of predilection: the feast-hall. Going straight to the kitchen, he toured the installations, giving a few tips to the relatives going about the business of keeping 247 kin fed and satisfied. As they found out quickly, feeding the horde was easy but keeping them from bitching about anything was hopeless.

Younger Lucas #18 took a tray for his meal, crawling through the buffet line with an expert eye as he chose to confect another monstrous three-course brunch. He took an appetizer in the form of a muffin with marmalade, slice of cheese and small bowl of baked beans. His main dish was a huge omelet with several meats and vegetables, folded and draped over a bed of mixed potatoes, onions, peppers and hollandaise sauce accompanied by a stack of buttered toasted bread. His dessert, which he would eat first as always, was a small bowl of fruit salad topped with vanilla ice cream and caramel sauce. The members of the Assembly at the neighboring tables were snorting in laughter at the sight of the mountain of food and the small body that soon consumed his way through it all.

(Nightcall – Stuck In Dreams)

As the youngster was finishing his omelet plate, the Tactical Chief that usually ran the Combat Information Center's operations sat himself in front of the child with a large coffee mug in one hand and a half-eaten breakfast sandwich in the other. His cold, keen eyes took in the little man's clothes and demeanor, so different from two weeks ago when everything was on the edge of the pit and he took over the CIC for the changeling scare. The 20 year old had a good feeling about the tetchy little gremlin, even though several others were actually a bit scared of him and his attitude. In reality, he understood it wasn't fear they felt so much as a deep sorrow that their little brother had to get so closed-souled and cold-minded so early in life.

“How's it shakin' mate?” the young adult asked while contemplating the mysterious mysteries at the bottom of his mug. What the hell had the 'Martin' serving at the beverage counter put in the coffee pot this morning to make it taste like this? Hmmm...

Younger Lucas #18 chewed slowly, at ease in the pleasant atmosphere of the restaurant. The sun was bright and a cool breeze flowed freely through the wide open patio doors leading to the terrace outside. Sighing in peace between bites of egg and sips of coffee, the child watched the others that were on their meal breaks or ending their shifts. He wasn't surprised in the least when the second oldest 'Lucas' in the Assembly joined him. Following the events of the first NCQ expedition two weeks ago, they had spent a lot of time working together in the CIC as they organized reconnaissance and foraging expeditions. After several friendly conversations they found they shared matching outlooks on life, politics, policy, management of assets and the use of violence.

“How's life these days? You must find it boring, up in the fishbowl, when nothing's burning or shooting around us.”

The older Lucas grunted in amusement; he had become so inured to warfare and constant battles for the freedom of his family and kin that moments of peace were like candy. They were sweet but...
not healthy for the long run, and you couldn't rely on them to endure for long. No; by necessity and
the events of a short unforgiving existence, this older brother had become a cold, callous bastard
who didn't give a damn about anything that didn't directly keep his people alive and free. The rest
could pray to their gods (real or not) and get some help that way; he had his own problems and
wouldn't take on more.

After chewing a large bite of his remaining sandwich, the adult asked “Have you thought about the
training that you need before going back to your reality? There's a lot of people to help you
available. You should take advantage of them while they are present. We could start sending
people back as soon as five weeks from now when our oldest sibling gets his head screwed back on
the right way so he can manage the blasted D-T-IR Portal.”

The child was now wiping the last dregs of hollandaise sauce from his plate with his remaining
toast, unconcerned but attentive. His attitude showed how at ease he had become with the older
man, and how much trust he had for his opinion. You knew fast and hard when the little boy didn't
trust you, didn't respect your opinion, or thought his life would be better without you in it. He was
amongst the few who could give the 20 year old a run for his money in terms of cynical sarcastic
rudeness, and it was just as natural. Everyone had realized quickly it was politeness and good
manners that the child struggled with and made an effort to maintain.

Younger Lucas #18 piled up his tray, pushed it aside then held his lukewarm mug of coffee with
both hands in front of his face, deeply inhaling the aroma of the life-giving liquid. The question
asked by his older sibling wasn't wasted on him as he had been thinking about it since he set foot in
this timeline. The first week of his presence here, he had thought almost only in terms
of technology so he had trawled the Internex to pile up a list of goodies he needed to get home
physically, or at least the blueprints and their underlying tech like formulas and molecular models.
Then his relatives awoke and with them came the reality of Psionics, the Traditions of the Old
Ways of Magick and demonstrations of what True Faith in real Divinities could produce; it all
combined to upend his world. All the carefully laid plans were scuppered so now he needed not
just a new sheet of paper for a new blueprint, but a whole new drawing table with specialty tools to
redo all the plans with the details and levels of information that had to be included.

“Yeah, I thought about it a lot actually. It's a migraine-worthy endeavor trying to organize all that I
don't know but need to wrap my head around before I go back. There's also the question of what
physical items I will bring back with me, like this little beauty when it's completed and approved
for deployment.” He pulled out a brand new laptop from his satchel, the thermoplastic casing
finished in tones of turquoise with gold and silver details giving it a rich upper-class look.

The 11 year old explained his new machine in abbreviated terms: "It's a combination CPU &
satellite-phone with solid keyboard, drawing pad, touchscreen and it also has a very good voice
command app. There's a movement detection 'airpad' that allows to control the thing without
actually touching any part of it. That means you can use it as an interpreter for sign language to
speak with someone who doesn't understand that form of speech. Or you could play air-guitar or
some VR game without the big gloves or special controller. There's a built-in text recognition app
that you can program to recognize, read, write and print for any alphabet including Braille; you just
need the appropriate printer to do the solid output. It also has a couple dozen full programs and
small apps that I am testing out, to see if they're worth lugging back home with me."

After giving the young adult a few minutes to play with the shiny new toy - Ahem! Important
accomplishment of technology! - The child took back his tool ("not a game console, I swear!") and
laid it flat on the table to activate the conference mode. The electronic machine generated a sphere
of light three feet in diameter above itself and barely a second later images, graphs and calculations
filled the luminous ball. The program in the device was interactive and grew the imaging sphere to
have enough surface to project as many images as it detected viewers while keeping it readable. Soon the other members seated in the restaurant were attracted to the discussion and began contributing opinions.

The concepts of unity

(SeaQuest - season 1 opening theme)

Saturday February 9th of 2301 – early morning, around 08:30am
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Main wing - restaurant

“Here is what I had planned up to date in the mundane technological side of things. For the psionics and magic, I have been talking to people all over the place for the last week, but I'm still lost in a fog bank.”

On the imaging sphere was now displayed a bare-bones structural schematic of an ocean faring ship, a massive mammoth of steel with 20 storey in the main body and another ten in the command tower; some 1,500 feet long by 400 feet wide thus putting it above the leagues of the Maersk Line's cargo container haulers. The design was truly stupendous in that it had a 300 feet wide body with 50 foot wide full-length 'shoulders' at the top on each side. These 5 storey thick overhangs were the emplacements for the graviton generators that allowed the ship to lift off and reach the cruising altitude of 100,000 feet.

“Behold my brainchild: the Omnibian Industrial ship Grendel. Omnibian means than it can reach and maneuver in all environments as demonstrated by the airtight & watertight hull design as well as the retractable tread blocks and the gravity-field engines. This thing will swim, crawl and fly anywhere I want to go. I plan on having electrical power delivered by an integrated pipeworks of plasma conduits linking the hot-fusion generator, the two exothermic chemical reactors and the many banks of liquefied sodium batteries. For ultra clean electricity the outer hull will be covered in seamlessly layered omni-voltaic panels. On top of that, the entire system is designed to be operated manually without any electronics or electrical power at all by having a series of boilers and steam generators to drive the screws and treads, heating, venting and waterworks. The system is completely hybrid so that it can keep sailing or crawling despite solar flares, ion clouds or magnetic discharge weapons like neutron bombs.”

There were some appreciative whistles and nods from the Assembly as the child explained his view on why he planned to take so much data and machinery back to the past and how he would do it. The ship was planned specifically not just to carry but also to build and replicate all the goodies to keep his family and friends alive and free. Younger Lucas wasn't holding back, he would not underestimate the adaptation or espionage capacities of his enemies. He continued his expose of his thoughts.

“As you can see, this has some of the best shipbuilding tech and know-how that I could find and assemble but I only had a week to make the design up to now, and the WMG's modules on ships and navigation were rather basic. I could produce the most basal outline of what I want but I still haven't figured out how to finish the design to full completion, let alone how to build it. Although,
the level of automation in some of the shipyards in the USA suggests that in the end, as people died off, the US government still put massive efforts into constructing sailing and flying behemoths to patrol the continental limits in case of foreign aggression. That leads me to believe that at least one facility capable of automatically crafting the parts and assembling the whole ship exists somewhere inside US borders, or maybe Canada.”

As the Assembly members were getting carried away debating the pros and cons of the design's technical aspects and what it was missing, the Tac-Chief asked the boy a poignant question: “What do you want to do with this metal beast kid? What is your end goal in all this?”

The child's answer stunned them all: “I want to make a design big enough, and universal enough, that all my family, relatives, kin and kith, vassals and assigns, with the livestock and agriculture to keep them alive can be together, endure through anything from weather to war, and move when they can't. I want a design that does so much of so many things that each and every one of us here can build it, take it back home with them, and ensure that the fuckshit we all had to endure to get here doesn't happen again. But I'm not stupid; it will happen again if only because of the fear and envy at what we have built. So my goal is that when it does happen, we won't lose people or get enslaved ever again. I want this to be my lasting gift and legacy to my family, because I'm not sure that I will ever do any real good in my life ever again, so this is it. Does that make sense to you?”

the child finished with an interrogative mien as he gazed in the eyes of the older, wiser, and much more worn out sibling.

Neither of them paid any mind to the rest of their relatives and friends as they simply shared a long emotional look, understanding each other better than anyone else ever had before. They would never again find such community of thoughts and reasoning in their lives, no matter how intimate their lovers and siblings would get.

“I think this project is something too big for just little old you by your lonesome, and I think it's too good to just let the opportunity pass us by without seizing it on the go. The fact that you thought about a polyvalent layout with adaptable mechanics for all our situations and defense means that it would be a good long term investment for each of our groups to built and bring back. I will recommend that we turn this into a communal project then build as many as there are realities to send people back to.”

As Younger Lucas looked around the restaurant with wide disbelieving eyes, the people began anew to think and comment on the specific knack the kid had for taking charge and caring for the entire group. He had a long, bright future ahead of him, especially if he opened up a bit to the friends and family that waited for him back home.

Magical-Utilities workshop

(SeaQuest - season 1 opening theme)

Saturday February 9th of 2301 – mid-morning, around 10:00am
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans’ Support Services (VSS)
Motorpool garage building
The 11 year old boy and his 20 year old tag-along were now in the workshops in the levels above the hospital's massive motorpool garage. It was here they had built the metal magical relay-plates they deployed outside to scan and control the zone all the way to NCQ. It was here that the CIWS menhirs, the rune covered defensive manatites, were conceived and built before putting them all around the complex to insure their collective safety. Both Lucas's stood there for a minute, admiring the products of their siblings' ingenious efforts.

Younger Lucas #18 wanted more; he had to bring back from this place more than just emotions, memories and ceaseless nightmares that weren't of any usefulness to anybody. He needed more manual know-how, more applied technologies, more higher sciences and the theories underlying all those things. Eventually he wanted to have solid equipment in hand at the moment of transiting back to his reality, thus he started designing the Grendel. But it wasn't enough because there were things that he saw and experienced here that flew in the face of reality, and he needed some explanations before he conked skulls together to get some insights.

So he brought along his older and calmer counterpart to serve as moderator, when he finally decided that some of his relatives needed a resplendent walloping to wake them up to the potential of what they held. He was such a reasonable child, bringing an adult to mediate. – Snort! – The older guy was liable to just hang back and laugh at the show as the runty little kid laid into his kin and kith with a vengeance.

"Whistle! – Oy! Plebes! Get yer lazy carcasses over here, ye knaves!" Younger Lucas #18 yelled out loud as his adult companion burst out laughing at his methods. And they thought that he had rough manners when handling the CIC shifts, giving orders! Ah! Get a load of this one!

(FullMetal Alchemist - Amestris)

One of the 'Martine Mystère' teenaged girls present went into full sarcasm at once; "Yes, Oh me laird! What ever you desire, me master! Command me, I beg of thee!" She exclaimed breathily like a courtesan while wearing a bratty shit-eating grin for all to see. The other relatives and friends piling around them had similar jokes and comments until the tetchy little gremlin puffed out his chest, bellowing "Atten'hut! There be a high lord in them halls! Bow and prostrate before his most munificent almight!" while attempting to strike a pose of momentous display with a foot on a stool, arm up in the air like a conquering hero of yore. The following five seconds of stunned absolute silence broke under a tidal wave of laughter so hard that several were crying or kneeling down, leaning against furniture to keep from rolling in mirth on the floor. The child rubbed his neck in embarrassment as he looked up at his loudly guffawing older sibling, commenting in low voice "I honestly didn't think it was that funny… These people ain't normal is all I'm sayin'…"

It took over ten minutes to let the people calm down and reacquire a more stable and – humph! – Professional demeanor to have the lengthy conversation needed.

The young boy began giving orders to gather everyone present in the workshop at the conference room next door on the same level. He had seen to it in the past week that there were edible provisions and cleaning supplies in all working areas with heavy traffic. His reflection was that they should be able to eat at their stations without interrupting production work or surveillance during tactical emergencies. This meant that several conference rooms and cafeterias had been cleaned thoroughly, then provisioned under his guidance, to now function at full service as planning hubs and watch-rooms. The garage building's facilities had been the second highest priority after the main medical wing.

"Okay dear colleagues of mine; this is planning meeting #1 of however many it takes to get things done right, before we all go back to our timelines and realities. I know that, under normal
circumstances, you prefer to sit grouped with the people who came from the same reality. In this case, the focus is tech, not society; I need all of you to rearrange by clusters of technological and, I can't believe it's coming out of my mouth, magical traditions and practices. Thank you.” He glared at the assembled folks, daring them to laugh at his incredulity of some things he saw and lived with recently.

After the people had moved around and repositioned by technological or magical group, they began placing holographic text-boards to indicate what they specialized in at first thought. Other items were added as they worked so the master-list of what he wanted to conglomerate and send back to all of their realities would evolve until it was complete.

After two hours of fast paced preliminary discussions, both Younger Lucas #18 and the Tac-Chief went around the room to see how things stood. The 11 year old also wanted the history and sociology of the important people from each group to add to his notes so he could plan his calendar of events and contacts once he got back to his epoch. 'You plan to win, or you fail to plan, then experience a planned failure spectacularly' the saying goes… He lived through that often enough that he wasn't going to spit on an encyclopedia's worth of history and society just because it took an effort to get it then memorize the stuff.

SeaQuest (and UEO Government per extension)

(SeaQuest - season 1 opening theme)

Saturday February 9th of 2301 – late-morning, around 11:00am
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Motorpool garage building

- DSV 6000 Submarine (1,000 feet long by 100 feet wide by 5 storeys high)
  ---) Bio-hull armor (N.H. Bridger variant)
  ---) Aquatubes & Deep Submergence Technology (N.H. Bridger)
  ---) Neuronal server & dependencies
  ---) Cold-fusion reactor (1st generation prototype)
  ---) PAL network (Personal Access / Locator)
- MR Class shuttles
- SeaCrab construction vehicles
- HyperReality Probe (UEO Probotics Lab / K. Hitchcock)
- WSKRS sentry probes (UEO Probotics Lab / K. Hitchcock)
- DSV human support dive suit
- UEO pulse weaponry
- UEO plasma-based laser array
- UEO cryo-pod containment cell
- UEO Atmospheric recycling tower
- UEO orbital defense satellite
In terms of technology and social advances, the UEO governance was not a resplendent beacon of hope. Historical records show clearly a hard-right leaning with strong fascistic and dictatorial tendencies at all levels of the decisional structure. There was an inbred concept that power must be held by force and used brutally in order to be validated in the eyes of the population. This view of society and politics was actually a mixed-bag of shite from both Nazi-era brown shirts' propaganda and Mao-era communist revolution dogma. The people at the top of the UEO's service branches were just as happy quoting Clausewitz as Lao Tzu, and didn't give a shake of a flying rat's ass where it came from, as long as the plebes swallowed the swill and submitted to them.

When analyzing the raw technology and industry potential, the UEO era comes up short in many areas. They did produce bio-hull armoring for several classes of ships, but then shut it all down, stopping completely any production, classifying the research and expunging it from governmental records. They managed to put large space stations in orbit but kept them unmanned so they could arm them without fear of a human stopping the triggering of the weapons. They built large atmospheric recycling towers to fight climate changes and de-pollute the air, but promptly limited construction to only the founding UEO members. Then they connected stores of poison gas and weaponized diseases to use the towers as evaporators in a scheme to employ those towers as presence-denial arrays, to keep their borders safe from reprisals, while they attempted invasions in neighboring countries to bring them under the redeeming light of the White Painted Cross.

Several medical advances crucial to humanity were given military classification out of the blue, or outright barred from research & development, because several key manufacturers were friends of the people in power inside the government. They made several fortunes per year selling weak ineffective medicines to the population, but could lose their businesses, if the ailments were cured for real. Thus, the UEO government willingly, and knowingly, chose to let several harsh crippling diseases run amok amongst their population basin in order to keep up the levels of medicinal consumption and expenditures.

At the same time, they also put out alarming reports of disease, criminality, economical failures, and other catastrophes, specifically to raise the levels of insecurity and hopelessness in the people's minds. Here the goal was simple: they wanted to silently push the desperate, the impoverished, and the sick, to the doors of the churches, into the control of the Ecclesiastes. The huddled masses got some illusionary hope to keep up their spirits in the trying times, while the government got them to quiet down as they endured being culled out.

The more one analyzed the UEO's governing methods and legal proclamations, the more one came to understand that they were a temporary precursor period; just the first step before a fully empowered tyranny deployed and crushed the people under an iron heel. The lists of laws and decrees limiting or abrogating personal rights and liberties were staggering. The legally enacted permissions to the service branches to press-gang people into the armed services by force or by taking family members hostage were mind-boggling. These were the tactics of dictature and tyranny, plain and simple. The publicly acknowledged enslavement of the 'Lucas' onboard SeaQuest was just the first clarion call of that rabid power mongering.

The "held child" system

Lucas was the testing subject for a concept they wanted to put in place permanently in their recruitment system called "the held child" to insure a constant flow of weak-willed, docile bright minds. He was the first super-intelligent teenager that the UEO tried to co-opt / enslave by bartering with his parents for money and social status. The concept of their planned method was to take an incredibly gifted child when they were young, and vulnerable due to familial abandonment
or violence, so as to groom them for easier manipulation and exploitation.

The grooming was to be done by putting the child directly under the personal control of a military officer who would "hold the child" and serve as their new parent-figure while receiving supreme authority over the child, to the point of bypassing the Law and Family Court. This person's actions towards the child would be monitored to ensure the child stayed alive and productive to work as the UEO wanted, but all treatment, feeding, education, and punishments, would be the sole purview of the soldier chosen to control the child. This officer could starve, beat, rape, or disfigure, the child as long as the desired job was done and the end result produced was a permanently pliable, obedient worker with great technical skills but absolutely no personality of their own.

As Younger Lucas #18 read the sectorial briefs and the final compiled report about the UEO, he could see that the chances of survival for himself and his family were slim to none. The people behind this scheme were not operating pragmatically, under the normal constraints of Law and Custom. They were acting by the tenets of Power Penultimate, coupled with the mentally depraved justifications of Prosperity Gospel. The fact that there was religious dogma mixed into the basic underpinnings of their methodology meant that speaking with these people would be a waste of breath.

Talking with sectarian worshipers never produces anything because they always leave the meeting believing even more than before that you were the devil's minion and needed to die. Then that fuckshit Prosperity Gospel gave them the immoral stance that they could steal your businesses or enslave your family members as their God-given spoils for all their work in His Name. After all, they would not have won the war if was not God's Will so it is obviously His Will that they be rewarded by pillaging and raping freely the fallen opponents. If God had not wanted them to kill, maim, rape, and pillage you, he would not have allowed you to become opposed to his Great Plan for His Children because, obviously, He would NEVER allow his Chosen Children to be defeated in any manner by heathens and satanic followers.

What a bunch of personal responsibility denying defective retards! You wage war because you chose to, or because you're pushed to in order to survive! It has nothing to do with God unless a mongrel dog needs an excuse to go burning and pillaging towns all around the country!

Younger Lucas #18 then started reading through the reports for his own incarnations all around the multiple realities and the statistics produced left a cold chill oozing down his spine.

- Lucas Wolenczak (research & accomplishments)
  ---) Born 24 December 2004
  ---) Caucasian/white, wheat-blond hair, flint-blue eyes
  ---) Obtained Grade school diploma by age 6
  ---) Obtained high school diploma by age 8
  ---) Obtained Bachelor degree in mathematics & physics by age 10
  ---) Obtained Bachelor degree in chemical molecular engineering by age 12
  ---) Obtained Bachelor degree in "generalized" engineering by age 14
  ---) Obtained Master degree in applied artificial intelligence at age 15
  ---) Self-trained as a full paramedic up to grade-2 but never got the license to make it official
  ---) Self-trained as general mechanic between ages 13/15 but never got the diploma to make it official
  ---) Trained martial arts; (from age 12) karate, beginner level; (from age 16) boxing, amateur level
  ---) Trained weapons; (from age 9) box cutter, broom handle, crowbar, tire iron, shovel, monkey
wrench
---) Trained firearms; (none before age 16) he learned basic arms security from friendly SQ crew
*--) Never truly trained or used a firearm in his life and Bridger didn't want him to
---) Mid-level at urban survival, foraging, scrounging and camouflage (but he is useless in the wild)
---) Mid-level at spying and surveillance
---) Ultra-High Expert at cybernetic espionage, electronic warfare and anti-spying measures

---) Gaseous isomorphic display technology (was never mass produced)
---) Owned and operated a small company to make and sell the GS Displays for about 8 months
*--) Company was forced closed by Lawrence when he "gave" his son to the UEO navy

---) Vocoder for dolphin speech & translation program (secret classified / never made public)
---) Biogenic map for 'Liberté' synthetic virus (secret classified / never made public)
---) Several hundred cybernetic viruses, defenses and virtual guard dogs
---) 2 upgrades to PAL network
---) 3 upgrades to WSKRS piloting and comm suite (secret classified / never made public)
---) 7 upgrades to World Bank servers and cybernetics
---) Created Wollon 8th generation programming language
---) Psychotronic CPU (cybernetic machine that emulates or connects with organic thought)
---) Hard-wired socketed invasive neural interface
---) Neuroplexic programming (organic to cybernetic connection & dataflow)
---) Upgrade of Wollon as a 10th generation language for psychotronic / neuroplexic programming

This was the first and most important group with which to discuss tech and history since it was his own life at stake; what he learned here today would determine whether it was worth it to return at all. During the conversation with the grouped Lucases of all ages and genders, it came to light that 'Lucas / Lucille Wolenczak' had some 100 patents publicly recorded directly to their name before the age of 18 when they stopped officially logging research. They went dark and dropped out of public view when it was discovered that their gaseous-medium isomorphic display manufacture had been stolen from them. It was also proven that several private companies, close to a few admirals in the US Navy, were stealing their ideas and research to make fortunes while never paying them, or even just crediting their name for the innovations.

The same admirals used their military badges and government positions to have his incarnations hunted by UEO Covert Section #7 and forced back into the SeaQuest program to help finish building the SQ II against their will, always by using illegal, downright criminal methods steeped in sadism. The cruel truth is that after they turned 15 years old, the Lucas's were not their own person anymore. They were exploited and imprisoned in one way or another, in pretty much every dimension or reality that the Assembly looked at. The other depravity was that in more than 97% of the cases investigated by the Assembly, one or both parents went along with his enslavement as they received power, access to important people, and contracts worth a lot of money like WPP.

It was confirmed that all of the Lucas's in the Assembly had magical ancestors, but several generations in the past; the last active spell-user lived in the early 1800's. The Wolenczak Family was actually very minor nobility that begun in the 1500's in Prague, then capital city of the Kingdom of Bohemia. They were the last surviving descendants of the Baron Haantonynus Wollen (subunct line of The Imperial House of Habsburg) who died in 1805 at the age of 138 just before the Kingdom was annexed to the newly-made Austro-Hungarian Empire.

He was spoken Von Wollen Der Chezezkia (The Wollen of the Czech Lands) in respect for his prowess at defending by magick, arms & money the lands of Bohemia and the old Czech cultural ways. He was the last fully magical Head of his Clan, which then became defunct since all his Heirs had died before him from various plagues, murders, and ill advised Oathed Duels which
dissolved the Family's Magic and fortunes. The survivors having neither magic nor money, nor even a title to fight over, eventually took the last asset they had: the man's surname. It was firstly contracted and redone to create the new Family Wolen-Czech around 1809 and then changed again to Wolenczak in 1918 when the First World War redrew the borders of Europe, creating the Czechoslovak Republic.

The move to that last version was born of cowardice, as the Head of the family wanted to avoid being thought of as allied with a political faction or Crown in Europe's continuous 'bowling alley' of succession wars where everything was a target for intimidation or eradication. It was that man's instinct that made him begin the transfer of money and assets to institutions in the USA, in early 1930, as the Hitlerian moveance was gaining a large following amongst the germanophones. Since their family had been Juden for over four centuries, they would never be tolerated in the Nazis' backyard, which is what they saw the Czech Republic as. Even their old historical links to nobility and der Kaiserlich Haus Habsburg-Lothringeren would not be enough to save their lives, since practically a quarter of Aryan Europa could make the same claim truthfully.

So they sent overseas the artworks, money, research papers, as well as the few precious magical artifacts they had managed to keep from when the Clan dissolved. There was a minute chance that the contents of the vault at the magical bank hadn't been sold. But, truthfully speaking, in half of their realities, the death of his great-grand-parents terminated any claim to the contents of that vault, thus allowing the bank to keep all books or documents and sell the artworks. The Wolenczak Family had indeed become as dirt poor as his grand-parents had told him as a child when they raised him. – Snort! – Oh well! It's not like he was hurting for money and creature comforts anymore…

Younger Lucas #18 grunted in scorn at the data about his mother's side; they had already been reduced to a single person per generation long before accidentally surviving World War II which led to his maternal grand-father and then his mother. The Holt side of the family had been practically defunct for six generations already and legally disappeared as of his mother's birth. That particular family had contributed nothing worthy of notice in its past epochs, and left nothing behind in terms of heirlooms or culture.

The detailed UEO era analysis with its multi-varied reports about Nathan Bridger, Kristen Westphalen, William Noyce, Andrea Dre, and hundreds of other key political, military and business figures were dry reading but a necessary evil. The global conclusion was that almost all of humanity exploited the incarnation of 'Lucas' they had access to shamelessly. The young child now had a pile of personnel service records, medical records, police investigations, and privately commissioned investigations on thousands of high profile targets to compile. He needed to establish a complete societal portrait before deciding if he went back to his own timeline, or chose the strategy of living in a different timeline / reality.

International Rescue & Tracy Heavy Industries

(Thunderbirds Are Go! - opening theme)

Saturday February 9th of 2301 – early afternoon, around 13:15pm
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Motorpool garage building
The next batch of reports to read and process were about an organization that had not yet become active in his own timeline yet. In fact, the only guarantee that it would come to activate was that the diviners had made the appropriate spells and rituals to commit Visions of the Past and Scrying to find pieces of the system's agents and machines. The existence of Tracy Heavy Industries' many divisions was already known to him, but the confirmation of International Rescue being in the works was obtained only via the seers having taken the appropriate steps. Now that he knew for certain that they were about 3 years away from launching, he could plan for that event in peace.

The item of genuine importance was, after all, his newly found spiritual brother Alan along with his own spiritual siblings Tanusha and Fermat. If either of the elder Tracy's thought they could harm Alan or Tanusha unpunished, they would then learn from Lucas himself that the Krachen does not let go any of its kin from its many arms. Speaking of which, it was now time to turn his baleful gaze to the technologies and histories behind IR and the Tracy / Hardale / Evans bloodlines.

- Cloaking device (all ships & pods)
- Holonet server & relays
- Communications jammer & ECM countermeasure suite
- Autopilot program with Back-to-home recovery flight program

- Thunderbird Operative bodysuit
  ---) Holonet Communications
  ---) Self-contained life-support pack
  ---) Remote piloting & control gauntlets giving access to each TB and homebase
  ---) jetpack (usable air, water & space)
  ---) Personal rechargeable rocket anchor & wire (pistol grip with single shot clips)
  ---) magnetic boots & gloves
  ---) Helmet with HUD & polarized faceplate, local air supply, emergency comm & beacon

- WorkPods
  ---) Standard setup is 2 person cockpit; adjustable seats; full climatic control
  ---) multi-adaptable mobility (ground, water, air, space)
  ---) Several hundred tools (from mini to super large)
  ---) UniKonnekt universal hydraulics / powered sockets for all movable tools & parts

- Thunderbird 1 advanced command post
  ---) Vertical flight & hover engines
  ---) hypersonic scramjets going to mach 8

- Thunderbird 2 heavy-hauler
  ---) Superlift vertical mobility thrusters
  ---) Rocket anchors & magnetic grapples
  ---) Droppable cargo-hauler pod (2 vehicles carrying capacity)

- Thunderbird 3 space rocket
  ---) Cockpit for four persons; no sleeping cabins, limited sanitation
  ---) Limited gravity control by rotation around the long axis
  ---) 3 grappling arms (deploy from wing struts)
  ---) Drill for mining asteroids (hidden inside the ship's nose cone)
  ---) Fusion / ion engine (1st generation prototype)
  ---) Capable of going to sun and back on one tank of fuel
  ---) Carries 1 WorkPod & tools specialized for space
Thunderbird 5 orbital station
---) Orbits around Earth; cannot go into atmosphere, is not built to land on anything
---) Magnetic artificial gravity generator (VERY energy intensive, rarely used)
---) Rotating section to create gravity and manage orbital position
---) Military grade communications array
---) Space exploration grade sensors and optics
---) Living quarters for up to six persons (or 12 if you use a hot-bunk schedule)
---) Full sanitation facilities but very limited food preparation systems
---) Massive rocket anchor with grappling claw
---) Space elevator (the anchor contains a life-supporting cabin for two persons)

There were discussions about Thunderbird-4’s technologies and capacities, but in comparison to some of the submersible technology from the SeaQuest or Quest Enterprises, it was discounted from further talks.

It is important to note that none of the International Rescue vehicles were armed with weapons. They are armored to resist fire, explosions and shrapnel; they have anti-theft and anti-spy devices, but nothing harmful or damaging to either persons or material. Jefferson Tracy did not want anybody mistaking his outfit for a militia of extremists so he banned anything bigger than a personal pistol. Operatives are not required to carry guns or grenades, but are very much obliged to carry several utility knives, a hatchet and a crowbar.

The two most important people in the Tracy Heavy Industries / International Rescue ecology were doubtless the good professor Hackenbacker and their friend Alan. Their other friend Tanusha Bellegant (Kayo) was important on her own terms but she never went into research or industry, so her contribution is mostly as a soldier, bodyguard, infiltrator, and in the domain of traditional psionics which are discussed by a different group.

Professor Hiram Jeremiah Hackenbacker (research & accomplishments)
---) Born 1985
---) Caucasian/white, mud-brown hair, watery-blue eyes, glasses, slight stutter
---) Velocion particle (new particle related to speed and movement; connex to Graviton)
---) Velocium alloy (new metallic alloy exclusive to Thunderbird ships)
---) 'Superon' liquid fuel for space exploration & industrial ultra-heavy machinery
---) Artificial Intelligence programming (sentient robot 'Max' is the preferred test bench for this)
---) Industrial & domestic robotics (like the WorkPods and Mobile Engineering Lab)
---) Nanite development & programming
---) Creation of the Earth-version of nano-construction technique & management software
---) Some 400 patents officially recorded; in actuality it is some 1,100+ discoveries
---) Officially works exclusively for THI but has participated in 900 outside projects to date

Professor Hackenbacker is an orphan who went through foster care in a public orphanage, in the USA, in New York State. Despite the very few monetary means available, the director of the overcrowded institution saw the potential and early accomplishments of young Hiram as a child so he pushed for scholarships and bursaries to send him to better schools, or at least have access to remote classes by internet. Hiram entered university at age 10, got a master's degree by age 12, another at 13, a first PhD at 14 followed by three more until age 17. H.J. Hackenbacker and Lucas Wolenczak comfortably fit in the same bracket of intellect, competency and character, as they both prefer to use their inventions for peaceful community-building efforts. The difference is that Hiram got recruited very young by Tracy Heavy Industries when he was 24 years old, when his son Fermat was 2 years old, just after his wife disappeared without a trace in an uninhabited part of
Mexico's southern provinces.

While the contributions of H.J. Hackenbacker to the IR projects are so fundamental that Jeff Tracy often said he couldn't have made it real without 'Brains' at his side, it was his personal efforts that were the least acknowledged, but the most important. Hiram was listed as the Tracy boys' secondary legal guardian since his second year of work for Jefferson, when he was made aware of the International Rescue project, about four years before Scott was told.

He was THE adult of reference in the Tracy Household, especially once the Tracy Island systems were online and the family was moved there permanently. Unlike the explosive tantrums of Jeff, the perpetually angry disposition of Ruth, or the basely subservient attitudes of Kyrano and Onaha Bellegant, Hiram always spoke up to defend the children from the harm the two violent grown-ups were wont to spread around. When it became clear that the four eldest Tracy siblings had been corrupted, mentally programmed, by their father to distrust and hurt Alan, it had been Hiram who sheltered him with Fermat and Tanusha in his laboratory during their brief sojourns on the Island, during the mandatory home vacations from their boarding schools. It was Hiram who went to school meetings, signed paperwork, or arranged travel for Alan since he had turned 8 years old, after the blow-out with Ruth that caused Jeff’s hate to blossom unchecked.

Prof. Hackenbacker made several attempts at teaching the truth to the four oldest Tracy boys, but to no avail. It wasn’t until Alan died, or ran away to never be heard from again, that the young men woke up from the sectarian atmosphere maintained by their father to finally see the harm they did. By that time it was of course far too late.

- Brother & friend Alan Shepard Evans Tracy (research & accomplishments)
  ---) Born July 2006
  ---) Caucasian/white, straw-blond hair, sky-blue eyes
  ---) Youngest professional astronaut on record at the age of 13 when he finished IR training
  ---) Youngest full-time member of IR (in several realities, but not all)
  ---) Has latent talents for both traditional & virtual psionics
  ---) Founder of ASET safety & homesteading products when he was 8 years old
  ---) Created the ASET 'Sweet Home' electronic locks series at age 8
  ---) Created the ASET 'Luxury Estate' hybrid electro-mechanical locks series at age 9
  ---) Has 28 patents recorded directly to his name to date; his company has some 200 copyrights
  ---) As of age 12 he is richer than all his four brothers put together, but nobody knows

Since Alan had learned from his family's inbred violence and his father's reach with his companies, government contacts, and British MI-6 through Penelope Creighton-Ward (Jeff's paramour), he knew that any disappearance had to be permanent and irreversible. When 'Alan' lived passed the age of 15 with enough health and mobility, he usually managed to draft Brains and Fermat into helping himself and Tanusha, to escape and change their identities, thus cutting contacts with their two best friends for ever as it wasn't safe to still communicate.

In the very few realities where Alan and Tanusha fail their attempt to escape incognito and get captured, or Alan botches his suicide, the violence from Ruth, Jeff, and the four older brothers, escalates to such level that it becomes torture overnight, bad enough to kill Alan inside of six days. This means without fail that the 'Tanusha' who helped him dies as well, if she was captured along her version of 'Alan', since Jefferson sees her actions as treason, a clear danger to his sect if she told police of his activities.

In more than 2/3 of the realities the Assembly plumb, Alan is blamed by his father for the death of
his mother during an avalanche that happened during a ski trip in the mountains in Colorado; he was only 3 years old at the time. Since she died immediately but he survived after a month-long coma, Jefferson blames him for murdering his wife and orphaning his four 'good' sons. Alan has suffered much along the years because of the violent 'Tracy Temper', bred into and across the Tracy bloodlines for about ten generations, as his brothers bullied and hurt him with their father's and grand-mother's silent approval.

His grand-father Grant Tracy was sober as a rock, but like his parents and grand-parents; mean spirited and prone to explosive violence that his wife, children, and grandchildren alike, suffered until he died when Alan was 5 years old. Grandma Ruth Tracy (née Hardale) was herself a violent angry woman, coming from a family of fanatical protestant fundamentalists, who beat her children with a large heavy wooden spoon until they bruised and bled, keeping them unable to sit, or even walk straight, without help for days. If they resisted or tried to help each other when she attacked, she would hit all of them, all over their bodies, heads, and even in their faces or eyes. She treated her grandsons the same way once their mother died and wasn't present to hold her at bay anymore.

Jefferson Tracy having been raised with a violent family setting as his normality, didn't see anything wrong to corporal punishment that leaves welts, bruises, cuts, deep bleeding injuries, or even the odd black-eye or broken bone. He remembered his grand-parents from both sides being angry, domineering people; the uncles and aunts were just as much heavy-handed with their kids, and treated their nephews or nieces the same way, when they visited their homes.

Jeff's three older brothers had all been in the US Navy, but fully into heavy criminal activities as a sideline to get rich quick. Because of this they all died violently, in depraved circumstances causing many dead and mutilated people to be strewn around the point of conflagration. All three men had lived their lives the way their parents, uncles, aunts, grand-parents and ancestors had shown them to do: dominate by pain or take them down with you. Since this mentality was prevalent in all branches of the Tracy family and those they married with, it's no big surprise that Ruth, her son Jefferson, and his five sons were the last living members of the lineage. All the others died from violence at the hands of criminals, police, or like Grant Tracy; an incurable disease as cancer took nearly one third of all their relatives.

That means that Jefferson was for his five boys an absentee parent who let his angry aggressive mother Ruth, and oldest son Scott, handle the brood most of the time until Hiram Hackenbacker came along. Poor Scott tried to be brother, keeper, father, and healer to his four siblings, but he had inherited the uneven, swiftly shifting, temperament of his father and granddad so in the end, he did more harm than good. When Jefferson was present, which was one weekend out of the month until the move to the island, all five boys anxiously awaited what would set him off next. He never hit or threatened Ruth, but she certainly wasn't shy at swearing, cursing, and hitting him with her damned wooden spoon whenever he was in reach of her, despite the fact he was in his fifties at the time. If he dodged or ran off (as he now always did) she just picked on the closest child to pass her rage, until she was too tired to keep on hitting.

Most of the 'Alan' were almost killed by Ruth at the age of 8 in a truly depraved event. That is why Ruth helped Alan start his company at the age of 8, as payment to keep him quiet about the event, so that even her son doesn't know what truly happened that day. The only things known were that it involved an ambulance, the hospital in Kansas City where they lived at the time, then being flown by med-evac to Los Angeles to another hospital for specialty treatments to his larynx, vocal chords, and severe neck/spine trauma. It was there that doctors notified police who came in, then the FBI got involved because he was the son of Jefferson Tracy, NASA's darling and All American Hero.

It was at that time that the government's child advocate came in to take over the case and help Alan
determine his best course for what he needed to happen. He wanted independence from the adults urgently and money since he already knew his father would cut him off at 18 years, or even kick him out before that. Independence would never happen by the age of 15 unless he could find a sympathetic judge; the average age was 16 to obtain emancipation, and that was with a high school diploma and money in hand. It was the DCFS lawyer that suggested strong-arming Ruth into creating the company, and giving some seed money for it, to do what he wanted with, to repay him for the injuries she had inflicted. The fact that Alan already had a pair of programs to sell, and the design of his magnificent electronic locks in hand, just made it easier to start operations. He managed to get stability and profitability straight in the first year of production.

Just after being made aware of the gross lines of that event, Jefferson's hate exponentialized so he sent him away to the first of many boarding schools he would attend in his short life. His father was rabidly angry that he had resisted the beating his grandmother was administering; he wanted blood and misery in payment for his rebelliousness. He made Alan change schools every year, to keep him from making friends amongst the adult staff, so he could not get help against the two rabid dogs that kept hurting him: Jeff and Ruth. Jefferson even went so far as to pay adults to write false reports of misdemeanor and delinquency to show his other sons; this manipulation convinced them to let him handle Alan any way he wanted. They not only let him, they joined in on the hatemongering and punishments, all the while exclaiming how ashamed of having him in the family they all were.

In most realities observed by the Assembly, the incarnation of Alan runs away from his family before turning 15 years old or dies from their violence in the last month leading up to his 15th birthday. There are only a few realities were the 'Alan' runs off with 'Tanusha', they change their identities and marry, to live a long and happy life away from the cult-like sectarian atmosphere of Tracy Island and International Rescue. There is less than 1% of realities where the Tracy Family manages to exist in harmony, in such a way that all five brothers live together without violence, and actively harming each other. The only way that happens though, is because Jefferson, Grant and Ruth die together in a car crash after Alan turns 5 years old, allowing Brains to take in all of the siblings as his own children.

Alan's psychological profile between the ages of 14 and 18 is that he is actually intellectually just as smart, intelligent and competent as Lucas, Martin, or Hiram, and would have reached further into research and development if he had been loved, nurtured, and supported properly, like Hiram was. The way he mentally stalled then regressed to the point he became an almost purely physical being, with an infantile attitude halfway younger than his actual age, with border-ADHD, was a direct adaptation to his hostile environment. At the age of 11, the constant assaults from his relatives created a preponderant need for better perceptual speed and dodging reflexes to stay alive and limit his injuries, so all energies, training, and personality development, was directed to this. On the other hand, running his company activities, his piloting licenses in multiple vehicles from age 10 onwards, and completing his astronautics qualifications at age 13, all attest that his capacity to learn and intellectualize instruction was still present and going strong. He just demonstrated his full mental potential when Ruth, Jeff, or his siblings, weren't around to go crazy at his performance and hurt him for 'acting out of his proper place in life' similar to what Martin had learned to do.

Younger Lucas #18 turned off the digital display of the statistics and societal dossier of IR, THI, and their bloodlines, with a disgusted grunt that made the others around shiver in dread. That his look was mirrored on the face of the Tactical Chief, who was reading the other copy, meant somebody was in for a world of hurt real soon.

The child looked deeply into the angry eyes of his older sibling and said in low measured tones "Those besotted curs will regret laying hands on our family! Alan, Tanusha, and even Fermat if he wants in, are MINE and the Krachen does not EVER let go of what it holds in trust. Maybe the
other Tracy brothers could be redeemed or kept from depravity, but I doubt it. The statistics about my birth timeline are not in favor of any of our kin. This will demand both finesse of thought, and finality in execution.” There was no denying it anymore; he had to bring Paul Vanasse to active status much sooner than he thought healthy, or feasible, for the 9 year old child, but needs must.

The 20 year old contemplated his much younger and much more violent sibling, thinking back to his own life, wondering if he could have been happier, or just less injured, if he had developed his killer instincts that early in his life. He probably would have been; the proof was staring him in the eyes as he sat there.

Quest Enterprises International

(Real Adventures of Jonny Quest - opening theme)

Saturday February 9th of 2301 – mid-afternoon, around 14:30pm
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans’ Support Services (VSS)
Motorpool garage building

After a quarter hour pause to use the bathrooms, refill coffee and plate up an actual meal of club sandwiches, mashed potatoes and coleslaw, the child and adult who were fast becoming the de facto leaders of the Assembly along their 33 year old Uber-Brunder stretched their backs and limbs before sitting down to a working supper. Eating with one hand while typing, writing, or turning book pages, with the other hand was an old habit. Now, with the fully digitized reports, they didn't even need their hands to work as the display could be programmed with a timer or verbally 'told' when to turn the pages.

Given the generally upbeat and happy demeanor of the 'Jonny' incarnations zooming around the compound, the two chief strategists didn't expect many bad parts. A lot of technobabble and dry-cut stats for sure, but no horror stories like the Wolenczak and Tracy dossiers had revealed, or the haunted looks in the 'Martin's eyes warned them of. Given their orphan status, the Labarre and Jenkins wouldn't be any cakewalk either.

"Weeelll, back to the cart said the horse; my back won't break itself all on its own, now will it?" the Tac-Chief quipped glibly about the amount of digitized administrative work waiting for them.

His little brother snorted, responding forlornly "If the governments fell, there's no lawman anymore, and therefore no deadlines or obligations anymore, then why do I still have bloody homework to do? This is child abuse, I'm tellin' yous'… I'm gonna tell my lawyers, see if I don't!"

The muffled laughter and giggles from around the conference hall left the two leaders well aware of just how their plight – Yes! They said plight! – was perceived by their family. Such a lovable bunch, the lot of them...

- 'QuestWorld' cybernetic virtual environment (Private project; was never mass produced)
- 'HoloWarp' full-body-experience interface
- Neural interface (non-invasive; headset)
- Neural interface (invasive; cryo-pod 'Ars Morpheum') (Secret project; was never mass produced)
- Avionics controls & support consoles (Firefly, Catalina Rebuild, Dragonfly)
- Fixed metallic sails & tri-mast (Questor I) (available for sale but never mass produced)
- Naval controls & support consoles (Questor I & II)
- Chryo-Blast chemical explosive (instantaneous freezing of water and air in the zone)
- Chryo-pulse beam weapon (energy freezes & covers in ice anything it touches)
- 'IRIS' Secure Domotics Server & Sentry
- 'Rachel' Time-Travel Portal; hardware & Programs (secret private project)
- Vocoder for whale speech & translation program (was never mass produced)

The Quest International Enterprises (QEI) was a world renowned, multi-billion dollar capital and assets corporation that spanned the globe. However, unlike Tracy HI which was led heavy-handedly by a ham-fisted Jefferson, the QEI was an even keeled affair. The Board and Company Direction were in the hands of professional business people that were chosen jointly by Benton and Rachel before Jonny was even born. Almost all of these old timers still worked actively at the time Jonny turns 19, when the family's internal emotional troubles vanish.

As a corporation, QEI has many domains of activity, mostly centered around very high tech, bleeding edge research & development, computer programming and cybernetics of all sorts. Some truly marvelous experimental chemicals and bio-agents were either discovered or produced by experimentation in the HAZMAT laboratories of QEI. One of the four precursor solutions needed to assemble and energize Synthium (Blue Moon variant) was created by Rachel Jenkins Quest at their labs in Florida. Benton himself discovered and developed an anti-radiation antibiotic called "Adrivair; AR#001-bolus" that was now a staple of the first aid kits of every army in the world thus insuring by itself the profitability and viability of QEI for generations.

While Benton and Rachel always tried to take their research ventures away from weaponry and militarized usages, some things just naturally have an implementation amongst police or military forces. As such, they tried to limit these undesired projects to non-lethal, or at least non-mutilating, devices and concepts. The very few projects that could not be made or constricted to these non-armament standards were usually pure chemicals, like new space rocket fuel, acids for biomass reactors, fire suppression gases, etc… All in all, as of Jonny's birth, the company was trying, and succeeding quite well, in obtaining and fulfilling many profitable, often classified, government projects for all the members of the NATO Alliance, and successor Alliances, without ever actually developing a gun, bullet or bomb.

This was displeasing for many neo-con worshipers of the White Painted Cross in Washington DC. They thought the many Wars of the Worthies they had started up, around the Arabic and African countries, could have been won with a much more superb panache, if Quest had gotten off his high horse to accept supplying them with the applied dominance and murder technology they knew him capable of producing. In fact, they had wanted him to create nerve gas and DNA-targeting inert chemicals that could be used over a crowd, to only kill or sicken the wanted group. In reality, they wanted QEI to identify the gene that controls/marks the skin color of a person and then create toxins that would attack only those not caucasian/white. Benton received credible informations about the projected tactics, along with a list of military personnel, politicians, and companies, to avoid if he didn't want his family sullied for eternity by getting caught in this web of depravity.

Many in the intelligence community, the CIA in particular, have long suspected that the murder by sniper fire of Rachel J. Quest, at the Florida Quest Compound, was retaliation by the neo-cons and their Apostolates of the White Painted Cross against the Quests for refusing to submit to their fanatical God Given Plan for America.
- Doctor Benton Harald Quest (research & accomplishments)
---) Born 1962
---) Caucasian/white, rust-brown hair & beard, deep-blue eyes
---) Founder and principal researcher for Quest Enterprises International
---) Human & veterinary medicine, biochemistry, genetics, mechanics, cybernetics, phenomenology
---) Has more than 600 discoveries patented directly to his name
---) Has participated in the vetting or validation of over 2,000 other projects for QEI
---) Has been validation consultant for the US Government on more than 600 projects to date
---) Has received honorarium, medals and diplomatic credentials from 27 Nations to date

Benton Harald Quest would need a hard-cover book to properly enunciate his many achievements and the vast experiences of his life. He was formed as a Florida National Guard field medic who then learned chemistry and advanced biology to work on the Human Genome Project. He was right in the front pack, during the budding Age of Silicon, when Microsoft and Apple began spreading their user-friendly systems as he was developing new thinner silicon wafers, and conductive alloys for CPU and circuit boards. He then opened his mind to the wonders of the world with phenomenology, when he began traveling extensively with his son Jonny, after Rachel's death sent them both into a depressive spiral that they needed external help to recover from.

For most of Jonny's life, Benton was an amiable, calm, even-tempered person, who cherished every moment with his Little Angel as his wife had dubbed him. She was still calling 8 year old Jonny by that nickname the day she died. Benton kept doing it intermittently, until he was 14 and the 'Troubles' happened.

Benton has a phlegmatic, almost British/Germanic, approach to life with an unflappable demeanor and this weird character trait that most of his fear, anxiety, or anger, are converted to curiosity about why a person or event happens that particular way. While he does have very strong, deeply rooted principles, Dr Quest is by no means a fanatic, nor is he a tree-hugger, nor a left-leaning bleeding-heart liberal, despite the depictions that many ecclesiastes of the WPC have tried to publish about him. It's just that very few events or personalities can manage to get him roused enough for violence to become the solution he will employ to resolve a situation. Threats against his children and extended family are amongst the few sure-fire ways to get him to pick up his trusty old Lee-Enfield .303 to put some lead in the offender's career perspectives (and health).

Because of this almost inbred tempered reaction to reality, and the many multi-varied accidents caused by human existence, Benton is what most would consider a liberal, even lenient parent in that he never allowed corporal punishment or confinement terms for any child under his care, and would routinely interfere when he witnessed it. Despite this overtly lenient attitude, he was in fact quite demanding and firm, with a strong work ethic and impeccably clean life. Because of that role model, Jonny and Hadji could never in their lives be called spoiled or bratty, no matter how many material objects they had, or how much freedom they enjoyed at home or on the road during their family expeditions.

When it was Benton that gave punishments, Jonny and Hadji, with Jessica Bannon later on, were always given extra chores over their usual daily allotment of household work. For more serious offenses, or those mistakes borne of bad judgment and moral ambiguity, they had to write lengthy research reports on topics related to the error they did, to help them understand why they should not repeat the mistake. Since Benton was a celebrated academic, with many books and articles published, his criteria for a successful report were quite high and helped all his children develop very critical, analytical minds. It also took a crapton of time; neither wanted to be on the receiving end of the dreaded 'reading list' the man would give them to base their text on, with the obligation to include pertinent quotations, notes and references, etc…, in the report or else start over again.
The truly good thing about the type of discipline Benton maintained was that he never 'grounded' one of the children, nor did he ever use isolation or confinement based types of punishment. Any child that disobeyed or made mistakes was instead given less leeway in their decisions, and kept closer to have more constant direct parental input into their activities. Since the damnable report could take two or three weeks to get done right, Benton understood that the child would need some breathing room and time to de-stress, to clear their mind to use it properly, so adding restrictions and 'grounding' to a closed room on top of the assignment was never contemplated, nor seen as beneficial for either child or adult. This meant that Jonny and Hadji never once in their lives saw their father as a jail guard or someone who thought them too idiotic to be let out of the house, as many parents unfortunately act towards their kids.

However, given the amount of actual real thought-process and work-product that Benton expected to be put in these reports, the children would have gladly preferred a good spanking instead. Jessica, who was in fact spanked by both of her parents until she was 19 because of her hot-headed, volatile temper, often preferred her own father's much more direct, but quite shorter, method of punishment to the interminable yet supposedly kind and gentle method of the good doctor.

Benton and Race argued, and actually quarreled quite a few times, about the effectiveness, morality, and legality, of corporal punishment applied to children, especially when they pass age 13. Benton was disgusted that Race and Estella would treat their only child in that brutish way, but he never interfered out of respect for Jessie, who had asked him to leave her family dynamics alone. In counterpart, Race never hit or spanked the boys, even when Benton was away for work or illness, and it was him alone that watched the three kids for several weeks. Even when they were on expedition, trekking on foot in desolate icy plains, or climbing up forested mountains, Benton never relented on his pain-free approach, and Race never stopped sighing in exasperation, along with the kids in fact.

The kids still thought well into adulthood that a spanking would have been a lesser pain in their asses than the damned report, but Benton never wanted to hear their opinions. It was one of the few things in their lives for which he would always pull out the old "You're just kids! What do you know about life and parenting? Do what you're told, as you're told, or I'll add a report on respecting the authority of your elders as well!"

The whole family never did resolve this difference of opinions in Benton's lifetime, but it is noteworthy that it was the only enduring, and recurring, subject of contention in the entire family.

--- Brother & friend Jonathan Benton Quest
---) Born June 2005
---) Caucasian/white, straw-blond hair, sea-blue eyes
---) Trained martial arts: judo, karate, kung fu
---) Trained calisthenics & acrobatics to olympic level by age 13
---) Trained weapons; staff, sticks, knife, hatchet, ropes and hooks, slingshot, bow, crossbow
---) Trained firearms; pistol, bolt-action rifle, lever-action rifle, 12 gauge shotgun
---) Trained paramedic grade-3 license
---) Expert survivalist, camper, forager, hunter and fisher
---) Expert Explorer, surveyor & mapper
---) Expert urban escapist; could hide in city indefinitely despite hostile pursuit in progress
---) Expert pilot of many types of boards, moped, cars, boats, planes and helicopters
---) Expert computer analyst & hacker
---) Has conceived several video games for QEI that were put on public sale
---) Has conceived several video games for QuestWorld system (never sold)
---) Has conceived several types of surveillance firmware to spot CPU & BIOS hacking (never sold)
---) Has conceived 3 applications to improve efficiency of IRIS domotics server (private usage only)

In all the realities plumbed by the Assembly, the 'Jonathan' incarnations are good, kind hearted people, who were lucky enough to live in a good home with kind adults, then they were blessed with Hadji and Jessie as siblings. The only real depravity was the murder of Rachel Quest (nee Jenkins) his mother right in front of his eyes at the age of 7, when a sniper took aim at the Quest compound in Florida. They never found the man responsible or why, but that is what began the intensive relationship between the Quest Household and US Central Intelligence Agency / section I-1 who began to supply them with bodyguards all year long. This led to meeting Race Bannon and, three years later, his daughter Jessica Velasquez Bannon.

Besides nightmares and some anxiety attacks, Jonny developed a long lasting despise of guns and firearms that impeded his survival training quite a lot, until the age of 17, when some mental blockage came apart and he took to pistols with a vengeance. He did however perform incredibly in all athletics, sports, and physical endurance tests. He could swim, run, climb, or ride several types of animals and bikes. He learned by age 10 to drive several larger vehicles in case of emergencies, getting the proper licenses as soon as he reached the lowest age recognized by International Law to do so.

Unfortunately that meant that the 'Jonny' incarnations were not pushed into developing personal survival strategies like the 'Lucas' or 'Alan' had to. Despite having faced violence, death, depravity and insanity at the hands of Zin, Surd, Rage, and several other terrorist madmen, it was never the family that hurt them, so they recovered quickly with little trauma to their soul. That 'easy life', compared to their other friends, eventually would come back to haunt them in the worst way.

The 'Jonny' were well loved and supported until the age of 14, when their father and Race Bannon, supposed body-guard cum secondary legal guardian, started leaving him behind at the Rockport (Maine) Quest Compound, despite taking Hadji and Jessie on their explorations and adventures. Neither adult could tell you why this started to happen; there was never a conscious decision to leave Jonny behind. They were well used to traveling with all three children together, had the money and equipment to manage a five person excursion easily, so there was no reason for this to happen. How or why Benton started leaving his birth son behind while focusing on his adoptive son, or even on the daughter of his employee, more than on his own blood-child was never resolved; it just came to be then passed after five years of turmoils.

It was following almost a year of abandonment that Jonny, now 15, was fed up and started moving around, meeting people and making himself a life. That lasted peacefully for a full year, until age 16, before the adults noticed something. Immediately, they started blaming him, calling him undisciplined, rebellious, untrustworthy, and so on. His father wanted him at home like a goldfish in a bowl; immobile and silent while he traveled the world with Race Bannon and the two other teens.

Jonny instead threatened to get DCFS involved if his father didn't shut up and let him live; he was 16 years old now; he could even legally have a full time job since he had just obtained his high school diploma by going to the Rockport Private Academy's testing center to get qualified. Their extensive testing proved that he was being held back academically some three levels behind where he could be, just because the adults wanted him under control to decide about his life! He was short-changed on his education, just so the two older men could constantly speak about how
intelligent and advanced Hadji and Jessie were, while Jonny was deemed as the child who was "just ordinary". Due to his physical prowess and athletics in community events in Rockport, they had made him believe that he was just a grunt, a meat-tank, unable to think straight or develop anything of scientific value. In short, they tried to convince him that he would never be a great man like Benton, nor even just an okay man like Race.

That entire family dynamic means that at this time, in the many realities observed, 'Jonny' never created big technology or science like Lucas, Alan and Martin did. He never logged any patents or copyrights, despite being an incredibly competent hacker and programmer who had developed several sub-games and applications to be run specifically inside the QuestWorld game, while using their proprietary neural interface and whole-body display / control system. Jonny had become a professional-level sportsman who could have gone to the Olympics by the time he was 13 years old. He could scuba-dive, use nitrox systems and a diving bell. He could ride a bicycle, dirt bike or moped, as well as his hoverboard built by Benton when he was 9 years old. He could pilot their boat Questor I, the seaplane, the helicopter, or even the hypersonic jet by himself, safely and efficiently. He was an incredible martial arts combatant with a staff, knife, or hatchet, but warmed up to firearms only late in adolescence past the age of 17.

Younger Lucas #18 munched thoughtfully on some fresh-picked sliced apples, dipped in english cream of course, as he sipped his cappuccino with distinguished (snobbish) manners. The sniggers of his siblings were promptly dismissed as the brayings of uncouth peons, unworthy of his attention. Still, the statistics about QEI were actually quite promising, not something he could say about the UEO era. Pursing his lips in thought, he studiously ignored the interrogative looks from the 20 year old sitting in front of him, and most certainly did not find amusing the illusory donkey ears someone (child Alan # 3) had spelled behind his head. Ah, the freedom of childhood's carefree age… Humph! Where was he, now?

The QEI tech was nice, but the family profile and societal report was very interesting since it meant that there may be at least a pair of mature, stable, reliable adults out there to get help from. It was already too late for everybody else, or they had been born wrong to begin with. There was something though, that niggled at the back of his mind, as he reviewed key parts of the 19 year old Jonny's accounts and descriptive of their lives, habits, and patterns of activity for years 14 to 18.

The few adult-aged 'Jonny' and 'Joanne' described a rather difficult passage to adulthood because of that weird period of passive – aggressive detachment on the part of all their family, but by age 18 it had all come back together. But the siblings remembered the broken trust, the insults, the accusations, the abandonment, and crying themselves to sleep alone in the huge house in the Florida compound, because even the paid housekeepers, the Evans, were ignoring them for weeks at a time. It all smelt of manipulation and outside interference of some sorts, to the more experienced people in the room. They decided that an in depth investigation was needed, to be done before they returned to their home timelines. The adults could not change anything, but for those in the younger years there was still time to get tactical information and mount a defense against what tried to split them apart.

CIRPA: The Center for the Investigation and Research of Paranormal Activities

(Martin Mystery - opening theme)

Saturday February 9th of 2301 – late afternoon, around 17:00pm
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
After the downright ordinary (Yeah, right!) adventures of one J.B. Quest, the complete fuckshit that was Martin Mystère's life and on-the-side job came as a shock to the mind and soul. There were some damned zingers in this report, and the tech stats were complicated by magic and aliens galore. As if the animated cursed Malenque Mummies or the ancient Alien-Summoning Nazca ruins, the Quest family had explored were just plain everyday amusement park tricks and light-shows!

Younger Lucas #18 shared a look with his older brother who quite helpfully shrugged, silently mouthing "Hey, what can you do about it?" Damn the lazy twink! He would have to do all the heavy mental work by himself again, just like always! Meh! Adults, these days!

The child traded his sugary cappuccino for a black espresso and some dry sablé cookies to keep him on track for the evening, and most of the night. They would take a full stop around 11:00pm for a real meal, then continue until the last report was read. Man, what a fun night in perspective!

The Center (CIRPA) has never logged or recorded ANY patents or copyrights of ANY know-how, technology, science or theory; be they mundane or mystical, earthly or alien. No one knows why that is the established policy and the M.O.M. does not tolerate questions about the subject. The result is that the institution has never made any effort to disseminate its trove of science to the Earth, to improve the minds and quality of life of the planet's inhabitants, as they should have.

Most governments of most planets would consider this to be SEDITION and TREASON.

The official policy of CIRPA is to help local law enforcement with the magick / alien situation then wipe memories all around regardless of badge, rank, social position or even diplomatic privileges. The Center operates completely out of the legal bounds of the mundane governments, the Wizerias, and even the alien law agencies they partner with. Given this lawless mentality, it is pretty much certain that not all is clean and legal within the command structure and procedures of CIRPA. Then again; nobody remembers long enough to keep the investigation going, otherwise that would be SEDITION and TREASON as well.

- U-Watch (Utilities Wrist-mounted Device)
  ---) Some 300 mundane, alien or mystical devices programmed into replication / storage
  ---) Energy-to-matter replication matrix
  ---) Dematerialization storage matrix
  ---) Communications for telephone (analogic, cellular, satellite)
  ---) Communications for radio (short wave, analog, CB)
  ---) Communications for Infra-red & optical laser port
  ---) Powered by environmental radiation, bio-electricity from user, ionic crystal battery (5 day charge)

Several devices used by CIRPA were;

- Alpha goggles (meta-glasses with variable lights, scanning lenses & other functions)
- X-Rod (metallic collapsible electrified staff; shoots stun net from one end)
- X-Knife (light saber; variable frequency, coloration and length / width)
- X-gripper (rocket anchor with wire and hydraulic winch)
- Shield Handle (Metallic handlebar that emits a barrier shield; 12 feet diameter for 30 seconds)
- Ecto-scan (portable scanner for samples with integrated linkup to Legendex)
- Ecto-diffuser (portable energy emitter to disintegrate ectoplasm deposits)
- Vertical flight / hovering Aircraft (cloaking device, comms suite, scanners)
- All terrain wheeled vehicles (cloaking device, comms suite, scanners)
- Small & medium naval boats (cloaking device, comms suite, scanners)
- Memory Management device (wipe & rewrite memories of 200+ species)
- Holomatrix cloaking device for vehicles
- Humanumorphic cloaking device for alien collaborators
- Artificial gravity grid for vehicles
- Sublight engines (slow obsolete models; max capacity is 55% of sublight speed)
- Warp engine (slow obsolete models; max capacity is Warp 3.25)
- Portal Generator
---) Same temporal referent only (no time displacement feasible with this equipment)
---) Same dimension and synthetic pocket dimensions
---) Free-float entry / exit points
---) Range 25,000Km through solid matter or energy fields
- LEGENDEX
---) Cybernetic encyclopedia
---) Holographic interactive display
---) Contains all mundane, alien & mystical knowledge / protocols of CIRPA
---) Access managed by security clearance levels coded biometrically
- Aliens species
---) Partnered = 40 species / 100 races / 300+ cultures
---) Extra-terrestrial governmental contacts = 250+
---) Alien personnel that work for CIRPA on Earth = 2,000+

There is nothing known about the woman called M.O.M. and she actively keeps it that way. Any being that came close to unraveling her identity or secrets was mind-wiped then killed. She has a frigid demeanor covered by an artificial smile that fools people for a few weeks before they realize what monster they work for. You would receive more sympathy from the virus killing you than from her even after you did her a favor.

- Director of the Center: M.O.M. (Identity never revealed)
---) Woman of questionable origins and genetics; part-human suspected
---) Looks caucasian/white, hair black with purple highlights, purple eyes, slight fangs on upper canine teeth
---) Is rumored to have founded CIRPA; never confirmed
---) Controls 'The Center' like a fiefdom or an abbey; her Rule is ultimate and unyielding
---) Aggressive and domineering; even when she is patently wrong, people are afraid to call her on it
---) She has NO regards for the governments / populations whose territories she violates daily
---) In her eyes everyone is an enemy; she does not differentiate between aliens, humans, undead, etc…
---) While she smiles and plays nice with her agents, it's always just skin deep; everybody knows better
--- She NEVER gives her agents any assistance in their personal lives, even when sick or injured
--- Under-aged agents victims of family violence are commanded to tough it out silently or lose their job

M.O.M. might look like she hates Martin and lets Diana smack him around on mission-time as payback, but it isn't so. She just could not give a damn about his health, welfare, or emotional well-being; as long as he functioned enough to get the job done, she kept him as an agent. The few adult 'Martin' in the group all shuddered at the memories of the fight that exploded when they told her they were leaving CIRPA to work full-time for the projects they had developed with the Lucases and Alan's of their realities. It had been open warfare in the streets and sewers, in the air and on waterways; she wanted the whole group mind-wiped and deader than roadkill Right-Fucking-Now and she had been willing to wade into the fray to do the deed herself.

On that note, M.O.M. has several psionic skills and a repertoire of combat magic to back up the tools from her one-and-only Director-level U-Watch. During the fight she let loose extra-dimensional abominations, poison gas, a pair of lava rivers and shot at everything around with a beam pistol that disintegrated anything it touched.

- Assistant Director of the Center: Billy (Ganthar)
  --- Alien from another planet where he was supposedly a great warrior
  --- Reptilian; green; medium height with spiky crest on head and back, clawed hands and feet
  --- Prefers to look like the stereotypical martian: 2 foot tall & green
  --- Usually a friendly person but truly submissive to M.O.M.

Billy (Ganthar) is a lot older than his appearance suggests and his preferred humanomorphic disguise, as a human teenaged boy around 17 years old, does not help in tracing his age. It is proven he came to Earth in 1947 during the Roswell incident, but little of his personal past and species' culture are known. For some reason he is very dedicated and profoundly submissive towards the M.O.M. something that the 'Martin' and 'Diana' have never figured out why. Billy helps Martin's team as much as he can during their missions for The Center but is kept on a tight leash by M.O.M. She systematically and rabidly forbids him from helping anybody with their home life, even if they should step in to regularize the situations of their juvenile agents who have violent families.

- Martin Mystère the best agent CIRPA has ever had in service
  --- Born November 2003
  --- Caucasian/white, gold-blond hair, amber/copper colored eyes
  --- Begun working for CIRPA at age 11 by doing research using Torrington Academy's workshops
  --- Everybody but M.O.M. thinks he started at age 15 along Diana when Java was discovered
  --- Trained in several martial arts: Karate, Kung-Fu, Judo and is part of the school wrestling team
  --- Trained with weapons: staff, knife, hatchet, dart, rope, chain & hook, fencing & kendo
  --- Has trained with several firearms since age 11 by attending a secret gun-club run just by kids
  --- Good enough with computers and software to hack into several classified sites, including CIRPA
  --- Trained to be certified as paramedic level-2 for the school's volunteer firefighter & rescue brigade
  --- Profoundly gifted with ecology, zoology, biochemistry, genomics, biotech engineering
  --- Specialties in fluid analysis, oozology, mycology, xenobiology, crypto zoology, phenomenology
Mystical specializations after adolescence: herbology, alchemy, healing arts, necromancy, dark arts

Has actually patented several bio-sciences innovations under an anonymous numbered company

Martin was always a good child, with a wondrous kindness inside of him, that all the hurt and misery inflicted by his father and step-sister has never managed to kill off. He just did what all the other kids in his situation learn: hide your true self until you move out and leave the crud behind. He was playing the endurance game and was in the process of winning it on his own terms. Learning first aid and rescue techniques in preparation to join the school's volunteer rescuers saved his life, both in the field and at home. His superior performances in gymnastics, and extra-curricular self-defense classes, taught him to tumble and fake injuries to appease his rabid father's rage when he was beaten. The multiple biology-themed classes helped him develop the skills needed to find ingredients to prepare his own remedies for when Gerard really put an effort into hurting him enough to see to it that Martin was scarred or maimed. The very secretive weapons training was for the inevitable moment when, upon leaving secondary school, he would join the Canada Coast Guard training program and ditch his blasted family; they would react violently, but he would be ready and able to fight them off.

Martin has always had public service and community at heart; all his prodigious intellect and competencies were geared along the "Rescuer's Principle" to keep himself alive and conscious so he could keep others safe until the rescue effort reaches them. This was what gave him the drive to study hard, perform very well in homework and assignments, but then willfully tank out his exams to maintain the charade of an idiotic lazy bum that made his father feel less threatened. Martin had found out very young that coming home with the truly magnificent grades and civics commendations he should really be getting would only anger his father and step-sister, thus resulting in a two-on-one beating that injured him for three to five weeks.

The many incarnations of 'Martin' all learned at an early age to keep quiet, do things silently and invisibly, especially when the attack-bitch 'Diana' was nearby as she always hit, abused, and injured him, on the orders of their common father. It would take many years and several near-death experiences on missions for The Center before the 'Diana Lombard' incarnations figured out that they had a great sibling and should cherish his presence in their lives. Usually, that happened around Martin's 17th year of life, in their last year of high school as Martin had skipped a grade to be in Diana's year. It was Gerard who insisted that they be in the same year and groups because he wanted his little mercenary to keep tabs on Martin when he wasn't present. In reality, Gerard loathed both children equally, but never got violent with Diana to maintain the illusion that it was "all the boy's fault".

Gerard Mystery & Diana Lombard

In most realities plumbed by the Assembly, the 'Martin' normally learn of magic and the heritage of the Maison des Mystères only when they have reached 17 years of age, during a mission for The Center taking place in Paris (France) where they accidentally fight a group of magic-created vampires hybrids. These were actually located in the cellars of an old mansion of the Mystère family's ancestors, which explained the fact Martin has hybrid-vampire DNA and capacities that get accidentally activated during the mission in question, due to his being 'turned' into a vamp for a few hours before obtaining control over his biology and powers. From that point forward, Martin will desperately do all that he can to find amicable magic-users with the goal to meet people and befriend them, instead of 'neutralizing' them on orders of M.O.M as he had ordered. His change in attitude brought him into contact with a county sheriff of the Wizeria Hammerrika's continental
governance, thus allowing him to establish inroads with the magical communities of North America and Europe.

He learned the ancient lores of the House of Mysteries, founded in the year 502, right after the fall of the Western Roman Empire; how they moved from Rome to France until the 1300's then fled to England before fleeing those religious wars and witch hunts in the 1500's. Their last destination was Canada, the Sherbrooke area in Quebec, under the jurisdiction of the Laanderstadt of the Hassmerrisskath where their numbers slowly dwindled out until only his magickless father remained.

And that was the basic reason for all the hatred that Gerard Mystery spent on both of his children: they were fully magical and he was not. Gerard's father Gilbert was a semi-user of magic like his father and grand-father had been, but Gerard was a squib. Squibs are a genetic mutation that happens for many reasons; natural, accidental and malevolent. Squibs are non-users of magic, specifically Essence, who do not have a magical core so they can't use any type of direct sorcery but they can still use the lesser realms of channeling (Faith) and mentalism (psyche) with a lot of effort and remedial training. In basic facts, squibs are sensible to magic and can perceive things or events, but not affect them like their wizardly counterparts would. They can brew and use some potions but not all of them since those requiring an active core during the ritual of imbedding will always fail and be toxic. They can read, write and empower runic arrays, but rarely as efficiently or powerfully as their fully magical relatives would. Because of these limitations, squibs are often reduced to manual labor in farms, restaurants and of course, the banks, accountant offices and law firms, as these require no magic unless Oaths and Blood Tithes are needed, which even squibs can perform properly.

What is important to understand here is the social and legal stigma attached to this condition when you live in a completely magical community, which is a lot of bigotry and contempt all day long. When you are the Heir Presumptive to an Ancient and Noble House like Gerard was, as the only male of his generation, then there is really no explanation for it, other than living through hell every day of your life. The moment he was confirmed a squib instead of just a late bloomer, he saw his title of Heir, and the rights associated to it, stripped from him by his father with approval of the Wizeria Hammerrika and he was no longer able to access or control the family's remaining fortune. Even his name was forcibly changed by the Family Magic from the ennobled french version 'Mystère' of the central title-bearing line to the menial english 'Mystery' reserved for squibs, mundane members of the house and paupers taken into fostering. By the Family Charter and House Magic, it would be his first-born son who would be the new Heir of Mystère, and eventually the new Magistrat de la Maison Mysterieuse.

So Gerard did what a lot of men in his situation do: he got his act together and found a woman he respected, not 'loved' as it would interfere with the plan. He wooed her, bedded her and made sure to get her pregnant as with her magical background, education and social status, both their parents would forgive them if this produced a son and they married to legitimize the union of both houses. Unfortunately, at the first signs of the baby's gender it was proven to be a girl, and this stuck Gerard in a bind as he had actually fallen in love with Sophia Alesianne (her mother was born Lombard) and wanted to marry her. Sophia understood his situation, and since they truly loved each other, she helped to negotiate with her parents to let them name their illegitimate daughter Diana Lombard to be the Heir of her maternal lineage thus giving both females a good position in society.

This done, Gerard rapidly took up his list of prospects to go hunting for the next fully magical woman of pedigree to give him his bloody thrice-cursed son so he could put this shite behind him and live his life not in poverty or shame like the magical community wanted to impose on him. After all, he had produced a girl-child who even now, at the end of the first trimester of gestation,
was showing the precursor signs of a magical core forming. If he produced a son and was made the lawful Regent of House until the kid passed his 'legal' magical maturity (age 7, awakening; age 13, puberty; age 17, maturity; age 21, ascendo magisterium) then he would be respected by society again. So he chose a woman of good stock and standing, but since he respected her for her mind and accomplishments in both magic and mundane science, he actually explained the whole situation to let her decide if she wanted in on it.

Now you have to understand that much of the magical communities, humans, humanoids and non-humanoids alike, are somewhat stuck in the past in terms of social morality and customs because of the longevity of the peoples and the multiple binding-oaths inscribed in the Charters of the Wizerias, the Banks, and the Family Magicks. That means that even the most active, morally progressive social reformers, are greatly limited in what they can change before they are stopped cold by these Oaths, Charters and the Sovereignty Magic of the Laanderstadt. Because of this, everyone in these communities is educated, and prepared, for the eventuality that they may have to live with a paper wedding on one side, and a love-match never legalized on the other.

Because of this crushing imperative to produce an Heir for the title-bearing line of the Family, Clan, or Dynasty, it is not uncommon to see a titled Lord (or Lady) having several wives, several concubines and several 'intimate assistants' to make certain that procreation and heredity are insured. Now there are several ways to accomplish this, like just asking and getting permission from the women / men involved. There are old marriage contracts set up between allied families or between businesses where a debt can't be paid in money or land, so a marriage is offered. There is still the practice of paying concubines under set-terms contracts which is legal, just as taking the person under contract for the time needed to produce the Heir and then she is set off with a small pension for the rest of her life, in a secondary house somewhere out of sight.

What Gerard did at that point in his life was neither illegal, immoral, abnormal, or even unexpected, given that the title of a Most Ancient & Most Noble House was at stake here. He could even have gone to one of several conclaves of witches who serve as midwifes and match-makers, or just asked any magical hospital to put down his name for assistance in finding a woman in procreation age and, for a few gold coins, would also have had the health reports of each candidate submitting their names. It was just simply a way of living and doing business like any other, because the alternative was allowing Chartered Families to die out and society would then lose those family magicks and eldritch secrets forever.

Gerard found a second woman quickly and lucked out for once in his life; she understood because she was in a bind of her own, so this would work out well for both of them. The woman was called Kerenza Basset, from a respected old Cornish family that traded magical minerals in nine countries. Unfortunately, her family was patriarchal like 80% of the Chartered Families were, and she had only one sister called Tamsyn, no brothers. As the eldest, marrying well to continue the line fell unto her, as the much younger Tamsyn was born functional but not quite right (read: wild magic that could not be controlled) and would probably never settle down or even get into a relationship that mattered to the family.

Now, Kerenza looked at Gerard who was from noble blood, athletic, educated, and a recognized scientist who didn't think that her studies in crystallurgy and alchemy were weird for a woman. He told her right off the bat that he expected, and demanded, that she continue her life and dreams, no matter how their relation progressed. This blasted heredity mess had spoiled his life, it would not damage Sophia's, hers, or anyone else's if he could manage it. They agreed to date, trying for a real relationship rather than go for a hospital and potions right away. It worked well for them, and soon they produced the much desired male heir the old fashioned way. Lo and behold, he was fully magical as the first trimester scans indicated. So, keeping with traditions and polite conventions amongst people of their rank, they married but kept an open door / closed eyes policy.
This meant that Gerard would live with Kerenza & Martin two weeks then spent the other two weeks with Sophia and Diana. This went well until Gerard's envy and jealousy against his son manifested just before the child's first birthday. He silently brought into the house a priest: a charlatan who apostollized "The White Painted Cross of the Truly Christian, American Christ" while actually being a secret member of the Catholcric Vaticanese, the criminal wizards who perform fake miracles to maintain the people's faith in their sham religion. He paid the con-man to place an unlawful Paternal Authority Ward on his son and Bind his magic with a block reserved for juvenile delinquents sentenced to prison until they reach maturity at age 17.

Now, Gerard could have lived with a son who was fully magical but not displaying any magical outbursts just fine, except his wife Kerenza got suspicious that he no longer had accidental magic. She took Martin to a hospital to get him checked out. Outraged and afraid by what she found, she contacted Sophia to have her examine Diana post haste. Having found similar criminal acts on her daughter, the other mother agreed to a secret meeting to decide what to do. Unfortunately, Kerenza had not checked the house for magical or mundane spying devices, so her conversation was recorded and heard by Gerard who flew into a rage. After calming down and calling paid helpers, he discretely followed her to the meeting.

Since Kerenza came by car with Martin but Sophia teleported alone after leaving Diana with her servant, he hatched a two-way crime to solve his problem. He attacked the women with a sedative spray can and put the sleeping mothers in his wife's car, in the front seats, while placing the drugged Martin in the child carrier, in the backseat behind his mother. Making sure there was no trace of physical violence from his part to be detected, he manipulated the remains of the Paternal Authority Ward that the healers had not finished removing and simulated Martin having a strong bout of accidental magic that propelled a hard wooden toy at his mother's head, impacting hard enough to crack the skull, rendering her unconscious. If she wasn't already asleep, that is.

After that, Gerard placed the car and called his con-man priest to help with a few spelled adjustments to make it look like the car was driving fast, the accident inside happened, and the car swerved off the small causeway right into the bog underneath, where the stunned women drowned to death. The two accomplices made sure that Martin's emergency portkey and healer-alert bracelet were functional or else the Family Charter would kill Gerard before the car's engine started up. Besides, no living son meant that he would lose access to the money and resources of the Family, so he had to keep the little error of nature alive until he was old enough that Gerard kicked him out for good.

When the accident was discovered upon Martin's arrival at the family's usual hospital, it created an outpouring of sympathy for Gerard because he had lost his two women at the same time, and he was now without support from either side. His parents had died in the last decade at quite young ages from a rare disease caught during their yearly vacation cruise in the Caribbean Isles. His wife's relatives were all passed away from accidents or disease, so it was just her and Tamsyn since she was 22 years old. Sophia's parents were alive, but both in a nursing home due to her father having had an accident while brewing a potion in their home laboratory.

Gerard now had two magical, and very vulnerable, children in his hands but nobody to keep him in check. He quickly had the unlawful wards and blocks reapplied to both children while also having their memories adjusted to match his version of events. This was critical with Diana since she was also programmed to be his spy and attack bitch, to keep her half-brother in a state of emotional weakness and physical ill-health, when he wasn't present to do it himself. He told Diana about the accident so that when the 19 month-old baby looked upon the 11 month-old that had murdered her mother, she knew a hate that was her own but multiplied by 12 because of the spells and loyalty potions she was fed. From that point onwards until he turned 17, Martin was hurt and put down by his sister at every chance she got. It was only after going through severe cleansing and healing
rituals that the damages to their minds and personalities were undone, allowing them to choose to become the close, supportive, siblings that they should have been all along.

Younger Lucas #18 looked in thoughtful yet detached consideration at his bleeding hand's torn palm as an adult 'Jenna' cast cleaning and healing spells on his damaged appendage. He had unconsciously crushed then ground the coffee cup in his hand at some point while reading the Mystère bloodline's biography. She saw the title on the report's default cover page and exhaled a shallow sigh of sadness. "He never talks about what happened in that house before leaving for Torrington Academy. Please brother, we have to find a way to help the youngest ones." She asked, begging one of the few people she knew who would actually care about Martin's health and happiness.

"We will annotate the reports and make recommendations towards a concerted strategic plan for everyone, in all realities, before anybody goes back. I promise it." The young child answered, unwavering in his faith and decision. Seeing the Tac-Chief lock eyes with her, nodding his head seriously, she believed and hoped again that somehow, the pain that gnawed away at the heart of her fiancé could at some point be relieved and healed. These two would certainly not take lightly any threats against any member of the Assembly, regardless of what they looked like or where they lived. She finished her healing routine on the child's hand, helping him to flex the fingers to test the skin and nerves to detect leftover damage. Since all was well, she stunned the unprepared boy by kissing him on the forehead, along a soft-spoken "I love you, little brother" that nobody had ever said to him. She then repeated the gesture with the 20 year old who was barely less surprised, even though she was from his reality and he knew her rather well. Just like the other incarnations of Lucas, experimenting and receiving affections freely was a rare occurrence that was made worse by his paranoid, standoffish attitude. Not that either of his spiritual siblings were ever deterred; it's just that it always surprised him when someone showed him affection physically like they all did. Some old, bad habits, were rooted in such deep pains that even years of friendship and family could not yet erase or change them.

The two young leaders recovered their emotions and balance, locking eyes and restarting the local mental communion they used to exchange their more determined and violent ideas in private. They both agreed: Gerard Mystery had just earned the undivided attention of a certain young family leader, just as soon as each group returned home from their vacations amongst the Void and Stars. No, it would not be a short, nor humane, way to go for the good doctor Mystery.

Jenkins Scientific & Archaeological Investigations Inc

(Kong: the animated series - opening theme)

Saturday February 9th of 2301 – early evening, around 19:15pm
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Motorpool garage building

The company has existed since the university days of Dr Lorna Labarre, as it was created by her newly married husband Rudolph Jenkins to help with her paperwork and legitimizing her funding schemes. It has never done much other than manage finances and taxes, justify the movements of equipments and personnel, and get a few travel permits. It became more active when the UEO
came into existence as then Kong Island became part of UEO territory since the alternative was to fall under Micronesian control. Since her only husband's death many decades ago, all business and communications were handled by Dr Jenkins herself, and she rarely answered questions, even from legal authorities, by citing that her laboratory was located in International Waters despite being well inside UEO jurisdiction.

It is interesting to note that Kong Island is less than 100 miles from Tracy Island yet, despite the close proximity, in the 30 years she was established on the Isle, Lorna never contacted them for anything, including rescue or just some friendly chatter between neighbors.

- Psychotronic earset Animus Unificat #01 beta tester
  ---) Also referred to as the Cyber-Link
  ---) It was never mass produced since it's a secret private project that is also illegal and unethical
  ---) Research done in the fields of: biogenics, psychotronic interface, neuroplexic programming
  ---) Connex research in the fields of: cryptozoology, xenobiology, phenomenology, metaphysics
  ---) Non-invasive free-wave neural interface
  ---) Crystalline structure computing CPU
  ---) Neural-fiber structure computing CPU
  ---) Energy-based free-wave fusion / fission of organic bodies and minds under 3 seconds
  ---) Can merge the user with any animal programmed into the database of the system
  *--) Could be used as an emergency backup of the user's mind to heal mental illness & memories
  *--) Could be used to rebuild the user's body following physical damages or injuries

While Jason's grandmother Doctor Lorna Jenkins (née Labarre) is an accomplished biologist, geneticist, neurologist and medical engineer, she never patented or officially logged any of her discoveries and research as most of it was either illegal or unethical. She DID use the DNA from her grandson to merge with the gorilla DNA of the long-dead King Kong, to produce the presently living synthetic super-ape residing on Kong Island without ever asking Jason for his permission. This is physical and spiritual RAPE of her grandson.

There is also material evidence supporting the suspicions that on top of violating the human DNA testing laws and procedures, the animal hybridation laws and the New-Entity genetic engineering laws, she used alien tools and mystical methods during her work to produce the Cyber-Link and its quasi-magical effect of merging two bodies and souls into one completely balanced, functional and sentient being. Biology is never this quick, clean, or error-free, when it does something naturally. Even the most powerful true-blood lycanthropes have problems with active enchantments or clothing when changing form.

Her research on the newly revealed Power Stones of the Ancient Empire of Mu trudge painfully through myths, little known legends that few credit with any validity, and occult phenomenology of the most bizarre. However; since the confirmed existence of CIRPA with its partners amongst several hundred alien species out there, it becomes a fundamental necessity to reexamine to theories and legends while understanding that magic, Divinity and aliens are in fact real, and do influence humanity and the Earth. Thusly, the Empire of Mu could have been humans influenced by magic or aliens or both, or even actually be aliens from another world / dimension / reality. Another pivotal conclusion is that the accounts of war between Mu and Atlantis could in fact be true since they coexisted in the same period.

Further research on Mu and Atlantis by reliable independent parties is needed.

- Jason Randall Jenkins
---) Born 27 April 1999
---) Caucasian/white, ink-black hair, ocean-blue eyes
---) Grandson to Lorna Labarre Jenkins & Rudolph Jenkins
---) Son of Mitchell Jenkins and Anita Briggs, explorers and archaeologists (both deceased)
---) Student at Cambridge, in Massachusetts; major in archaeology, second major in ancient legends and lores
---) Average student, not rated as exceptional in any one domain or activity at school
---) Exceptional sportsman, hunter and survivalist
---) Trained in martial arts: Wing-Chun kung fu at championship level; won several tournaments USA & Asia
---) Trained in weapons: staff, stick, spear, javelin, mace, ax, hatchet, knives and rope & weights
---) Trained in firearms: learned to hunt with a bolt-action rifle and a crossbow
---) Driving licenses: moped at age 14, car at age 16 and heavy trucks at age 19
---) Aircraft piloting license at age 15 for propeller planes
---) Boat piloting license at age 14
---) Qualified paramedic level-2; was training for level-3 when events of Kong Island happened

Jason Randall Jenkins was orphaned at the age of five when both parents died in a laboratory fire
the causes of which were never found, until he confronted his very own archaeology professor,
Doctor Ramone De La Porta, on Kong Island at the age of 21. That was the moment the evil man
confirmed he had caused the fire when stealing research and materials from the place but was
cought in the act by Jason's parents, which he then had to dispose of.

Following the deaths and funerals of his parents, Jason's grandmother Lorna promptly placed him
in boarding school and kept him there all his life. He rarely had any contact at all with her, even in
summer vacations which were spent mostly in specialty summer camps or, as of age 14, with his
friend Eric Tannenbaum at his house. The moment Lorna learned that Jason had struck up a
friendship with someone who had money, a well known family name and several corporate
connections, she encouraged Jason to spend all the school holidays he could with them instead of
going to camps with strangers. It was after Jason turned 21 years old that Lorna invited him to her
secretive isolated island laboratory for the first and only time of his life. Even when his parents
lived, he had never been to that forsaken piece of primitive land, lost in the south Pacific ocean.

Thus came the series of events on Kong Island which saw him lose his grand-mother and his friend
Eric, but gain the presence of Lua in his life from then on.

At the point when the Assembly divined the timelines, Jason had never been a prodigy except for
Kung Fu, never wrote or published any academia, and he never patented or logged any technology
since he would instead have used the Tannenbaum Industry brand name and credibility to do so
while Eric was alive. This state of things is because while he was never bullied, attacked, violated
or otherwise abused, Jason was not loved, supported or encouraged to excel either. Given the very
distant relationship with his grand-mother, he was essentially in charge of his own life since he was
5 years old. This created a fiercely independent personality, but not one bent on proving anything
to anybody, especially not in terms of scholarly achievements.

Jason's grand-mother is the sister-in-law of Hoss Jenkins, father of Rachel Jenkins Quest; thus he
his cousin to Jonathan Quest through his mother. The woman was born Lorna Thelma Labarre as
the sister of Thomas and Jenna's late grandfather Jeddiah Ruey Labarre; thus he is cousin to them
also. Because Doctor Lorna was so estranged from her family and reclusive on her island domain,
Jason had never in his life heard about his cousins until they dropped into his life by accident.
Lorna would certainly never have introduced them if she could have kept them apart, especially the
Quests. She knew full well the mental capacities of Benton Quest and his fabled intolerance for
what society called unethical experimentation on living beings like animals or humans. What she
had done to her grandson would certainly trigger every alarm and disgust the man had.

Except for the championships in Kung Fu which he won at a rather young age, all before 18 years old, Jason is really just an ordinary college kid from New England in the US. It's when he starts using the Animus Unificat that his real potential for mystical arts specializing in magical beasts, ecology, zoology, totemism, shamanism, animism and the Labarre's Family Magic specialty of shape-changing become apparent.

URGENT:

The medical potential of the Cyber-Link to heal body and mind was never delved into.

Dr Jenkins was dead-set on proving something to herself at the expense of everything else, including the welfare, health and sanity of her last living relative; her grandson Jason.

The capacity of the Animus Unificat to deconstruct and then rebuilt under 3 seconds any living being up to the size of a fully mature super-ape means that it could be used as the penultimate regeneration system to repair physical injuries.

That it can include the clothes and equipments of the humans in the merge process was never investigated but leads to believe that it could be used to remove parasites or foreign bodies from a victim of a traumatic accident involving explosions and shrapnel.

The potential to store the memories and personality of a human as a fail-safe against dementia, mental illness or brain injuries was even less researched and begs for attention given the urgency of these problems across the Earth and all societies.

Younger Lucas #18 and the Tac-Chief looked into each others' eyes and silently agreed that this bitch needed taken down hard, and fast. She committed the physical and spiritual RAPE of her grandson without any sorts of remorse. She exploited the death of her son and daughter-in-law as if she had planned it all along, like it was no more than disposing of obsolete equipments she needed replaced on a five-year plan, like a truck or backhoe. Her end would be slow and painful, they agreed. "Only after a thorough scan of her mind and memories, both mundane by neural interface and mystical by every potion, spell and psion in our arsenals." The child specified in low tones through the localized mental communion he shared with the 20 year old. "We need to know why she did this, what she was after, what could be worth Blood Treason against the Heir of the Line and damning her soul to Hell everburning for it."

The Tactical Chief was in agreement; every Family of every reality would get fully briefed on this, and they would make certain that those who were younger would contact the Jason and Lua of their timelines as soon as they could manage it and warn them of the impending troubles; then arrange shelter for them. Let Lorna clean up her mess by her worthless self. As for Ramone De La Porta, he could be killed off rather easily by hiring out a contractor; no need for any family member to get their hands dirty with that particular bit of mopping. Once the Mu Power Stones were secured, the Earth would be as stable and immuable as any other astral body, without any concerns beyond the usual environmental problems caused by human over-exploitation. If it was such a problem, then the planetary governments and Wizerias could assemble some terraformers and ecomancers to handle it. Their family would not carry that burden any further than the boundaries of their Sovereign Laand.
Both young leaders took a (un)healthy dose of Tylenol with codeine to dampen their sympathetic migraines so they could plow through the last technical specs report for the night. All the magical history and Traditions could wait a few days while they amalgamated all this data and produced a basal outline for what they needed to standardize into a common learning course to spread to all teams.

After preparing yet another espresso with some nice spongy cake generously frosted and topped by candied fruits and ice-cream, they set back to work accompanied only by the night shift’s short crew. The coming news were just as bad as they had thought, thought the familial setting of the Labarre gave them some hope for establishing a close-knit family like they had wanted all their lives but never got. Well, they now had plenty of time to spare and share around, so to speak. No reason to be stingy with it, humm?

Labarre Venison's & edibles

(Arrow - opening theme)

Saturday February 9th of 2301 – mid-evening, around 20:30pm
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans’ Support Services (VSS)
Motorpool garage building

---) Labarre Farming & Hunting Guild in existence for almost 2,300 years non-stop
---) They perfected the arrows and spears now most commonly used across Arabia, Europa and America
---) They perfected several types of fishing nets for both trawling and in-flow river installations
---) They created the first underwater spear gun from a crossbow stock but using different wires
---) They popularized the use of cleated shoes for forest and mountain exploration
---) They created over 700 different farms, plantations and natural preserves in 43 countries
---) The Labarre territory holdings agglomerate almost 6,000,000 acres across the world
---) At its greatest time in history, the Labarre Clan counted almost 1,947 living members
---) At its peak, the Guild had over 30,000 full-time (non-family) employees across the world
---) Food industries still active: plantations, natural preserves, canneries, distilleries, tallow mills
---) Non-food industries still active: lumber & paper mills, textile mills, iron & copper mines

The name "Labarre" refers to the wood-rod based instruments found in the heraldic crest of the clan as they were the primal tools for survival and earning revenue in antiquity: the arrow, the spear, the 'U' headed catch-staff to hold animals, and the yoke to harness an ox or mule. For all of their 2,300 years of recorded history, the Labarre have toiled the land, tended crops, gathered from forests, fished, trapped, hunted and herded many beasts and fowls. They are now as they always have been, faithful in Yggdrasil, stewards of the Laand and dutiful children of Gaea.

The Labarre family is classed as Most Venerable & Most Noble by the Wizerias of Europe and America since they first appeared in the depths of Antiquity, in the sands of Judea, and dwelt there humbly from the epoch of Salomon until several of their daughters, many of them witches and shamans, married several minor nobles from Italy in the beginning years of the Roman Empire, around 300BC. They had come by boat over the Mediterranean Sea, escorting their fathers who were rich noblemen from the northern provinces of Italy in the region that would become Venice.
Since these events happened before the Romans annexed the kingdom in 6AD, neither side had a bad reputation or anger towards the other, so intermarriages were an accepted way of sealing alliances and trade deals. It also extended mutual citizenship by wedlock, which was desirable when negotiating passage fees and boat mooring taxes with the port authorities.

The women were young, beautiful, and surprisingly well educated in literacy and philosophy for the epoch at large, and for farm-women in particular. They knew several potions and runes to heal injuries or calm bad humors. The men were strapping young lads, muscular, handsome, of good breeding and well connected, each being the second or third son of an important man. Each youth was accounted as minor nobility themselves with very good prospects, and especially, each had a plot of arable or forested land in their name already.

The two groups were united in that they were farmers and hunters, traders of meat, furs and bones, good raw wood or finished wooden wares. They saw in the other family a mirror of their own, just wearing different clothing and a different skin complexion. The union of these several lesser bloodlines into the strong vibrant tree of the Labarre would create the root foundations of a familial trading empire that lasted nigh on two millenia before it collapsed due to the two World Wars destroying most of their ships and polluting their lands.

The family initiated a strategic distribution of its membership to better control its interests around 197BC. They moved the main seat of control and business, along with more than half of the living members, to southern Italy where they stayed in fishing and shipping activities centered in the port city of Taranto for several centuries. The other large part of the family, those with marital connections to the northerners, moved to that area where modern Venice would one day be built. They established fishing, farming and hunting guilds as was the family's central plan, but also land-based ox-cart expeditions to the Germanic tribes around Eastern Europe. They rapidly made the family a name as expert scouts, rangers and trackers of runaway criminals.

All seemed right until the Romans became even less stable than was customary for their bellicose society. The year 235AD began the great crisis which ended in 285AD after 50 years of bloodshed, which led to the split of the Empire between Eastern and Western roman governments. This was the first toll of the bell announcing that Roman Rule was coming to an end, the continuously dictatorial, fascistic, and criminally insane fools they named as emperors from then on simply confirmed that the process was irrevocable.

Upon seeing around 290AD that the Roman Peace was no longer stable or able to maintain Law, Right and Rule under the Law of Venerable Antiquity, the Labarre again held a Clan Conclave. They decided that another tactical movement of their members was needed. They packed the majority of their people in Taranto to move them by boat along the Mediterranean coastline to the southern regions of France. They chose to settle in a series of important towns that each had a harbor and shipping activities to maintain the links with their relatives in Italy and Judea-Palestine. They spread almost 600 relatives across Monaco, Nice, Cannes, Hyeres, Toulon and Marseilles, quickly setting to find local merchants and craftsmen to marry with to set down permanent roots into their new communities.

Meanwhile, following the Clan conclave, some 300 of the 500 members that lived in the Venetian area were packed and moved northwards into Germanic lands that would one day become the Bohemian Kingdom and then the Czech Republic. They hoped by that move to get out of the zone of conflict between roman armies and barbarian client-kings, but it was only a limited success as the Gothic tribes had as much warring between themselves as they did against the Romans. Around the year 670AD this secondary branch of the Clan is so dissolved and intermarried to others that the name of Labarre disappears from the legal records and history.
Unfortunately, it was only a few short decades after the Clan Conclave and move of 290AD, that the Roman Empire turned to monotheist Christianity as of 312AD under Emperor Constantine I, as their primary source of law and morality, thus beginning a series of wars to conquer the barbarians in the neighboring nations, to bring them all under Roman rule and faith. The Labarre managed to amass enough goods and money to build their own ships to sail to Judea-Palestine to fetch their last living members there and, after folding that part of the clan into the french holdings, they went to Italy to do the same with their last living family on Roman soil, to move them westwards to France and beyond.

The Labarre merged with the Frankish peoples for several generations until the eleventh century whence Dutch wizards managed to establish a colony of sorcerers, druids and witches in the area that would become Maine, in New England, in the 1500's and 1600's when mundane explorers reached those shores. Being of strong druidic faith and being pressured to convert by christian fanatics who were more numerous as the years passed, the Labarre used their Blood Law to convoke another Clan Conclave; this set forth a path that led the majority of the family to the New World of northern America. At this point, the family splits into many subjunct branches and twigs, laying out seeds of fertility and vitality in whichever other bloodline they marry.

While the splits of the 11th century were harsh upon the Labarre, they managed gradually to recover and reunite their living members by using the Blood Law as a homing signal to divine and then scry the people until they could contact them physically by more mundane means. It took almost three hundred years for the Clan to reorganize and agglomerate its members again, but they managed and, from the years 1400's onwards, they acted as a singularly well managed familial system. They methodically explored, mapped and claimed tens of thousands of acres of pristine virgin Laand which they set aside as natural preserves for their basic hunting, trapping, scavenging and wild harvesting, but never allowed anyone to built or develop despite several lucrative offers.

The 1500's came with the arrival of mundane french trading companies in the upper part of North America; it was a boon to the Labarre's export businesses, allowing them to formally reestablish contact with those that stayed behind in Europe, oftentimes under different family names. The arrival of British, Dutch and German traders in the 1600's, and their fierce competition to claim control of the New England zone, forced the Labarre to move their operations westwards and northwards, around or above the Great Lakes to avoid the wars they knew would happen since the monarchs of Europe were again at each others' throats.

The Labarre managed to maintain their landholdings and industries until the 1800's when the advent of railways and steam engines made the world so much smaller. The mundane were now boring through the lands of the eastern seaboard of America and Canada like worms in the wood pilings of a dock. Many magical beings moved west and north to the vast unexplored wilderness, but a large tract of population chose instead to open the Gates to the connective planes or sail the flows of the Styx River, the pink gaseous miasma of the Phlogiston, or even tread by ox-cart the Border Ethereal plane's paved walkways to… somewhere?

At that period, between 1800 and 1900, almost half of all the magical higher sentients left Earth and most magical animals retreated to the few inaccessible places left to hold out against extermination. For the Labarre, this was their death knell as the population was now rushing to the cities to live the urban dream, eating canned meats and pickled vegetables, eschewing the natural fresh produce of the Laand due to the higher costs and longer provisioning delays.

It also became clear as of the late 1800's that a group of fanatics had begun hunting and killing the members of the Clan as the number of deaths each year kept going up while births were declining. It was then discovered in the period around 1980 that someone was scouring the public records in the mundane archives to correlate births, marriages and deaths to find out where the Labarre had
landholdings and businesses, then they went out to hunt and kill them.

Many industries and business offices of the Clan were burned down in criminal acts against their livelihood and their lives. In several of the arson cases, the criminals had first gone inside to steal the paper records of employees, partners, clients, suppliers and money movements to expand the targeting of their nefarious deeds. After that, the criminals attacked not only the Labarre family but also their extended relatives, in-laws, the employees' families in their homes, and so on. It was a veritable vendetta to end the Bloodline of Labarre which even the Wizeria Hammerrika's warlocks couldn't make sense of, nor find trace of the culprits.

In early 2000, the once massive network of family and businesses was reduced to a handful of people who lived in remote, inaccessible tracts of heavily warded land, away from all civilization be it mundane or magical. By the time that 2015 arrived, Thomas was 10 years old, Jenna was 12 years old, and both had just survived barely a deadly firefight with felonious Catholicu Vaticanese sorcerers backed by mundane mercenaries. They were now orphans, living isolated in the northern part of British Columbia in Canada, near Atlin Village, right next to the Alaska border. At that point of history, there is only 7 living Labarre on the entire planet and 5 will die quickly in the following year to leave only Thomas and Jenna safely hidden in their hermitage. The moment they leave their shelter, they are killed within a week unless they have somehow made contact with the 'Lucas' incarnation of that reality so that his group can shelter them and give them the time and resources to survive and prosper anew.

In all the realities that the Assembly's diviners plumb, the situation for the Labarre is beyond critical and can't be recovered without extraordinary assistance from outside sources. Younger Lucas #18 took the time and effort to contemplate and memorize the depravities contained in the analysis results, vowing to find a way to save his spiritual siblings' family from oblivion. He also swore Blood Feud against the individuals and groups that hired the mercenaries that relentlessly attacked and killed off all of Thomas and Jenna's relatives over the passing of the 1900's.

Someone masterminded this and would pay for it.
The author wishes to express thanks to anyone who may read his story and encourages them to leave reviews, comments or even flame it hard. As with any who try their hand at publicly expressing an idea or story concept, all feedback is important and welcome.

Disclaimer: I do not own SeaQuest, Star Wars, nor any other sci-fi or fantasy series, movies, comics, cartoons or news items used in this fiction as they belong to the creators or broadcasters or publishers who put them out for consumption by the public.

I give you warning that many of the stories spoken of by the characters will involve various degrees of corporal punishments, legal and criminal, from mild to torture having caused injuries, scars and handicaps. There are stories of imprisonment with psychological abuse and torment leading to the suicide of teens. There is murder, infanticide, fratricide and parricide. Various types of emotional and sexual relationships including hetero, gay, bi-curious and underage (willing). There are multiple cases of physical, biological, psychological & sexual rape as well as magical, psionic and cybernetic soul violations.

This story was, is and always will be rated a strong 'M' for clear reasons. Be advised.

This chapter is 80,000+ words, all notes and headers included. Since many of the subjects covered are hard, harsh and sometimes inhuman, you may want to space out your reading. And maybe avoid eating or drinking unless you have a strong stomach, although if you made it this far, you should be fine. Perhaps.

Justice for Lucas

Eleventh chapter; Children adrift in sorrow

Tom & Jen; siblings alone against the world

(SeaQuest - season 1 opening theme)

Saturday February 9th of 2301 – mid-evening, around 19:30pm
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans’ Support Services (VSS)
Motorpool garage building

After many a long hour of reading dry reports containing a heavy tonnage of crapulence, depravity and despair, Younger Lucas #18 decided to change the format a bit to help everyone go through the evening until the end while at the same time generating some group-wide cohesion and emotional bonding. He gathered the Tac-Chief and their Oldest sibling, the 33 year old who had
brought them together and proposed to move the rest of the brainstorming meeting to the main floor of the garage edifice so they could form a large agora-like setting to accommodate the entire Assembly for the conversations and story-telling to come. He proposed to let the people who wanted it speak out loud their experiences as they were consigned to the reports instead of writing them in silence as if nobody cared for what they experienced, endured and suffered to reach this point.

The two older siblings were impressed with his depth of reasoning, both tactically and emotionally. His solution was practical, would save time, would allow people a form of catharsis they needed a lot and provide a form of collective entertainment for a change. Until now, the members of the Assembly had either used some video games in solo or network, some team sports on the compound's lawn or done more private things as couples in their bedrooms. Entertainment was not one of those things that had survived well the passing of humanity into history. With a proposal like their youngest brother had devised, well fueled by food and drink along the way, things would go easily. And he was a genius in deciding to use the garage rather than the restaurant as the change of scenery would add to the mental effect of having gone out for the night instead of staying in the same boring institute. "Nicely thought out, kid!" they both complimented him.

After a short half hour of intense spell-powered modifications and provisioning, the garage floor was converted into a large, wide open agora with many rings of soft beanbag couches, settees and lounge chairs so people could laze around during the presentations. Younger Lucas #18 sat primly at the central table, computer active and paper printouts all around him, as he primed his final and thickest societal report: the Labarre. They were only half done to this point and they would be the ones to open up the evening's remembrances.

The boy re-read the personal data compiled and aggregated from the multiple incarnations of Thomas and Jenna up to date as a reminder of what he needed to set in context as they spoke.

Lady Jenna Mylene Labarre, eldest daughter of clanhead
--- Born 23 March 2002
--- Caucasian/white, wheat-blond hair, sky blue eyes
--- Lived in isolation until the age of 18 when she left the clanstead with Thomas
--- Homeschooled in mundane subjects at regular pace
--- Mystical formation as a green witch with druidic asides
--- Specializes in potions, alchemy, healing arts, protective enchantments, construction & crafting spells
--- Has very little combat training, most was received from her brother after their parents died
--- Trained with weapons: staff, spear, slingshot, crossbow, knives, hatchet, machete
--- Trained with firearms: bolt-action rifle, revolver
--- Jenna is usually the manager / planner for the siblings but in combat she always lets Thomas take charge

Lord Thomas Benoit Labarre, eldest son of clanhead, sole Heir
--- Born 18 January 2005
--- Caucasian/white, wheat-blond hair, blue-grey eyes
--- Lived in isolation until the age of 16 when he left the clanstead with Jenna
--- Homeschooled in mundane subjects at regular pace
Mystical formation as an anointed ranger and totem-warrior with shamanic asides
Specializes in herbology, zoology, runic enchantment, combat magic, construction & crafting spells
Has good combat training received early in life from his father and a cousin
Trained with weapons: staff, spear, slingshot, crossbow, knives, hatchet, machete
Trained with firearms: bolt-action rifle, revolver
Expert tracker & trapper, forager and scrounger in either forest or city
Thomas is the titular Lord of Clan Labarre but he usually follows Jenna's advice in everyday life

In terms of livelihood and lifestyle, the Labarre have always believed in the simple, clean life of the farmstead and forest. They have always had their Family Seats and Clanstead located deep inside a forested area, surrounded by crop agriculture, plantation fields, cattle ranching and barnyards for fowls. They also systematically supplemented their diet and income by fishing, trapping and hunting anything that was not endangered or suffering from thinned herds due to disease or climate changes.

All of the 'Thomas' and 'Jenna' incarnations were very happy and enthusiastic to talk about their childhood, both before and after their parents were murdered in front of them. The fact that Younger Lucas #18 had so much survival and forestry training made the two farmers feel at ease while speaking with him as they didn't feel inferior, like uneducated rural yokels who came out of the bush by accident. That Lucas could in fact speak of hunting and skinning rabbit, deer and moose, trapping beaver and porcupine, scavenging river shores for mollusks and seaweeds, and all sorts of Nature-based activities dear to them made the Labarre eager to share their past and emotions.

It was funny seeing how each older Labarre sibling sat with the youngest leaning against them and snuggling into the eldest. Whether Thomas or Thamara, the youngest always nagged and pouted until the oldest gave in and let them burrow into the warm, welcoming side of their older sibling who then wrapped a loving, protective arm around their beloved younger friend with a lot more acceptance and affection than they let on. It was actually fun to watch as the oldest side-hugged, back-rubbed and kissed on the head their little sibling. And 'little' was a question of perspective given how athletic and muscular the 'Thomas' and 'Thamara' were, regardless of age. They certainly rocked those jeans and kept those t-shirts tight and stretched, whether they sat or moved!

After some good natured sibling ribbing as everyone took place in the circular arrangement of conjured lounge chairs, beanbag couches and low coffee tables, Younger Lucas #18 and his older selves served around some creamy hot chocolate and bowls of fruit salad topped with vanilla ice-cream and caramel sauce, courtesy of the young chef's expertise. The pasty little gremlin had realized that his brothers and sisters would be more at ease and speak more freely their emotions if they were fed comfort food in a familial atmosphere.

After smirking and snorting in humor at the brat's transparent efforts at setting up the final part of the interrogation to finish compiling the societal stats for the Labarre estate and clan, everybody settled for what they saw as a melancholy but easy discussion. Thomas and Jenna came from a family whose long lineage had never been known for keeping secrets or participating in conspiracies and sectarian movances so nobody expected bad revelations. Just a lot of old, sad memories to relive for an evening while the reports were being assembled and compiled at last.

It was the adult Jenna from the Tactical Chief's reality that began the tale, being oldest at 22 years old and better with historical facts than Thomas who preferred technical specs and maps versus...
dates and forgotten lores.

"Our family's traditions have deep roots, many dating back in fact to the times of Solomon, when the mines were dug and assured prosperity to the peoples of Judea. This was before the Roman Empire came and subjugated the Tribes of Israel into almost extermination for the second time of recorded human history, since the Pharaohs of Egypt had enslaved them several centuries before. But those are not what I will talk about tonight. The ancient lores are old enough to warrant a history class with a diploma at the end; it's not what you want or need to hear to complete the strategic report."

Everybody laughed at that proclamation while a few 'Thomas' made a show of wiping mock sweat-of-worry off their brow as if saying 'we dodged that one!' much to the amusement of the siblings, even the 'Jenna' who knew their brother's reluctance at anything over a century old. She could attest that visiting museums and antiques exhibits were not amongst Thomas' favorite activities.

"Alright, I will explain how we lived for the last 150 years or so, since the 1850's. Our organization was separated territorially into the Clanstead, the Family Seats, the Homesteads and then the 'public' farmsteads for the paid employees who didn't have a blood-link with our family by birth, marriage or adoption. The Head of Clan lived of course in the Clanstead and administered all businesses from there as well as managing all social and magical aspects of the Family, Bloodline, Blood Law and Family Rituals. All the Family Magicks and Secrets were kept in great blessed grimoires that could be opened only by the Venerable Head (retired), the Titled Head (current) and the Heir Presumptive or Heir Apparent (in training). That was the life we lived in the first decade of our lives, Thomas and I; we were the children of the Clan Head, and Tom was Heir Presumptive."

Thomas spoke up to clear up a detail for others to understand the subtle differences in status, legally, socially and in the Family Magicks that each status meant. "Heir Apparent is when you are the only child alive or mentally and magically capable of holding the Title which the Family Heirlooms will judge acceptable as new Titular Head. In, my case, I wasn't the only child alive as I had a male cousin who's five years older than me but he died a year after our parents in an ambush by Catholicu Vaticanese. The other possibility is that Jenna could marry and the Heirlooms could choose her husband over me as being a better, more fitting choice. The third possibility is Jenna gets married but the Family Magicks waits for her first son to decide which between us would be the best new Head. That's why I was 'Heir Presumptive' only until I reached 17 years old, and then the Family Magicks actually refused to elevate me beyond 'Heir Apparent' until the age of 21, after the Magisterium Ascendo rituals were done to see if another male candidate wasn't available instead. Our Family Charter and Magic gives the Heirlooms, Family Ghost and Clanstead Throne a lot of leeway in selecting the new Titled Head. It's a pain, but at the same time, it guarantees the best leadership available for the Family and Bloodline."

Jenna pursed her lips in upset and poked her brother's belly gently but firmly; "Don't you dare tell me you're fine with this, Tom! I know it hurts you that the Heirlooms pushed you back, as if saying you were too dimwitted or morally lacking to take up the position when it's yours by Blood and Right!" Getting only a halfhearted shrug, Jenna sighed in sorrow at the great silent suffering of her beloved brother and resolved yet again to work through this and get him to admit he was worried. In reality, he needed outgoing male presences like Lucas, Alan and Martin to help him crack open his natural shyness and become the free-thinking, free-speaking person he was destined to become to lead their family back to something they could be proud of.

Open Life, Open Spirit
"Well, anyways" Thomas forged on, hoping to waylay anymore discussions about his many shortcomings and aim his sister's gift-of-gab to another target. And since they had a full audience of willing subjects, why not aim her at them? "Our way of life for the last two centuries was pretty much what anybody who lives in rural, outlying areas of North America could tell you about. The really specific principles though were something that had been passed down from the generations before and kept our households clean and clear of the crap that accumulated in the other cultures around us, especially the white christian kind."

Jenna put a hand to the top of her head to rub her hair, as if the gesture would help her to think and order her thoughts. It was just one of those many little things amusing about her mannerisms. "The most important principles are all around Bloodlines, Blood Law and Family Magicks and we are all going to discuss those at length in four or five days, after you have compiled the tech reports to reboot the designs of the Grendel Project. For the fundamental lifestyle and social principles, they were simply this: respect of all things and beings; service and protection to the community without favorites; mutual help and support for our kin and vassals in all circumstances. In a more personal theme, our households were managed by our parents along three guidelines that were never tolerated to waver or deviate: Safety, Honesty and Openness."

Thomas detailed this a bit: "Safety; everything, every plant, animal and person must be healthy and safe at all times, be they guests or food animals. You show respect for Yggdrasil's gifts by caring, protecting and husbanding them carefully. Honesty; no lies, half-truths, prevarications or deviations. Willful omissions and obfuscations are as bad or even worse than flat out lies and dealt with as such by the family. You can cause a lot more mischief or interpersonal strife with a well planned omission or fudging the exactitude of facts than with a simple lie, so this is never something to compromise on. Openness; it is the extension of the second and even more important in some ways. You never keep secrets; not for yourself and not for another. Secrets and hiding things, passing an event under silence, hiding things behind the veil of 'privacy', it all means that somebody is being hurt, demeaned or injured and we need to know that to stop the situation and then offer help."

Jenna confirmed this. "The principle of Openness is probably the most fundamental in all of our lifestyle's way of organizing and deciding. Many centuries ago, it was found out that corruption, criminality and depravity thrive in the darkness of secrecy and silence. When people of good faith and standing close their eyes, ears and mouths to the suffering of children, spouses, servants and laborers, it creates a moral pit of decay that acts spiritually like a sinkhole. It will inevitably enlarge, allowing for more silence and blindness, more tacit complicity that becomes willful participation and then the entire household collapses."

Thomas sighed, part angry and part morose at the subject. "Our ancestors realized that in other groups, beatings, rape, incest, murder, and even selling your kin to indenture were prevalent but nobody spoke out. In fact, nobody even tried to stop it from happening in the first place. And it's proven that when some old geezer beats his wife and kids without consequences he would also..."
beat his children-in-law and his grandkids. Letting it happen in the name of 'christatu legis: pater familias' was just the cowards' way out of being responsible for anybody other than themselves."

Jenna carried on. "It was the way of life and the spiritual oath that our ancestors added to the Clan and Family Charters around the year 1,200AD; our kin were to always be the more mature, responsible and amiable members of the community. As such, they could not let these debasements happen like that and do nothing. But they could affect the community at large only in small ways or the christians would assemble and hunt us down as Juden, heretics and rebels against church doctrine. So the elders concentrated on our own people and households to affect change and protect our weakest, most vulnerable members from the predators who waved around their books of priest-spawned lies. They created the principle of Open Living by which all members of the family reject immorality, depravity, dishonesty, corruption, exploitation and all forms of philosophy that seeks secrecy or excuses to discharge a person from being responsible for their actions and consequences."

Younger Lucas #18 snorted in spiteful contempt: "That must have gone over well with the neighbors at the time. And with the hordes of preachers, evangelists and Prosperity Gospel spewing, thieving frauds that abound nowadays, I don't see it becoming a popular fad."

Jenna shook her head in sadness but agreed with him. "Many of our ancestors were persecuted and killed or badly maimed under accusations of heresy and treason because they no longer stood silent when crimes and sedition were done in the name of a god that does not exist. But that is more external history, not in-house like what you need to know."

She took a breath as she remembered her mother and father teaching her this when she was a toddler. "Open Living in a household means exactly that; you don't do things in secret or behind people's backs and are always upfront with your needs, wants and ambitions. This allows to make certain the necessities of everybody are met, that proper sanitation and salubrity are maintained and that the health care of the children or sick is tended to without delay. It also means that by speaking out loud of their wants and projects, people will receive help, resources, partners to lean on and social protection from the entire clan when the project becomes public as they will have the time to prepare the revelation and lay the scene properly. It also means that the clan can create an orderly calendar to mesh together the projects of multiple members and share tools, workshops, laborers, etc… to get the most done with the least expenditure or delay."

Thomas followed up with: "Open Living is based almost exclusively on 'Openness' and 'Honesty' as when those two things are kept and tended, the rest comes along naturally with hardly any effort. But when somebody is dishonest, prevaricates, lies and defrauds the Family, then everybody is put at risk and intervention must be immediate. That means the second line of communal protection comes into action: the Homestead Council. This isn't some joke where the father holds his damned bible and fakes out listening to his wife and kids before spewing out lies and distractions to justify what he had already decided to do. Our Homestead Council is a mandatory fixed protocol written into the Family, House and Clan Charters, bound by Magic and Blood. Nobody can go around it and keep their magic, health or position as a member of Labarre or one of the subordinate families. The Homestead Council is established by the presence of every sentient being who is a Labarre by birth, blood-adoption or magical-marriage, from as soon as they can communicate somehow by spoken words, sign language, writing, empathic projection or a magical device, with the minimal age being 1 year old. That means that little geniuses that speak fluently early on like the many 'Lucas' would all have a say in governing the family from the earliest age
possible. Each being is given one vote, no multiples, abstentions or veto allowed. If the number of people present is evenly split on a vote, then they can ask the magical portrait of an ancestor to sever the tie. In any case, all decisions about the Laand, Family Law, Family Magicks, Family Rituals, Blood Law, Votes at the Wizeria and all homestead discipline issues for family or workers are to be presented and arbitrated by the Homestead Council, without any exceptions known or recognized."

Jenna expounded on her brother's basic expose: "What that means is that any decisions that regard the welfare, health, life, familial or social position of any person who lives on the homestead is NEVER to be discussed and decided in seclusion behind closed doors, especially without the concerned persons themselves being involved. That was the unfortunate reality that many women and children faced as old men drank, gambled or bought useless luxuries that they could not afford and then prostituted their kin as whores or worse, sold them into slavery to pay their debts and social climbing. Our Charters are written to forbid this and never allow for a decision to magically or even just legally bind a member who does not sign the decision as well. That means that the Homestead Council can validate or invalidate, rewrite or completely break and forbid a decision made by the Head of Family / House / Clan and force him back unto the Path of Morality and Service to the community. If he does not abide the vote, the Charter's Blood-Bound Oaths can strip away his titles and positions, then his magic, then his life and even destroy his soul. Nobody who is a fully lawful member of the Labarre Charter can participate willfully or tacitly in crimes, depravity or debasement and remain amongst us."

Thomas sat up from his very comfortable recline against his sister's side and moved until he was instead leaning forward, elbows on his knees, hands joined while he looked pensive. "This brings us to the Couch." He said in a forlorn voice, his mind's eye turned inwards to old memories long buried. "In all Labarre Houses, the Homestead Council assembles in the Great Room or what most people call nowadays the living room or family den. In that room we always put a couch, a large five-seat affair, plush and overstuffed and sinfully comfortable on long winter nights when everybody was wearing thick bathrobes and slippers and huddled together. I still remember the smell of pine balm as the fireplace crackled and the hot chocolate boiled in the cast iron kettle over the living flames." Tom closed his eyes and bowed his head, his face reflecting the loss and sorrow for a life long past. Martin passed his arm behind his fiancée's shoulders and gave his brother-in-law a gentle squeeze on his neck, making certain the young man knew he was loved and wanted by them.

After a deep, cleansing breath to exhale his sorrow, Thomas continued his story. "That couch was special enough that we called it the 'Felt Altar' because it was so fundamental to how the household and family worked to keep order and peace amongst us. You see, whenever an important event happened to a member of the Family or House, it was announced and then resolved on the couch, in full view of all who dwelt in the Homestead. If you got a good grade on a test and earned a reward, you were told to sit on the couch with mom or dad, and the adult would announce the event and then suggest a reward. Every person would then voice their opinion until all participants agreed and that became the decision that was enacted. If there was a misdeed, the suspects were sent to the couch with their accusers and the rest sat or stood around to hear the case. Each side presented their version and could ask the adults to help in using the Homestead wards or, recently, security cameras to prove their point. It wasn't rare or out of bounds to ask for a magical oath to prove truth or take veritaserum to answer questions beyond any doubts to clear a person's reputation. However! In such cases, if the person who spoke the oath or took serum had been honest, they could ask for a specific compensation from the person who said it was needed to resolve the dispute as retribution for spreading their unfounded doubts. It also meant the person who spoke the erroneous accusations could be punished for lies, possibly for perjury and possibly
for defamation of kin depending on the whole situation and who was involved."

Jenna took over while her brother drank some hot chocolate to whet his parched throat and reorganize his thoughts from the deep past to more present concerns. She knew he was still troubled in many ways and there was a great deal of private embarrassment about his failure to become Titled Head of the Clan. She really hoped that he would take time to speak with Jonny and Jason as they were family as well as Martin, Lucas and Alan. All of these young men could give him the boost in confidence and ground him to reality the way he needed to be able to break out of his funk.

The young woman took a stabilizing breath and passed a hand on Tom's back, gently rubbing his shoulders and neck, helping to ease out the tension. The simple familiar gesture helped her as well as she walked down Memory Lane. "When the Council had established the material reality and truths of the events, the whole group discussed what consequences would be applied to whom and they kept talking until a majority over half of the participants accepted the proposals. They had to check their decisions against the written laws of the Charters as they have both MINIMAL and MAXIMAL punishments for each category of offense. They are even split across seven age groups: 0-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20 and 21-25 for the young then 26-75 and 75+ for adults. Some sanctions required a majority of ¾ of the voters in order to be lawfully and magically binding. NOBODY of any age, maturity or health status could be restricted to an enclosed locked room or expelled from the Homestead unless that threshold 75% of voices was reached. Any sort of lesser punishments were usually dealt with right then and there. Harsh restriction sentences that last more than 5 straight days also require ¾ majority vote."

Tom snorted in laughter and said "Dealt with is pretty much as it sounds. Normally the sanctions given out were pretty banal restrictions for the rest of the day like: no access to the gameroom that evening; not going out to the barn to work with dad and the animals until tomorrow; doing the dishes instead of Jenna because I bugged her all morning. In our culture and way of things, the concept is that imprisoning a child, what people call 'grounding' these days, is the cowardly, lazy parent's way of dumping their responsibility into the environment and letting inert objects, like the house itself, take the brunt of the child's anger at being corrected. The real way to educate and train kids into controlling their emotions and actions is by having them studying and working near the proper model of behavior you want to see emulated. That obviously means having them in arm's reach of mature, stable adults or very reliable siblings. That is how the 'master-apprentice' relationship was built and strengthened throughout the millennia's and it always worked pretty well unless the master was a criminal or a pervert. Our Charters and Oaths take care of removing those possibilities from the whole process."

Jenna unfolded her legs and leaned forward to place her elbows on her knees, hands loose, so Martin could rub her back and shoulders, gently massaging her while Tom leaned back into the couch, looking curiously at their youngest thinking head in the group. Younger Lucas #18 sat at his work table with their 33 year old Uber-Brunder and 20 year old chief tactician sat in their own plushly cushioned wingback chairs on each side. He had a large mug of hot chocolate held in both hands under his nose whilst he breathed in the warm, soothing aroma. The young boy was extremely attentive so far and hadn't showed any sort of distrust or disgust towards how they had lived. But now they were going to get into the hard stuff and Thomas wondered how he would take it. Every family hits snags at least once in the life of each person and the results were never pretty, neither was the fallout easy to live through. His parents had certainly never enjoyed being harsh or unyielding towards them but both the Principles and the Charters were firm and demanded a basic level of adherence, one could say orthodoxy, for the Homestead to work properly. As Martin was wont of saying with the experiences of his hard, uneasy childhood: "Life is rated 'M' at all stages
and is not for children or the faint of heart."

The young boy in question may not be psychic or have any real magic at this point but he was very good at reading facial expressions and body language. It was after all a prerequisite if one wanted to make a successful livelihood in the hospitality business and a most vital instinct for surviving the criminal underworld. "Spit it out Tommy, before you give yourself an ulcer. I can guess where this is going. After the lengthy reports and analysis of how things were in every other family group, I can bet we are about to hear the specific prohibitions and particular sentences that your family must maintain despite the laws of the country they are in because they are written into the Charters." The child said with a bored expression on his face. He seemed rather resigned, or was it accepting, of the situation.

Thomas made a face and explained: "You need to understand man, most of what happened when we were kids Jen and I was pretty much ordinary for all families across North America that live in remote rural areas and depend on the labor of all the people on the Homestead to care for and feed everybody. Most small family farms don't have the revenue to hire employees full time or even have all their own machinery. In most small, far removed communities, the farmers make arrangements between homes as to whom will own what kind of tractor or combine and then they schedule to pass around from one farm to the other to make certain all the harvests are brought in on time. The one thing you can't own or pass around easily are your people, despite all that biblical shite about how 'men own their wives' and 'fathers own their kids as they are given by god' and all that crapulence. Men don't own men, period. So that means that you need coins to pay fellas to work your land or you create your workforce the old fashioned way."

Jenna took over to let her brother cool down to be less defensive. Given the past and lifestyles of everybody here, she didn't think that what they spoke of would be seen as either weird or unnatural but Tom had always been very protective of her and their family's traditions. "What my dear beloved big lug of a brother means is that when you own a farm or plantation, it's like a ship at sea. You can't keep somebody who doesn't work hard enough or well enough to create food, drink, medicines and support themselves or assist the rest of the community. That means that kids are taught to work with their hands at basic life skills as soon as they can sit and babble. That usually means small stuff like mixing dough in a bowl, towel drying kid-safe dishes, or just watching the timer and shouting out to mom that the bread is done baking when it rings. In the rural areas, it's normal that everybody participates and fishing communities are pretty much the same. Unfortunately, folk in the big modern cities tend to see this as too harsh, too demanding too soon. There is a bad tendency to infantilize and reduce the mental and physical capacities of young people to that of rag dolls instead of giving them tasks and challenges to make them rise to the occasion and earn pride in themselves and trust from their community for being reliable. It leads to demoralized, layabout kids who just play video games or loiter around the mall, spending money they didn't earn or work for in any way. It has created several generations of people who feel entitled but without having proof of earning the things they claim to have earned."

(Audiomachine – When It All Falls Down)

Thomas spoke, his words growled in anger. "And that fuckshit of 'Prosperity Gospel' the damned religious fools have spent seventeen thousand years spreading hasn't helped anybody. It may be the stupid worshippers of the White Painted Cross that are pushing it the most these last decades, but it was already old poison when our ancestors were toiling in the sands of Egypt. There is nothing worse, nothing more toxic against personal responsibility, morality and accountability towards the community than the idiot belief that 'I did it because GOD's power compelled me and I don't want to resist GOD and go to Hell' or the other piece of crap 'IF GOD didn't want it to happen, he would
have intervened in one of his invisible, mysterious ways to stop me'. Meh! All that does is create
 generation after generation of brain-addled imbeciles, who all kneel like slaves in front of the
 priests instead of rolling up their sleeves and working their land or healing their families. All this
crap does is create exactly the kind of indolent, lazy, morally bankrupt bums that the very same
clergy peddling the damn poison rails against since the very beginning of its existence. They
punish kids for lying, thieving, laziness, arrogance and a host of other things whilst the hypocrite
adults do each and every one of those crimes right at the kids' faces and then they wonder why
their progeny act like they do! Bunch of defective retards!"

Jen & Tom; life, education & maturity
(Ori and the Blind Forest - The Spirit Tree)

Saturday February 9th of 2301 – early night, around 22:30pm
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Motorpool garage building

After taking a quarter hour to let people use the bathrooms and give all of the Labarre siblings
some time to cool down, everybody came back and sat around by reality-group as they had in the
beginning. They all knew they were about to enter the nastier side of family life but it had to be
done so they could complete the portrait and compile the reports needed to hammer out long term
strategies to save their composed extended family from its horde of enemies.

Once more, Thomas took the lead and spoke first. "You have to understand that our ancestors were
pretty wise in their ways and had almost seven thousand years of master-apprentice relationships
behind them whilst also having about four millenia of school-based techniques from the early
Egyptians through the Israeli epochs then the Romans, the Franks / French and then North
America. They were not idiots and definitely not backwards redneck yokels as farmers are usually
portrayed in stories and films. Being a farmer and being uneducated are two states of moral
existence that don't have any obligation to exist together in the same person."

Taking a few bites of the new piece of lemon cheesecake he had gotten his hands on (we blame
Younger Lucas #18 for having stored up so many sweet treats in the place) the young man chewed
thoughtfully as he tried to externalize things that were instinctualized from an early age. "You have
to comprehend it this way: every aspect of education comes in threes. Technical skills are managed
by 'training – reward – correction' and morality is managed by 'education – reinforcement –
punishment'. This is interchangeable though as with time it was proven to be more efficient to have
a system that goes 'rote learning – training – education – philosophy' and graduate the
consequences by 'answers & incentives – response & reinforcement – intervention & reward –
correction – punishment – confinement – exile'. As you can see, the system is biased badly in that
there are twice more negative steps and they are more elaborately spelled out than the positives.
On the good side of the system, they do make an important difference between the 'physical /
technical' aspects and the 'intellectual / moral' aspects of life and learning. Because of that, they did
have a much better success rate with those young people that we now know are kinesthetic learners
instead of auditive and visual like the majority of the population that attends formal schools. And,
since we mostly lived in outlying zones without schools at all, home-based education was the
Jenna swallowed her mouthful of fruit salad with English cream while silently thanking her newest little brother for having introduced her to the sinful dessert. He was getting a sloppy wet sugary kiss on the cheek before going to bed tonight! She took over for her brother all the while appreciating the fact this conversation with so many siblings and extended relatives around them was actually helping him out of his shell and making him more assertive in showing his beliefs and positions. What had started as a very melancholy, probably nasty discussion was becoming a therapeutic catharsis for them and she was thankful to their kin for their help.

"You have to understand that all of these laws, rules and protocols are ancient and very hard to update because of the Blood-Oaths in the Charters. And that is why there are so few explanations about mandatory rewards. Back in the founding days, giving a kid an hour of free time during the day was like giving an important worker in a workshop an extra hour of paid lunchtime. It could be justified under the right circumstances but it was a costly thing to do as they were not producing anything during that time but you paid the person anyways. So the incentives and rewards were very small and limited in both the value and the time allowed for their use. Being the practical-minded people our ancestors were, they never gave rewards that were temporary or easily discarded. Incentives could be a hug, a kiss, a compliment about good work and good results but rewards were always an object, usually a tool that the child would carry for the rest of their life. The most important proofs of trust a child could receive were his first knife from his father and his first fire starter from his mother. Back in the early epochs it was a bone or stone blade and a pair of flints set on a leather thong. Primitive and not very meaningful by today's standards of cellphones, game consoles, concert tickets and having a car at 16 years old on the dot even when you live in towns with incredibly efficient public transit like the provincial capitals of Canada's territories. Nowadays, we gave a Swiss army knife and a small belt sheath with flint & steel, waterproof matches, a small round Fresnel lens and a Zippo lighter, all engraved with the kid's name to show their belonging to the family and our pride at having them amongst us".

All the Labarre siblings took out and showed the items in question; the big complicated Swiss army knife with some forty tools on it and the decorated lighter with the person's name, mother & father's names, date of birth and place of childhood engraved in colored calligraphy. All were tastefully done in coordinated colors and symbols to denote their importance in the family's culture and the lives of the people who owned the items.

Thomas showed off an antique mechanical pocket watch with an engraved closing cover and many dials; a device complicated enough to match the explorer's watch Younger Lucas #18 had received from George at his death. The solid polished bronze device was truly beautifully engraved. "This is what each of us who reached the end of high school at 17 years old would get when we passed our magical maturity. It was to mark time but also a symbol that now we were old enough and autonomous enough to set our own schedule and jobs without somebody holding our hand all day. Now mine is more complicated as I am the Clanhead Heir and I was expected to keep track of a lot of kin and employees at some point. Those for kids lower in the clan ladder would be a mite smaller and have less dials, less decoration. It is both a badge of adult age and a symbol of one's function, position and importance in the clan hierarchy. We were lucky that such gifts are commissioned and stored away as soon as the children are born. We received ours despite our parents being long dead because the call item spells set on them made them appear on the kitchen table at set dates. We were able Jenna and I to maintain some of our culture and customs despite being the last living Labarre. Well, so we thought until we met Jonny and Jason. And now Martin has an eye on Jen so maybe we can bounce back at some point."
The young mafia Lord took the time to look at each item and use a miniature dedicated video camera to take still-shots and small films then typed an elaborate description of each device. He took special care to note the ages at which they were issued, the significance, which adult bestowed the gift and what they were used for in daily life. He realized that he had done something similar with his people's uniforms and belt of tools with the mandatory training in basic survival and self-defense. That was indeed food for thought but made him believe he had been on the right track from the start.

The child however had an instinct that they were far from finished; he felt the entire night would be barely enough to cover what had to come out and be spoken to be exorcised by his new kin. Well, he would just start serving espresso mixed with pepper-up potion to everyone and see how it went from there. A few gestures towards the 'Martin' and 'Alan' incarnations had the drinks switched out for black coffees all around along fresh water and fruit juice to counterbalance the excess of sugar they had eaten this evening. No need to get anybody sick.

Jenna raised her coffee cup and smelled the aroma slowly; appreciative of how the smallest member of the Assembly took care of his kindred. He was a special one and they would be fools not to care for him and see to his needs in return. "As our favorite tetchy little gremlin has pointed out so well, we now come to the nastier bits of how we used to arbitrate genuine misdeeds and full out malfeasance on the part of our members. It's pretty simple and I would bet most of you guessed it already. If confinement of any sorts is so very much reproved of even when used sparingly and legitimately, that leaves two methods available: taking away an existing right/privilege and corporal punishments of various degrees." She looked around to watch for signs of explosion but only saw understanding or mild resignation, but nothing close to an angry outburst.

"You need to understand that there is an important forbiddance when giving restrictions to a person in our family. It is completely and irrevocably forbidden to use what some call 'No Nothing Left to Live With' grounding. That is when all your basic rights are canceled and all private possessions are put in a 'box of shame' and removed from your room to be locked somewhere. Sometimes, they actually move the child to a separate isolated part of the estate like the attic, the cellar, a shed outside; anywhere they can isolate you and no longer hear you cry and beg for mercy. Then the door to that compartment gets locked from outside and you vegetate uselessly and mindlessly inside the closed setting for days, weeks or months depending on how uninterested in your welfare the adults are. Sometimes, when they don't forget you, you get let out to eat and use a toilet once or twice a day but the most usual manner for this setup is to give the kid dry rations like crackers and bread, a bottle of water and a bucket to use as dry toilet. Then they are visited once every few days to give food and empty the pail. There are a lot of people who are lazy, witless parents who swear by this method and don't realize they are imposing more restrictions, more physical suffering and more mental damage on their kids than what a prisoner doing federal time for rape or murder is obliged to endure."

Thomas growled his anger as he bit off his words to complete his sister's expose: "The Family Charters are clear on this: you cannot impose on a person, especially a child, more restrictions than a prisoner has to live with or the types of pain equal to what prisoners doing hard time in public prisons receive for murder, rape, arson, kidnapping, torture or falsely accusing others of crimes to cover their own tracks. If these kids and persons you accuse are actually that dangerous as to deserve such harsh, cruel punishments, then what the fuck are you doing dealing with it inside the house? You call the authorities! Have them arrested and judged by the Law of the Land in the country you live in!"
Jenna took the relay again: "That's why the Council's Couch is important: it's done openly in front of every one. Nobody can just grab you and drag you to a secret room or shed to do whatever they want to you. Each and every restriction or sanction is proposed, analyzed, debated and voted as an individual item in the decisional process. There is no 'minimum week' or 'magic month' of grounding spread around just to make parents feel big and powerful about the abuse of authority and position they dish out. All of the restrictions we got Tom and I were always less than 3 days for each as we never earned worse and it was normally limited to one or two specific limitations for the period. The usual were 'no TV tonight because you were lazy in doing your chores or homework' or the more painful 'you stay with mom in the kitchen all day because you act like a cry-baby so she will watch you while I get the work done in the barn or field'. Those were the most representative examples I can think of. The most exceptional I got was when I was 11 years old: 'you were so busy listening to that radio music program that you let the meal burn in the oven so I am barring you from the kitchen for 3 days during which you will be doing half of your brother's cleaning and janitorial tasks around the barn. I would try to teach him to cook but for all his careful attentiveness, he likes things raw and that won't do.' So you see, the restriction part was always pretty direct but mild and sought to teach us the lesson that if we work well, our presence will be wanted and maybe even sought out for specific jobs. It also showed us that rewards, like a worker's salary, have to be earned each day and for each task. Being children does not get you freebies and set you above others if you haven't worked for it, and proved your competency."

Thomas smirked and started a new track: "Now before any of you get any ideas about how Jen and I were beaten black and blue when we were young, I will say that we both got our share of bare-butt spankings, slaps on the shoulder and arm squeezes but we know we were not beaten or abused for three very specific reasons."

"FIRST: it was done in an open, civilized, mature way by the adults in charge. We got called to the Couch and got told in advance of what would happen after the sentence had been voted by the group. We were never just grabbed at random and dragged kicking and screaming wildly to the point of suffering a dislocated arm or broken bone like some kids have endured in the past. We were NEVER taken to a secret locked place to be beaten, tortured or molested."

"SECONDLY: Our physical size, mindset and health were taken into account during the decision and the application of the sanction. While the option to use a wooden rod or a light leather strap is written into the Charters' rules, it also says clearly for which offenses they are used and on which age groups. Note that the use of anything other than the unarmed, open hand needs a ¾ vote as it means that you allow the use of a weapon of torture upon Blood Kin. If you don't have a legal vote to magically bind the decision and hit the person with the tool anyways, then you are a Blood-Traitor and an Oath-Breaker which means you just forfeited your magic and a part of your health to the point you could die from it. In all cases, the Charters specifically prohibit from leaving any injury or markings on the person punished. Reddened skin is desirable as it means you have hit hard enough, and in some cases you could have the right to use enough strength, or hit enough times, to leave light welts or passing bruises. HOWEVER, the only times that such results are allowed are when the guilty person committed an assault that caused injury like a broken bone or damaged an organ. Otherwise, it's usually because they lied, defrauded, obfuscated and omitted in such a negligent or criminal way as to cause injury or even worse. If they caused somebody else to be accused of the crimes they were responsible for and then stayed silent to let the other receive what was their own punishment, they would always get a hard strapping that would leave welts for a few days."

"THIRD reason we were not beaten or abused: we were given our voice, our right to defend ourselves before the whole family and then we voted on the decision along with every one else."
Since we participated in full but were in fact honest about our guilt or faults, we understood and accepted that it was natural to receive correction, and yes, sometimes a punishment was actually needed. When it was needed, we were asked how we wanted to do the act; across the punisher's knees or bending over the armrest of the couch. Then we were asked whom we preferred to receive the punishment from. Yes, we chose the person who spanked us based on mutual trust and having with them a relationship that wasn't based on power or fear. As long as it was an adult kin present during the council vote, we could choose this person. Finally, all the persons stayed and witnessed the punishment carried out so that there was no violence, no arm twisting or dominance issues; no playing the damned tail-wagging alpha-dog like happens so often in these situations. The person punished was asked to take position, lower their pants to show the skin so the effects were visible and the punisher could then be careful to avoid anything other than reddening the skin. Then the voted number of hand spanks or implement strokes was applied in a slow measured rhythm, with respect to the person's breathing and reactions. The adult had an obligation to be in control of their own emotions and gestures since they were dealing with a person, sometimes a child but sometimes an adult, who was anxious and embarrassed but not panicked or fighting for their life. Because of this, they had no right to hold down the person's arms or legs, or grab and squeeze their neck, or apply any kind of submission hold in an effort to break them or deny them their dignity during the punishment. Also, the punisher couldn't go hitting at full blast; no withering volley of whacks all at once; no 'rapid-fire' smacking or 'single-spot' smacking techniques so beloved by abusers either."

Jenna took the pole again: "The basic purposes of corporal punishment are to immediately stop the behavior, make sure it didn't happen again and leave a memory of how bad the acts are in the eyes of the Family. It is also the best, most appropriate way to show the victim of a violent crime or deeply personal insult that they matter to the whole Family. You take the hurt they experienced and apply it back to the offender methodically but in a controlled dosage and manner so as to show them and everybody else what a controlled, mature member of the Homestead looks and feels like in action. Sometimes it works but, on some rare occasions, it can make the situation worse. If the kid or adult was antisocial and refractory to both familial discipline and common concertation of life activities from the beginning, then no amount of punishment will resolve the situation. It will make the person buck up, get even more aggressive as they feel ganged-upon by the group and then they will lash out at everything around. That is why the Family Charters actually have a method of calculation by which each sanction of corporal punishment could be instead converted to restrictions or time in confinement. This was of course devised to use in the cases of very young children having terrible accidents like playing with fire that goes out of control, poisoning a sibling, hurting a farm animal to the point of killing it, etc…"

Thomas waved his coffee cup around, jumping in to give his sister a chance to swallow a bite and sip some of her own coffee. "In such cases, just as in the situation of the person having a sickness or handicap, they had to have an alternative to the hand, rod and strap. The ancestors also found out along the centuries that some types of people, regardless of age group, respond better to and prefer confinement terms or non-physical punishments as they feel more respected as a full person in those circumstances when it is their mind that is addressed rather than their body. You need to understand that for a large percentage of people, especially in the last 60-odd years, there has begun to emerge a cultural conception that hitting and physical pain are only for imprisoned criminals that were judged by the courts, for slaves and for animals. By their concepts, normal ordinary humans should resolve their differences and misdeeds verbally, without pain and hurt unless an actual crime happened. That means that the Family Charters were in fact adapted to this several centuries ahead of the cultural evolution. It means that for almost a thousand years we have had a very liberal, modern system in which for each vote we hold, a person can chose the physical
or non-physical option. The corporal punishment is always just one option debated, a choice done freely by the guilty, never an imposition by the group or parents."

Jen & Tom; memories of orphans and lost children

(Nightcall – Stuck In Dreams)

Saturday February 9th of 2301 – night, around 23:45pm
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans’ Support Services (VSS)
Motorpool garage building

Younger Lucas #18 looked at both of the oldest Labarre and then glanced at the others that were spread around and nodded once to himself. He understood what the problem they needed to speak of was and why they were worried; it had been born mostly of necessity but the cultural norms in place made talking of it out in the open a rough conversation. He truly didn't think they had anything to be ashamed of as honestly, the system they described was better balanced and had better protections for children than anything he thought he would hear about tonight. He decided to lance the abscess and cleanse it quickly before it festered.

"So guys, I think I can see where the problems began and how. The indicators were there all along; the Charters, Oaths, Blood Law and such make the conclusion pretty simple in fact. Just tell me this: did either of you hurt the other during a punishment? If you did, what did you do to heal the person and compensate them for the loss of safety and surety they suffered because you botched the job?" The child asked with an open, neutral face as he sipped his fresh grape juice to make a change in taste from too much chocolate and coffee during the evening.

All the Labarre siblings actually face faulted and blinked in unison as if it were choreographed whilst the 'Martin' and few 'Diana' tried desperately to keep neutral expressions when in fact they wanted to laugh at their dear friends' comical faces. The 'Jonny' and 'Jason' looked to be curious about the question but not angry or disgusted and they didn't even seem surprised either. The rest of the non-Labarre, the incarnations of 'Lucas' and the many 'Alan' with his friend 'Tanusha' were likewise curious but not negatively disposed or surprised either.

Jenna started to chortle and then let out a long bout of loud belly-laugh at the face her poor beleaguered brother was making. Her fiancé passed an arm around her shoulders to keep her from falling off the beanbag couch the three of them occupied whilst trying to rein in his own light, playful laughter. "Go ahead and laugh, you loons!" Thomas griped while shaking his head at all the sibling antics around him. The fact he was visibly trying to hold back a smile and his upset was quite exaggerated told them he would now be less stressed and proceed with the rest of their conversation without a cloud of doubts hanging above them.

Younger Lucas #18 humphed loudly and exclaimed "Oh, for Pete's sake! Would you guys come off it! It was bloody evident from a thousand miles away! You said out loud that the Charters have several Maximum sentences but also MINIMAL ones for each category of offense. Couple that with 'magically binding blood-oaths' to obey the Family Charters, and then your parents die leaving you to live alone for six years in hermitage. Somebody had to pick up the lead and do the parenting. Since there were only two of you, it pretty much sums up what happened. Annoy your
sibling, miss out on a chore or botch a task, whatever the reason, and you got a stinging red backside to bitch about courtesy of the only other living human on the property. I mean, how many of us here didn't see this was coming?" he finished while looking around at all the faces to see if there would be any reactions of outrage, disgust or anger.

Thomas was a bit pink in the face as he mumbled something under his breath while his sister was still laughing, face buried in her fiancé's shoulder as the poor Martin wondered who would protect him from his brother-in-law if he took sides in this. The other 'Thomas' and 'Thamara' in the Assembly were in a similar situation with their siblings and lovers; not getting any help at all.

Peaceful orderliness was eventually restored by way of their Uber-Brunder putting fingers in his mouth to emit a sharp loud whistle. Most of the kids having been in boarding schools or some form of semi-military training at some point of their lives all came to attention, instinctively looking for the coach or drill instructor. When they saw the smirking 33 year old buffing his nails on his flannel shirt, crowing about "That how it's done" they all knew they'd been played. Weeelll, there would be payback at some point soon. "Okay plebes, let the nice people finish their story, you can tell yours later!" the older man said to the crowd, getting them onboard of the schedule for the time being. Damn, they were such a chaotic bunch of brats!

Jenna wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes and then gave her sibling's shoulder a firm squeeze to signify her love and support for him as well as tell him he had the first go at this. She wanted him to be assertive and set the style and tempo of their story. She would adapt and tell her side in due time without rushing him.

Tom took a deep centering breath and began in as clear and steady a voice as he could, given the emotional nature of the subject. "All right guys, give me a break, this ain't easy for me. I'm a bit embarrassed but also ashamed a lot about some things I did. Both of us were young children; injured, dispirited, in a dark, lonely place for those six years. We felt battered and damaged as if we had been put in a red hot forge and then put on an anvil to be manually pounded with a mallet like old style beaten copper pots. It hurt all over, in our bodies and in our souls. And that hurt started with our parents."

Memories 1; Jenna & Tom

(Audiomachine – When It All Falls Down)

Sunday February 10th of 2301 – around 01:00am
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Motorpool garage building

Thomas took a moment to gather his memories and emotions to obtain some order and then pushed ahead. "When I was 10 and Jenna 12 in the beginning of 2015, we were both old enough and reliable enough as members of the Homestead and laborers that we were routinely given tasks that took us away from the main buildings for a couple of days at a time. We had 1,000 acres of hilly terrain, swampy and heavily forested in evergreens, with long harsh winters and short humid summers. Spring and autumn were medium length but rainy, sappy affairs with morning and evening fog worse than England and cold spells at night that left hoarfrost until mid-morning. We
had about a hundred head of bovine cattle, twenty of them milking cows. We also had a quartet of
draft horses, a dozen mules, pigs, goats, sheep, some three hundred fowls, all in all a whole lot of
stuff for not much effect. Without roads or rivers to send out the milk and meat, and being under
siege as we knew we were since before Jen and I were born, all the Clanstead food production
systems had been scaled back to feed just the residents and rare occasional guest."

The young man gulped in raw emotion, wringing his hands on his lap, eyes glassy as he looked
into the far past to a moment he wanted to never remember; his worse failures. "I had just been out
of the house for three days, camping and riding my mule as I set up the spring time line of traps.
Some animals are hunted or trapped specifically at each of the four seasons and in remote,
roadless, undeveloped zones like we lived in, you took Yggdrasil's bounty when he offered it, as it
was presented. If you were picky or disdainful, you starved in warm weather and died in the next
winter. Simple and irrevocable truth. Hippies, Yuppies, Vegans and tree huggers would never
endure for real in the truly wild, far removed areas beyond the rural zones where they can play
weekend farmer to brag at their neighbors about how they milked a cow or washed a cute little
pink piglet. Nature's creations are far more robust against, and far less tolerant of, human
encroachment than these airheads would ever admit or know about."

The young adult passed a hand in his longish hair and pulled at it in a gesture that showed his
nerves were frayed and his anxiety. He was not happy to be digging around in this wound again. "I
had started to walk beside the mule as she had a full load of meat, pelts, herbs and some minerals I
had gathered in my outing. Since I was a toddler in diapers I had been taught the Traditions of the
Old Ways, the Little Magicks and the Faith of Yggdrasil as the druids and witches had practiced
for thousands of years. At ten years old I was already a deft hand with locating spells and
prospection charms so I always came back with eclectic loads that were full and helpful. My
parents would have preferred it if I had been thirteen or fourteen before sending me out like this but
the Family Tapestry in the Clan Chapel showed there was almost none of our Living Blood left.
We had to utilize what we had to become mature and competent quickly for the few of us left to
survive and endure until this war of attrition passed. As I walked besides the mule, I felt a vibration
in my gut and then several heirlooms and amulets around my body and packing began to warm up
or glow in warning. The unthinkable had happened after almost three hundred years of isolation;
the perimeter was breached and the Homestead was attacked. I used a special function in my Heir's
ring, the priority safety portkey, to be whisked away with my mule directly into the basement of an
old fieldstone barn that had been built and put under layers of warfare wards and a Fidelius prayer
specifically to act as a wartime shelter separate from the house and regular farm buildings. I spelled
the mule unpacked, tied and cleaned with a single click of my fingers. I triggered all the support
enchantments for heat, light, venting and raised the wards to battle stance as I climbed up the stairs
to the attic under the gabled roof of the barn to get a view from the dormer window. I still wish I
hadn't."

Jenna handed her brother and best friend a cup of piping hot chocolate with multicolored fluo
marshmallows floating on top of the whipped cream foam. He looked at her with an odd expression
that mixed relief, thankfulness and an 'are you serious at this point of the conversation?' kinda
glare. Jen smirked and patted his forearm, sisterly teasing in full force as the poor boy sighed and
looked to the sky for help. Nope. Still nothing. Damn!

Tom inhaled a deep relaxing breath along with almost a quarter of his chocolate, including the
foam and marshmallows, much to the mirth of his siblings. He smiled, showing off his white
cream mustache before running his tongue over his lips with an exaggerated slurping sound.
Laying his mug on his lap, he wrapped both hands around it and gazed into the brown and white
depths, like he was conducting a scrying.
"What I saw made my heart break and it never fully healed since. There were about a dozen men in grey and white pattern camouflage assault clothing, carrying AK-47 type rifles, escorting a pair of the worst sort of sub-human under-beings you would ever meet. Dressed in the ocher-red robes of their station amongst the ecclesiastes, wearing runed bronze field-plate armor and enchanted decorations, holding their great Book of Creed and sorcerous staff of despoiled oak capped in darkiron, there they stood; the Catholicu Vaticanese. The fraud wizards of the Vatican: the mercenary mages of the cult of a god that doesn't exist. They had captured our parents in the fields, outside the protective wardlines that surround the buildings. The Clan had never been bellicose enough to think seriously about establishing a wide area ward-line to encompass the entire thousand acres. It would be far too costly and labor intensive when we could simply wear talismans that hide our presence and obfuscate the magical signatures when we leave the Homestead's magical threshold. Our ancestors were wrong; we should have made that effort and we should have planned for safe houses and plotted escape routes from the very moment we stood in opposition to the Vatican and the thousands of sects of the Chriastatu Fideliae at large. We had chosen to be an active side in a war but thought we were independent and non-aggressable like the first incarnation of the Red Cross or something stupid of the sort. We now saw the result after a millennium of not minding our own business nor taking theirs seriously enough."

"I saw the mundane mercenaries shoot my parents in the back of the head with their rifles. The Vatican's wizards needed to do these murders by proxy in order to avoid bringing the attention of the magical societies to their actions as then would follow the retaliations of the Wizeria Hammerrika. That is the parliament of all magical species and cultures for the North America zone that covers Canada, the USA and Mexico. The False Priests of the Vatican knew that as long as it looked like a mundane home invasion gone terribly wrong, nobody at the Wizeria would think of investigating. Over the centuries, our Clan, Families and Vassals had established a large, important voting block which had finally been whittled away to a single meager seat by death, murder and treason. Some idiot vassals gave up control of their seat to arranged marriages into what they were told were good honest families. They all ended up like the women who married Martin and Diana's father. The newcomers and wannabees overwhelmed us and terminated our influence and silenced our voices as the result of too many old Blood Lines and magical species deciding to leave the Earth to survive the expansion of humanity's corrosive presence."

Jenna engulfed her brother in a hug to steady him while at the same time centering herself too. Martin placed a loving supportive hand on both and hoped they would eventually heal from these wounds.

Thomas wiped some tears from his eyes and continued. "I went berserk. I felt the magick circulating in my Heir's ring and instinctively activated all of the warfare wards around the regular buildings and motorized vehicles we kept. I sent out the order for the animals to revolt and charge the intruders until the enemy died or they were killed in the attempt. I took the Cricket Rifle cal.22 with 10 shot mag and telescope I used to hunt and cast a local silence charm on it. I lined up the first wizard and, hidden by a Fidelius Prayer as I was, he never saw it coming, especially since all the permanent wards had become active and were attacking them already. He was so busy casting anti-magic shields that he never had time to concentrate on projectiles. Got him in the back of the head, like his men did my parents. His blood spraying in the face of his fellow mage blocked the guy's view for a second and botched his casting of an animal bane charm. He only had time to clear his eyes to see some seven different wards, a druidic prayer from Jenna who was now in the window above the house's main entrance, and my other shot converge on him to end him all at once. When he died, the imperious curse they had put on what happened to be ordinary mundane soldiers from Russia broke. Through the wards and my ring, I felt them become free-willed. Unfortunately, Jen and I were both maddened with grief and no longer thinking clearly. We wanted our parents back but it would never happen. We wanted to be safe in our home, but that would also
not happen unless drastic measures were taken. So I took the measures. I used my authority as Heir to order the wards to attack and kill all the 16 men the wizards had brought with them and send the bodies to the cellar of the slaughter barn where our cells and execution room were located. We had after all made a name for our Clan as man-hunters who brought back criminals for trial. In some cases that meant capturing and interrogating accomplices and witnesses to get to the final bounty. We were equipped to do the forensics as well. After stripping and analyzing as well we could at that age, we used a timed cargo portkey to send them directly to the floor of the Wizeria Chamber during the next monthly meeting, along with an abnormally large and powerful Messy Missive of Malice."

Thomas took a break to rub his face with both hands and then punch the beanbag couch's cushion a few times to expel some of the frustration, rage and self-loathing he always felt when thinking of those events. "When that particular piece of mail was delivered, I went into the Family Chapel and put my ring to the crest of the Clan to activate the wide area Fidelius Enchantment and Fidelius Prayer that had been etched and inlaid into menhirs around the Homestead, cutting us off from even the few living relatives we still had. The World was coming to get us in our home; it wouldn't find either the house or us. The siege wards covered 2 x 2 kilometers and centered around a large druidic dolmen and cromlech that were buried fifty feet deep in the very center of the square, right under the slaughter barn so it could absorb the blood, life, magic and souls of the animals and prisoners that suffered and died in the barn's many levels. We no longer existed in the eyes and minds of the world, except the magical banks. Their records and Family Tapestries in the vaults are created and enspelled specifically to go around something as menial as hiding, disguise, invisibility and even Fidelius-type effects. Our money, personal and corporate accounts, heirloom vaults, it would all be safe until we were ready, Jenna and I, to be part of this angry, murderous world again."

Jenna now took over for the siblings as they would enter a part of the story neither was proud about. "When the whole mess was settled and we had put the animals back in their stalls, cleaned the buildings and the various equipments, sent our vitriol to the Wizeria and slept for about 20 hours uninterrupted… We were still a mess and not fit for company. But needs must and we needed to regroup, make a plan and before anything, eat a decent meal as we had essentially worked hard for two days but fasted during that time. We were famished and emotional, unstable and unreasonable. We were kids and we were in pain, alone, invisible, and thanks to the two-layered Fidelius, forgotten by even our relatives. We met in the kitchen after almost three days apart since the fight and the other three days that Tom had been trapping. It wasn't pretty. We accused, insulted and threw things, hitting each other not accidentally at all with flying objects and even the odd childish spell or cantrip as we still had enough sense to not kill each other. After about two hours of open warfare, we collapsed and cried ourselves out. We awoke, several hours later to yet another mess and hungrier than before. We quickly fell back to our old worn-out pattern; I cook, he cleans. He hunts, traps and gathers parts in the wilds then I use those things to craft the potions and poultices for healing and enchanting stuff. We both had common capacities but also some pretty specific specialties already."

Thomas had now recovered enough to pick up the thread and continue. "We cleaned and cooked, then ate in deathly silence. When the meal was finished, we looked at each other and had no idea what to do other than blindly follow the calendar with the farming chores. Well, I knew at that point we needed to prepare for a two-part war: hiding in our hermitage and on the run if we were found by a large group. But before that, we had a situation to resolve with our emotions and anger at each other. I told Jenna that I had problems with her attitude in insulting me and throwing things, especially magical attacks so I was calling her to the couch to atone. She answered right back with the same accusation. We went to the Great Room and sat on opposite ends of the couch and then
froze. Who would accuse and defend? I decided to flash my ring at her face and claim that as Heir, and now leader of the house, I would accuse first and after her defense, she could speak her accusations. A blind man could have seen where this was going but we couldn't until it was done and we needed to raid the stash of healing potions in the kitchen cupboard. We both had valid points and had both attacked the other with weapons and the intent to injure. The sentence was crystal clear according to the Charters: a good and proper spanking on bare buttocks with the heavy leather strap until 'passing' bruising occurred. The only thing left to decide was how many strokes to each."

Thomas was crying openly now as he was completely lost in a worse epoch of their past, unaware of the hug his sister wrapped around him or the hand of his brother-in-law on his neck to give him courage. "As I was Heir, I took the strap from its peg and told her to prepare by dropping her pants and placing herself over the armrest of the couch. She did and I whipped her. I might have been just 10 years old but that damned thing was an old style razor strop, a length of rough leather folded and joined at the opening by a heavy brass buckle with a hook to hang it on a wall or coat-rack. It would never have taken a lot of strength from anybody to harm someone when swinging that two-pound monstrosity. Unfortunately, even at that age I was the same size and a bit heavier than her, and stronger too. I hurt her. Right on the first strike, I hurt her for real. I didn't stop. Even when she squirmed, begged, cried, flailed her legs wildly, bawled her eyes out, not even when her skin bruised and then wore out to form blisters that burst and bled. Only when I felt too tired did I stop tormenting her. Then I retched my meager lunch on the carpet and ran to hug and support her. I will never understand, for the rest of my life and beyond, why she didn't kill me or at least push me away in anger and fear for what I had just done. I cast a quick healing spell from the childish lists just to close the skin and stop the bleeding but she was bruised purple and black from above the knees to right under the kidneys. I hadn't spanked her, I hadn't even whooped her; I had lost control of myself and tried to murder her by sheer negligence and disregard for her health. She cast a healing on herself, more powerful and better executed than mine but she had always been better at healing than me. She then took the strap and told me in a dead-like tone of voice it was my turn. I don't remember anything but pain. I was so happy that she hadn't shut me out, that she wasn't so disgusted by my very existence that I literally spelled my jeans and boxers off my legs completely and placed over the armrest of the couch without a word or thought of protest. I honestly don't remember the events or the details past the pain and hoping that she punished me for both the fight in the kitchen and what I had just done to her. She did. When I came to, I was lying on my stomach, on the couch, still half naked from the waist down but now even my boots and socks were off. I could feel something on my ass cheeks and thighs that I identified by smell as a poultice for when you have blisters and sore spots on your feet when you get new boots and have to work a full shift in them before they're broken in right. I had no strength or willpower; I fell back to sleep right away."

Jenna took over for a while as it was better to give her sibling some time to recover. "I had done like Tom did to me. It took all the hurt and anger, anguish and doubts, sorrow at our being orphaned and then tried to pass all that pain on his skin in the hopes it would leave me. Or at least, that enough of the pain would leach out that I could breathe and think again. It didn't. When I stopped beating him, he was badly injured and almost passed out. I retched my lunch out and after a few minutes, I cleaned the smelly mess with a quick spell and then went to work using what magic I knew to heal Thomas. I magicked him fully unto the couch and spelled off his lower clothes. A few quick spells and then some potions, spelled directly into his stomach, and ointments on the skin. Then I went to the bathroom to have a look at my own extremely painful backside as I had trouble walking and standing. What I saw in that mirror gave me nightmares for several months afterwards. Tom and I had really tried to cause lasting harm to each other. We had never done that before, neither had our parents. What was wrong with us?"
Thomas sniffled and rubbed his eyes, trying to find some composure to keep on going. "When I woke up the second time, Jenna was on the couch besides me, her arms wrapped securely around me as if holding for dear life. All my clothes had been changed for my usual sleepwear, flannel lounge pants and an oversized t-shirt with long sleeves and socks. I could still feel a layer of ointment on my ass and hoped my legs would still work. It wasn't the pain or soreness to come for the next two weeks or so that I feared, it was being less than functional as we had enemies pounding on our doors. That's when I realized the strategic reasons for limiting the strength and number of punishments a person can get during a set period of time. You need your workers to be workable and defensible at all times, even in peaceful countries as criminals will never respect peace, order or law. I managed to get up and reach the bathroom without waking Jenna. The damages were impressive to say the least. I actually felt a twinge of pity for my future nephews and nieces for when they would anger Jen and be called out to the Couch for it. I knew in truth she would never do that again, but I wasn't thinking straight. I wouldn't think straight for years."

Jenna took her turn speaking. "When I woke up, I smelled something from the kitchen that smelled like food that wasn't burned or raw. Thomas cooking anything normal was a miracle and I had to see that. So I very carefully walked to the kitchen while holding to furniture or walls because my thighs and hip joints were not very stable and worked weird at that time. – Snort! I wonder why? - Anyways, I came into the kitchen slash family dining room and saw that Tom had indeed tried to cook something decent and was using the teaching book of basic household charms to read from the spell list Prosaics: Gourmet Mastery to manage something edible while I was out of commission. I had this sudden vision of how proud mom would have been while dad would have joked about him making a good wife for the neighbor's boy. It is worth mentioning at this point that dad was a worse cook than Thomas ever was. I think the last sheep hank he cooked tried to commit suicide inside the oven to escape his botched attempt at a honey & brown sugar glazed finish. We will never know the truth…" She finished in a funny exaggerated accent.

Thomas was chortling out loud in a rare moment of mirth this night. "Yeah, dad and food… unless he was eating it, letting him near it was a disaster. And for a farmer who owns distilleries, canneries and meat packing plants, can you see how this is ironic? He could feed the whole continent but not himself unless it was as simple as placing a can of beans in the fire and letting it heat up a bit. The trails in the forest were pretty much the only place he could cook worth a damn. Anyways, After our, shall we say 'small disagreement', Jenna and I got our thinking caps on straight and got organized. The two first things we needed was a common accord to never hurt or demean each other again like that, especially to the point of injuries. Then we needed to take the Grimoires and review the warfare and siege protocols for the Homestead to see what we could improve. We made a pact that we would continue to discipline each other as loving siblings need to do and receive. We knew we needed to have a response and consequences for our actions, both bad and good; all people of all ages do. So we took the Charters' texts and read the sections again and saw where we went wrong; we punished when we weren't mentally steady and in full control of our selves and acts. We made accusations that were real, but we were guilty of the same and so should have canceled out each sanction, not applied it to both. We read, and learned, and swore to do better. Personally, I promised to never use anything but my hand when spanking her, that way I would feel her pain and reactions unlike with a tool. She decided to promise the same. Then we set for ourselves a shorter list of rules that was easier to remember and execute in the situation we had."

Jenna snorted in derisive laughter. "We were twits, is what we were! There was nothing simple in our list and the situation certainly couldn't be simplified. We were orphans without adults or contacts. We had foreign emotions boiling inside us and didn't know how to name them or how to act about them in a reasonable fashion. Nobody had ever spoken to us about grief and grieving for
losing a relative as when someone died our parents just never spoke of them again. Apparently, they had come to the conclusion that since we were under siege and could not help anybody, passing events under silence was the only response left. We were so screwed it wasn't funny and there was indeed precious little laughter in that Homestead for the two years to come. The few things we did right were to take care of our bodies' health. We had a wealth of traditional apothecary books combined with modern medicine books and we still had our satellite dish to have internet access, television and radio. As long as the unplottability and anonymity wards on the dish held, it was safe to use. So we remade a shorter, more exacting chore list to maximize our efforts around the immediate Homestead without having to leave the magical threshold."

The young woman took a breather to sip some coffee before continuing. "That meant no more outings to the forest unless we were missing a vital ingredient for a healing potion or needed new crystals to etch runic spells or wards. That was a hard adaptation for Thomas who was mostly an outdoors person but thankfully, with 2 x 2 kilometers under the cloaking dome, he could take morning jogs and slow evening walks to have his fill of Nature to stabilize himself. He jogged alone since he's much faster than I am but we walked together every evening from that point on. We used elemental spells to move earth to create a small steady stream, thin and shallow but with a swift current, to feed our new large pond and then out to the swamps on the other side. When it was done, it served as a swimming hole for us to have more exercise and within the year we had managed to enchant a druidic water gate to be able to scry far away or move around the interconnected watershed around the region, including inside the small bush town of Atlin."

Thomas took the pole again. "When that was done, it was like a great weight lifted off us. With this method we would be able to travel invisibly through the flowing waters of the Backways like the elder druids and witches had done for thousands of years. We could now go into town to find new clothes, spices for the kitchen, buy bulk metals, crystals and other materials for the workshop to make repairs on machines and buildings. We could breathe again after almost a whole year in captivity inside our own self-made prison. We immediately learned what we could about scrying and gating using the watershed and Backways but also swore to each other to never go alone until we were both passed 15 years old at least. We both needed to be a certain age, size and demeanor before we could travel alone and be safe when dealing with the people around. Also, due to my fully-evolved paranoia, we never left without both a mundane disguise and a set of glamours on top. It actually saved us on several occasions as we detected spotters prying around and somebody pulsed a magical detection wave in our zone every month for almost two years before they stopped."

Jenna took the hot chocolate her fiancé handed her and rewarded his kind attention with a sweet, gentle kiss on the forehead, just on his left eyebrow that had the young man blush a light pink in pleasure at receiving so much affection from his precious spiritual-sister. He kissed her back, on the cheek, and nuzzled her playfully while she took a large swallow of her warm courage before continuing.

"During those two years when we knew we were hunted, things were easy and simple in the house. We had whittled down our list of chores and rules down to what we could actually manage alone and not the overly optimistic adult-perspective that the first list had been based on. We still tried to follow the Charters and original chore lists set by our parents and ancestors but it wasn't realistic. Discipline was kept simple and direct; we didn't use the Couch anymore as there was no group, Council or witnesses anymore. We returned to the system our parents used; two verbal warnings, one strong warning of 1 to 5 swats over clothing and then a full spanking on bare skin if the behavior hadn't changed from just the warnings. We never again used a tool to hit and even today while we have the option in the rules we set, we haven't used an implement again to date. And with
the violent relationship Martin & Diana had when they came to our Homestead, using something other than the hand had a risk of going back to old patterns and emotions we don't want to see happening. Suffice it to say that with an overly simplified system like that, there was no shortage of '1 slap' warnings swinging around the house. Sometimes it was very serious; oftentimes we were just pulling the other person's leg a bit. We never hurt our sibling the way we did that first time."

Jenna screwed her features into a funny thinking pose as she wondered if it was necessary and came to the conclusion that yes, they needed to give further explanations on a few circumstances to have a truly complete picture of their lives in isolation and after, when Lucas, Martin and Diana came to them. The 22 year old started another leg in her story. "I remember well the first punishment Tom was obliged to give me after our damaging blow-out. About three weeks after we enspelled our water gate, I became buck-headed about finishing my studies of a new type of illusions to give us mystical disguises when leaving the cloaked lands. I studied through the night and was at it past 19 hours straight, sleep deprived and hungry too, when Thomas came into the workshop adjoining the Chapel, library and infirmary. He scolded me for being careless with my health and told me in no uncertain terms that I would pace myself and learn to keep time properly to spare my welfare. He then sat on a straight wooden chair and pointed at his lap. No extra words, no insults or reprimands; he knew me well enough to see I had understood and he respected my intelligence enough to not pile grief on top of more grief. That wouldn't stop him from correcting me and making sure I did manage my time and energies better."

Jenna Snorted in amusement as she continued. "I really don't know why people make such a big deal about spankings. When it's done with an open heart and a careful hand, it's nothing bad or harmful; at least that's what I experienced from my parents and from Thomas since. After I lowered my jeans to my knees, he guided me on his lap and pulled down my shorts. He gave my bare backside about three dozen good stinging spanks that made me squirm a lot and even cry a bit."

The young woman took a second to squeeze her brother's hand in affection as he looked rather depressed. "After that, Tom rubbed my back and pulled up my shorts back in place. He helped me to my feet so I could steady myself, wipe my face and get a grip on my emotions to tell him if I accepted his punishment or thought he had gone overboard. I stood there in just my shorts without shame or embarrassment; Thomas and I had been raised without body shyness or image shaming from our parents and relatives. Since I had taken to wearing yoga or bicycling shorts in lieu of the standard girlie underwear at all times since I was ten years old, like mom herself did too, it wasn't much of an embarrassment."

"In fact, it was bloody comfortable, especially during long work days or when you're outside in the cold rain or snow. They are much thicker, better padded and cover more area more comfortably than those skimpy lace thingies city girls wear in order to impress themselves in the mirror when they dress. Also, when I suddenly crave a hot chocolate or midnight snack, I don't have to get fully dressed to walk around my own house. After all, if it's decent enough to go in a public gym or pool, then no fuss is needed. Anyways, I finished crying, pulled up my jeans and then hugged him long and hard. He had reestablished my discipline for me without hurting or demeaning me, only love and care, just like our parents would have."

Seeing the thoughtful expressions on the members of the Assembly, Jenna poked her beloved brother on the shoulder a bit in warning and he nodded his head in silent acceptance. It would be a mite embarrassing but the events were over a decade in the past. If anybody didn't respect him because of this, then they didn't deserve to have their opinions taken into account by the Labarre siblings, period. Jenna would not let someone demean or degrade her brother and if she thought sharing the old stories did that, she would keep quiet. Grabbing an oat and raisin muffin off a
serving plate, she split the treat with her fiancé in an effort to eat something a bit more healthy than the rest of the fare offered around the agora. There was so much sugar in the place it would be a miracle if anybody slept at all tonight or tomorrow.

Bumping shoulders with Tom in a supportive gesture, Jenna began another anecdote. "About a week after my over-working incident, I discovered a disturbing new trend in our household. I would wake up and find a hot breakfast all done and waiting for me in the warm oven. However, what I didn't find at the table was a sibling. Now I knew Thomas was an early riser and he went out for a very fast, vigorous morning jog around the Homestead just as he had done with dad since he was 7 years old. He did need that much effort and practice for his traditional ranger's forestry and Faith training. Tom was an adept of moving meditation and the running trance, neither of which I can achieve."

"Anyways, after the ninth such lonely morning, I decided to hunt down my wayward sibling and set things straight to avoid misunderstandings as I had a feeling it wasn't just chores in the barn keeping him away all day. I went to his bedroom and saw that it was very neat. As in cleaned with a cleaning spell followed by a packing spell and then not lived in for over a week type of clean. I went to the Family Chapel and used the wards to find my errant brother to speak with him. He was in the main barn with the milk cows."

"I went there and confronted him about not speaking to me for nine days straight and his answer stunned me by how disconnected from reality it was. He had two points that were not in any way shape or form acceptable to me. First; he said we needed to sleep in different cycles to insure protection over the Homestead so we didn't get caught like before. Secondly; he was now certain he was hurting me every time he tried to speak with me about rules or discipline. He had nightmares about our blow-out the month before and now had added memories from the week earlier as well. He had become convinced he was just a danger to my health and needed to be away from me to keep me safe. That's what my big lug of a brother is like inside of him: a big softie with an even softer spot for me."

Jenna wrapped an arm around Tom's neck to hold him gently while she placed a soft sisterly kiss on his right temple, next to his right eye and then leaned forward to set her forehead against his. They sat there in peace for a minute before she continued.

"I forced him to show me where he slept and lived during the week and wasn't best pleased with him. I could have passed his choosing to crash in the attic of the warfare refuge barn as a genuine safety concern but not his eating habits. I was beyond incensed at what I saw. Tom had been systematically shorting his rations and eating only the blandest, most menial things we had in our pantry in an attempt to punish himself for what he saw as hurting me."

"Well, that wasn't going to go on any longer! I ordered him right there to pack up all his things and follow me in the house in a tone of voice he hadn't heard since mom died. He packed then followed me inside. I took him firstly to the kitchen and made sure to feed him a decent breakfast before anything else. Given how fast he scarfed down everything on the plate and asked for seconds, I could see how badly he had starved himself for food and for affection."

"After his meal, I grabbed his arm and took both of us upstairs to the bedrooms and walked us to our parent's old room. I sat him on the foot chest at the end of the bed whilst I used some quick packing spells to set everything of our parents in boxes in the closet until we were ready to deal with them. I told Thomas that from then on we would share this room and the bed together. It would be the best way for us to reconnect and see that the other person is not dangerous or harmful to us. It would also allow me to make sure he ate properly and didn't hide in a hole to let himself die of emotional breakdown like a swallow or finch would do."
He tried to protest but I warned him that I was about, in fact, to give him a good spanking for having come up with his ridiculous idea of isolating himself from his sister, the only other human on the territory. He relented quickly since he was still just 10 years old and quite aware I could hit hard when motivated. I decided to scrap the day as a bad job done with. The cows had been milked already and could hold until the evening for the next session. I told Tom to strip to his boxers and stand up besides the bench. I sat on the footlocker and pointed at my lap, knowing he wouldn't even think of running or refusing because he was too emotional, drowning in guilt and self-doubts. Once in place with his head lower than his hips, hands on the carpeted floor to hold his position, I just pulled down his boxers and gave him three dozen swats just a small bit less strongly than he had given me the week earlier. I didn't want to hurt him by hitting him as hard as a teenager or he'd bruise again and then he would start being afraid of me all over again. After his butt was properly warmed up to a healthy stingy redness, I helped him to his feet and held his shoulders while he set his clothes and face straight from all the wiggling and crying he had done. After that, we closed the lights and slid under the bed sheets. We both slept incredibly soundly all the morning away, holding each other tightly through memories and nightmares.

Jenna took a deep breath to steady herself against the flow of memories that had assaulted her during her telling. It wasn't easy rehashing old stuff like this. "We still had our original separate rooms but used them as private workshops or storage, not to live in. We went back to living in our old childhood rooms when Lucas came to the Homestead and then a month later Martin and Diana were rescued and brought back with us. We shared that room and bed for six years and kept our peace, sibling bond and friendship strong ever since. Not that we feel like that when we're the one getting tanned on the rear, but that's just a small part of the whole relationship, less than 1/1,000th in fact. Love, comfort, support, presence and genuine care, are all more important. Those events are ten years in the past as we are now 22 and 20 years old but we still use the same short list of rules and punishments with each other and our spiritual-siblings or lovers when the need is there. Or maybe we just want to see our beloved partner sporting a pink rear that evening before getting in bed."

She finished with a deep belly laugh while both Thomas and Martin were blushing from her very personal revelations. Not that they had any illusions about people knowing how their relationships worked at home, not with this bunch who all lived pretty much the same things.

Thomas gave a wan smile and said in low tone "If I earned it, I'll accept it. I have been raised well enough by my parents and then my sister to understand the value of honesty and openness in any relationship. As for still getting spanked at my age, well I don't feel embarrassed because I see it this way. The statistics for North America around 2010 showed that about 35% of young adults still live at home until age 25 or above. About 3% of the age group 18-25 still received regular punishments physically because restrictions and groundings would interfere with their work schedule or they would just tell the parents to screw themselves."

"These people don't want to get kicked out of their home in the economy we have, especially if they have no job, and don't want to lose there few freedoms they have worked for so they think it's better to buy peace with their ass like a whore with a client. It's a rotten point of view and I don't really care for those situations since I'm not certain the parents see their kids as anything but a burden or menial animals to tame and break." The young adult spoke disapprovingly.

"All I know is when I accept a punishment from Jenna or my siblings, it's because the person giving me a reprimand has only my best interest at heart and respects me as much after as they did before the event and they honor me for being honest and courageous enough to face the consequences of my acts. If the result was my being shamed or demeaned, I would not let things
like that happen. I would move out, away from the people who hurt me. I have hurt enough in my life, I don't need any more than I got."

Younger Lucas #18 signaled for people to take a break, use the bathrooms and cycle through the drinks and food trays. After some fifteen minutes, the crowd would be back in place and ready for the next story.

In the meanwhile, he had some notes to collate coherently. The way the Labarre Clan was culled down like they were whittling a full-grown oak tree with a vegetable peeling knife did not escape his notice. Somebody put in a lot of effort on identifying, tracking, casing then hunting to ground each and every Labarre, relative and affiliate they could find. It was also apparent than when in doubt, the hunters had gone out-of-bounds to harm employees and contractors, just to confirm that an area had been stripped clear of all living Labarre just like an exterminator would try to certify the zone ‘pest free & nest destroyed’ after his work was done.

Besides that, the cause for concern was that Thomas and Jenna had been so isolated and removed from society that any cultural references they had came from old books, or watching TV and the Internex. While not bad as such, this meant that they did occasionally have trouble relating with others face-to-face. Otherwise, they were well adjusted and sociable, just as had been their nature when they were born. Their lives over the last decade had not damaged them beyond recovery, or healing along the newfound family they had built around them.

Then there was this odd reluctance that Thomas had, when it came time to take over as clanhead and holder of the ward controls. If he had activated the Blood Wards sooner, or if his parents had never gone so far off-road, then maybe the family could have concentrated inside a single large, well protected estate and weathered out the storm with more survivors. As it was, Younger Lucas #18 was completely certain that it was the fracturing and separation of the clan into lonely, isolated individuals moving under the shadows that allowed the priests and mercenaries to pick them off one by one so easily. If the group had stayed united, cohesive and coherent, such guerrilla & sabotage tactics would never had succeeded unless the Catholicu Vaticanese were ready to come out in public to wage open warfare on a Noble Family that was a sitting member of the Wizeria Hammerrika.

Still, it felt like – SOMETHING – besides just the damned white christian fanatics was hunting for people that Lucas was now calling his family and friends. That suspicion/instinct would demand careful consideration and reactions on his part. Then he would apply some street justice to these curs.

The first real priority in all this mess was the in-depth study of Blood Law and Magical Heredity, and how to confirm the genealogy that led to the creation of all the individuals in the compound. There were proven ancestral blood links between at least three groups, but what about the others? And could they create a composite family that would be recognized? What exactly were the capacities and limits of Blood and Soul magicks?

Secondly, the Labarre clan had been vast and rich; it was necessary to create an up-to-date and accurate cartography of all territorial holdings, properties, companies, and revenue-making systems rapidly to ensure that the siblings had enough to live on for the near future. Even if they were capable of living primitively in the bush quite at ease, there were no probant reasons to inflict this diminution in socioeconomic status on them. Plus, Lucas was a landowner and entrepreneur himself; he knew how he'd feel if somebody screwed him out of his possessions, and it wouldn't be a pretty reaction to see.
Thirdly, the intense study of all Magical Traditions; like the 'Little Magick', Nature Cults, True Divinities, extra-planar entities and dimensional travels was now a group-wide priority since it could not only save their lives but help improve their health, skill-sets and general standard of life throughout. Not to mention the multiple capacities for medicine, spying and combat that had been demonstrated by their Assembly just in the last week. Some of those were really something to worry about, in enemy hands.

Memories 2; Lucas adrift

(SeaQuest – season 1 – opening theme)

Sunday February 10th of 2301 – around 02:40am
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Motorpool garage building

The wide inter-familial group stayed comfortably quiet in their couches, sofas and poofy beanbag chairs, simply enjoying the proximity of their loved ones for the moment. There would be a lot of things, deeply personal and incredibly emotional, that would be spoken before the end of this catharsis in the following daytime.

Young Lucas #18 was typing notes on his workstation, frowning seriously as he organized his topics and imagined on-the-fly the necessary categories and follow-up investigations they would initiate. Several things revealed by Jenna and Thomas had raised red flags of worry with him; his instincts as an up-and-coming mafia Don had him reviewing events from different, more judgmental perspectives and coming to conclusions that he didn't like. It would take the heartfelt storytelling of many others cumulating into a coherent portrait of their groups' internal dynamics, and how they synchronized together as an Assembly, that would eventually give him the last missing clues. He hoped. The root of blindness was to think you had all informations pertinent to the case in hand, then you stopped looking for anything else, including those things that were contrary to your established conclusions but necessary to know to validate the process. Thankfully, there were enough curious and inquisitive people, including professional investigators, in this group that the problem shouldn't happen.

After a good, much needed, 15 minute pause, the people were starting up conversations amongst little groups or settling down in a way that indicated impending sleepiness if nothing major happened soon. The young boy dinged his dessert fork on his empty coffee cup to garner attention, then said out loud: "For your perusal, comprehension, and loving, caring amusements, we now offer the memories of our dear beloved friend, the intrinsically fundamental part of all our groups; the much maligned 'Lucas'. May we have a volunteer from amongst the 20 year old bracket, please? Unless of course I get to point and command most imperially that you empty out your soul for us?" The smarmy brat asked with a shit-eating grin of momentous proportions.

Several groans and disparaging comments about his ancestry came about, mostly from his own incarnations in point of fact, until somebody was shoved forward by loving, caring friends who stayed well behind amidst the laughing masses. Traitors, the lot of them!

"A pox and a plague on all their houses!" the aforementioned 'volunteer' griped aloud.
Wearing on his face a much pronounced pout with jutting lower lip, wet puppy dog eyes and sniffing as if he might cry at any moment, the forwarded volunteer tried to get out of his public execution by siblings rather unsuccessfully if the explosion of laughter and thrown bits of food crumbs were any indicative. Girding his patience, the young adult moved forward of his group with the others rearranging to surround him and offer support during his trip down memory lane. Silence quickly fell upon the Assembly, everyone eager to hear and compare to the life story of themselves or the 'Lucas' they knew from their reality.

"Okay, here goes not much of anything." the young blond haired male spoke out in a soft firm voice that seemed more used to laboratories and libraries than public forums. "I have been dubbed here 'Lucas AG-4' as in 'Adult-Gay' version from 'reality #4'. Who was it again that thought having that many of us in the same space-time was wise? We need to shoot him before he comes up with something else of the same caliber." he deadpanned quite seriously against the explosive laughter of the Assembly.

"Anyways, as you know, I am an only child. My parents never tried for another and didn't stay married past my 3rd birthday so adopting or fostering was never in the cards either. In all honesty, their marriage was mostly a business arrangement to boost the social and political profiles of both; it was never meant to last the five years it did. My birth was a hell of a surprise since they had both been taking precautions. Apparently, doing it once a month during a chance encounter is enough to win the lottery if your condom has a pinprick that you didn't see and your female partner stopped taking her pills cuz she wan'nt getting any anyways. Contrarily to all rumors and publicly flirting with their escorts in mundane events, both my parents were cold fish who shied away from physical contact when they could manage it."

"Having been made aware as young as 1 year old that my birth had been both accidental and unwanted from either side, I also knew it was up to my grand-parents to raise me into something coming close to a responsible, mostly normal, human being. Or at least it would have if they hadn't all died in a KKK terror strike on the synagogue they all attended since they lived in the same neighborhood. My dear loving parents, being the completely uninterested people they were, promptly started hiring live-in nannies and tutors to corral me into something presentable in public since they couldn't just dump me. At least, that was the general consensus; dumping me to an orphanage after all four gramps died suddenly when I was barely 10 months old would have shown them in a bad light, thus damaging their careers. Being absent from home and my life totally was acceptable though, if it was done for work and mundane soirées related to political social climbing."
christian elites of the USA to 'save & redeem' the lost souls of inferiors by hiring them into their homes to let them see how the True & Pure Americans lived, so they could then follow the Faith and model life in their turn. My parents, while born jewish, were social climbers of the worst, less intelligent sort, despite all the technical and legal diplomas they hung on their walls, so they did this too."

"So, to 'save' the twenty year old girl's 'lost soul' they hired her, gave her a small dingy room in the basement then put me in her arms and let her do for a whole month before checking the nanny cams to see that everything was going well. Note that they checked the camera recordings before they ever even tried to walk into my nursery room to see me, the living breathing baby. My life wasn't important; only the 'public appearance' of me having a good home life mattered. Since that appearance could be sent out to friends and medias by email much faster than taking my baby carrier and walking around the offices and galas with me in hand, the choice of priority for them was obvious. As long as nothing wrong was happening, they didn't have any real reason to interact with me and accidentally form an emotional attachment that they reviled."

The depressive boy looked into the far night sky, eyes cloudy with repressed tears as he saw again thanks to his eidetic memory and psionic skills the suffering he had endured in those first years of life. His parents had reacted fast enough to the abuse the ignorant bitch had inflicted, but they had still never created a bond with him nor ever really cared beyond appearances that could be publicized to help their careers.

"The stupid little peasant girl had been destroying my health, my body and trying to dumb down my mind because I was too intelligent at that age for her ability to understand. She was a superstitious, religious fanatic without any true attachment to science, technique or even just reality. She lived and breathed the skewed catholic dogma taught by the illiterate priest in her birth village, even once she came to America. When she saw that I could already talk in complete sentences and articulate thoughts at the age of 11 months, she freaked out. She thought I had been possessed by a devil and tried to commit an exorcism on me, inflicting grave damages on my baby body at the time. She broke one leg but never let it set right. She dislocated the arm on the same side then never cared that it hung loose and unresponsive, starting to change color as gangrene and disease rotted it. She almost blinded me in one eye by trying to 'beat the devil out of me' by hitting me in the head and thorax with her dumb piece of trash, the 2,000 year old Book of Lies called Bible of Jesus Christ."

Swallowing passed a hard lump in his throat, the young man closed his flint-blue eyes in pain as his siblings closed ranks around him to support him with hugs and reassuring hands laid on his arms and shoulders. The rest of the Assembly remained respectfully silent during his needed period of recovery. What could they say to something twenty years in the past that was long gone?

"After firing the foolish, mentally defective waste of human skin, they brought me to a private, very discrete hospital that catered to the stars and richest patrons of Buffalo City. I was kept in that hospital's pediatric intensive care ward for almost two years to recover enough to be sent back home, if a live-in nurse could be procured for the year of re-adaptation I would need to have a normal life amongst regular people." Making a dismissive wave of the hand, the youth said despondently "I'm sure you can guess by now what Cynthia and Lawrence decided, especially since they were initiating their divorce procedures at the time? They elected to keep me in the hospital where I was obviously treated competently, even if devoid of solid emotional attachments worth mentioning. So, they continued with the contract they had given the hospital; heal my body, repair my organs and limbs, make sure all my organic functions were autonomous and ready for full use while at the same time supplying me with any reserved private tutor in any subject that I needed or wanted to learn."
Sighing, the young man explained "My parents didn't care what I learned or why; just that I get educated ASAP so they could leave me to my own devices in the shortest possible delays. The last common goal they shared was to see me emancipated and out on the street by any means available to their many contacts. So, when I showed I was good at languages, I got tutors for as many tongues as I had any interest in. When I showed a basic capacity for volumes, measures and calculating geometric shapes, I got tutors for mathematics. When I hummed music along the radio or could copy the sounds of a YouTube video after just a few seconds of listening, they got me tutors in vocalizations, harmonics, orthophonics and musical initiation. Then the hospital decided to have me fully and formally evaluated by the New York State department of Education before my release into society at age 5 with my grade school diploma already done, a full year before most kids even enter the school system for real. It was then that I got tagged with the label 'multi-genial super-prodigy' and my life was never the same afterwards."

"Contrary to what you may think, Lawrence and Cynthia were actually thrilled about the news. My elevated mind and capacities to learn meant they could justify keeping me at home with tutors, away from the masses of ill-washed uncouth peasants and delinquent juvenile rebels that haunted the streets of any city they had me living in. So, they didn't ask my opinion, just went on a hiring spree, the same way mom went on a shopping run for new shoes at the start of every season. They made two proofs of wisdom that I have to give them, despite how I feel about them as parents and people."

"Firstly; they hired a genuine 'governess' that was born in the USA and been through a specialty school in Boston that forms household live-in staff for the rich and important. She was in her forties, with experience and references from both parents and the kids she had helped raise. Her main job would be managing the household activities, all the while setting my discipline, schedule, budget and controlling the other tutors to keep them from harming me."

"Secondly; they hired tutors according to what I said I wanted to learn. That seems stupid to say at this point, but the people from the Dept. of Ed. said that if they listened to my needs and the way I expressed them, there would be less chance of rebellion or slacking off in the classes. So, they sat with me and a bevvy of experts to ask what my life goals were and where I wanted to be when I was 21 years old. After spending around three hours in general talks, they had a plan to direct how my secondary schooling would happen until I was 8 years old, then the university classes would be discussed."

"So, from the age of 5, I lived inside the boundaries of the large house in the outskirts of Buffalo. I never went to the stores, or parks or theaters. I always stayed inside the fenced in yard that surrounded the estate. It was four acres so it wasn't that small, but still, it was a golden cage. Given the improvement in comfort level and privacy from the hospital that was pretty much all I remembered since I could form and keep memories, it was enough to satisfy me quite easily. When I turned 7, I even managed to convince the governess that building me a small garden cabin with electricity and plumbing to spend the week-ends in peace with nature was a good idea to help me calm down from the week's efforts. She thought it an amusing notion; me having a private cottage on my own land, half an acre away from the main house. She agreed and had it built inside of a month."

"My tutors and governess had absolutely nothing bad to say about my behavior or performance, and my parents never saw anything wrong on the cameras that they surveyed every 2 or 3 weeks, when they had time to waste on overwatch. My trimestrial health checks at a clinic of their choice were clean as well, showing I had recovered from the cretin little peasant's attempted murder to the point it was as if it never happened. I lived the life I was told to live, because I never knew
anything else, and everything on TV or the web looked dirty, chaotic, dangerous and completely set to reduce my intellect to mush."

"When I turned 8 years old and tested out for all the high school classes, my parents decided that I was still too young to let out of the house, even with supervision like the governess or a driver/valet to escort me. They again sat with me and experts from the Dept. of Education to see what I should do for technical college or university classes that I could do from home, preferably without any class presentations or lab work that would mean physically going to the campus for those events.

"Given my high capacities in math and languages, I was 'guided' to do a bachelor's degree in advanced mathematics, geometry and physics. This would be easy as it was all classes that you read books, did the exercises and then had two exams that you could mail-in or do online for each class included in the diploma. It was so easy for me since I could speed read and write equations faster than most that I finished the whole thing inside of a year. Then, now aged 9, I asked to do the bachelor's degree in electrical & electronics engineering as it was also a mostly theoretical diploma. I completed that by age 10 then wanted a change of pace, so I went for a bachelor in history, sociology, civics, Law and politics that was also just book-readings and mail-in exams."

"After doing that easy humanities diploma by age 11 like I was on a sabbatical to relax my brain, I turned towards heavier sciences. I wanted to get a bachelor's degree that combined chemistry, biochemistry, material sciences and manufacturing processes targeted specifically for CNC machining and 3-D printing so I oriented towards bio-medical tools engineering. The parents were not enthusiastic, but as long as my outings away from the house were strictly the labs or classes of the university and nothing else, they agreed. On the other hand, it meant building a large garage & machinery shop with a second storey to hold the chemistry laboratory, chemicals' vault and a small 2½ rooms apartment that I could live in for all-nighters in crunch times when the exams and term projects were due. That diploma took me 2 years to accomplish out of home near Buffalo, but I still managed to have incredibly high grades and honorary mentions from several teachers."

"After that, the home troubles began. I was now 13 years old, autonomous enough to no longer be satisfied by staying tucked away in a cage like a pet finch, all blond and chirpy. With the small trips to university campus I had begun to see how much I missed having people and movement in my life, especially when I took the time to speak with the other students before class. I asked to do something that would help me reach my higher education goal, and have a social life as well since the estate's employees really didn't give a damn for my life or health, and never interacted with me unless it was maintenance related. The household staff had all been upbeat and happy to built the small cabin in the trees, then the large workshop with apartment, because it put space between them and me. The more time they spent away from me, the better off they were and, in the end, most didn't bother to hide their contempt and despise for me. I needed to leave that house quick before the contempt materialized into violence against me. To this day, I still have no idea what I did for those hirelings to hate me so much. I was always obedient, respectful, and even helpful when I could be, but none of them ever told me what I did wrong or why I was so hated."

"Anyways, I told my parent about how the situation had been changing badly, how the staff had begun openly scorning and insulting me for no reason I could see. We even reviewed the camera recordings and they saw that I hadn't lied or exaggerated. They didn't like the situation, but in order to process a crew change, plus give me a life outside the glass box, they had to swallow their
doubts to agree to send me away by myself to Stanford, in Silicon Valley in California, as an 'independant' student. They would buy a detached house for me so that I had my workshop and laboratory to maintain my hard sciences as I studied for the new diploma. That is when I surprised them; with four bachelors' degrees in hand already, I wanted to try for a master's degree in a domain nobody had tried. I wanted to study a mix of cybernetics and medicine to invent then build a 'neural interface' to link a human brain with a computer in such a way that it could transfer information and commands from one to the other. My goal at the time was to palliate comas and mental illness by an external device attached to a bed or wheelchair."

"My parents were caught flatfooted and the Dept. of Education people were flabbergasted about the subject I wanted to pursue, and the lofty ambitions I had for my life. In the end, Lawrence and Cynthia decided that it would look incredibly good and proper to have a Medical Doctor in the family instead of just another engineer or technologist, so they agreed and began the procedures to find a house with some land around to build the workshop and chemical vaults. I had a specific design I had worked on for years now that I submitted to them so their architects and engineers could redraw it, then build it to code. Again, they were surprised not so happily at the ideas and the costs involved, but it would get me out of their lives for 3 years solid and that was the real goal. Inside of a month I had a vacant lot and the build of house, workshop and laboratory had begun, with hiring the staff well under way."

"Since I had already been shipped off to start my classes at Stanford before the land was purchased, I lived in a rented duplex with an adult valet, since I was 13 years old and deemed physically autonomous. Most of the beginning classes in the first two years could be passed remotely by Internex and mail-in projects so I was able to pack as much work and credits into the whole 3 years I had to realize the diploma. Because of the complexity of the equipments and chemicals to buy periodically, my parents gave up on having a governess or butler manage my school affairs; they had the family lawyers incorporate a biomedical development company for me then handed over ownership to me the moment everything was stamped. They gave the company a yearly budget in exchange for dividend-bearing stocks, starting to treat me like just another business partner or foreign investment. That completed their emotional estrangement from me for the rest of how long they lived."

"At that moment, I only had a pair of adult valets to clean the house, cook and drive me around to my appointments. Unfortunately, they were hired by my father and knew he didn't care anymore, so they were less than respectful, and actually became violent against me. One even tried to beat me with a belt in the name of 'disciplining boys into men' so that I stayed a 'real white citizen of the Pure America'. I threw acid in the bastard's face when he came at me with his strap in the air, causing him life-long handicaps and forcing Lawrence to pay attention again. Dad's solution was simple; he fired everybody, telling me to use my company to hire my own employees instead of waiting for him to hold my hand. I understood the resulting situation for what it was, terminal parental abandonment, as I put the ads to hire my own household staff."

"For all practical purposes, as of the age of 14, I was completely on my own terms, free and alone without any adults to guide me or give help when I was sick or depressive. My cybernetics and medicine studies were going well. The teachers were again astounded by my intuitive understanding of concepts, and instinctive gestures that solved problems in the parts, or chemicals, on the workbench during tests or demonstrations. I had no social life despite being completely free of my decisions and having nobody to say 'NO' or hold me back when I did something. Out of isolation and depression, I concentrated solely on studying and inventing, plus doing some volunteer shifts at the Stanford University Hospital to get familiar with practical medicine and patient care ahead of those classes that would have me focusing on the hard-core health sciences. I actually managed to complete my packed-full master's degree in 3 years as predicted and presented both a closing report and degree's project that was a completely functional neural interface that
actually did connect a person to a robotic arm that moved according to the will of the human."

"That was when the problems started getting bad. Cynthia had completely abandoned me when I was 10 years old and no longer answered or implicated herself in my life anymore. She didn't even answer to the letter about my completing the master's degree and being recognized as 'Medical Doctor Wolenczak'. Lawrence no longer cared about me as either a son or a person; I was downgraded to 'exploitable resource' and nothing more. In a gesture of complete contempt towards my life and welfare, he did a secret deal with US Naval Intelligence to sell them 'exclusive rights' to my neural interface to interrogate prisoners despite the fact that he didn't have any ownership rights over the device or it's programs. He simply invoked being my 'father under God's law' and the stupid christian judge at the courthouse signed the papers without ever even giving me a word in the case."

"The head of US Naval Intel had just gotten transferred to the UEO to help bolster their fleet and military strategy because they were seen as deficient, weak even, in many circles around Washington DC. The bastard had a team of soldiers from the UEO come to my house and forcibly beat me down until I was unconscious so they could kidnap me and bring me to SeaQuest without my causing a scandal, or having the time to ask for help from people like DCFS or the ACLU who would have the means to stop the christian pig. The sailors were not in the least bit happy with my presence; they assaulted (beat) me regularly. I was injured every week and almost unable to work either the computers or the infirmary due to the wounds, lost mobility, and bad reactions to the medications. It got so bad that Admiral Noyce himself had to come in person to kick off the boat the worse offenders so I could recover enough to try and achieve the productivity levels he wanted. Since he was the fat white christian pig that kidnapped me and imprisoned me on that death-barge, I lied to his face about being thankful for him saving my life. I thanked him by putting the powdered form of a fatal virus in his coffee while he was talking to the doctors next to me, as I lay in the hospital bed with a broken arm and dislocated leg, yet again. He died in NCQ just six days later."

"After Noyce's visit, we were shoved off to hunt for Madeleine Stark and her merry bunch of pirates. None of the crew liked me and the top officers, Bridger, Ford, Hitchcock and Crocker, all constantly insulted, demeaned or spat on my capacities and achievements in medicine or technology. I spied on them using the ship's cameras and learned of how afraid of my intellect and creations they were. The underlying theme was they thought I would connect them to a central neuroplexic server to convert them all into mindless, soulless Borg drones for my own power and uses. There was no way in this life that I could ever convince them otherwise. With Noyce having already signed the orders to send over a dozen 'test subjects' out of a secret US-NI prison, they all had their minds made up and would never change for any reason."

"When I learned all this and saw what Noyce and his backers around the Trump White House wanted to accomplish with my device, I decided to actively patch up my health by my own medical expertise then get off the damned floating coffin, sinking her in the process if I could manage it. Given my deep, core-level access into the CPU stacks and data servers of the ship, I was able to completely hijack the cybernetic systems, shut down the PAL comms and project on the monitors completely false images and maps to lie about where we were going. I routed the ship towards the West Coast of the North American continent, aiming somewhere above the USA since Canada's reputation as a country of morally minded people was well established in my reality. When we were in range of the MR-class shuttles, I activated a ship-wide anti-intruder system that dispersed sedative gas through the vents to put people to sleep. I had measured the dosage to be sufficient to kill the entire contents of the ship three times over. I isolated myself in the secured quarantine room on sea-deck, injected the antidote in my veins, took an extra immunity booster pill and wore
a HAZMAT suit for seven hours until the traitorous deed was done."

"As the last living being aboard since even the dolphin had died from the poison, I took my time rewriting the ship's logs to send falsified back-ups to NCQ Fleet Central, then disconnected all GPS, comms and beacons to have the boat run silent at 1,500 feet beneath the waves. I took four days to evade the aerial search teams, a few small patrol ships, and shot dead several submarine drones that were hunting for the SeaQuest. I activated the comms just long enough to send out a batch of ten thousand different viruses and nasty malwares I had found on the web over the years and kept piling up for such an occasion of cybernetic warfare against somebody who had hurt me. That attack directly against the UEO's Fleet Command HQ was bad enough, especially since I used Bridger's security clearance to get in, to cripple their long range sensors for a week, allowing me to finish my escape. It's because of that radar silence, combined with the brouhaha of Noyce's death just that very day, that I was able to fake my own death along the SeaQuest and crew. I dove the ship down to 4,000 feet under the surface and found a nice little ledge jutting over a cliff that dropped down to 19,000 feet beneath. The drop would be catastrophic enough to kill and wreck the ship when she went over. I took a few hours to loot the ship of any small cybernetics, medical and weaponry parts I thought I could use for building shelter or barter with the locals. I took all the canned, pickled and jarred foodstuffs I could pack in the shuttle after my very rapid overview of the few tech spoils that were mobile enough to be carried by one single, small, non-athletic person in bad health like me."

"When my shuttle was filled up to the hatches, I did the very basic pre-sail checkup, filled the NitrOx tanks and again rewrote parts of the ship's automated logs and surveillance to throw off search parties. I parked the ship on the very cusp of the ledge and sat inside the shuttle cockpit, waiting for the midnight hour to finalize the last dirty deed. I opened every hangar door to the outside to fill up the parking silos and then used the computer to open all the internal doors, blast-doors, hatches and bulkheads that I could activate remotely. Once done, I ordered the nuclear reactor to commit terminal emergency shutdown, then triggered the simultaneous opening of the Aqua-Tube's outer gates, the parking hub's access hatches and the maglev's maintenance blast-doors that led to outside the ship. As soon as the freezing oceanic water started filling the ship's living spaces, I gunned the shuttle's engines, leaving the silo like a gunshot. It took less than one minute of water accumulation for the ship's weight to imbalance, tipping her stern-down into the abyss. She crashed, broke into about four large parts then exploded from ruptured diesel fuel bunkers and several chemical bombs I had set at key places in the structure to insure it would crack like a nutshell."

Letting out a mournful sigh, the young man's face contracted into a scowl as he said in hushed tones that belied the emotional storm behind them: "At the age of 16, I had finally acquired my Freedom from Evil and enslavement. All it cost was the mass murder of 235 people, high treason and going into a shadow-war against the planet's Alliance of Great Powers. No biggie, all told."

"I kept the shuttle hovering near the cliff drop long enough to witness the ship going down and exploding at the base of the ravine. When the wreck had been burning for a while, I turned the small craft towards the continental shoreline and gave her full throttle. I stayed on a straight course at 100 feet under the waves until I could beach her for good to finally, safely, breathe open air
again. After almost three whole months of violence, pain and humiliation at the hands of the military cronies of Noyce, I was aching for some solitary quietude to recover in peace. Thankfully, most of my injuries were no longer threatening, even though many were deep and disfiguring in ways that limited my mobility and more extended capacities. I still had a cast on my broken arm but my leg was getting better. It was the whip scars on my fingers that hurt and hindered the most. No matter though; as long as I could do the basics by myself, I could endure and eventually prosper."

"Now, for those who don't know it, the Western seaboard of British Columbia is about as bad as the shorelines of Alaska as they were formed the same way at the same geological period. It's mountainous, craggy territory split by huge fault lines into the bedrock and an almost sea-to-sea archipelago of miniature to ginormous islands all over the freaking map. There's almost no direct way to reach the continental shores because there's too many damned pieces of split-off rock making a virtual barrier between the main land and open ocean. So, I idled the shuttle for a while as I looked things over on Internex Mappe Mundiae© and made my peace about setting to ground on the outermost parcel of inhabited Canadian land I could find on the charts. That so happened to be a minuscule fishing community called Langara on the southern tip of a medium island called Langara as well."

Taking a few bites from a cold chocolate cake topped with green mint icing and maraschino cherries, the young male smiled in contentment; chocolate really was a universal remedy to all ailments. After a deep pull on his large metal thermal mug that every version of himself seemed to come with included, 'Lucas AG-4' leaned back into his settee and snuggled against the Thomas seated next to him for some human warmth. His friend, brother and lover wrapped a gentle supporting arm around him, lending him strength for the rest of the tale.

"I was immensely lucky: I emerged from the waters at night on the ocean side of the Langara Island's southern tip, about five kilometers (3 miles) away from the actual village of Langara. From where I was, the fishing wharves and houses were visible through the cameras of the shuttle's navigation systems. Everything seemed very quiet and peaceful, which was expected given the population is supposed to be under 1,000 people all year long with tourism bursts here and there. I started to scan the shores to find a place to beach the shuttle until I could unload my spoils of victory when I found something intriguing. There seemed to be an artificial trench in the beach that dug down to bedrock and did a straight line from the sea up to a small promontory deep inland. I brought the craft closer and scanned the seafloor to confirm my find; a man-made canal, and very old by the looks of the sediments and debris packed into the trench."

"Not having any better place to park, I piloted the shuttle up the canal until we were beach-level and I could confirm that it did go deep inland at the same elevation and width as a passable waterway, not just a dam spillway or factory's wastewater drainage. Barely a minute away or 1,000 yards from the beach line I saw a weird building on the left side of the canal, away from Langara Village, and my sensors suddenly told me they had finally spotted something huge another 2,000 yards ahead. The 100 foot wide, 35 foot deep canal ended up at the feet of a large building with two tall metal doors that closed the canal from bottom to about 100 feet above the water. The lower part of the doors, the 35 feet inside the trench, was actually metal grating through which a steady current streamed constantly to keep the canal filled all the way to the sea."

"I turned the shuttle back to the weird building on the left of the canal before of the large manufacture and parked the craft with only the dorsal walkway above water. I used the boat's four dynamic anchors to keep the boat stable while I got the hatch opened and the gang plank in place to reach the canal's sidewalk. In that temperature, getting the slightest bit wet would have killed me in mere minutes if I couldn't get back inside the boat to dry off and get warmth into my bones; better stay dry from the onset. After a couple of tries, I got the aluminum boarding plank set up and
steady. I got off, bundled up in all the warm clothing I happened to own and tempted my luck by going around the stone construction."

The young adult took a long pull of his coffee then swirled it in the mug, eyes blurred with memories long passed in times he tried to forget. After a few bites of cake, he continued. "The edifice looked centuries old and was made of quarried stone, large 100 pound blocks that were stacked neatly and mortared tightly. The basic shape was a round tower about four storeys high with two rectangular wings at 90 degree angle; one of the wings was parallel to the canal and the other one was completely perpendicular with the tower as the joint of the axle. The walls, balcony slabs and banisters, roof shingles and window frames, everything was heavy stone varying from dull gray to deep night-blue for the decorative details. The windows were actually solid; filled in with antique slats of thick barely translucent glass. Even the door was made of a single slab of deep blue stone that must have weighed a ton. There was no lock on the door's face but there was a handle. I tried it and after giggling it a bit, the rust fell off and the portal opened."

Thomas leaned into his boyfriend's side so he could place a gentle kiss on his head, hoping to calm him enough that he could finish the tale of how they met. Jenna, seated on the emotional young man's other side, put her hand on top of his head to massage his scalp, something that always helped him with his tension migraines that he was prone to suffering periodically. Looking deeply into his empty thermal mug, Lucas 'AG-4' pouted at his boyfriend, adding in the quivering lower lip until the other man grumped goodnaturedly about his lover being a lazy bum. He still grabbed the coffee carafe to refill his mug anyways, earning himself a kiss in return thus making the whole 'effort' well worth it.

Now fortified by Holy Java and loving friends, 'Lucas AG-4' had enough strength to continue. "After getting inside the building, I found out that it was built very differently than a traditional lighthouse guardian's home. The ground floor was used for a workshop in one wing and a stable & cart parking in the other whilst the middle room had a sort of antiquated infirmary setup. The first floor was a 12 bed dormitory in each wing and living room in the central joint. Then the tower's second floor was a combo kitchen & dining room and the fourth floor was a sort of guard room with antiquated brass telescope and a central table that held a drawing of the entire Langara Island with several land features, roads, railroads and canals that weren't on the Internex satellite maps. The fifth floor was the tower's flat roof, surrounded by battlements and four small 2 inch caliber black powder cannons that looked like the first models of breach-loader from the 1800's."

"The whole setup wasn't that big but it had two major benefits I could see right off the bat: cast iron wood burning stoves in every room and primitive electrical appliances with wall mounted wires and sockets. I trailed the wires down to the basement where I found a gem in riveted cast iron: a steam engine that drove a water pump and electrical generator. I was incredibly lucky that everything was completely dry without any rot, fungus, animal droppings or any sort of damages that I could find during my quick tour. I had lit up the steam boiler and all the stoves as I walked upon them when I visited the entire edifice, that way I would have enough light, warmth, and a simmering meal when I started moving my camping gear and equipments from the shuttle. With such a well built, solid and well kept edifice at hand, I didn't see the need to go elsewhere for a long while until I was certain of the situation in NCQ. Believe it or not, but the primitive radio and radar installation in the fourth floor was going to be a big help with that once properly connected to my own portable CPU systems."

"It was after seven long hours of arduous manual labor in the cold biting wind that I finally finished transferring my stores and got settled in. I was installed in comfort in the dorm facing the ocean shore for the long haul and even had my portable computers and communications antennae set up so I could watch CNN, FOX, the local CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) channel. I needed to have some passive entertainment for when I was too affected by my medications to do
anything active safely. I took the second day I was on Langara Island to survey my injuries and infections, and try to self-medicate as best I could. Thankfully, I had done a razzia in the SeaQuest's infirmary stores so I had plenty of surgical tools, sensors, analyzers and dozens of different meds to solve my situation until I could find a discrete private clinic on the Canadian mainland. I knew I wouldn't be able to finish everything by myself and most of the bad injuries would scar, even the internal things, so I had always planned to find an in-patient facility, once things settled down with the UEO, so I could move silently under everybody's radar."

The young male swallowed passed a lump in his throat as he thought of how to explain what he lived. "When I was settled in after about two days, I toured the small infirmary in exhaustive detail. I was amazed to find what looked like a primitive X-ray machine but turned out to be so much more. It showed things in both living and inert matter that I had never been aware of, and covered segments of the energy spectrum that were only hinted at in the fringes of the scientific community. Basically, it was a magical scanner even more efficient and capable than the top-of-the-line prototypes aboard SeaQuest had been. Then the cabinets revealed books and tools about what I had stumbled upon; potions, alchemy, biomancy, faith healing, organic manipulations and other wondrous themes that grabbed me by the mind and held me in thrall for weeks. I was so enraptured by the things I read and learned that when I tried some of the potions in the reserves and then scanned my body to confirm the results, I almost lost an entire day in flabbergasted stupor! My deep organ injuries and skeletal cracks were all healed! The permanent lancing pains in my head behind my eyes were gone and my vision was no longer blurred or skipping around every three hours! I was cured at long last!"

Turning his flint-blue eyes to the Assembly, the sad youth asked "If you are demeaned, tormented, abused, battered and threatened with rape and death for months then escape to a place where new sciences and techniques save your life, health and sanity, what would you do? For my part, I savored my new health and relished my recovered freedom. If I drowned myself in these books, immersed myself with abandon in this new world of wonders and miracles, can you blame me when you compare it to what I had escaped, or had to return to, if I was found to be alive?"

Smiling sadly, the young adult looked towards the past with glassy, teary eyes as he remembered the events that followed his two months of isolation in the remote wilds of the north. "I slowly rebuilt some of my old health and emotional equilibrium by the most ordinary means available. I walked around the building's outside perimeter twice a day to get some exercise and fresh air, even when depressed. I chopped at least two dozen logs every day to get some upper body workout and put on some muscle mass, which meant I got to start taking down some trees. I never did that in my life, so I went online to look up lumberjack videos before coming near anything green so I didn't put my meager life in danger. I started with saplings, then medium trees and stayed with that since I was alone and couldn't strain my back and legs too much. And in the evenings or stormy climate, I read about the Arcane Arts, Occult Sciences and Eldritch Practices of Lost Aeons, even going so far as to learn how to cast and use some practical magic myself, thus confirming the reality of it all."

Sipping some coffee, 'Lucas AG-4' ordered his thoughts about what he wanted to speak. "As time passed by, I was getting used to my lonely existence on the snow swept island. It wasn't bad or even harsh, just very demanding because I had never been very physical until I was obliged to fend for myself. I actually enjoyed chopping wood, shoveling snow off my balconies and all the projects, cybernetic, medical and magical, that I had going all at once."

"Then I got a heart attack at the ripe old age of 16 when this big lug," he pointed the smirking 20 year old 'Thomas' seated besides him, "came into my life by jumping out of the damned
monumental fireplace in the basement of the tower. The thing was big enough for two adults to stand in side-by-side. I figured it was made to heat the entire four level structure since it was the only hearth that big in the entire building; but no! It was a bloody firegate terminal! And this smarmy brat just ups and launches out of it like a jack-in-the-box right at the moment I'm walking by with an armload of quartered logs to feed the steam boiler. We ended on the floor in a pile of limbs and logs, face-to-face close enough that we could actually TASTE what the other guy had for lunch that day. And then the demented little runt had the gumption to start laughing his head off like a loon, asking me 'That was Fun! Wanna to do it again?' like it was an amusement park ride!"

"Laugh all you want, cads!" griped the young man as the Assembly members were chortling openly about his first encounter with the Labarre's for his timeline. "Here I was doing my chores, minding my business quietly like I always do and 'wham!' in the kisser! I tell you, even just on their feet, blonds shouldn't be allowed to drive!" he told his gathered family much to their amusement since over three quarters were in fact of the blond haired persuasion.

"Oi! It wan't funny then! I barely weighed 140 pounds all dressed and sopping wet when that 180 pounds of muscular adolescent wearing full trail gear rammed into me like a roller derby champion! It bloody well hurt and since I was barely recovered from my months of injury, it really wasn't pleasant. Anyways, the Apostle of the Loon finally got off me, then helped me stand up so I could figure out how hurt I was, and how much backslide my health had suffered. When he realized I was injured, Tom acted as he usually does; on instinct with his heart on his sleeve. He placed both hands on my chest to incant a 'Lay on Hands' prayer in the glory of Yggdrasil that healed all my recent injuries. Then the overgrown moppet put his head in the fireplace and shouted at somebody to come through cuz he needed help. That was when the other blond bimbo came out of the flames to scare another decade off my lifespan."

Thomas and Jenna were laughing hard, holding their ribs as they shook in mirth at the memories of those first weeks with Lucas in their lonely, isolated lives. The smarmy motormouth certainly didn't leave his place to anybody else when he was in a snit! They had both learned pretty fast that their new brother would care for them but not let himself be taken for an easy to victimize fool ever again by anybody.

Smirking at the pair of his closest friends-cum-siblings, 'Lucas AG-4' accelerated the pace a bit. "You have to know these two moppets to understand just how kind and caring they are. But, you have to live with them to know just how high maintenance they can both be. After our encounter by the firegate, Jenna healed the rest of our contusions and bumps then proceeded with better introductions. She's the polite one in the family, in case you didn't know yet... Anyways, they were impressed by my taking care of the place, and even more impressed by my academic performances, especially when I explained what I had managed to learn by myself of the Arcane and Occult. A few demonstrations later had them inviting me to come live with them permanently at their cloaked estate in the mountainous eastern side of British Columbia. Since the alternative was to live alone until I became miserably depressive again, I accepted easily enough so they helped me to move. It's incredible how fast 'packing' and 'unseen servant' spells can make all that inventory move around."

After a few bites of oatmeal cookies to counter-balance all the sugary coffee and cake, the young male took up his tale. "Living near Atlin Village in the evergreen forests was a truly novel experience for me." The medical engineering specialist spoke in soft content tones. "I had lived in the small wooded patch on my family estate for a long time when I was young but it was never truly the life of the farm and wilderness, not when you have water from plumbing and your food gets delivered on call from the kitchen in the house nearby. The first few weeks living together were quite funny. We all had a whole lot of adapting to living with more than just our selves, and its not like any of us were particularly used to strangers at that time."
"Firstly, in my reality, Tom and Jen shared the bedroom of their dead parents. It was the coping mechanism they had used to have an anchor through the grief, nightmares and catastrophic destruction of their lives. Without any other relatives or even neighbors to lean on, they had folded into each other to find the penultimate bastion of safety and relief. In many ways, I think the only reason they had not become incestuous by the point of our meeting was due to Thomas being gay and Jenna not having any real desires for a relationship with anyone at the time. Suffice it to say, my arrival caused a lot of weird situations. I had to talk a lot to convince them that I didn't see their shared bed as odd or wrong, so long as that was all it was; a shared sleeping arrangement to keep the night terrors at bay. Eventually though, because of my presence and my much more frequent watching of TV and Web which brought more culture from the outer world inside their home, they separated and returned to using their own original bedrooms full time."

"It might surprise you to learn that I had sex with Jenna first. But you need to remember that back then, I was just as isolated and malignized as they had been, just in a different way. I had never been allowed to develop feelings for anybody nor figure out clearly for myself what I liked. That means that when I had to help out Jen after a cauldron of potion accidentally spilled all over her arms and chest during a test we were doing together, I got an eye full and didn't dislike what I saw. Jenna herself wasn't adverse to my reaction and, after healing her superficial injuries, she showed me just how lonely and forlorn she herself had been until my arrival. I won't go into details, its useless, but we took two hours of shared comfort in her room and we never regretted it afterwards. Well, that's not true; we regretted the butt-warming Thomas gave us both for trying to hide from him that his sister had gotten injured, and for 'fooling around' instead of doing our chores properly. I have to say that was my first real experience with their way of keeping discipline in the family as more than a simple witness. It was less damaging and cruel than what many of my tutors had tried, but it certainly left an impression on my poor cheeks despite the fact it was another teenager who spanked me. On the other hand, it might have been that nice long hug Tom held me in afterwards that made me consider that a man with good strong arms could possibly be what I was really looking for." The blue eyed male shrugged amusedly as he elbowed his lover gently in response to his laughing at the old familiar tale.

Speaking again, 'Lucas AG-4' continued. "We had to make a lot of efforts in learning to live together since neither of our little trio was that used to a crowd. Getting passed our personal habits to include the others was a constant mantra at the back of our minds, and it wasn't always that easy to put in practice. All three of us ended up getting scolded and spanked by the other two for multiple things that we were so used to do alone without thinking that we would be safer with help, or even simply the act of leaving a message when going out of the building for a prolonged evening walk in the forest around the estate. Snort! That one was mostly Thomas, though. That boy simply can't stay indoors unless there's a life-threatening storm pounding on the region, but Jenna had her absent-minded moments too. I certainly didn't shy away from disciplining them when they needed it, as they both had asked for me to participate in making them better people who were fit to go out in public instead of acting like the forsaken wildlings they thought they had devolved to. And that was the first of many misconceptions that I had to help them pass beyond; they were neither wild nor savage, just unused to having large crowds around them. Since I had the same problem, I used my own situation to teach them 'indoors' coping skills."

"And yes, If you think that often, those events of 'warranted' punishment started out as genuine disciplinary concerns but ended as sexual encounters, you aren't wrong. All three of us had no experience with sex or even with relationships at all, and here we were, in a safe setting with people who had proven to be as badly worn-out by life as ourselves. It was the ideal place and time to try out things in peace without feeling threatened or pressured into things we didn't want. And neither of us was blind to the fact that quite a few times, the order to drop our pants to receive a 'well earned spanking' was just a transparent ploy to get frisky after a little athletic 'warm-up'
foreplay. On other times, though, I will admit like 'Thomas AH-I' did, that being reprimanded and corrected was necessary to grow and become a better person because I don't think I would be half the man I am without the help my spiritual siblings have given me. The actual set of rules was adapted to my presence and the use of 'outside world' perspective became more common through my explanations of it, while they taught me the Traditions of The Old Ways, the Faith in Yggdrasil and how druidic religion was actually compatible with sorcery, transmutation and mundane sciences. We re-wrote the list of chores, rules and added a few obligations to have time off, de-stress and even start little forays to the villages they could reach safely and secretly by firegate or watergate."

"We then started acting young, like the age we had. We went out to see the world while knowing we had a secure compound to retreat into at night. We went to the Magical Bank in Victoria City (BC) to awaken the Labarre clanhold to get Thomas full status as Head with Jenna as the Lady-in-Waiting, in case something happened to Tom before he married and had kids to inherit. We shopped, we ate in restaurants, we got some clothing that was simply nice to wear and look at, not just bare necessity. We were starting to live again. And yes, we found comfort and solace in each other's arms and body when the burdens of ancient history were too much to bear alone. Since it was always wanted, never imposed, we three found ourselves healed, stabilized and better off for it all after it was done. Along the way, I discovered that I was bi but mostly gay and promptly told both so that I could honestly concentrate on my relationship with Thomas. Jenna accepted it kindly, even though she pouted a while and destroyed our meager reserves of ice cream in an attempt at self-medication. Tom and I made certain to integrate her in our activities often, to not let her fall into depression or a feeling of abandonment. Thankfully, we had begun to break out of isolation so she wasn't completely dependent as she had been in the beginning, and now we were getting some new people too."

The young adult raked a weary hand through his stringy blond hair as he thought about how to end the recap of his early life. "The months after I arrived in Atlin were peaceful, compared to the rest of the world and my life, until the arrival of our new siblings in adversity. First we had to rescue and heal Martin and Diana. A few months later it was Jonny, Hadji and Jessie who stumbled on us badly frozen, starved, and catastrophically depressed because their dads had just been killed in front of them by General Rostov as they were fleeing his island fortress. After that we saved Alan and Tanusha from a plane crash, and a month later it was Jason, Lua and Eric that had boat troubles near one of the Labarre's emergency bolt-hole properties in the south Pacific. About a year after I had joined them, our extended group of spiritual siblings was assembled, trying to heal, help and support emotionally each other as best we could. We were really lucky to have as many survivalists and medical experts as we did, otherwise we would have had a far harsher time of it, with at least two dead that I can guarantee wouldn't have made it passed the moment of contact."

With the story's important parts told in full, Young Lucas #18 signaled for the Assembly to take its bathroom break whilst he compiled some notes and comments for later consideration. His 'brother' had said many things and very intelligent observations during his long exposé, many leading the juvenile crime boss to think that several things had been going wrong in their lives because of external interventions, not because the kids themselves were bad, stupid or destined for Perdition.

The boy filled the forms and analytics sheets he had programmed in his computer then ran a preliminary compilation to have some foresight of what the extended broad-spectrum inquiry would produce once everything was properly tagged and quantified. The initial results were bad, confirming his gut feeling; there was something nasty underfoot, trying its best to destroy them. The hints of it were clearly visible in the two first stories; he expected to see further symptoms in the following accounts of all the other groups.
Now, specifically about 'Lucas' were to be researched the multiple technological and medical diplomas his counterparts had studied. To whit, neurology, neural interfaces, neuroplexic programming, brain-control implants, drug based hypnotism, and the presence/activities of psionicists in all their lives to see just how threatened their sanity was.

It was also an absolute necessity to analyze and evaluate the parents, grand-parents and tutorial setup for each because it seemed to be a lot more variable for himself than for the other members of their extended family, whose study pattern seemed pretty much fixed across all realities. Why were his studies and professional competencies so wildly different? And how had he managed to not end up so totally alone and isolated like all the others seemed to have been made to suffer? In fact, it was a recurring theme for the 'Lucas' versions that they had been practically pariahs, either exiled or imprisoned all their youth, until the US Naval Intel or the UEO Navy came to hijack them.

Why were the 'Lucas' the only ones who had criminal contacts unlike any of the others? Only Martin came close in that score, but strictly from a law enforcement perspective, never by having friends or usable contacts amongst the interlope community, nor the Dark Web. For that matter, it would be necessary to figure out from where exactly came the idea of enslaving so many of his counterparts aboard a bloody warship, the same ship in all realities too. The child seriously doubted that somebody as unimaginative as his father could come up with that crapulence all by his lonesome. And Admiral Noyce was always involved, too. That, right there, reeked of outside interference, focused on himself with clear malice.

Plus, of course, they had to identify who the Hell was this bastard Franklin Henry Wise, what he did, WHY did he try to destroy the Lucas in his reality, what his connection to SeaQuest was, and WHAT was that demonic womb-tuber plant that emerged from the brain implant used to enslave their 33 year old brother.

After a good 15 minute break, the Assembly gathered again to hear from the Mystère family.

Memories 3; Martin & Diana

(Martin Mystery – opening theme)

Sunday February 10th of 2301 – around 04:18am
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans’ Support Services (VSS)
Motorpool garage building

Martin AH-2 (Adult Hetero – reality #2) the second oldest 'Martin Mystère' in the Assembly spoke up next. His sister placed an arm on his back, her face a mask of anguish. "I'm gonna skip a lot of my childhood because practically 90% of it was spent in boarding school, exclusively at Torrington Academy as they have two campuses next to each other; one for grade school and one for secondary school. There is even a Torrington House & dorms at the University of Sherbrooke, purpose-built and reserved for the institution's most promising alumni who want to go into higher learning in town, instead of leaving for Montreal, Quebec, Toronto or elsewhere to study. Because of the tightly regulated behavior of the school's personnel, teachers could be verbally aggressive, sometimes demeaning, but never got physically violent with the kids as that was already
It's funny, somehow, to think that I never got spanked a single time in my life until I met Jenna, Thomas and Lucas in my reality. It was illegal for teachers to hit students in Canada since the late 1980's and there was even a mandatory denunciation law in place since. From 2004 onwards, it was illegal across the entire country to punish physically a young person over the age of 12, or use anything other than the bare open hand when spanking a child. Hitting the head, face, or use of any item during the punishment were considered an automatic aggravated assault with intent to cause harm which Canadian criminal courts judged as such. Lucas is actually the first person to ever warm my rear for correction in a gentle, responsible way, to help me grow to become a better person. My father certainly wouldn't have been gentle about anything, and never saw any potential for goodness or evolution in me."

"In fact, my damn father never cared for laws other than his own cuz he certainly never shied away from slapping me in the face, or punching me in the head. I got belted, whipped, rodded, switched, strapped, boxed, punched, slapped, smacked and pretty much every aspect of physical hitting or torturing that a man can do, but without ever receiving anything on my ass. I have no friggin' idea why or how that happened. By some dumb accident of bad luck, it was the only part of the child endangerment laws that Gerard ever respected, and not because he was careful of aiming his hits specifically. I kept hearing about butt-spankings from other kids in boarding school who bitched about their parents having heavy hands, while trying not to weep out my eyes or black out completely from the pain of my injuries. They worried about their sore ass when I wondered about the infections in the bleeding cuts across my back, the burns from the fireplace poker on my torso, or the broken ribs that my old man left as a back-to-school parting gift at each and every – mandatory – school holidays that I had to spend at our family house."

Martin AH-2 contemplated the purple grape juice in his glass as he chewed pensively on some oatmeal cookies, trying to pass through the lump in his throat. What he had to say wasn't pleasant and, contrarily to popular belief, it never got easier with the passing of years.

"Everything in our lives, for Diana and me, had been ordained by Gerard from the moment we were born into his unwanting arms. That's a hard truth to accept after all these years, especially for Diana, that our dad had never in his life loved us, or even wanted us a little bit. We were burdens imposed on him by society, and he resented us for it everyday of our lives. He had to be 'careful' to hit me only in places that I could hide from outsiders with everyday clothing, so he couldn't hurt me to the point of crippling or maiming as he dearly wanted to do, therefore he devised a way to do so indirectly, in full view of the public. He 'weaponized' my own sister, brainwashed her, turned her from the moment I drew my first breath into an attack bitch that was relentless in her vicious attacks against my body, mind, and standing in society. She hit me, she demeaned me, derided me, and conspotted me right at my face at every chance. She spoke ill of me, tarnishing my reputation with each and every adult, child or animal she met. She beat me with her fists and feet, with any improvised weapon she could grab in her rage... Broomstick, shovel, belt, rope, brick, rock, throwing tableware at my head, trying to splash me with scalding grease from frying bacon in a pan or boiling water from the tea kettle on the gas hob... And numerous other ways and attempts, all over a decade and a half of misery, whether at home, school, or in travels during the obligatory holidays when dad took us on his xenobiology survey expeditions to Africa or South America."

The 21 year old young adult sighed deeply in miserable recollection of what had been a dreary, lonely, pain-filled life until salvation began appearing at age 15, taking 2 whole years to finally coalesce into reality that would truly set them free of Gerard.
"The Center for the Investigation and Research of Paranormal Activity (CIRPA) was specialized in dealing with not only the magical plants, animals and evolved races that most of you know about, but also 'aliens' from off world. The more I learned and experienced about magic and aliens, the less I cared about, or reacted, to the violence of either Gerard or Diana. The violent, cult-like atmosphere lasted for all the first 15 years of my life until I started field work for CIRPA. I had already been doing small research projects and lower administrative work for them since age 11, but under non-disclosure contracts, which was no help at all. It was when I started going on expeditions with Diana and Java that they started lending me the U-Watch with its incredible Legendex and the multiple training manuals inside. With all the scanners and tools the U-Watch could materialize, I increased not only the pace of my work, but also the quantity done and the overall quality of the results. CIRPA helped me learn and develop a lot of skills that I had secretly been trying by myself to become good at, in the hopes of joining the Canadian Coast Guard at age 18, the age of majority in Canada, and the minimal age the recruits can have to apply."

With faces showing clearly the great turmoil in their souls, the two siblings held on to each other, an arm around each other's shoulders as they let fall the tears they had repressed for so long when the tyrant had still been around to hold them in thrall. The young male wiped his golden hued eyes before he continued, squeezing his fiancée's hand to anchor himself emotionally, to draw strength from her as he retold the depraved history of his childhood. Jenna leaned sideways to kiss him on the temple near the eye, then laid her forehead against the side of his head to share some of her warmth and kindness with this wonderful person who had agreed to share his life with her.

Swallowing his bile, Martin continued forward through the story. "From age 15 and on, I started to take better care of my body and my person as a whole, including my mind and emotions. I became almost refractive to the attacks from Gerard and Diana, especially the psyche stuff they both kept piling on, to grind my soul down to dust so they could finally push me to suicide. They failed. And when I turned 17 years old, Gerard began to panic. You see, the bastard had kept Diana from advancing in school to the grade that she was really capable of achieving, which would have her in university by age 14, if not earlier. In truth, I could also have qualified for early graduation to collegiate classes by age 14, if our dad hadn't been a criminal bent on killing us both. So, the man made friends with the principal at Torrington, fed him a steady diet of lies, money and gifts, paid out of MY inheritance, the fucktard! He managed to make it so that despite being 10 months older than me, Diana and I were always kept in the same year, and also the same class group. The reason was simple; Gerard wanted his attack bitch to always be at hand, to hurt or demean me non-stop, all day, every day, even on holidays and vacations."

"But then the inevitable happened. Diana was already 18 years old when I turned 17 while it was the end of secondary 5; the last year of mandatory schooling for 'child age' persons in Canada. That meant that regardless of my actual physical age, I would now be free to choose a University, career or trade of my own, without parental consent required. Gerard went ballistic! He had wanted BOTH of us dead by now, before I reached majority so that I didn't find out about La Maison des Mystères with its rich history. He especially didn't want me taking a hold of the vast fortune, for he feared that I would hire lawyers to investigate my health and childhood, then attack and destroy him under the aegis of The Law of Venerable Antiquity, which is the founding precept of all magical communities on Earth and the Other Planes. His time was out, so he tried one last great play to try and obtain the finish he craved."

Martin sipped some grape juice again, taking a small muffin filled with yummy pear jam that went down just the right way to soothe his stomach and nerves. A gentle shoulder massage from his lover while his brother-in-law Thomas grasped his forearm to squeeze it in a show of affection and support were well appreciated.

After a couple of minutes, Martin explained: "What our idiot father didn't know was that I had
become aware of my Family's magical roots by accident during a CIRPA mission to Paris. We had to clear out a coven of hybrid vampires who were nesting in the catacombs beneath an old, abandoned manor, just by the river's retention walls. It so happened that this was the ancient ancestral seat of the Maison des Mystères, MY house by inheritance. The very moment I set foot inside, the wards and protective enchantments awoke, trying their best to heal, soothe, and support ME as their reigning Lord Magister. During the fight, it was revealed that the vampires were actually several of my ancestors that had hibernated for a few centuries, to outlive a systematic purge of mystical beings by the christian fanatics of the epoch. Once they recognized us as blood-kin, after an ill-fated attempt at converting me into a vamp, all hostilities ceased and my place as clanhead was established in full. It was through sustained magical communications with these distant kin that I was educated about my past, and lofty station in life. This would be critical later on."

"Gerard was bad-lucked until the very end. His great finale was to drag me and Diana, who was drugged and spelled up the wazzoo, to a remote stretch of untamed forest in the north of Quebec. The funny thing was that these primordial woods had been owned by the Labarre Clan for centuries, as such, they had several stonework watchtowers dotting the landscape to guard their lands and natural resources against poachers or claim jumpers. The two siblings were tower-hopping around their many lands because they had welcomed a certain blond wunderkind (Lucas) to their homestead a few months before. They wanted to show him how much their family had contributed to society by protecting the forests in its hay-days. It was our dumb luck to Di and I, that Gerard pulled out his gun to shoot at us right next to the tower being visited by the blond trio, or else my sister and I would be compost on a hillside today."

Looking towards the young man to was soon to be his beloved brother-in-law, Thomas, the young alien and magicks specialist from CIRPA smiled a rare genuine smile of affection and respect like he rarely showed outside his small family group. Grasping firmly the younger male's hand, he squeezed gently to show his love and desire for the other boy to be in his life, just as much as he wanted Jenna or Diana. Even with all the group assembled today, Martin still felt he didn't have enough family around him to help fully heal all the wounds his heart had suffered in his life. The others had similar feelings for their own health and souls, too.

Turning to face the center table again, the Magistrat des Mystères sighed sadly as he told. "Gerard sucker punched me in the back of the head, dropping me to the ground before putting a wildly shot bullet through my leg, in the thigh just two inches beneath the hip joint. Then, he knelt down besides me and pistol-whipped me all over, hitting every part he could reach without moving from his position. Thinking me finally out of action and unconscious, the old bastard concentrated on shooting Diana once in the gut, then pistol-whipping her to death's doorstep like he had done to me. I had never been unconscious, though I faked it well enough to fool him. With all the missions for CIRPA in the preceding 2 years, plus my violent childhood, I had learned two critical skills for my survival. Staying awake through pain so I knew what was happening, and more importantly, how to stay mobile to dodge properly despite pain and injuries, to avoid worse damages when out in the field. That I actually used those skills almost as much at home as in the missions just goes to show you what kind of parent I had. Anyways, Gerard had just pummeled Diana into a blackout induced by the double concussion he smacked into her head, when he turned back to me, gun raised, lining up to kill. I initiated the change into my hybrid form, using the wings to deflect the bullets until his weapon was empty, then charged at him, intent on ripping his head off, except the injury in my leg had gimped me badly. As I collapsed in a heap on the loam, I saw him fall to the ground, having sprouted a pair of brown wooden arrows, which promptly detonated into stasis and slumber spells. Thomas had just used his most reliable go-to system for combat, his hand-crafted ranger's bow, to put down the bastard until we could be healed enough to deal with him permanently."

Closing his amber eyes, the young man spoke softly. "The three rescuers ran out of the heavily
cloaked and warded tower to come help us. The moment Lucas used his few nascent psionic capacities to scan my mind and identify who we were, and why the old adult was killing us, he flew into a rage, telling Thomas in clipped words what it was about. Lucas took care of me since he was much more familiar with general medicine, and Jenna took care of Diana who was actually much easier to heal with potions. For some reason, potions that work well of soft tissues and concussions are easy to make and keep reliable, whereas lesions and bullet holes need more specialized treatment. I was just lucky as Hell that Lucas was educated the way he was, and that he was present to give directions for my care. The three teenagers gathered all three of us like a mule train, with Gerard solidly spelled and physically bound by steel chains on top, then brought us to the homestead in Atlin, in BC."

"While Diana and I were in the infirmary, fighting for our lives, they managed to get a full accounting of his lies, frauds, crimes, and depravities from Gerard's own mouth by force-feeding him enough truth serum that he was almost poisoned by it after five days. Once certain he had no further secrets, or even just general informations that Di and I would need to reach the bank and claim the House, they executed him. We were never told who did the act, or how, and frankly, we never wanted to know either. We were just both incredibly grateful they had saved our lives, our sanities, and completed that interrogation so thoroughly, because I know that I wouldn't have been able to endure through the process myself. Interrogating, spelling the truth, out of your own parent, I know inside of me that I couldn't have. But my life is safer, saner and so much better because they did do what I never could."

"It was after being rescued by the Labarre's that I finally got a healthy family supporting me and explaining things truthfully, with enough openness and facts to understand the difference between training, education, incitement, reward, deterrent, reprimand, correction, punishment, abuse, torment and torture." The young adult turned towards the people from his reality, smiling at them in genuine love and respect before continuing his remembrance. "I finally saw in Lucas, Thomas and Jenna the genuine role models of what stable, mature persons should be like, instead of the insane, unstable brute my father had always been. They showed Diana and me that you can love someone enough to forgive their errors or misdeeds, but you don't have any obligation to just lie down like a victim, taking silently what they do without defending yourself or rectifying their attitude."

"I sure got an eye opener to family life the first time I saw Jenna grab Diana, take her across her knees, pull down her sweat pants, and lay a full hand-spanking on her bare butt because she had just threatened to hit me in the head with a wooden broomstick. My sister had been nastily reminding me that she had done so dozens of times before, and certainly would not be shy about doing it again, regardless of Gerard's actions against her, or his death. Jenna was outraged by that revelation and wasted no time in showing it. After that rude shock to the system, we had a solid group conversation about what was expected in respecting the safety and integrity of each person on the Labarre estate, and what would happen to deviants. Let's just say it was a road with a rocky starting point. Diana and I didn't always 'take it sitting down', if you get my drift... The others weren't any better off either, come to think of it..."

While the 'Lucas', 'Thomas' and 'Jenna' from the speaker's reality just shrugged away the implications with good natured smiles, there were a few guffaws and snorts of laughter from the younger members of the Assembly, while the older gave the many 'Martin' looks of sympathy for the violence and victimization he suffered from his father and sister in his earliest years.

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hurting me. It was actually Lucas who took me to task the first time it happened. About a week after being rescued from Gerard's latest - and last - attempted murder. I was almost recovered from dear old dad attempting to kill me, moving out of the infirmary to a bedroom when Luke came in, took my meager bag of stuff and said to me that I was too hurt emotionally to leave alone before a long while. He offered to take me into his room as all the guest rooms had two single beds so we would each have a clear sector to call our own."

"While I had been used to single occupancy rooms at Torrington Academy since it was a 'luxury school', I told myself having a bunkmate could be fun and it would be a change of pace to have someone not running away from me at first glance. I took the offer gratefully and moved in with him. He helped me to walk as my legs and back were healed but still sore, like my arms and head too. Dad had done a number on me during that beating; he really had wanted to end me that day."

"Anyways, Lucas set me up, helped me to move around by letting me lean on his arm or shoulder, and he always smiled or looked me in the eyes without anger or disgust. That was new for me, but I was so emotionally unstable that I couldn't take it for long. After about an hour together where he had helped me to the en-suite bathroom and back, I blew up and asked him why he was wasting his time and efforts on a wastrel like me. After all, my dad and sister had just tried to kill me, planning to dump me in the woods without so much as a goodbye, let alone a gravestone or funeral. Back then, Diana was still convinced that I deserved all that misery since the potions and brain-washing hadn't been purged out of her yet. The problem was, her poisonous views of me still affected me badly, plus I still had some potions and curses on me too that we hadn't found out either. I wasn't stable, let alone logical, but it didn't matter to Lucas. He stood me up so he could hug me to his chest while I was screaming and breaking down. He let me bitch and blow out the storm of hurt that had been boiling inside for years, never judging me or the life I had lived because he'd lived the same."

The 21 year old had tears running down his face as he remembered the distant past. His sister and friends all sat closer to support him and give him their love by placing a hand on his shoulder or leg to show their presence. Martin sniffled and blinked his eyes a few times to clear them.

"When I finally calmed down enough to stop shouting and throwing things around, he took me by the arm and pulled until I was face down across his knees, holding onto the pillow on the bed, wondering what was happening until I remembered what Jenna had done to Diana three days before. Well, Lucas didn't waste any time in pulling down the sweat pants and boxers I wore, all the while explaining in a gentle, even tone of voice that I was not allowed at all to demean myself and certainly NOT approve of others harming or murdering me. He told me that I would get a dozen swats for each egregious offense of thinking or saying that I was meaningless, useless, a waste, a criminal or deserved to die. Then he dropped his hand on my bare butt for the first spank and it stunned me."

"After all the martial arts training and fights for CIRPA that I had survived, I couldn't believe that something as inane as hand smacks on the rear could hurt so damn much! He gave me a decent, slow paced correction to let me adjust to the rhythm. He paused twice when I squirmed too much, or was out of breath from crying so hard that I had a pair of rivers flowing down my face. Luke never tried to break me, or show me he was stronger, or more powerful. I was crying from the fierce warmth in my butt cheeks, sure, but mostly from the love and affection this pure stranger was giving me by telling me I was worth the time and effort to see me healed, healthy, safe in his arms, and above all else, that I was not in any way a waste or a debris."

The young adult blushed red as he remembered the rest of the scene. "Ah, damn! I forgot about that part! Ah, well, no going back I guess… Anyways, after roasting my rump for dinner, Lucas rubbed my back and neck, speaking kindly about how I should never lessen, reduce or doubt my
value as a person. After I got control of my breathing and stopped sobbing, he helped me stand up and put my clothes back right. He hugged me to his chest again, just like if we had been brothers all our lives. Nobody had ever done that with me before him. It almost broke me, feeling so much love, care, and consideration from someone like that without warning."

"Anyways... Then we heard people in the door. Man, the embarrassment! It was bad enough Luke saw my bare reddened ass, but now Diana, Jenna, and Tom were all there, and they'd seen everything too! Diana looked like she wanted to say something bitchy, as she was not yet healed from Gerard's mind control potions; we would find out about those later that month. Tom seemed to find the whole thing normal, and gave us thumbs up for doing it well. I still think that's the day Jenna decided I was good material for a husband; she saw the 'merchandise' and decided she could work with that…"

The outburst of honest friendly laughter from his own people and the rest of the Assembly comforted Martin as his fiancée kissed his cheek while he grasped hands with Diana on one side and Thomas on the other. The two Labarre seemed truly appreciative of him and the 'Lucas' from his reality leaned forward to place a brotherly hand on his neck in support. Everyone could see the solid respectful relationships between them at play.

"Go ahead and laugh you guys!" Martin said to his friends. "Maybe I should talk about the first time I had you over my knees and see how you like it? Brats, the lot of you!" He grumped in good natured humor at them.

Jenna smiled in an almost predatory way, as she asked in a fake sweet tone "And what would you have to talk about dearheart, humm?"

The young man was quite red in the face from the sudden proximity of his fiancée and her temper. She was nobody's victim and wouldn't be easy to talk down if he blundered about this. "Well, I thought about that time with Tom and the aging potion in Atlin, when he faked being 30 years old to get some beer at the local bar…"

Thomas hid his face in his hands, shaking his head in denial whilst the 'Lucas' next to him patted his back in patently false sympathy, given away by his shit-eating grin. Jenna cooed at her boyfriend to "Keep it for another time, sweetie. There will be plenty of camp fires besides which to drag out old stories to embarrass siblings."

"Before we go further" asked their 33 year old Uber-Bründer, "I thought I heard you talk about being a hybrid? Part vampire, you said? Could you show us? I never saw a vampire before; I always thought they were just legends to scare kids into staying inside the house at night." Looking around the Assembly, the oldest present shrugged off their frowns. "Hey, I'm just curious! I've lived in a dry, lonely fishbowl for the last 15 years, and the 17 before that weren't anything to brag about."

Martin made an upset face, wiggling on his seat, clearly uncomfortable with the attention that people were now giving to his 'personal condition' that he tried to never use or talk about outside of extreme urgencies. Which basically meant that he never transformed or showed his alternate form unless he was in a bad fight that had a high chance of being lost if he didn't use the capacities given by the hybrid shape. He wasn't ashamed of his biology and alternate form, just very, very shy about the whole situation. When you know Human History and how much effort was put into insuring racial purity by the diverse sub-groups, usually by exterminating those deemed 'unworthy' or
'defective', then you understood why he was shy about showing his 'special' side.

Encouraged by his fiancée and brother-in-law who was himself an expert shape-changer, Martin stood away from his cushy sofa and triggered the change. However, since he was stressed, anxious, and rather put out to be asked to show off like a circus pony doing tricks, he forgot just how he really didn't know much about his hybrid state or the capacities it had. He transformed right in the middle of the impromptu agora, right under the floating magical orbs of sunlight that illuminated their overnight conference. And very clearly didn't feel a thing about it. Weren't vampires allergic to sunlight, solar radiations and all forms of sun magicks?

As he flapped his 12 foot wide wings on each side of himself, shaking his head to fling the much longer hair back over his shoulders, the young adult never realized the loving, supportive expressions on the faces of several in the converted garage because he was making every effort at not perceiving them, for fear of seeing only disgust and rejection.

"Eh, Martin... Are you okay?" asked his own fiancée, looking at him with worry clearly visible on her face. Why was he not reacting to the sunlight orbs? What kind of hybrid was he, really? Her man had NEVER let anybody get close to him while he was in this shape, and they had never managed to learn much from it other than the shape and that he could use the wings to fight or fly.  

"Ehm... Yeah, I'm okay sweetie." the male replied as he self-consciously folded the large black and purple wings around his person like a cloak in a nervous gesture. Wrapping his arms around his torso, he folded the wings over and around himself, looking like a traveler bundled up against a storm in a winter coat or cloak. The wings were hard to distinguish as organic or mobile when folded that way.

His skin tone had change from a healthy sun-tanned white to a granite gray, his hair had whitened out completely and lengthened down to mid-back instead of the blond crested high-top he normally styled. He now had four pronounced canine teeth, fangs really, long sharp finger nails that could rip through body armor, and long pointed ears that occasionally moved on their own to track noises and vibrations.  

But for all that, the most radical change was his eyes. They were now a complex compound shape made up of a central dot, twelve small ovals oriented like spokes around a hub, and twelve small rectangular slots at the edge like the perimeter of a wheel. His eyes had purple sclera but maintained their natural amber-gold hue for the sensitive elements that composed the 'cartwheel' through which he saw. Those eyes would need to be analyzed quickly to figure out what they saw and how.

"Oh, Martin! You're so handsome! And buffed, too... Why don't you show this more often?" asked Jenna softly as she tried to alleviate his emotional fragility at being so exposed and observed. She hugged him gently over his folded wings, careful as if she were holding on to a scared child. In a sense, she was doing just that. With his childhood and the way CIRPA exploited him, the young man had precious few positive experiences with which to compare the circumstances, let alone justify any hope he'd be treated fairly or gently by anybody.

The 33 year old placed his scarred hand on top of the younger man's head, letting the immobile weight emanate a comforting presence for the highly sensitive youth to absorb, until he could believe that they really didn't scorn or disdain him for his nature. And those that had in fact insulted, rejected and harmed for being different by birth... Well, their juvenile mafia lord could be put to use to punish them. He would probably insist on it, too, and nobody would even think of holding them back.
Younger Lucas #18 was shaking his head in weariness at the antics the kids had been up to while in isolation in the high north. He hoped his incarnations had displayed more basic common sense than to be caught in those situations as more than just witnesses. Seeing the by-play between the two from that particular reality however made him scratch that idea. Of course his twit self would be neck-deep in it, the stupid fool! The child sent everybody to the mandatory 15 minute pause and directed the appropriate people to reset the service trays.

As the pause went along, he typed into his all-important analysis spreadsheet the data he had jotted on the fly, then wrote out the questions he had to research in detail. Among the more pressing were the entire history and genealogy of the Maison des Mystère and its legal status in France, Canada and all former french colonies. If there was still anything operational on that side, it could afford Martin and Diana some serious legal, political and financial advantages, like automatic multi-national citizenship and free movements between the old french territories.

The second most critical factor was CIRPA; that organization was secrets inside obfuscations, inside shadows buried under gravel at the bottom of a dark pit. Nothing about them seemed either moral, legal or the least little bit permitted by either the mundane governments or the Wizerias. Not to mention the amoral, sociopathic she-bitch that held sway over it all. That one was a menace all to herself. She needed investigating, neutralizing and disposing of in short delays, depending on how the individual acted in each reality. If she were a little bit useful while simply being unemotional or uninterested in her agent's lives, then those versions of her could perhaps be tolerated and worked with. From a distance, while under severe restrictions.

And that meant that ALL of the tech CIRPA lent to Martin and Diana was suspect.

There was no way in bloody Hell Everburning that those types of devices weren't locked tightly, and their usage regulated from a remote management hub, otherwise handing them to teenagers was downright STUPID. Younger Lucas #18 was willing to bet that the sterling character and self-sacrificing nature of the many 'Martin' were a glaring exception in CIRPA's workforce, not the norm. And that meant they must have had enough accidents, abuses and information leaks to learn to monitor, survey, and remotely follow or lock up their machines for fear of losing control, or being exposed to the public.

As for the technologies they had; the U-Watch that was part holo-projector, part matter replicator, with comms, sensors, energy absorption & relay ports, and so many things... Why was it that items generated by the watch disintegrated after 10 minutes max? Why was it that certain devices like the 'shield handle' could only function for 30 seconds flat when the watch could easily produce dozens of it during the day? Why were there the X-Rod and the U-Blade but no projectile weaponry? Why contact weapons only, with the visible exception being the single-shot stunning electro-net that was ejected from the X-Rod? Both siblings had mentioned vaguely that the woman in charge, the M.O.M. She was called, had a purple 'Director Level' U-Watch that nobody else had, and there seemed to be a specific model for junior agents versus adult/senior agents. Were there differences beyond just the aesthetics of the casing? Were the circuits and capacities different, or was it all a question of cybernetic programming adapted to each agent?

The tech CIRPA had was phenomenally useful, and idiotically underused. In fact, Lucas would say it was incompetence tantamount to criminal negligence on the part of the organization's higher managers, but that could just be him, because he'd been raised by a lawyer for most of his life. Still, the Portal, the massive telecoms and surveillance array, the hundreds of alien species registered, warp engines, subspace comms, advanced biochemistry, applied genetic engineering to create new antibiotics or antiparasitics in a matter of mere hours instead of months...

Yes, there were a lot of secrets inside CIRPA, and they needed discovery in the immediateness of
the moment so their family could exploit them to survive, free and no longer hunted or exploited.

Memories 4; Alan & Tanusha

(Thunderbirds are go! - opening theme)

Sunday February 10th of 2301 – around 06:57am, past Dawn
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Motorpool garage building

Teenaged Alan #4 grunted in amusement, shaking his head at all of the brouhaha. "Ah, pluuueeeaaase!" he drawled brattily in his Kansas farmland accent. "We grew'ed up in a house with seven kids and only Fermat was the least bit calm and easy going. Even Tanusha was two whole handfuls to deal with! And you read the reports about the nasty Tracy Temperament that my grandma, dad and older brothers had. Dad always had a heavy solid oak paddle nearby; in his home desk, in his office desk, on each plane or boat, in the trunk of each car…"

"There was always a weapon at hand to beat fear and submission into us at a blink. And he was a big fan of the 'No Nothing left to live with Grounding' too. He conceived all of his kids' private bedrooms on the island and in each property he owned with en-suite bathroom, a massive two-door dry closet and a large microwave oven inside the closet. It was all built into the walls' structures and bolted solid. That was so he could lock anyone of us for up to two whole weeks at a time without any human contact. He could control from his office the vents, electricity, heat, water, network, comms, the windows and patio doors… He could lock the pantry or open selected shelves or compartments to hand out, one piece at a time, what he wanted us to have at specific moments."

"Everything was dominated by a locked computer panel in his desk's central drawer. What happened in those rooms was under his sole purview and we weren't allowed any privacy either as he had hard wired cameras and microphones everywhere, including the bathrooms. And God have mercy on us if we ate in our rooms anything he hadn't specifically allowed us to bring there! He would accuse us of stealing food and contraband ing it into our rooms to avoid the fullness of his grounding rituals. The beating for that was always public and fully nude. For willful challenge of his Great and Mighty Authority, there was no other punishment than fully baring our souls for judgment and redemption under his Rod. Our dad was a fuckshit sack of crud! That's what he was!"

Alan passed a weary hand over his short blond hair and took a calming breath. "Tanu's mom and dad might have been infinitely submissive towards my father as their rescuer, employer and owner of the island, but they were never shy about reaming out Kayo in public. I lost count of how many times they forcibly pulled down her jeans and shorts, even as an older teenager. They would bend her over the nearest piece of solid furniture to apply the rattan cane or some switch from the nearest tree. They hit her bare butt right there in front of all the boys as if her modesty and dignity meant nothing. Not that my dad was any different. It's just that while her parents at least looked at her skin's condition and tried not to injure her during punishment, our dad never cared. He just grabbed us and twisted both of our arms behind our back until we were bent over something then he whaled away at our backside with his paddle until he was too tired to continue. When Kayo got punished, she recovered in a day, two at most. We usually needed 4 to 6 days on average but up to 12 days
wasn't rare, especially when dad was beating me for my 'going away to school disciplinary reminder'."

The 'Alan' who was speaking gratefully accepted a cold fruit juice from the child-aged 'Martine' next to him and drank almost half the bottle in one go. He passed his tongue on his lips as he thought about what was for him the very recent past. "Grandma was a real rabid bitch; she hit until she could no longer move her arm from getting a cramp and she left bruising and marks as bad as dad even though she never used anything bigger than her damned wooden spoon or hand. She was a face-slapper however; you never knew if she'd blind you or leave bloody claw marks in your face that day. Hiram really was the only person of adult age on that island who was the least bit reasonable, both in his evaluation of our actions and in his own reactions."

The young man spoke out softly, remembering the many times that professor Hackenbacker had sheltered him and Tanusha from the rabid anger of their parents over the last decade.

The teen's face hardened as another painful memory resurfaced. "I was among the youngest with Gordon but even then, he was still 5 years older and much closer emotionally and socially to the others than I was. All of them had bought dad's lies about my being responsible for mom's death and orphaning them so the guys, including Gordon, always set me aside at the least bit of an excuse because they said I would 'cramp their style' or some such shite."

"Then my dear older siblings started passing over 18 years of age and thought they had the right to grab the paddle and use it on the youngest kids but dad killed that idea right there. He started by giving Scott one of the very rare public, fully nude, bare-butt whackings he kept for truly egregious offenses and literally beat into him that this was HIS 'rod of authority' as given by GOD and not for children to use. So being the gentle, caring brother he was, Scott started systematically yanking down our pants to wallop us on bare butt with his hand, belt, ruler, fly swatter, electric wire, tree switch... Anything he could find in reach really, until we were bruised or his arm was too tired to continue."

"Scott said that if it was good for a weak teenaged girl like Tanusha, it would do good for us big muscular boys. The fact he had practically never been treated like that by dad and he was a hypocrite that had become a child beater like dad and grandma never passed his conscience. I can guarantee that for you. Then of course, as they passed age 18, the others did the exact same thing as Scott had. Even the family healer, Virgil, was a bully and a brute who beat Gordon and me regularly."

"Jeff had to let me out in public for people to see me; see that I was alive and healthy, see that the family was united. He hated being forced to do this with a passion and so did I, but I had no choice; I didn't want to give the old bastard a reason to drag me away kicking and screaming to imprison me again, after another beating surely. Well, Gordon wasn't having any of it. It was his party and he knew what he wanted for the biggest gift of the day: proof of his manly adulthood over me."
"He sucker punched me in the face to stun me without any provocation whatsoever. He dropped me face down on the tiles next to the pool then he ripped off to shreds my cheap swim trunks that were the only clothing I wore as it was a pool party. He really didn't want me to ever squirm free so he knelt with one knee on my shoulders and the other knee on my neck, even at the risk of choking me or breaking my neck and crippling me for life. Now though, placed like that, he could beat me all he liked with the buckle end of his leather belt which he had worn for just that reason. He whipped my nude body in front of everybody that was attending his party."

Alan rubbed his arm over his eyes, angrily trying to stanch the flow of tears he still felt from the betrayals and backstabbing he had endured from these people all his life. "He whipped me naked, on the floor, just as if I was a damned mongrel cur. He did that in front of some 60 guests, on top of the whole family. NONE of the adults OR kids did absolutely anything to stop him. Dad was laughing himself hoarse at the sight, so all the guests did too. Since most of them were his employees or his suppliers, they all feared for their jobs or sales so they gulped back their disgust and laughed along with the criminals."

"When Gords let me go, I had blood flowing down my ass, thighs and lower back area from having the skin torn by the pins on the buckle until it bled. He was waving his belt around in the air like a trophy of sorts, when I got my bearings back just enough to grab a glass pitcher full of beer and swing it at his face with both hands. It was voluntary. I told myself that if he was crippled and couldn't move then he wouldn't beat me anymore. The pitcher exploded into shards that shred his left eye, cheek and part of his neck, cutting veins and nerves. They had to leave immediately to save his life but could never manage to save his eye or his vocal chords. From what we heard through the media, he spent over nine months in the hospital. He would never beat me again since I never visited and he came back to the Island after we had left. Same for my other brothers as they were now scared stiff of my reactions to their years of abuse. Dad was apoplectic but now afraid for his own life. He had lost all control and knew for a fact that I would fight back and kill someone to be safe."

"Jeff split the family immediately by sending me to the Island with Kayo, Fermat and Hiram. Tanu's parents had stayed on the Island with grandma as she wasn't feeling well at the time. They went to a hospital in NYC to stabilize Gordon urgently and then transport him to Los Angeles where dad had minions to help him cover things up. Once arrived at the Island, Grandma, the unrepentant idjit, tried to beat me into submission with a wooden broomstick while everybody was with Gordon still in the New York hospital. I responded by fighting back, breaking both her arms and legs so badly that there were bones jutting out from open injuries in the skin on all four limbs, slowly bleeding out. I left her unconscious, locked in one of Thunderbird 2's less used transport modules. I know she died from it; her funeral was reported in CNN about a week after we were gone, but not the cause of death. Her attempt to beat me to death was the event when Tanusha and I made up our minds to leave the Island forever. We never contacted any of them again since; not even the Hackenbacker's."

The two oldest Labarre were giving expressions of sympathy to the many Tracy's in the group when Tanusha raised her hand and to get attention and spoke up. "Hey, I have my part to say in this!" Then she whispered something in Alan's ear that had him blushing but he nodded and kissed her on the tip of her nose, his gentle act a very big contrast to his usually brash, high speed persona.

Kayo smirked and began her story. "We left the island by preparing thoroughly and stealing a very nice two-propeller floatplane that Mister Tracy kept for my parents to go fetch groceries and mail on Australia's mainland. We were lucky this plane was so well made. It had four separate sections: the cockpit with four stations and pivoting seats. The luxury passenger area with four 4-seat
couches, luxury desk, four wingback chairs, galley kitchen and 12 person conference table. The main human entrance was in the combo mud room & infirmary with three wet toilet / shower stalls. They had set up a washing machine & dryer side-by-side with a medical cot spread over them for emergency cases. The mud room also had two huge climate controlled cabinets for medications and equipments, as well as a dedicated medi-comp with wired scanners. The last section was the 40 foot long cargo hold at the very back with the rearwards loading ramp and personnel doors on each side. As an escape plane, we were golden and we also had the small four-seat jeep they usually left in the plane to facilitate errands in the city."

Tanu swallowed past some bitterness and continued her tale. "Alan thought it was the least his family owed him for all the violence and depravities they had put him through. He jokingly told me it made a nice wedding gift for us to elope in. I didn't realize just how serious he was back then. We also 'got wind' that Mr. Tracy was contacting a group of church-based mercenaries that specialize in forcibly recovering 'rebellious teenagers' to bring them to an isolated military-style boot camp in the Caribbean Islands, out of US jurisdiction."

"It was run by ecclesiastes whose specialty was to brainwash kids into accepting religious lies as the only truth in the world. Their standard method was to starve a kid until he was 90% dead and then feed him drugged food until he was back at around 60% of his health. Then they started alternating their cruelties. One day of harsh, ritualized public beatings while fully nude, with any instrument the guards enjoyed using, and the day after that was peace in solitary isolation in a white concrete cell. No windows, lights, or anything but the hole in the floor for a toilet and a small tray of drugged food along a large bottle of drugged water."

"We saw, myself along with Alan, Fermat and Hiram, video messages where they bragged to Jefferson that no boy had ever toughed out past the first month and lived. The kids surrendered their autonomy, dignity and obedience to the ecclesiastes, and then their parents afterwards, or they died from being broken under the Rods of their Creed and Faith. Jeff said he was completely aware of this and had chosen them specifically because if they failed in converting Alan to a human rag doll, he wouldn't be alive to haunt him or sue him for abuse and neglect when he turned 18."

"Suffice it to say that these messages were copied and sent to several hundred friends that all four of us had, including several media stations critical of Tracy Inc and Jeff in particular. Alan pushed things to the penultimate end by filming throughout the International Rescue hangars and laboratories before uploading it all to the web in public forums. It was just after uploading the final film sequences to the web that the gribitch Ruth came at Alan with the wooden baton to attack him. We dealt with that, and then we vamoosed out of Tracy Island, never looking back."

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"I was 'officially' not available as he kept me for one of his three older sons. It was them that he deemed capable of earning my respect, but especially of taming my wild ways and putting me back in my place so I would stop questioning and judging him about how he treated Alan so badly. Well, that plan backfired; tell a girl she can't have a guy because he's bad and what do you think happens? Especially when she's practically raised by his side as his sister? And since I wasn't the only one who thought of Alan as a good person, Hiram and Fermat were honest decent people after
Tanusha drank some tea to whet her throat, giving herself time to organize her story. Alan rubbed her neck and shoulders in such a nice, capable way that she closed her eyes and hummed in pleasure, much to the laughter of the Assembly. Opening her eyes and cracking a playful smile, she continued. "You can see easily why I keep him around, don't you? He has good hands, I can tell you that! And that leads me to how we set our relationship to be how it is."

"Now, remember that by our clock, we left Tracy Island less than a year ago and had been with Lucas, Martin and Diana at the Labarre Homestead for about seven months. The relation we have, Alan and I, is very much in the beginning of things. Well during that initial trip away from the island, we went south in Australia to Brisbane, the same town we used for getting groceries, medical supplies and mechanical parts. All mail and cargo deliveries were all stored there at the warehouses on Tracy Heavy Industry's private airfield. We instead used one of the smaller public airports in periphery of Brisbane, inland rather than close to the ocean to maintain some privacy. We landed then did a tour of the plane to confirm once again how we had packed and what few items we needed to go buy in town for the remainder of the trip. We decided to change into more anonymous clothing and readied to go for our errands. Since we had been raised all seven together for over a decade at that point, we didn't use the bathroom or bother to separate."

Kayo rubbed her eyes to wipe away a few stray tears and inhaled deeply to gather courage for the next part. "We undressed and I saw, underneath the whipping lesions left by Gordon, the fading bruises from the last full-body punch-out Jefferson had given Alan a little over a week before Gordon's party, when he told him he wasn't going to boarding school anymore, no alternative explained. It is because of this sentence of isolation that we dug through the communications of the Island servers and found he was arranging to dispose of Alan. My parent's position was that I would no longer go to University and would not be permitted to enlist in the armed services either, despite being a legal adult and autonomous. They wanted me married to a Tracy son and pregnant before my 20th birthday. I had no valid opinion about it, so they said. Anyways, as I took off my usual green cargo pants I had started wearing at Uni, Alan gasped and swore like a bar full of drunken sailors. He had just seen the injuries from dad's angry reply to my refusal to bow down and accept being harnessed to one of Jeff's dumb-as-an-ox sons as if I were a simple cart to drag around.

Tanusha was crying hard by now, unable to fully understand how a parent could treat their only daughter this way. "When we had argued, Kyrano had slapped me across the face so hard he had made me see stars for a few seconds. He forcibly held me down over my bedroom desk with both arms bent awkwardly behind my back to hurt me into staying put during the beating. He took the rattan cane off its peg on the wall then lashed me across the backside of my thick cargo pants for almost five whole minutes at 'rapid-fire' speed to get immediate, irrevocable submissiveness. When I just yelled in anger and started fighting back while swearing out loud at him, he became enraged beyond all reason and hit me in the back of the head on a pressure point to make me fall unconscious like a rag doll."

The young woman was sobbing her heart out now. Alan wrapping his arms around her was the only thing that gave her the courage to continue telling the important story. "Then dad dragged me by the arms to my bed and took the time to undo my clothes and remove them completely from my body. He set me face down with a pair of cushions under my pelvis to raise my buttocks in the air. He used some of my belts from my closet to tie my arms and legs to the bed frame so I couldn't fight him anymore."

"Then he woke me by squeezing some pressure points again. The moment I was a little bit aware of my state, he started applying another minute of 'rapid-fire' lashes on my bare backside and kept
going even when the skin burst in angry bleeding welts. When I didn't relent, he started hitting everywhere else on the rear side of me; thighs, calves, back, shoulders… He only stopped when Fermat ran in alerted by my inhuman screams and rammed into dad like a human battering ram. Fermat actually grabbed a vase on the nightstand and broke it on dad's head to knock him out, then he freed me and brought me to Hiram."

"They healed me secretly to avoid the catastrophic melt down that Alan would have if he found out. Unfortunately, that was just four days before we had our emergency escape. And that is what Alan saw; the fact I was wearing long legged and long sleeved underwear despite the tropical climate, and the blood from the still unhealed lesions had soaked almost through the thick layer. The cruel injuries hadn't even really begun to heal yet because I couldn't stop moving for long due to all the troubles we had. Ally was so angry he wanted to fly back to the Island to find my parents to kill them then finish off his grand-mother to be certain the job was done right."

Alan repositioned himself behind his girlfriend, sitting with a leg on each side of her, and hugged her from behind, nuzzling the nape of her neck, making her aware of the safety and protection his embrace guaranteed. Tanusha leaned backwards and took a deep breath, passing hands in her face to wipe away the flow of angry tears as she remembered the betrayals of her parents.

"Alan became very assertive at that moment. He ordered me to undress completely and lie face down on the medical cot in the mud room/infirmary. He took out the scanners, did a full body scan of me and started asking the questions any traumatologist would ask when getting an assault victim in OR. He checked the pain pills and ointments I had taken against the 'master list of negative interactions' in the medi-comp then proceeded to give me two different injections; antibiotics for the cuts and a stronger clinical-type pain management drug. Then he took the time to wash and redress the entirety of the injured areas with new unguents, compresses and bandages to hold it all."

"When Ally finished, he helped me put on loose sweats and a long plush bathrobe. He walked me to the passenger area to lie down on one of the long couches. He decided to call the control tower to extend our parking space booking for the whole week. We would take the time to heal both of us fully before our next leg of the trip to safety. I wasn't certain we should even have come to Brisbane but Alan killed that thought by lighting up the TV and dialing up CNN. The wonders of satellite communications was that in the three hours we had flown from the island and taken time to re-medicate me, the whole planet had become inflamed by the revelations of one Alan Sheppard Evans Tracy showing his face and claiming his name as he walked around the TB silos and showed off the secrets of the Island. After muting the TV set, he told me glibly that he thought his family would be much too occupied with Gordon and the fallout of this news storm to bother looking for them. Plus, with the films of his injuries, and now mine, being sent out to the networks, nobody with a decent moral compass would help Jefferson get back at us."

Tanusha sighed in contentment as her boyfriend's hands made a trace along her spine, gently massaging the stress and residual anxiety from her taught frame. She wiggled a bit and turned to reward him with a quick kiss on the tip of his nose, playfully laughing at the 15 year old's expression when she managed to surprise him so. Turning back forward, she leaned to place her elbows on her knees and joined her hands loosely, taking full profit of just how good at physiotherapy and massage her best, most precious friend had become.

The 20 year old woman hummed in joy as she continued onwards he story. "We actually stayed on that airstrip for five days. Alan refused to let us move until all my injuries stopped bleeding and we could determine if any needed setting stitches. Thankfully, Hiram and Fermat had invented for IR
something called 'medical glue' which was a measure to replace the often used old trick of pouring liquid glue into an injury to stop a bleeding artery until you reached hospital. Trust me, for having heard Virgil bitch about it enough, regular glue is a no-no when trying to stop bleeding on a human. So the Hackenbacker's plumbed the problem and came up with a surgical strength, biodegradable, live-human-friendly adhesive specifically for use in traumatology. Alan used that on my cuts over several days thus none required stitched. For those first five days he insisted in sponge bathing me, coming into the shower with me. He carefully redressed each cut and welt before helping me into the loose clothing I preferred during my convalescence. He would playfully poke my hips and swat my knuckles with his hand as if I were a naughty toddler to get me to follow instructions when I kept telling him I wasn’t an invalid and tried to refuse his orders a few times."

The young adult looked out to the horizon through the open garage doors, her eyes glassy as she contemplated the past. "It was during one of those bouts of playful brattiness on my part that he flat out told me that he enjoyed seeing and touching me. He said that it might heal my injuries but it certainly gave him pleasure and good dreams to help my nude form in the shower or when he dressed the bandages on my injuries. When he came out with that admission, it reminded me of how close we had become in those few last weeks and that afternoon, we shared the same couch. We were dressed lightly and nothing happened but some caresses and a few soft kisses, but it was the start."

"It's how Alan convinced me that he was a keeper. By healing me and keeping a straight enough face and attitude that I hadn't even realized he was getting something out of it instead of acting like a dog in heat the way his father and brothers would have. After my injuries no longer bled, we took some World maps and tried to find a good country to crash for a prolonged period. The idea was to go off grid and use the plane as our camp as it was fully equipped while we would ride the jeep around to hunt, carry cargo or just go to the nearest village for a pleasure outing to break the monotony of isolation."

At this point Alan took over the telling again. "We were lucky that the Hackenbacker's had been such dedicated employees but even better friends. Both Hiram and Fermat had foreseen that I would need to run away from dad before long and had prepared a few surprises in the plane's design just for that."

"They had rebuilt the kitchen's gas-only oven into a unit shaped like a traditional wood stove but with the ability to burn gas / solid / liquid plus full electric circuits, both incandescent and induction. They recreated an old mechanical-only water boiler that runs on solids then added the gas nozzle, gasoline pump and electric coils to complete that hybrid design. They switched out the emergency gasoline powered generator for a hybrid steam-piston engine burning gas, coal, wood or the plane's liquid fuel that actually produces as much electricity but also creates the mechanical movement to make the water flow in the plane's plumbing and activates the ventilation fans."

"With a system like that, plus a full covering of solar panels on the entire outer hull and a full stack of batteries, we were well set to outlast any autumn storm or winter snows. Then there were a few other surprises like the extra liquid-fuel tanks in the wing's floats so as to have extra range between stops. This opened up a lot of land masses and water bodies for us to choose from."

The two lovers took a moment to remember and give prayers of thankfulness for the two people they saw as family as much as the Assembly around them. Alan continued afterwards, a bit more subdued. "We started having conversations, Tin-Tin and I about where we wanted to go and what climate we preferred. We settled on the Western coastline around British Columbia because
Canada had never been particularly impressed by Tracy Industry's business model or Jeff's attitude. With the recent news releases, that would get worse. So we planned, shopped for more food and went to the bank to withdraw a lot of cash from one branch but converted it to Canadian money at another while also getting new full identities and credit cards by using our combined hacking and forgery skills. I am good with a CPU and 3D printer. What can I say?"

Alan gulped another large swallow of juice while Tanusha gave his back and neck a good strong rub with her thumbs, easing out the stress. Giving his fiancée a grateful glance for her kind attentions, he spoke on. "After some 7 days in Brisbane, we were partially healed enough to travel again thanks to the meds we used. Those ointments Hiram had invented for IR did an incredibly fast job on what ailed us. The daily massages and soft little kisses we had started exchanging as of the fourth day were even better for our moral and friendship. On our tenth day I surprised Tin-Tin, rather nicely I think, by offering her some time to go shopping by herself to get time to decompress and find some inner peace for the upcoming trip. She agreed gratefully as she had wanted that but didn't know how to say it without hurting my feelings."

"When we had dinner in our plane that night, I offered her an engagement ring I had seen during our tourist-like shopping two days before but couldn't get with her being right by my side. She was bloody stunned and sat there for an hour before her brain rebooted. She has worn my ring every day since, so I think her promise to marry me when I turn 16 is still good. In the meanwhile, we are progressing slowly and lovingly as we need, and want, to go ahead."

The two dear friends exchanged a slow, gentle kiss on the lips and gazed deeply into each other's eyes as the Assembly members cheered or cat-called out at them. Younger Lucas #18 was busy typing his notes but wore the small shy smile he usually showed when things went well, without anger or violence to hurt those he cared for so deeply.

After turning back towards the crowd and situating Kayo at his right side with her left arm resting playfully around his shoulders, Alan continued. "After that gift of the ring we systematically shared the couch and had a few nice make-out sessions along the days. After spending two whole weeks in Brisbane, we decided to complete our plans and leave the known world. We flew laterally towards the very end of South America at the Land of Fire and then upwards, on a northern path along the Andes mountains."

"We always stayed on the western side of the chain, where there are the most villages and the easiest rescues in case the unthinkable happened and our plane went down. At three occasions, we agreed to land the plane near a small village to wait out a bad storm formation. In those times, we discovered the joys of playing strip-poker or its other amusing variant where you write down a forfeit like a chore or favor and put that in the betting pot. We ended up mostly naked quite a few times and each collected some pretty amusing or enjoyable forfeits from our little couple's games. We kept it non-sexual as we weren't ready to go all the way. We were too inexperienced with ourselves and each other to try, and we respected the other too much to force the issue and lose them. With my ring on her finger guaranteeing her safety and welfare, Tanusha's dignity and happiness were not something I would ever gamble on just for a cheap thrill. We will get to complete our union and pleasure physically when we are ready and fully willing."

Tanusha pumped her fist in the air and crowed in joy "That, ladies, is why I wear his ring. I took the jackpot, why should I look elsewhere?" While the women and a few of the gay guys whistled or complained about the good ones being taken before they could make an offer.
Alan chuckled and said "Tin-Tin may not agree all the time. During a three-day layover to let a huge tropical storm pass we had plenty of time to play a few games, but also bug each other like the spiritual siblings we were raised as. She started it by saying with a loud sigh she hadn't thought this would be a babysitting job. Well, I wasn't gonna let that pass! I made sure she knew I was playing along then I started to cut her food and try to make her eat as if she was a baby in a high chair… You should have seen her face! It was priceless! She had been baiting me, trying to make ME react as the childish one and never expected the table to be turned on her."

"When she started pushing the plate away and tetching up a storm to match the weather outside the plane, I did exactly what a nice, attentive boyfriend should. I warned her that I would swat her bottom firmly and send her to bed early if she didn't behave, just like a moody impolite teenager. And since she was 19 years old, she fit the definition quite nicely. She blushed deep red like a traffic light then angrily challenged me to do just that. Weeellll, I wasn't passing that up! Kayo has quite the gorgeous rear and if I got to massage her a bit vigorously over her cute, tight green cargo pants, then would I refuse? No, I would not!"

"After pulling the squirming and squealing girl out of her chair, I chased her around until I caught her and gave some nice stinging swats to her butt to lay down the law and show her I might be younger, that didn't mean I would let her infantilize me and boss me around without fighting back. Well, she wasn't going down without a fight and swatted me right back! We ended up tickling, swatting and basically wrestling around the passenger compartment until I got her on the couch and bragged about getting my tantrum throwing baby in bed as I promised. Except I used the same language filled with innuendo that Scott or Gordon would have."

"You should have seen her face and heard the scream she yelled at me! Oh, she was mad now! And little old me at point blank range! What to do, what to do...? Well I did what any good boyfriend would to save his hide in a case like that... I kissed her silly right on the lips and I swear I saw her toes curl under her socks! Anyways, I must have done something right since she stopped fighting and griping at me and snuggled into me instead. And she kept the ring. That was the important part. Especially when I took her hand and kissed her finger with the ring on it. Yeah, we can get each other's goat a bit... Okay, a lot! We're young, impetuous and full of vigor. What do you think happens? We blow up and make up in about 15 minutes a dozen times a day. So what? As long as we don't hurt each other and end up still together at the end of the day, I'm good with it."

Tanusha was both blushing fluorescent red from laughing so hard and slightly mortified at the description of their relationship. They were not that volatile or infantile. They were just kidding around to let out steam from the cabin fever of being cooped up in the plane so long and they were also at their very first experimentation at touching and pleasing each other. A lot of uncertainties, trials and errors as well as playing around like fools was normal at that stage. She decided to explain a bit more of their relationship as there was a bit more to how they came to really want this to work long term.

Kayo got herself back under control and spoke up. "Well, as we were finally back up in the air, we got a distress call from a private water craft far at sea on a very weak signal, using old short wave radio. Any other modern airplane or boat would have missed it since short wave isn't mandatory amongst the communications equipments anymore. However, we were aboard an aircraft that had been designed in a team effort of Jeff, Scott and John Tracy with Hiram Hackenbacker. They had put in every old radio, cellular and satellite gear as well as every signal interception & translation program they could find that either had ever heard of in training. If it had been a mandatory requirement at some point in the history of the Army, Navy, Air Force or NASA, then Jeff wanted
it installed and accessible from every one of the four stations in the cockpit as well as the Boss's desk, infirmary medi-comp and emergency back-up control station in the cargo hold."

"The damn plane had more back-ups than an officially vetted NASA spacecraft! And we loved her for it! We also had had a bevy of external cameras, color & thermographic, mounted in directional turrets at eight points around the ship. Lets just say that changing course and spotting the drifting yacht being tossed about in the dregs of the storm was a piece of cake with the sorts of gear we had to work with. We judged the sea conditions sufficient to land on the water and get them aboard if we used the central roof hatch built above the cargo hold for just such occasions as choppy sea rescues and transfer of people and goods."

The young woman paused for a few bites of the delicious strawberry shortcake their young host had graciously provided and purred in delight at the flavors. He had added some delicate hints of rhubarb and mint liquor jelly decorations piped around the top. Definitely a recipe to get before going back home! She saw Alan sip a brand new mochaccino and pouted to signal she wanted one too. Being the ever playful boyfriend, he instead oriented his mug towards her lips to let her sip from his own. She winked in thanks and sipped some, the bitter caramelly drink warmed her insides as it went down and she wasn't all that surprised when Alan leaned forward to lay a slow, thoughtful kiss on her sweet lips. He certainly smiled like the cat that got both the canary and the cream together!

After eliciting some laughs from the Assembly, Tanusha advanced her story. "It must have been quite the sight for them as that plane was 200 feet wingspan and 150 feet long by 20 feet wide in the main body. They had what is considered a commercial seaplane coming down at them. We landed and brought the plane close enough to open the top hatch and extend the service crane over the side of the plane's body. What we got was a pair of these." and she pointed at the 'Jason' and 'Lua' near them.

"They had left in a panic as the sole survivors of the events on Kong Island less than 24 hours earlier. Once inside with all the few stuffs they had, we closed the plane and motored away using the wood burning steam engine to power the twin screws at the back of the plane's hull. We needed to get away from their craft or it could impact the plane's body or wing struts so it had to be abandoned. As a precaution to avoid leaving a derelict, they had hacked a hole with an ax as their last gesture aboard. In less than ten minutes, the storm tossed sea and the leaks inside took the yacht under the waves and it sunk for good. We now had a pair of twenty-something's aboard who were huddled on our couch, and very much in shock from exposure to the freezing storm rain and winds and the violence they had lived. They had lost three dear people right before their eyes and had to kill several criminals to escape alive. They were no longer ordinary people as any who have killed will tell you."

It was Alan who continued from there. "I asked Tin-Tin to get us airborne and back on track towards the next village we had planned to make a layover to buy air fuel, fresh meat and veggies. We had plenty of preserved foodstuff including things made by Hiram and Fermat for long duration rescues or bad storms. But fresh is better when recovering from any trauma, and since we were both still healing the residues of our families' depravities, we needed to also boost our moral, not just our bodies. The interactions with people who didn't hate us or attack us when we were shopping around in bakeries or butcher's stalls helped with that a lot. So we were actually happy to have guests in our humble home and I joked openly at Kayo about our housewarming taking a new meaning while distributing thick winter blankets and hot drinks. The newbies looked at us for barely ten seconds before shrugging and getting back to the job of undressing out of their freezing, sopping wet clothes. Since both Kayo and I had been exposed to the storm when bringing them aboard, we took turns doing the same and they saw the remains of our injuries, just as we saw the old & fresh ones on them."
Tanusha picked up the tale. "Once we were in the air, on course back towards the continent and all four of us were dry, changed, and sat in the cockpit chairs with warm food, they told us a short, sanitized version of events. A version without the Cyber-Link, giant super ape, Mu ruins and other mystical stuff. It sounded like a bunch of low-lives after the tech, and possibly the chemicals a scientific outpost usually had, especially in their infirmary. There are a lot of pain pills worth more on the streets than classic drugs like weed or coke nowadays, and a lot of amateurs who don't have big networks or contacts try their hand at getting and selling a small batch here and there when it is an easy grab."

"What they described sounded like a rather banal crime of opportunity and cowardice, the sort which is unfortunately common in the outlying islands around Australia and South America as there are a lot of tourist boats going anywhere unprotected, and only so few coast guard ships to patrol the whole continent. After that, we gave them the short version, without IR, of why we left our families and stole the plane. It showed they were upset by our tale but also relieved for something. When we asked, they said they thought we had gone overboard with our disciplinary methods in our relationship and needed to re-scale our corrections down to a reasonable level. And that topic opened up a whole lot of embarrassment all around…"

Alan snorted in laughter at the memories of that conversation. "It's not like talking about equality and personal dignity was ever going to happen inside my family or Kayo's! And trying to bring up sex only got me the sort of answer that Bible-thumping idjiots usually throw around as if the entirety of Reality would stop to accommodate them. Being threatened to not even think about biology or sex until I was 21 when the subject comes up regularly in school classes about biology, society, ethics, history and so on… Well nobody ever accused my family of being composed of bright people."

"So we had a lively, enlightening conversation that soon had all four of us sporting red ears and flushed faces from the truly explicit nature of our subject matter. At least the embarrassment wasn't any less for them; I would have been pissed off if I got the short straw again just cuz I'm so much younger. And boy, did we have fun talking about pleasure, displeasure, satisfaction, trust, respect, rules, rewards and punishments, belonging, stability and reliability. Lua practically vibrated in envy when she saw the ring on Tanu's finger and we explained what it meant. I gather that our Jason and Lua back in our timeline will soon have that too. We certainly haven't regretted it since it happened."

The teenager thought a bit and brought the story close to its end. "After that fateful meeting, we went up to Canada, to British Columbia as planned. We chose a water body at random and accidentally landed on a private lake, on the eastern side of the mountains, near Atlin village. It belonged to the Labarre's but was separate from the main 1,000 acres homestead, and was actually listed under a company, not the family itself. Boy, was it a surprise for all involved when Jenna, Thomas, Lucas, Martin and Diana came out from an old fieldstone watchtower that looked abandoned to greet us. They asked what we were doing on their private property; how long we would stay; did we need help with our engines and that sort of things. We talked openly about our situations."

"After a few days of friendly interactions while we camped in our plane with Jaz and Lua, those two actually negotiated an agreement with Tom and Jen to have a couple's room, food and assistance in the Homestead in return for work and support to the residents. After that, when we were alone again, Tin-Tin and I talked it over and decided jointly to negotiate ourselves a place in this eclectic group as well. We had never seriously planned on prolonged isolation from all human contact as we were both far too sociable to sustain this and stay healthy. We felt that here we could
be accepted as we were. Since the average age was so low, we didn't feel like we would be attacked or victimized either. The short list of rules was easy to live with, the exact same for everybody, and intuitive enough to not have any traps or 'gotchas' in it. The consequences ranged from amusing to natural to embarrassing but didn't feel threatening or chosen to humiliate, and the idea of a Council and Couch appealed to us as it was a good mechanism against tyranny and false accusations."

"We were impressed that we could select the person who would administer the correction if we accepted corporal punishment, or even ask for extra chores or a confinement instead. We both saw that the system was reasonable, fair, well balanced and not a transparent attempt to put us in position to molest us. Given their emerging relationship, our Jason and Lua had no problems with spankings and didn't try to talk themselves out of it when it was deemed the appropriate correction for their mistake. Neither did they seem repelled by the idea of allowing another person from the Homestead being the corrector either. Given that neither had lived in an actual family setting in their youth, I can see why they had no inhibitions about that. For Tanu and I, the violence from our families was still too fresh and recent. We explained and everybody agreed to let us handle things as long as it was done in front of the group, as was the rule everybody else followed willingly."

Tin-Tin took up the conclusion of their story. "To conclude, Alan and I are still in the initial phase of our relation and still recovering from what we escaped on Tracy Island. The therapist we use together has confirmed that these situations happens a lot more than people know about, and that it was in fact a bona-fide sectarian setup that Jeff created to satisfy his all-encompassing need for control and dominance. The cameras in every room and corridor, even the bathrooms, were one of the easiest giveaways. The endemic violence and training the family to use the smallest, weakest member as a whipping boy to blame for their ills is another one. Arranging forcible marriages and breaking the future in-law is a classic tell too. Those are things we are on the lookout for, and we will never be caught in another sect of that sort again in our lives. We would prefer to die instead of giving up our freedom and safety like that."

Kayo frowned in thought before closing the tale. "So, as Alan said, we are progressing slowly but happily and we will get where we do because we want it of our free will. And while we have adapted the system of rules that the Labarre's have in their estate when they welcomed us as refugees, we do not follow that closely yet, at least between ourselves as a couple. We do agree with them that you do not have the right to give rules, discipline or punishments of any sorts to a person that you do not respect as much after as you did before when they accept the correction. If you do that, then you are just using the person as an emotional or physical punching bag to vent your own anger, you're not helping them at all."

"Holding to the rules and calling out people on their mistakes did create a few funny, sometimes highly embarrassing situations, but we eventually managed to make the difference between serious cases and just joking around a bit among friends. And yes, with that many fit, athletic guys and girls, there is a lot of horsing around to be seen! I am a hot blooded girl and seeing a good looking boy getting a red bottom from his girlfriend like Martin or Jason wasn't unpleasant. The girls really aren't ugly and I know Alan wasn't complaining about the show, either!"

As the Assembly's laughter died down from Tanusha's closing comments, her friends wagged fingers and uttered dire threats at her unrepentant humor, Younger Lucas #18 invited people to take a good half hour for an intermission. He told them to use the bathrooms while the food was cycled for fresh trays and pots. He asked for the use of a few air freshening spells to help change out the air, to put in place a fresh, clean lemongrass scent. He warned the Assembly members that the new hot drinks would have a vial of pepper-up potion mixed in to give their flagging energy reserves a
boost to last until the end. There were still two groups who had memories to share for the strategic and societal reports to be compiled.

As the intermezzo was happening, the mafious child was typing more data into his analytics sheet, trying hard not to bust the keys on his portable workstation as he filled in the fields and queries that would let the program produce rows and columns of abbreviated, visually simplified reports. It was only partial success, judging by the fact that their Tac-Chief had to cast a special 'techno-device mending' spell on his laptop CPU at least once during the pause.

Younger Lucas #18 was well beyond aggravated and wanting blood from this story. In many ways, it just as bad, yet so much worse, than what Martin and Diana had lived, because in this family, everybody knew of the abuse and actively participated or turned their backs on Alan's suffering, telling themselves glibly "He murdered Lucille, he deserves it." This led the pale skinned boy to glare at an imagined vision of the Bellegant parents who had not only ignored Alan's torture, but often tormented and demeaned their own daughter as well, going so far as to plan out her wedding and life without ever thinking she had the right to make up her own existence. The young woman was far from dumb, and she certainly had a better personality than Alan's brothers seemed cursed with, so why were they so Hell-bent on damaging and dominating her? Was Jeff pushing them to it, with rewards when they did? It would be just like a sectarian guru to do so, and could explain a lot.

"Imbeciles! Just more fuckshits who didn't deserve to have living kin around them!" the mafious child griped lowly under his breath as he typed notes and raw data into his programs.

Then there was the duo of Hiram and Fermat Hackenbacker; they might not be evil or complicit, but certainly they could have done something other than just cower in a hole, limiting themselves to holding Alan's hand when he cried or pushing pills and creams at him to manage his injuries with by his own self! At his age! What was Hiram thinking at the time? What the fuck kind of adult behavior is that? He could excuse poor little Fermat who was 2 years younger than Alan, who was himself 2 years younger than Lucas in all realities, but still, dammit! The bespectacled kid had inherited an almost pure form of his father's practically astronomical genius. HOW was it that neither had ever done anything truly helpful for Alan, especially when calling social services during his arrival at school, when the wounds were fresh, would have been so easy to do?

And that pink-clad BITCH, the Lady Creighton-Ward! Miserable self-slutting whore! Even when considering that she worked for MI-6 with confidentiality and classification laws to respect, she could have told her handler or regional manager about the situation, letting them decide. But no! She knew everything but sat her bony, anorexic arse on the information, thus condemning Alan to years of undeserved suffering and, in so many realities, a cruel inhuman end before age 15. Well, no! But oh Hells, no! Lucas had plans for THAT particular part of the entire situation, and the moronic apostle of 'seeing life in hot glam pinkness' would not be such a dead weight to drag around any longer than absolute necessity dictated. She worked for MI-6; that is British Military Intelligence - Section 6, as part of a vast, well ordered organization with a thick, dense corpus of laws, protocols, and a hierarchy that went from the field agents all the way up to the English Crown. She had superiors, and they had laws to follow. Let's see what these fine upstanding people would say if news of her being Jeff Tracy's toy in the pool-house while on 'official hours' were to ever reach their sensible ears.

The last thing Lucas wanted investigated and taken in control was the conception and construction of International Rescue. The organization was simplistic in the extreme, and everything in the scheme looked designed to keep as small number of people busy to the point of exhaustion, leading
to dangerous levels of tiredness, with associated dizziness, fuzzy/blurry vision, lack of auditory capacity, and reflexes slowed beneath operating requirements, all by critical margins. Whether this was designed willingly to work the Tracy sons to death, or just keep them too occupied to think about their miserable lives, or Jefferson was really that dumb a planner... The real goal wasn't clearly discernible yet... Still, they had very good tech, well ahead of their epoch, but badly managed, ill appointed, with a stupidly small number of employees to do it all, around the clock 24 / 365. These guys needed to be supported on the ground, have full crews on each ship, and have enough people to cover minimally two twelve hour shifts like US regulations for active military submarines. Even then, Lucas would much prefer three shifts of eight hours, no more than five days per week, otherwise the crewmen would burn out fast given the hard, exhausting, and often bloody rescues they had to do.

Memories 5; Jason, Eric & Lua

(Kong, The animated series – opening theme)

Sunday February 10th of 2301 – around 07:46am
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Motorpool garage building

One of the three 'Jason' in the assembly, the #2, waved around his recently acquired croissant while drinking a large gulp of his coffee. Once he had the people's attention, he spoke in his deep, rich voice that set those listening at ease with his kind tone and ordinary language. "As pretty much everybody knows by now, I'm an orphan too, since I was 5 years old. My dear grandma promptly dropped me in an all-boys private boarding school slash foster care arrangement in northern Michigan. That particular part of the USA still allows paddling in public schools and their laws state that religious and private schools can make their own independent choice about it. Suffice it to say that the place may have been officially secular, the truth was that over half the employees had been raised in Michigan and were white protestant christians. That meant you got your daily Jesus pill regardless of the school pamphlets and the official policy about not stuffing religion down the kids' throats."

Jason took a large bite out of his pastry and chewed thoughtfully as he remembered some of those things he saw and experienced in those young years. "You have to realize that since it was officially an ordinary private boarding school, they tried to hire people who were not fanatics or preachers in disguise. That meant that if you had a good head on your shoulders and lip-synched along when they prayed or spoke about Jesus being the most important man, world leader and spiritual figure of all history, you were pretty much left alone. And I mean really, really alone, too."

"We were in the middle of a swampy forest near the Canadian border with absolutely nothing to do but one chore each day and some really light homework. The school was close to the only entertainment around; a seasonal vacationing village for hunters and fishers about only fifteen minutes of walk away from the campus perimeter wall. The staffers never checked who was where until bedtime count. If you had a reputation as a quiet, shy kid and nobody in the village called to complain about you, the staffers let you roam around without bothering you."

"Now, If you were an idiot who made trouble or had the village sheriff call now and then, you'd
get a paddling in the principal’s office; that was one to five whacks over your clothes. If they
brought you back in the cop's car, you got a bare-assed whooppin' with a razor strop on the raised
stage, in the dining hall right before dinner so everybody could laugh and jeer as you bawled your
eyes out from the pain and shame. And when that was the punishment used, the principal hit until
the boy's backside was bruised blue & purple so he couldn't sit straight for a good long week
without help."

Jason exchanged a look of love and affection with his fiancé Lua as she rubbed his arm and kissed
the back of his neck, tickling him with her warm breath. He turned forward again while leaning
backwards to use the young woman as a plush, comfy cushion. Her gentle laughter and his squawk
of surprise when she tickled his hips amused the Assembly as they looked upon their antics with
benevolence. They were a truly well matched couple with a deep, strong affection and the
Assembly would work to protect this.

The young adult pouted as his girlfriend chuckled in his ear, her arms firmly around his middle to
hold him and lend her strength to him during his reminiscing. "That was grade school until I turned
10 years old. The place didn't have any kids older than last year of elementary so grandma moved
me to the eastern seaboard, in Massachusetts to another all-boys boarding campus. Given the state's
laws and common culture, this one was truly secular and among the liberal places."

"Like Martin's Torrington Academy, the place I went didn't impose uniforms and the campus
perimeter was made of lamp posts with lights, cameras and microphones, but no real fence. They
even had their own small private airfield and their own private leisure marina on the ocean shore to
accommodate water sports. As you can see, the airfield and marina were primarily to back up the
large parking lot so that rich parents, or usually their lawyer, nanny or butler, could come and get
their kid directly at the limit of campus without leaving their luxury vehicle. That's the place that I
met Eric Tannenbaum and his grand-father."

Jason looked lost for a moment as he remembered the day that took away for ever his best friend
Eric and also made certain he would never again love or respect his grand-mother Lorna. "My time
at O'Clearny Academy was pretty standard for the kids there. I got less than three detentions a
year, not even one paddling a year as I was among the more quiet and reserved students in the
place. I never got called to the principal's office for disciplinary issues. Everything I did was so
mild it was usually taken care of by the teacher who had reprimanded me or it was passed to the
dorm-house tutor to handle."

"Detentions could be given or watched over by any member of staff but corporal punishments were
limited to only your assigned dormitory surveillant and the school principal. State laws were pretty
clear too: one to five swats over clothing, and at least one adult and one extra student, both chosen
by the child himself, to witness the punishment. It was almost like what Jenna and Thomas
describe in their house except the boy's opinion wasn't very important in deciding either guilt or
sentence. They did after all see us all as only the property of our parents, little pets on a leash to be
trained and then passed on to the next establishment. We were lucky though, that the
Massachusetts laws are among the good ones in the USA when it comes to boarding schools. They
have a lot of them and there were a lot of bad beatings, hazings, molestations and rapes in the last
100 years so they adjusted a lot of the laws in the early 2000's."

After a gulp of coffee to whet his throat, Jason #2 continued at a leisurely pace. "It's at O'Clearny
that I met Eric and became friends with him. He arrived when we were both 14 years old after
transferring from a protestant boarding school where he had been badly beaten and assaulted by a
teacher who took an active hate to him because his name and family are German-Jewish in origin.
He wasn't molested, but the fucking teacher had attacked him by hitting him around the back, shoulders and head with the paddle he was supposed to hit his butt with."

"The damn thing was about five pounds worth of varnished oak and when Eric saw that, he knew it wasn't the school's official item. He refused the punishment, especially since the principal had already cleared him of any wrongdoing in the whole spurious affair anyways. The teacher flew into a rage and began spewing racial and religious crap as he swung the thing around and clipped him in the face and on his shoulders a few times. Eric managed to leave the office by bulldozing his way right through the plate glass in the door's frame and alerting the rest of the staff. It would have been 'He said / He said' if it weren't for his blood on the paddle's edge from when he got hit in the mouth. They called the cops, had the man arrested, blood test confirmed his story, but Eric's grand-dad had lost trust in the school and moved him right away. So I got my new best bud and bunkmate."

Lua took the time to rub her fiancé's back and shoulders as she knew how painful the coming memories were for him. He had a very ordinary life until this last year but some events were very personal and not the kind you go around bragging about in public. The 22 year old man bowed his head, eyes closed and hummed in pleasure from the gentle caresses along his spine and neck, enjoying his soon to be wife's expert massage skills. She had done a really good thing in insisting that everybody in the group take those therapeutic massage courses to help each other when injuries occur.

Jason took a deep breath, inhaling the smells and also the emotional presence of everyone around, steadying himself and getting ready to continue. He knew that there were parts of his past with Eric that the Labarre's and also Younger Lucas #18 and their 33 year old Uber-Brunder needed to hear and understand.

"Einrich Tannenbaum IV more commonly spoken 'Eric' or 'Tan'. Yes people, they were that kind of rich and snobby folks. Even Eric was mightily pissed at his parents for some of the snobbery they pulled on people in the streets or shops when they moved around. I never met them as they died the year before Eric changed schools, but the portrait he made of them is like a combination of Jefferson Tracy with Benton Quest; the manners of Benton but the new-rich wannabe attitude of Jefferson. It makes you sick just to hear what they used to do; imagine what Tan went through when he was by their side as it happened."

"Anyways, he was not like his parents. He was a down to earth, happy, smiling mountain of a guy. In fact, we compared family pics with one of our Lucas's programs and determined that Eric was bigger, heavier and much more athletic than even Virgil Tracy had been. At his death, Eric had been 6'4" tall, 260-odd pounds of muscles and bone, almost no fat and a heart healthier than most vegans could brag about, despite being a red meat kinda guy. Eric also had a very simple way of thinking things: don't involve the authorities since as minors we would always get shafted, even when we were in the right. As adults, it would just be more of the same."

The others practically all nodded their heads as the crushing majority of the group had been in boarding schools or foster care at some point of their lives and knew that fundamental truth all too well. It was better to have a bad agreement between kids, away from adult eyes, than to get the old cruds involved and have to pay for their anger even when you were innocent and already a victim. This was in fact perpetuated at adult age as most people would prefer a knuckle fight in the parking lot of the shopping mall to a day in court where the judge, bailiff, jury and attorneys all got something for their troubles and all you got was a pile of bills and a mortgage on your home to pay it all. No, they were not surprised and quite a few had ideas where this would go.
Jason continued his story with a rueful smile and chipper tone in his voice. There were things about his relationship with Tan that made him both embarrassed and melancholy at the same time. "Eric replaced a sick kid who went to hospital for the seventh time since he had come to O'Clearny and we were warned that this time it was the last. His health was not recovering and he was expected to die in the coming 3 to 5 months."

"Since he usually lived in Europe, near Hamburg in Germany, I thought I had lost my good friend of the last four years so I was unstable, morose, depressive, crying myself to sleep and waking up sick, late in the morning. The school actually tried to do a caring job; they assigned me a grief counselor to help get through. I admit the daily internet chats I had with the counselor helped a small bit but it was talking to my friend over Skype and Facetime that helped to see that he was coming to terms with the end of his life."

"Eric saw that my grief was real so when Mattias died peacefully in his sleep at home, he asked his grand-father to arrange for the two of them to take me to Hamburg to the funeral in their private Lear jet. The old man, very dignified and well mannered for a rich guy, actually traced down my grand-mother Lorna and had his attorneys liaise with hers to have a temporary guardianship and travel arrangements for the coming two weeks. For the first time in my entire life, she called me at school and I couldn't even recognize her voice because I had heard her so seldom to date."

Jason swallowed past the lump of angry bile in his throat, trying no to cry again about something long passed. "She congratulated me on making good contacts and promoting the Jenkins name. She encouraged me to keep up the friendship and call the company lawyer anytime I needed to spend time out of campus with the Tannenbaum's as she put them on the list of approved extra-scholastic contacts the lawyers could sign for in her absence. Meaning, without bothering her for instructions. We left, went to the funeral, then spent two weeks visiting Hamburg and Munich, the seat of Tannenbaum history."

Lua got more solid food for her fiancé and herself, sliced fruits and a small bowl of dipping caramel whilst Jason refilled their coffees and fixed them to their liking. "Oh, my! How very domesticated of him! Lua dear, you must tell me how you did it! I just can't seem to get mine right." Exclaimed Tanusha #1 in a posh fake-British accent about her fiancé Alan just as the young man in question crossed his arms and pouted most magnificently by her side. This caused many guffaws of laughter and a few snorts as beverages and food bites went down the wrong pipes. Brats, the lot of them!

Jason took up his story telling again, placid but not really sad, just very much missing his friends. "Tan became my friend the way that Mattias had been in less than two months and then became my brother just before the summer vacations. I was mournfully looking towards another two months in a vocational summer camp for teens of some sort or other that Lorna always set up for me when Eric asked my plans. Well, he nixed that in the bud and told me he'd talk to his grandpa and have me over at their house for the holidays until we came back to school. Eric had enjoyed the classes and the teaching styles at O'Cleary, rightfully so I have to say, and he wanted to come back. Since his grades were good and he had not a single reprimand on his record to date, his gramps would be delighted to agree."

"It took less than a day for Eric to call home and get permission for me to pass the summer with them, even on the small overnight trips they usually enjoyed to go sightseeing around the US or back to Munich at least once every year for the summer festivals. Lorna was ecstatic as she had been digging her head and rolodex to find me a summer camp that I wouldn't be bored to tears in after the events with Mattias. In truth, I think she just forgot, and the lawyers hadn't planned any
backup, so I got lucky for once. She signed a practically unlimited guardianship agreement with Mr. Tannenbaum with only the stipulation that I take a few pictures and films with my phone to send her as proof that everything was going well. As if she finally started caring after over a decade of putting me in a closet and ignoring me! Well, it would be the beginning of a beautiful, long lasting friendship that even death hasn't stopped."

"Tan and I had rooms beside each other with a large sliding wall. It was made that way so that when you had little kids, they opened up the wall to make a large playroom and at night the wall was closed to allow for each child to have some privacy, especially if one snored loudly. For Eric and me, it was like we had never left our dorm room; we soon had everything set up the way we liked it at school and took to his home's gym and sports facilities with a vengeance. We were both very athletic; I had been doing martial arts since the first year at the primary boarding academy and he had started earlier in infancy. It showed."

Jason spoke proudly about his deceased friend's life: "There wasn't a machine, weight set or exercise he hadn't tried and become master at. Even though he had never gone into fighting sports before meeting me, Eric helped me greatly in my overall health and training regimen whilst I became his instructor for martial arts and wrestling. We went bicycling, canoeing and even sailing without any adults on the small 24 foot boat he had received as his 15th birthday present from his parents. They had arranged the construction before their deaths and his grand-dad had paid for it to be finished as he liked sailing too. I rapidly got the idea that they had detached from him as early in his life as Lorna had from me, but his grand-father however was a firm and continuous presence in his everyday life."

Jason took a napkin to wipe some caramel from his mouth and barely had time to register the act that his dear loving girlfriend had stained his cheek with a sugary kiss. Stunned for a few seconds, he passed a thumb over the kiss print and smiled at her playful attitude, laying his forehead against hers in his own loving gesture.

"I rapidly realized that Eric took his temperament from his gramps. I saw old Mr. T take Eric by the arm, turn him around and swat him a few times on the rear, but without any of the anger or violence I had seen in other parents. The old man explained to me after such an event that it was better to use just a few swats at the moment you felt your patience thinning than wait until you exploded. If you explode, you're out of control and could hurt your kid by being abusive, or simply not care anymore until the red haze of rage had dissipated. I could see the similarity because Tan had on occasion swatted my rear at school when I made a really lewd joke, was lazy about my homework, or refused to close a video game at night when I should have gone to bed. He had threatened to spank me firmly when I misbehaved but I had always taken it as a joke between boarding school kids; now I could see he had been serious at the time. That evening, when his gramps went to some mundanity in town for the family company, we sat on the back porch with our dinners, drinks and snacks and had a talk about what kind of relationship we wanted to have."

The young adult's eyes were glassy as he looked down memory lane, seeing events long passed but still significant to his heart. "Eric was really open hearted and forthright about what he wanted; a brother. He had been alone all his life and it was because of this that his grand-father sent him to boarding school instead of keeping him at home when his snobby parents died. He hoped Eric would find a spiritual-sibling or three and become happy, no longer isolated or forgotten as he was now. For Eric, that meant finding people who were more than just guys to hang around with at school or the mall. It meant somebody who would hold him up emotionally and keep him grounded to reality so he never became a rich ditzy airhead like his parents were."
"He openly spoke of the spankings his gramps gave him when he erred in judgment or morality. He wanted somebody more his age that he could argue with and then, if convinced he had been wrong, willfully accept the correction without fear of being hurt or demeaned by an adult and their dominance games. I was impressed by his honesty and in truth, by the fact it was pretty much what I wanted too."

"You see, to that point, the only place in my life that I excelled at and made sustained efforts to improve was martial arts & wrestling as I was a prize-winning champion. I practiced up to four hours on some days but I had begun to sacrifice my school work and other aspects of my life for it. In reality, I was becoming disinterested and flat out lazy about anything school related; it just hadn't showed in the grades yet. So we made an agreement, Eric and me; we would write down a list of dos & don'ts we needed for ourselves and arrange for the other to hold us to that standard with rewards and punishments when appropriate. We convened that as long as we weren't injured or in trouble with the school or the law, we would settle everything between ourselves in private."

Several of the 'Martin', 'Alan' and a few 'Lucas' all nodded and spoke of hearing similar tales in the boarding schools they had attended. It wasn't that rare amongst teens to seek out a protector-type or sibling-type of relationship to obtain a measure of safety and affection when your family is either dead or doesn't care. It is the same thing for sexual relationships; it happens all the time but none of the schools or foster homes will ever freely admit what can happen in the dormitories at night or on weekends. Boarding Schools without walls that allow kids to roam the village are basically admitting that they can't control the kids (it's true anyways) and simply allow them to find a private place in the village to have their relationships in peace without disrupting the school's social order. And having an all-boys or all-girls establishment stops nothing when hormones rage and a depressive, morose kid is looking around for affection, support and love but often enough will settle for just cheap sex to get by emotionally.

Jason swallowed some coffee and smiled playfully at the group. "I will pass over the rest of high school and even our time together at Cambridge University, in Massachusetts, where we went together even though we had different studies. Suffice it to say that from the age of 15 onwards, I was a fixture at Eric's residence; it became my first real home. We had a good, strong brotherly relationship even though many a time we had a stinging rump for it. I rapidly noticed a dramatic uptake in my health, my grades, and the teachers' notes in my next trimester report were all noting improved behavior and demeanor in class. Eric had the same but in more flowery language in respect for his gramps and the family's money."

"I had somebody who loved me and spent time with me just because; not for money, fame, or my family's name. Tan felt the same but even more acutely since he knew I never gave a crap about his money or name unlike everybody who orbited around his parents. We had a real, genuine sibling that cared for our welfare and that was worth more than anything in the world for us. His gramps died in his sleep peacefully while we were on the patio roasting hot dogs and making a racket about it. We know he was a happy man as he had a true smile frozen on his sleeping face. It happened in summer, the year we both reached 19 years old and were truly adults in the eyes of the law. We are pretty sure he prolonged his life despite the pain from his liver illness and waited until we were both above legal age by as much as possible so he could leave us to our own selves and not in fosterage. He had transferred EVERYTHING to Eric the moment he turned 18 but it wasn't made public before he died so that his grand-son wasn't bothered about the sudden fortune and importance in society."

Jason was melancholy as he remembered some of the best years of his young life. "It was after O'Clearny that Eric and I decided together to attend Cambridge. Since he turned 18 before me, he got the first part of his inheritance out four scheduled parts at 18, 21, 24 and 29 years of age along the ancient traditions of the German nobility back when the family was founded in the early
medieval period. The real kicker was when I turned 18; the lawyers for my dead parents contacted me about the procedure to claim what they called 'The Jenkins Estate' like it was something big and impressive. It was big for me, even though it was a lot smaller than Tan's loot from his ancestors. And that was why we went to uni together. I had hesitated a lot because of the costs for housing, food and stuffs... I knew Lorna had an obligation to keep me lodged and fed while I was a kid, but passed 18, I didn't know what she'd do and she never called about it. So, I was aiming towards finding a job to live on since there wasn't any way that I'd grift off Eric's family like that. I wan't no parasite! But then, while I was vacationing at his house for the summer like the three previous years, I got a bunch of papers from my dead parents along with money, investments and two dozen pieces of land, some leased out for revenue."

"Because I now had my own wealth to pay my way, I finally agreed with Eric and his grand-father that we should get a house near campus to live in so we would have the space to have workshops, a music room and gym, amongst many other things. In fact, the old man had quite a lot of fun calling us an 'old married couple' because of how we squabbled over what we wanted the house to have. It took us a month of evenings and weekends spent looking at MLS photos and virtual tours of properties around the Cambridge area until we found an old 3 storey house that needed some renovations to put up to code, but had everything we both wanted. Eric's grandpa almost got himself a conniption cuz he laughed so hard when he saw our new place the first time we visited to make the purchase. The old loon called it 'our cozy little love cocoon' right there with the ex-owners in front of us."

Jay glared at the Assembly as they chuckled at his expense. Well, okay, it had been funny back then too. Eric certainly had been laughing his head off like a loon the same way his grandpa had been doing. Both of them had shared a lot of mannerisms and character traits over the years; making fun of poor little Jason had been one of those things they both did.

"Anyways, moving on," the young adult grumped, his fake ill-mood belied by the amused smile he was trying to stifle. "We had three good years cohabiting at Cambridge when the events that would make us meet Lua happened. Just after I turned 21, when I already had my major in archaeology and was plowing through my other major in ancient legends and myths, grandma Lorna called out of nowhere. She was inviting us, Eric and I, to come visit her on her remote island laboratory, deep in the South Pacific ocean, not far from Australia. Honestly, I didn't want to go since it had actually been three years at that point, since the last time she had initiated any contact with me. She never returned my messages, not even through her lab assistant, secretary, or the lawyers she had on the mainland USA. Eric however, had nothing better to do and was curious. His reasoning was that if things went bad, we could just hightail it to Australia for some surf & babes to help me recover from my rotten family reunion. Since Tannenbaum Industries had a production facility in Sidney and my parents had left me a small beach-house in the same city for no reason we ever found out, we had the makings of a 'plan B' so we packed up, got into Eric's private seaplane and left."

"We traveled overland from Massachusetts to Washington State, doing some rest stops along the way just for a few hours of fun and meals in restaurants instead of just subsisting on prepacked sandwiches and soft drink cans. We touched base in Seattle to spend the night in a motel near the airport then left in the morning after a good breakfast. We flew along the coastline in a single long trip, down to the southernmost tip of California where we stopped for a night, then we started down Mexico's western shores, and so on, stopping our flight every 10 or 11 hours to spend the night aground. We went all the way down middle and south America without any issues, even in the small fishing towns where we stopped for rest and fuel. We followed the coast until the city of Antofagasta in Chile where we fueled up and resupplied. The plane was big enough to have a wet bath, cabinets with a gas fueled hob & oven to cook simple hot meals, 6 full sized seats and enough aviation fuel to power the propeller all the way across to Asia if we had wanted. However, due to summer storms and the fact it was our first time flying across the Pacific, we decided on a broken
flight path with stops. The first was Easter Island, then Cook Islands, and Finally Fiji."

Jay smiled at Lua over his shoulder, gazing deeply into her eyes, enjoying the warmth of her presence in his life through the small pause. With a sigh, he turned back to the story.

"From Fiji we finally received by radio the coordinates to reach Lorna's secret island. And it was secret; nobody, from her lawyers to the governments her company was registered with, had any map grid coordinates for her base-camp, nor any route to guide rescue ships with, if she ever deigned to call for help. The incredibly amusing fact was that her secret base was just 100 miles from Tracy Island, itself about 300 miles from Brisbane in eastern Australia, even though neither group knew at the time. We spent several hours in flight, from just after dawn until mid-afternoon, to reach the laboratory. The island's facilities weren't just a conglomeration of tents and wooden sheds; they had a cement docking quay big enough for a 200 foot ocean faring ship on each side, a separate jetty for floatplanes, multiple concrete buildings for laboratories, workshops, ground vehicle garages and warehouses. They even had a helipad with a dedicated hangar that housed a Boeing CH-46 Sea Knight twin-rotor cargo helicopter. All their electricity was actually generated by a combination of solar panels, a small concrete hydraulic dam on a creek and two wood-fired boilers with naval piston engines and generators from the 1890's. Fresh running water with full sanitary facilities were available in all of the many buildings, as were wood-burning stoves. The most impressive and unexpected part though, was the horseshoe shaped 5 foot thick, 20 foot high (+10 foot foundation base) armored concrete wall that surrounded the entire complex with multiple livable gatehouses and watch turrets spread around. The wall was open full width on the ocean facing side, but covered every other face or angle of the village to repel animals and the occasional flash flood when it rained in the mountains."

"You know, when Tan and I left Massachusetts, we expected to be arriving in a gathering of tents or ISO cargo boxes, like modern day gypsies, not the equivalent of an independent village hidden among the palm trees and rocky shoals of Kong Island. Well, it was unnamed for us until two weeks later when we met the principal inhabitant, one of my grandma's ceaseless secrets; Kong, the super-ape. He wasn't the original King Kong though, he was a genetic clone made by Lorna from DNA taken in the fossilized marrow of the skeletal remains she had found in a man-made cavern covered in golden sculpted metallic columns and walls. These artifacts were our first true physical contact with the relics of the Ancient and Exalted Empire of Mu, proof that the legends I had been studying in my archaeology classes weren't fabricated stories after all. This was the first thing that Lorna revealed to us, after a week of just walking around the island idly, while wondering why we had actually come here since she didn't do much with us in the first 7 days."
words and get a better opinion of the two young men, as I had received many mixed signals in the last six days. I was rather surprised when Tan told Jason loud and clear that he had been irresponsible, a bad guest towards Lorna and myself by leaving like that before finishing the camp tasks, nor making certain nobody needed him. Eric said 'That's it brother; you're getting a spanking. Get your shorts down and get over my knees, we'll do this quickly and be back at camp to help set up the morning tea.' And to my surprise, that big athletic 21 year old did just that! And what a scrumptious ass he had, ladies!"

That set off a series of loud explosive guffaws of deep belly laugh while most of the guys who were gay said together "Why are we never there when that happens?" in such a forlorn way that the Assembly exploded in good humor again. Several girls playfully suggested they had a pensieve stashed somewhere, if Lua would accept to share her memories with some sisters in need of eye candy for the long winter nights. That set off another round of explosive laughter all around.

The 20 year old woman smiled in a bratty way at her fiancé who was pouting like a little kid at her joke at his expense. She kissed him on the lips, sweetly and softly, sending out a short dense wave of empathic projection to confirm her love and respect for him. He responded in kind, hugging her to his chest, giving her a comfortable nest from which to conclude her side of the story.

"I admit that I was genuinely surprised to see a pair of boys, young adult men in truth, resolve a dispute in this manner. I was raised by the tribe that found me as a baby to see this as the way a parent, or any adult really, would reprimand and chastise a truly indocile child; I had never heard of equals, especially adults, doing it that way. It was obvious by the sounds of the smacks and the faces Jason made that Eric was not holding back. At some point, Jason started to actually cry and bawl out in pain, begging Eric to not hit so hard, but Tan just answered that 'he was old enough and muscular enough to handle it like that'. He stopped when Jason's buttocks were blazing red, his friend sobbing hard in genuine remorse."

"That had been a real penance, not play swats between lovers or sex-friends. Eric rubbed Jason's back as he lay over his knees, getting back his breath as he finished crying out his pain and guilt. When he stood up, Eric helped him with setting his boxer briefs and hunter's cargo shorts back in place. Then they hugged and Tan kept an arm around his shoulders all the way back to camp. Jaz had a brand new attitude after that and was much more attentive to the rest of the group's needs. After the morning tea, I asked them to follow me, supposedly to show an unexplored section of ruins deeper in the jungle's virgin areas. Once about two miles from the camp, I confronted them about what I saw and heard. I wanted to test their honesty, so I asked Jason to show me the results of his punishment to see if the lesson was well learned."

"It was actually Eric who defended him by saying that if I had truly seen the event, I would know he hadn't been kidding at the time and given Jason a real spanking, not play-swats or big heavy caresses. I remember poor Jaz looking mortified that we spoke about him like that, but then he defended himself quite well. He asked me if I preferred dealing with a dishonest 'manly-man' who was always big and powerful even when he was wrong, or with an honest guy who accepted that sometimes receiving a wake-up from a true friend could help him stay kind and mature. Since I am engaged to him, I think the answer is obvious."
since the angry feelings were expressed quickly and clearly. The black-haired male signaled at the Assembly, bringing them back to the oncoming horrifying realities they had lived as the tale continued.

"After 12 days in the laboratory village, Lorna had finished her pressing secret experiments and was finally ready to show us something else than the exquisite craftings of the Mu caverns, crypts and ritual sites. She brought us to the deep jungle between two of the island's many hills to introduce us to the 'owner' of the land they worked on. That was the day we met Kong, as in the mythical giant gorilla 'King Kong' from the novels and movies. It so happened that the explorers from the early 1800's had indeed found an uncharted and unexplored island, situated north-east of Australia and above New Zealand, where they found primitive, prehistoric, lifeforms along the iconic monster that struck the imagination of seven generations since."

"Then grandma revealed one of the many depravities she had been responsible for; the massive super-ape she introduced us to wasn't the original but a 'replicant' version. That meant she had synthetically produced something that resembled exactly like the base template of a real creature, but with several significant internal and genetic variants of her design. It was the way she introduced those genetic variants and traits that caused me to almost deck her, if Eric hadn't held me back. The rabid bitch used – MY – DNA, sampled and preserved at my birth when she had bribed one of the hospital nurses to take all the organic wastes from the event, package it, and hand it over to Lorna without any in the family knowing. The very first contact that I had with her, the very first gesture she did towards me at the moment of my birth, was to RAPE me, to physically and organically rape me by thieving my biological material for the sorts of experiences the damned NAZIS would have been proud of calling their own!"

Jaz leaned forward, hiding his face in his hands, his entire frame shaking as he tried to hold in the soul-wracking sobs that still took over him when he thought about just how completely uncaring of him and his welfare his grand-mother had been. She had only seen him as a source of components and data, nothing more.

Lua rubbed his shoulders and neck, trying to help the young adult to live through his emotions instead of repressing them so badly that it would make him sick and depressive if he continued. They took almost a quarter hour to help Jason recover from the painful heartache of what his family had inflicted on him, during which Younger Lucas #18 typed away feverishly on his workstation, filling forms, setting reminder notes and running a partial compilation of what these two had said up to now so as to orient his questions and inquiries later as they finished up. The juvenile crime boss had an idea that violence and bloodshed were just around the proverbial corner-of-the-wall, and that was what they needed to hear and prepare. For some it was too late, but for others, there could still be a chance to influence events towards better resolution.

Lua spoke their memories for a while, to give her closest friend more time to stabilize himself and order his own recollection of events.

"As you saw, Jason reacted badly to what Lorna had revealed to him so callously. It's important to understand that she was the only person aware of these facts. She had hidden it from her husband while he lived, and from her son and his wife while they lived. It took Jay 2 whole days to recover enough to talk with the old woman again, to get the sordid details of the affair. She admitted openly that she had already found the Mu caverns and their relics, including the bones of the original King Kong, before Jason's father married and had him. In fact, she admitted that she had found several artifacts and relics of Antiquity before she herself had birthed her son or even married. That woman was so enamored with her damned secrets! It never stopped! Every time she opened her mouth, another horrendous piece of criminality came tumbling out, without care for laws, morality, legitimacy, or even the most basic good taste. The woman was completely devoid
"Eventually, when Jason and Eric calmed enough to use their extensive scientific training, they began to pester Lorna with hard-fact questions, fishing for solid data to base their judgment of the situation on. When she began sharing her research with us, she showed just how truly deep the well of depravity sunk. She was borne of the Labarre Clan and married into the Jenkins Bloodline. Even back in her youth, she had been aware of how many suspicious violent deaths her clan suffered every year, along with sabotage or destruction of manufactures, canneries and distilleries. She accidentally found in her ancestral archives information that she thought would be the salvation of the clan, as well as the tool by which they could retaliate against the attackers to claim back their full freedom. She found the coordinates of Kong Island consigned to the Clan's master map by Labarre fishing ships in the early 1500's when Australia's discovery was done by the British Magical Exploration Corps. She then hunted down the ship logbooks, captain's journals and their boat's navigational maps and charts, excavating old paper volumes and magical lore crystals until she found. An island covered in lush, dense, almost impenetrable hot wet jungle foliage. What little exploration the fishermen of the period had done showed that the animals present were much bigger, more aggressive, and most had special capacities well beyond just poisonous fangs or stingers. Partial invisibility field, chameleon-like chromatic skin, thermographic sight, natural compass or location capacities equal to the best spells or machines known at the time, etc...

Lua relented as Jason sat straighter, wiping his red bloodshot eyes before he took over.

"Lorna was as bad as the damned Nazis; she was silently working on eugenics, active genetic selection and modification of biological traits and capacities in species, races, and individuals, to create a 'super human'. Her goal was to infuse characteristics from exotic – magical – animals from Kong Island into human children through the mother's womb before the actual conception so as to procreate a special group of combat specialists who would have integrated abilities and traits that would allow them to overpower any adversary. It didn't take much effort to extract from her that both dad and me were victims of this research. She had put herself on a regimen of potions and spells to guide the procreation of her only child. Then, 3 decades later, she took secretive criminal methods to take over my mother's mind to make her accept the regimen of potions and spells to produce her grand-child just the way she wanted".

"Lorna had spent almost 6 decades of her 79 year life on this work at that point; she wasn't even capable of seeing just how out of synch with reality she was. She explained that her goal had been to produce artificially for a large group of varied people the capacity that had been the Gift of Nature for a limited number of Labarre men in the distant past. You see, the magical specialty that makes Thomas so unique, his shape-change and life-communion prayers, had allowed the Labarre of olden epochs to be the fiercest fighters and most devious spies for thousands of years. Thomas can take the shape of any higher entity, beast, animal, plant and even some basic items while retaining his mind and spell-casting abilities. He can also merge his body and soul with any plant, animal or beast to create a 'fuzor' combatant for the duration of a fight, travel across harsh terrain, or work through a specific type of project. He could either change into or merge with a dog to sniff out and follow a suspect until he could arrest him. Lorna's goal was to take what was a 'special gift' from druidic tradition based on prayers to the Divine and animal totems, convert the spells into pure arithmantic equations that would then serve as base code to program synthetic DNA & RNA sequences to implant in children, to give them these very same capacities but without all the education, Faith, and prayers like Thomas needs to use his capacities."

"And that was a whole kit & kabootle of new knowledge neither Tan or I had expected to get dumped on our heads that day! It was bad enough with the Mu Empire being real, but I never expected magic to be a reality, or that so many legendary creatures were actually completely real and true to the stories. Even as an archaeologist who specialized in legends and folklore, I never
would have bet on any of it being other than fabricated by community leaders to make children behave. You see, despite being a part of the Labarre by blooded birth, I was never taught any magics or psionics, not even the basics than non-users can learn like arithmancy, potions, alchemy or runic arts. Lorna, who was a full spell-user from birth, had used criminal methods to control the way my parents raised me without ever speaking of magic in my presence. After their deaths when I was 5 years old, she used her mind magicks to examine my memories while I slept, to remove any mentions of magic that wasn't just popular culture or 'official' legends. We had not been ready for this culture shock. We didn't reject this history and culture or the peoples involved, we weren't racists Eric and I, but we just had no preparation at all, no forewarning whatsoever, so we kinda panicked not-so-quietly for a couple of days."

"Lorna's research had led her down two avenues of research; biomancy and technomancy. She had pre-determined my DNA to be specifically attuned to the power realms of mentalism, primal essaece, as well as traditional and virtual psionics so as to boost my natural affinity for 'shape-changing' or 'merging', in both body and mind. In my birth, Lorna had actually managed to create the super combatant she craved as evidenced by my championship-level performances in martial arts, and how easily I learned any weapon I tried. Now she would show me what my true potential was destined for. Along her explanation of WHY she had used MY genetic material to create the new Kong super-ape. She told me that we were a 'programmed pair', procreated and programmed specifically to work alongside each other to better employ the merge capacity for the maximum effect in a way that non-programmed pairs would not be able to achieve. Kong and I were the penultimate achievement of her program, and we would reach the final weaponization of our bodies and souls by using the produce of her technomagical work, the Cyber-Link, to become a 'fuzor' combat-beast."

The young man made a face, so many emotions passing over his features in a jumble that most in the Assembly couldn't see well enough to interpret them correctly. What was clear however, was that all the 'Jason' and 'Lua' in the meeting were experiencing emotional distress of varying degrees. From what the people around saw, there was little to be done about it but give them friendly shoulders to lean on.

Lua spoke softly, the hesitancy in her words highlighting the heavy burden of raw emotions and nightmares that still haunted them.

"You have to realize how Jason was struck and drowned by a tsunami of foreign, alien knowledge, ancient family history, then the existence of Kong on top. Please take the time to realize what that means; Jason learned he had been procreated in a completely synthetic process, which gave him a 'brother' created through an even more synthetic test-tube process. Forget the fact they never knew of each other, nor ever met; they were different SPECIES! They were from two different groups of entities that were never supposed to organically couple and reproduce! Lorna had not simply been unfaithful with another man, or hidden the infidelity of her son or daughter-in-law; she had literally stolen their Bloodline to couple it against the Laws of Nature with an animal to spawn what was accounted a 'magical creature', not even a full humanoid person!"

Jason took up again the story: "Eric, Lua and I barely had four days to get used to the secrets and depravities revealed by Lorna when violence came to the small village. In fact, Eric and I had established a small camp in a large convoy tent on the rocky beach next to the seaplane so we didn't accidentally run into Lorna at night, when the nightmares and acid churning in our gut kept us up all night. At dusk on our 17th day on the island, one of the laboratory assistants was found at dusk, dead, on a stretch of beach outside the village wall, his belly ripped open by a camping knife left planted in his gut. It was an act of cold murder; we were now all at risk. By the time we got
back to the central cluster of buildings with the body on a stretcher, the tall cement tower that housed the generators and fuel in the ground floors, with the radio & surveillance room in the glassed cabin on top, was fully ablaze like a heretic's pyre. Then there was an explosion from the airfield where the helicopter had been taken out to prepare for an emergency evacuation. It was a loud gunshot, telling us that the pilot had just died. When we went to investigate, we found the woman dead in the helo's cargo hold, with several key parts of the flight electronics removed to paralyze the chopper on the ground. The 50 years old, 200 foot long landing boat that served Lorna for as long as she used the island was found sabotaged too. Like the helo, engine parts were stolen so she could be easily repaired by just placing the parts back. We were now besieged, and the worse would come with dawn.

"Just after sunrise, before the breakfast bell, we were all alerted by the loud blaring noises of an airhorn. We all went to the middle of the village to see what was happening. It was our enemy, come to present himself to command we surrender to him. I almost lost my marbles then. The man leading the team of mercenaries was my professor of archaeology, the Dean of the Faculty of Ancient Myths and Legends at Cambridge; doctor Ramone De La Porta. The bastard had the nerve to mock me and Lorna publicly, boasting about how he had waited in the shadows almost 30 years to get what he wanted. He told me how he had hacked into my emails to steal the coordinates to Kong Island and had a hireling place a beacon on Eric's seaplane. Then, right there, the bastard boasted about how he had killed my parents 16 years prior, not only to steal their research, but also make certain nobody else could recreate it to beat him to the prize, like Lorna came close to doing."

Lua explained; "The prize the man wanted was not the extermination of the Labarre Bloodline, although he most assuredly would not have objected. No; his goal was to access the ruins of the Mu Empire to find and obtain control over the Holy Power Stone hidden within. According to the hieroglyphs engraved on the walls of the caves and several metal tablets with a different, more modern version of Mu writing, there were 14 stones each placed at one of the 14 tectonic points of the Earth-sphere. Imagine the Earth as a cube: you have the 8 corners plus the middle of 6 sides, thus 14 mathematically accurate map coordinates upon which the Mu had built large temple complexes to hold the Holy Stones, regardless of volcanoes, oceans, or ice plains. These Stones were not natural rocks with engravings, not the way the druidic menhirs of Europa had been made. These were alchemical constructs crafted by the imperial technomages in the lava flows of the volcano that was the heart of Mu magic, science, and principal source of thermal steam power for their entire capital city: Mu-Tala-Teha. Where the citizens of the great city Atlantis focused on biomancy, crystallurgy and nuclear electrical energy, the Mu focused on metallurgy through lava, fire and steam machinery."

The 20 year old woman detailed the stones further: "Each Holy Power Stone was crafted as a manatite, to be permanently linked to the 3 primordial energy weaves of 'Soul', 'Mana' and 'Energon' while also having sustained connections with all the other Power Realms; 'Electricity', 'Life-force', 'Channeling', 'Essence', 'Mentalism', 'Primal Essaence', 'Radiation', 'Mythal' and 'Psionics' or neural energy equivalents. The 14 power stones together served to form the greatest Wonder of the World that not even the Atlanteans have ever matched: the Planetary Laandcrafting Array. It was a gigantic system of machines, computers, reactors, magicks and alchemy that served to constantly terraform the planet, to smooth down the worse climatic excesses, or clean up environmental damage left by wars, industry, or cataclysms of other sources. If all 14 stones are activated together, you could even reset the magnetic poles or shift the axis of the globe to improve the total surface exposed to sunlight to diminish the ice banks, leaving more arable land for the people to exploit in gentler zones. He who owns these Holy Power Stones can threaten the governments of the planet into submission, but he who controls their functions will be crowned Emperor, to rule penultimate for Ages of History untold. That was Ramone de la Porta's endgame.
The Throne of Earth, and the entire planet with it."

Jason sighed deeply as tears began to slide down his face again, the wounds of those days still very fresh in his mind. To him and his fiancée, it had all happened less than 11 months ago. The faces of their dead family and friends still swam before his eyes occasionally, even in the daylight during work or play. Jason carried within him a burden of guilt and self-loathing few could understand. 'Survivor's guilt' it was called, and very little could be done to assuage its constant torments, other than supporting him by listening when he spoke of it.

"We fought them. There was no alternative for anyone on the island. Besides the fact that we all knew instinctively they would never let us live, not with the terrifying secrets we knew. Plus, they had killed my parents, and that demanded payment in bloodshed. We spent the next 20-odd days in the vast jungle covered hills of Kong Island, playing a hellish sort of hide-and-seek with only death as the endgame. Regardless of who was found by whom, the result was always the same. At first, we were hesitant to kill. As children, we were all told that only the 'bad' people kill others, 'good' people arrest the 'bad' and bring them to jail. We were hundreds of miles out to sea, no contacts possible with anybody, and the last motor vehicle that was operable had its engine parts secured in a safe under armed guard. After losing 3 workers and another lab assistant in just the first 2 days, we changed our minds and started fighting back dirty. It was actually me who scored the first kill for our side; I used the Cyber-Link to 'merge' with Kong so we could outfight and outsmart some of De La Porta's men. I grabbed a guy and threw him against the side of a rocky outcropping. The crack of bones that sounded off was sickening... His back had crumbled in four places... His skull had literally exploded upon striking the rock... Kong was ecstatic but I wanted to puke my guts out... We merged again in lethal purpose when another goon, attracted by the death screams, managed to shoot Kong in the arm with an assault rifle, penetrating the thick fur through the skin and into the muscles to make him bleed. We grabbed a half-ton boulder and threw it... The guy barely had the time to shriek in misery before he turned into squished reddish paste, splashing all the trees and rocks around for 20 feet."

"We fought, we ran, we hid in caves or Mu ruins, we ate cold for fear the goons had thermal cameras. There had been sensors and cameras in the labs, some of it designed to be mounted on tripods or vehicles, so we had to limit our heat signatures, never make a fire or let raise a trail of smoke, lest we give up our position. We learned that lesson harshly, at the cost of seeing Lorna's old friend and oldest worker, her mechanic, get shot to death by De La Porta himself, after he caught the old man besides the small campfire he had lit to make a hot midday meal during one of the innumerable short rainfalls that plague the island's wet season. After that, we became even more paranoid and secretive. But still, it wasn't enough... On the end of the first week, Lorna was shot in the heart by a sniper, perched in a palm tree across a deep gorge, more than 900 yards away. She dropped dead on impact, her corpse falling into the raging torrent in the bottom of the gorge, getting carried downhill to the sea, never to be seen again. The day after, several members of Lua's tribe were killed since torturing them for information about the Mu ruins gave De La Porta nothing of value. He had them brought to the flat roof atop the helicopter hangar, where they were tied to long metal poles, left to bleed to death, hanging upside down by the ankles like deer on a skinning rack. The day after, we lost another mechanic, the landing boat's pilot, and the village's pharmacist-cum-paramedic."

Jason began crying hard again, his breath coming out in harsh gut-wrenching sobs between the painful words.

"On the 12th day of pursuit, the bastard mercs managed to find and capture Eric when he tried to do a night run to one of the damaged vehicles to steal the comms equipment to build us an emergency radio. They brought him to the roof of the copter hangar. They tortured him for 3 days before he died. Do you know what the worse part of it was? We didn't even know he was captured!
We didn't know Eric was gone until the second day, as we were all hiding in small clusters of 2 to 4 people to minimize the chances of being caught, and by some dumb misfortune, Eric and Lua weren't in my group at the time. I learned of his death a full 2 days after he passed in horrible suffering. The goons had tortured him in public because they thought that I was nearby, and seeing him suffering would make me surrender a whole lot faster. They were absolutely right in their logic! Except, I was deep inside a cave, on a hill four miles away at the time. Eric died alone, miserable and forsaken that day, and I will always hate myself for not being there to help him, or at least hold his hand while he passed."

"When I heard about his death, I got so depressed I became suicidal. I hated myself so much that I merged with Kong to save what little sanity and personality I had left. In the communion-state, Kong held my soul, healing me, making me understand that self-loathing would not bring back my other brother, but violence could at least make De La Porta fail his mission, paying for his multiple crimes. So we planned, coming up with a far more aggressive idea that would turn the tide of war in favor of the last few survivors. Instead of hiding like cowards which had only gotten us killed off one-by-one, I began to use the Cyber-Link to merge with small innocuous animals, to bring me in contact range of the mercenaries where I transformed back to human, to take them out by dealing out killing blows in silence. Usually, I employed a knife or a silenced pistol that I took from the corpse of a dead criminal. In less than two days of retaliatory strikes, I had managed to inflict more damages to them than they had done to us, for the entire three weeks they had hunted us."

"It all came to a head when Kong and I reunited with Lua’s team and the other survivors. We planned to attack doctor De La Porta from several sides all at once during which I would fly in as a bird and change mid-air to fall on him, guns blazing for one final showdown. We managed to corner him and his last four men near the sea boat quay. He was trying to repair the landing boat to escape while leaving us stranded. Three mercenaries went down fast in the first minute of fighting since Lua was now using her shamanic magic offensively, instead of just defensively like before. Unfortunately, we didn’t know their full strength; the fourth bastard had scrounged around Lorna’s lab and found a spare Cyber-Link. He used it to merge with a scorpion to become a giant toxic menace that monopolized Kong’s efforts. That completely unexpected maneuver would have been a devastating ambush against our group if it had been in effect before we arrived, but as it was done mid-fight, all it did was stall Kong while the rest of our desperate people were now all focused on hunting down Ramone, who was finally truly alone. Except the bastard was in the boat with several crates of illegal merchandise he had brought to help take over then fortify the village."

"The rat bastard showed up at the ship’s top deck, near the wheelhouse, with a rocket launcher on his shoulder. Not just an RPG or a little anti-jeep rocket; no, it was a large anti-bunker or anti-ship missile that threw the man flat on his back when he shot it. He shot right at Kong who was in the middle of the fight with the scorpion fuzor. The blast was so big it killed the two super-animals the moment it exploded, and blew the glass out of the windows of buildings and vehicles all around at some 200 feet. That was the last straw for my flagging sanity. My last living relative that I was aware of had just died in front of my eyes, from a plan I had helped to create. I lost my marbles and abandoned myself to the Wrath inside my heart."

"I had been hiding in the form of a small falcon on the angled roof of a cargo warehouse near the docks when the bastard killed my kin. I jumped in the air and, as I came down to the deck plates near him, I lost control of my emotions making all the pent-up magic inside my body that had never been able to express itself, due to illegal potions and blocks, burst out to interact with the Cyber-Link. It activated a function in the device that Lorna had kept secret, no surprises there, and transformed me into a monster. I became an Eye of Doom, an Occulary Tyrant, a terrifying nightmarish horror called officially a ‘Beholder’. I was now a legless, armless, 12 feet wide round ball of malevolence with a full-width maw, a giant central eye 7 feet wide and a crown of ten tentacles 15 foot long that each ended with an eye emitting a cruel magical capacity. I saw my
reflection in De La Porta's fearful eyes; I knew what I was from the legends I had studied, and knew what to do next. I gazed upon him most balefully with the great 7 foot wide Eye of Undoing to dispel any arcane protections he might be wearing, then used the small Eye of Psychosis to mind rape him thoroughly of any and all information his unworthy soul may hold. I was stunned flabbergasted by the depth of criminality he had committed in his life, and just how many secrets about the Labarre and Jenkins Families he had managed to acquire during his pursuit of penultimate power. It was by this mind rape that I found out that I still had living relatives in Jonny Quest, his grand-father Hoss Jenkins, and the Labarre siblings Thomas and Jenna. This allowed me to anchor my own conscience, to begin planning for a future reunion from which I would orient and plan the rest of my life. After having emptied out Ramone's mind of everything useful, I used the Eye of Castigatio to inflict terrible agonies upon his body while the Eye of Psychosis served to shred his mind and warp his soul. In the end, I was sated enough in my desire for vengeance to aim the Eye of Nullity at him, using the green beam of raw magick to disintegrate him into a cloud of free-floating atoms. After that much expenditure of magic out of an untrained body, I was forced back to human form out of some survival instinct, or maybe the Cyber-Link had a safety feature, and immediately fell asleep of physical, magical and emotional exhaustion.

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Lua spoke in hushed tones to complete the dreariest part of their shared story.

"I was the one who led the team to find Jason on the boat. We took him to the village infirmary, to set him to sleep at peace safely. He was in a comatose state for almost five days before he woke up feverish, unsettled and sickly. This was from the catastrophic breakage of several illegal, immoral blocks on his magic and mind-control potions that had been fed to him all his life. It was done by order of Lorna, through her many paid minions that were never far from her grand-son, even though he never knew he was being followed and watched. He needed almost a month to be mobile again. During this time of sickness, we scrounged for, and found, the parts for the engines or comms to our vehicles, patching them all as best we could until they all worked again properly. It didn't really happen since none of our technically minded people had survived the massacre De La Porta ordered. Our last living tech was actually Jason, if he could awaken. In the meanwhile, we were safe inside the walled village; most of the habitat buildings still stood, and we still had running purified water thanks to solar panels on the roofs and a backup artesian well with a motorized pump."

"During Jay's coma, we searched to discover where Ramone had accessed the island. We found the large 400 foot long commercial cargo ship anchored in a sheltered marshy cove, with a set of wooden gang-planks linking the ship to the inhospitable rocky beach. The mercenaries had come to Kong Island with much equipment and some thirty hired men-at-arms. The rusted old hull was in far better shape inside than it was made to look outside; that was a cheap lure to make pirates and police think there was nothing of value or dangerous onboard. However, we found several troves of treasures in materials, machinery, computer systems, a full hospital for 8 convalescent patients, a pharmacy lab, a material sciences lab, two armories and three workshops to mill parts for the boat or dependent vehicles. The best finds however were in the private sectors reserved for the professor; four large artifact vaults, a treasure safe full of currency and gems, a library full of books, scrolls, tables and icons, and lastly, his private high-security data server with all his research accumulated over 3 decades of obsession. For all the violence we had suffered and the many people we had lost, all those spoils of war and fresh archaeological discoveries seemed paltry pittances compared to what we had paid for them. These would help us find Jason's living relatives, and aid in rebuilding his life and sanity, but not much else."

"It was during this long recovery period that our real relationship formed. Jason had just lost every last living relative that he knew about, but so had I. The tribe that had adopted me had around 30
people all inter-related as my immediate family, plus some 400 more as residents of our small fishing and hunting village. They were wiped out by De La Porta's mercenaries. Out of near 430 humans, only a dozen survived the repeated attacks, but at the inhuman cost of being crippled for life, rendered unable to fend for themselves. 5 would die of infections during Jason's coma, 2 would commit suicide during his convalescence, leaving only 5 true survivors besides me. None were of my family; I had become an orphan again, just like Jason had been all his life. So, when he woke up from his coma, I naturally stuck by his side as he was the last piece of stability and kindness that I knew in my life. He clung to me for the same reason. Since we were both wracked by survivor's guilt, trauma, nightmares and self-loathing, we rapidly found solace in each others presence, then bodies. Faced with a choice between cheap meaningless sex or falling into the pit of alcohol and drugs, we opted for the safer, less destructive option. The fact we managed over time to change our relationship from just friends into genuine siblings, then truly loving partners, was probably the only good thing to come out of it for either of us."

Lua took a moment to wipe stray tears from her face, fighting hard against the sobs that wanted to come out. She had already cried herself out over this, but it was still less than a year. She had no idea what mental trauma she still harbored, nor how to deal with it. The therapist her new family had insisted she see had only begun the first few sessions, barely scratching the surface of her pain, just as she had with Jason. "During the time Jason was bedridden, I stayed mostly with him in the village infirmary unless it was for basic chores like fetching food and clean laundry for us. Or we had to bury another person, which happened far too often for anybody's tastes. During this time, the few survivors of the village and tribe gathered together to help each other in trying to find a way off this forsaken isle. Unfortunately, they also began to shun us for our close proximity to Lorna, whom they saw as the second worse culprit after De La Porta. This isolated us further, and was probably a big factor in how we ended up getting physically intimate so fast, out of desolation and loneliness. In his second week of recovery, Jaz still had lots of problems with his legs and stability, but he could move around in an old manual wheelchair we found in the supply closet. He used that so we could move around the complex, to explore the places that Lorna had kept locked or flat-out hidden under spells and tricks to turn away curious employees or spies. Since her death, no less than three dozen such small buildings, rooms or doorways to underground levels had appeared as the magic linked to her life-force dissipated or Labarre Blood Law transferred all controls over to somebody else so they could reset everything to their liking."

"We were even more disgusted by what we found in those hidden sub-floors and cloaked outer buildings than by the tortures De La Porta's men had used to kill our families and friends. That should tell you how depraved and unnatural the old woman's secrets were. All of the outer buildings were crypts where she had stored under stasis spells and preservation wards the deathly remains of her male Labarre ancestors that were confirmed as shape-changers, skinwalkers or capable of merging with animals and plants. These were her 'primal source' of untainted genetic material for the human side of her eugenics research. In the unknown underground levels beneath the village were catacombs built by a mix of transmutation, transfiguration, crafting spells and Oil of Eternity to keep it all solid and durable for Lorna's lifetime. She had used the six decades of her presence on the island to create a miniature concentration camp that nazis like Josef Mengele would have recognized, and even envied for the secrecy and efficiency built into the layout and operations."

"When you go from the second basement of the main laboratory complex, you pass a large blast door which allows access to a concrete ramp. It sloped downwards to reach the equivalent of two floors under, then there was a large circular 'turning chamber' so you could access corridors on that level or do a U-turn to go down the ramp for another two floors beneath. And so on, to cover four secret levels, spaced out with about 20 feet of solid earth between them to keep the soil hard and
stable. We discovered quickly that there were other ramps, staircases, and elevator systems, hidden in all the major buildings across the small village, that linked with the catacombs but all had been under heavy concealment ward schemes. When we found that first floor, Jaz and I... We have no shame in admitting that we were sick enough to vomit as we sobbed our eyes out. Lorna Labarre Jenkins had truly been a traitor against her own Blood, and against the Nature given by Yggdrasil."

Jason spoke up, his words softer than usual, as if he were still trying to reconcile with the reality of what he had witnessed in the depths of that Divinity forsaken island.

"The first level of catacombs was for 'specimen containment'; a drab, trite way of saying concentration camp for humanoids and animals alike. Each cell was crafted specifically to allow the entity inside to be able to lay down on a concrete slab suspended above the floor in lieu of cot. They could lie down as the cot was as long as their full standing height; it was also placed across the back wall of the cell, so that there would be little room to back away from the door when it was opened to work or fetch the prisoner. Basically, each prisoner had a cube with each side as long as their actual personal height, no more; that meant each cell was crafted for that particular prisoner then altered at need with spells. Each cell was completely made of solid concrete, including the cot, the water spout in the ceiling, the drainage bowl/toilet in the floor and the door itself. Prisoners were always kept naked, receiving no blankets, pillows or mattress; only concrete and some meager food, usually raw vegetables and fruits, like feeding livestock in a damned barn. There was a pipe in the wall besides the door that sloped down to a shallow concrete bowl dug out of the cell's floor, where all the cut vegetals collected when the guard passed between cells to distribute the rations. People had to get down on all fours to get the pieces from the bowl to eat them. The closest they had to cooking was to wash the vegetals under the constant, ceaseless stream of tepid water that flowed from the hole in the ceiling in hopes that it would be enough to remove insects and bacteria. The only source of heating in the cubes was a small strip of scrollworks that ran around the lower part of all four walls, like the magical equivalent of electrical baseboard heaters. The states of the prisoners, the injuries they had, the grafts, the implants, the maimed limbs and mutated twisted bodies, all wracked by ceaseless pain..."

The young man put his face in his hands; whether trying to blot out the memories or hide from the shame his grand-mother had left him in inheritance, nobody knew. Probably, he didn't know himself. Lua was holding on to him as well, lost in her own terrifying remembrance of those gods-awful hours spent crawling inside of Lorna's warren of abominations. Eventually, Jason continued, despite the tiredness and emotional pain.

"The second sub-level was split in two sectors; the 'raw livestock' pens holding regular rats, cats, dogs, pigs, goats, sheep, cows, horses and chimpanzees on one side, and the 'living vegetation' arboretums and airtight greenhouses on the other, all clearly separated by blast-doors and airlocks to avoid cross-contamination."

"The third sub-level was a series of tightly segregated sectors separated by airlocks and thick armored walls to avoid contamination or break-outs. There were several laboratories for chemistry, pharmacology, potion brewing and higher alchemy. Several workshops to develop and produce medical tools or implants. Several rooms to cut or shuck plants then prepare the parts for usage. One large slaughtering room with ceiling rails carrying powered winches with innumerable chains and hooks, the entire floor made of steel trellis to let fluids and offal fall to the sluicing canal bellow. Then there were long corridors with heavy armored doors on each side, barring access to the climatized storerooms that held all the animal and plant parts at optimal conditions to be used in research and production. We both noted that there were parts of humanoid appearance amongst the shelves of treated preserved components. At the very far end of the third floor, we found three blast-doors that led in to a separate sector; archival vaults, one each for plants, animals and humanoids. All the specimen were preserved in alcohol, with many wards and spells for continuing
study. They had all been injured, mutated, and twisted worse than those still alive in the prison cells of the first sub-level. On some of the large jars containing humanoid shapes, we saw the small bronze tag spelling out thing like; 'Base - Jonas Tim Labarre 1874 + super-ape + (chemicals) + (spells)' that made us sick. Here was the proof she had replicated our dead ancestors to use them in twisted unnatural experiments, then gone so far as to deny them a decent burial after. We both lost our marbles a bit more at that. We must have spent a good half hour, crying and wailing, inside that dreary, forlorn vault, before we moved on."

"Finally we reached the fourth sub-level; we had guessed what we would find there, as after going through the three first floors, it was evident how things were organized. In that deepest pit of nightmares, we entered a massive main corridor that was at least fifty feet wide, thirty feet high, over a thousand feet long with doors only on one side, leaving the left-hand wall bare. The corridor's floor was riddled with metal rails to roll trolleys, with similar rails integrated to the flat ceiling above us. Our inspection revealed two dozen large surgical rooms, all extremely well equipped and supplied, each centered on an oversized articulated surgery wrack made of hard steel, big enough to lift a huge ox to orient it for maximal exposure to the surgeons performing their fell arts. Towards the end, there were two enormous sliding blast-doors giving passage to cavernous rooms, both set up more like vehicle repair hangars for helicopters than organic surgery, with several huge steel wracks gliding along rails embedded in the concrete floor, matched by massive powered winches mounted to rails in the ceiling. There were several medium-sized, hydraulic, telescoping cranes affixed to permanent concrete pilings at six emplacements of these rooms; each crane held aloft a one-man nacelle with many winches, water hoses, electrical cables, gas lines and computer wires to connect a bevvy of tools during work. These rooms also had a weird mobile walkway/bridge system mounted on rails embedded in the walls at 20 feet in the air that seemed to serve as an observation or control platform."

"We discovered the reason for the existence of these oversized corridor and surgery rooms when we continued down the giant-sized main corridor to reach was was obviously an autopsy suite. Lying there, carried to its death bed by an automated portkey several hours after the battle that killed him, was Jason's biological half-brother, the synthetic super-ape Kong. He was lying in advanced decomposition, splayed on several rolling metal wracks, his dead-weight held in place by the unyielding steel frames and several thick chains that hung from those huge powered winches on the ceiling rails. Here again, were the six hydraulic cranes on their concrete pilings and the rolling bridge/platform was positioned above Kong's pelvis, giving a plunging view into what was left of his exploded thorax, if you were to stand on it. After praying, crying, screaming in anger, and throwing things around in our rage for poor Kong's death almost an hour, we continued. As we were walking around the suspiciously clean floor, we wondered what could keep it so well maintained since we saw no living beings other than the prisoners in their cells."

"When we reached the far end of the huge corridor, we were faced with a sliding blast-door that spanned the full width and height of the tunnel. Since it wasn't locked, we managed to work the controls to open it, and regretted it immediately; the stench from inside was beyond description. We had discovered the emplacement where Lorna disposed of failed experiments, trash, and dumped her secret sewers. It was a natural chasm, about fifty feet wide, several thousand feet in length, and about three-hundred feet from the bottom to the top. We could see the rushing brackish torrent at the bottom, due to some sunlight filtering from above, through the intertwined tree roots and vegetals in the places where the gorge roof opened to the sky. What little light came down showed us piles of offal, various trash, and organic materials that were revealed as body parts or complete cadavers of deceased experiments. The gorge's utter horror was increased tenfold by the sight of severely mutated creatures, warped beyond recognizing their original species, crawling around the ground and walls of the chasm, feeding on the trash, turgid sewer sludge, and even the decomposing cadavers. Some of the bodies were still visibly humans despite the decay and
mutations. Then we saw the gigantic bones; three sets of massive super-ape bones that indicated Lorna had actually created, and killed off, at least three prototypes of 'Kong' before she had one so functional that she let him loose in the forest, presenting him to Jason as his 'half-brother' to manipulate his heart strings."

Lua wrapped an arm around her fiancé's neck, kissing him on the cheek as she passed her thumb under his eyes to gently wipe away the tears leaking from his sad ocean-blue eyes. The young woman took a deep breath, before saying out loud some of the other atrocities they had discovered after Lorna's secrecy wards had collapsed due to her death.

"We came back up to the surface, and realized we had been aimlessly walking around the tunnels for close to seven hours. We were too sickened by what we had seen to eat anything but weak soup broth and the bitter spicy tea that my tribe favored for its digestive virtues. We shared a bed for the entire night, the first time we did that, but only to share warmth, presence, and have someone to hold on to when the inevitable night terrors came calling. After the day we had, neither of us was interested in anything remotely active, let alone intimate. Even taking a shower with scented soap hadn't fully removed the stench from that accursed sewage trench and its denizens."

"The day after, following a meager breakfast that we barely kept down, we went into Lorna's private house that she had shared with her husband and son when he visited the island. That showed you the kind of snobby woman the yellow-furred bitch was. Everybody else who was a paid employee had to live in one of the three communal habitat buildings, or the two apartments connex to the infirmary for the paramedics. There was an enclosed apartment integrated to the main laboratory building, but reserved just for Lorna who used it constantly. Otherwise, you pitched a tent on the beach like Eric and Jason had done when they arrived. But the self-styled great madam was better than that; she had built herself a large sized mansion with three full wings and protective curtain wall, removed from the village by a mile, with four live-in servants that never came to the camp. It was where she entertained, received and housed important visitors, did most of her academic studies, read her old rare books and kept most of the company's admin paperwork. What we found in the large house was banal, almost devoid of personality. We learned from the listless, uncaring servants, who were all under mind control potions, that she had a postal box in Australia that was emptied once a week, but she never received anything from anybody that could be deemed personal, let alone intimate, as she told no one where she lived or how to join her. We found all Jason needed to take over the company and family bloodlines through the banks and lawyers, but even less information about the Labarre and Jenkins families than what Ramone De La Porta had in his smuggling ship."

Jay took up the tale, speaking wistfully.

"It was in the mansion, in her private study, on the top floor of her wing, that we found the means of our salvation from this island prison, along some help to clean up the mess without going public about it. Hanging from the wall in a glass display case was a magical True & Pure copy of the Labarre Clan's master map of the Earth, including all the mundane zones, the magically hidden enclaves, the private Labarre lands such as Kong Island, and several hundred anomalies they had noted along the centuries it took to compile the data. In another glass display case, we found a genuine, exhaustive map of Kong Island, including the village, Lorna's mansion, the village Lua lived in, the 60+ Labarre watchtowers, and the vast network of Mu ruins with their large city built inside the active volcano, in the island's mountainous middle zone. That map showed us the danger spots to avoid when foraging, hunting, or logging to feed the wood-burning furnaces, but also where to go to call outside for help. Next to each Labarre tower was inscribed a code that resembled the call-signs used by HAM-radio operators with a second line of glyphs that seemed to
indicate what was inside/near the tower. Since there were similar codes next to the image of Lorna's mansion, we called in a servant to ask if they knew what it meant. Boy, did we get an education when we were explained how the firegate, watergate, mirrorgate, magic-mirror comms and other sorts of devices worked! At least we now had a way to communicate externally to ask for outside help. One of the servants showed us where to find the Clan Ledger that contained all the properties with their call-signs, access codes and types of defenses and resources. Lua and I decided to play it safe, to call the most central building in the list; the Clan Hold, with the firegate. We got an answer immediately and soon were awash in blue-eyed, blond-haired, brats from the icy mountains. Well, Tom, Jen, Lucas, Martin and Diana were all there was at the time; Jonny came a few weeks later and Alan... We never met Alan or Tanusha in our timeline... Never heard of them either."

Sighing in anguish, the young man roughly dragged a shaking hand through his ink-black hair, as his clouded eyes beheld ghosts that only his troubled soul could perceive. After several troubled breaths, he continued the painful catharsis.

"The arrival of the Labarre and their unexpected allies was the balm to our souls that Lua and I desperately needed to save our waning sanity. Ever since we had visited the catacombs, the shadows of self-destruction hovered about us, even when we worked or moved to a new location. The arrival of two trained healers would give us the vital medicinal support that kept us from committing the irreparable, and allowed us to guide them through the mess. Thomas had just accepted his position as Clanhead a few weeks earlier; learning that his grand-father's sister had committed these acts for decades unchecked, while also denying the Clan the use of the safest, best equipped refuge they could have in their inventory, made him explode in a fury like we had never seen. Firstly, Tom ordered everybody of the family to pack and move all their kit into the mansion since it had magical wards and guardians that the laboratory village didn't. Secondly, he wanted the entire family under his own eye to insure we recovered up to full health without relapse or getting shorted on care. Lastly, he knew what it was to survive terror only to be kept awake by guilt and nightmares; he wanted us to have as much support surrounding us as possible, for those dark moments of despair when only dreamless sleep potions could make us rest enough to recover our health."

"The first moment of goodness, true care and genuine familial unity I lived from someone other than Eric was when Thomas offered me a gold ring with the Labarre crest on it, to signify my confirmation as a full member of the Bloodline and Family to the entire world. It was, however, contingent on me reading and signing the Family Charter to bind myself and my descendants to the Blood Law and Traditions of the Clan, so that I didn't turn out crazy like Lorna or try to usurp the headship. Yeah... He was willing to trust me, but only if I proved I was deserving of that trust. After everything I had lived in the passed three months, I couldn't fault him for being that way. Two days later, Tom returned from a trip to Atlin with an old ledger and photo album that had more information about my ancestors and even a few bits about the Jenkins side of things. For the whole kit, I would have to go in person to the magical bank where the Clan did business, to be identified by Blood Law ritual to claim my inheritances and rightful place in the clanic structure. These were all big decisions that would take me a long time to figure out what I wanted to do, and how far was I willing to go to be part of this entire shindig. The entire group offered to come with me, for technical assistance and moral support. Support that they showed us plenty of, in the weeks needed to empty out, clean, disinfect and lock down all of Lorna's warren of depravity."

Jay looked at his hands, as they rested on his lap, palms up. He had a lot of troubles with the decisions that had been made that week, and the consequences they forewarned of.

"Lua and I were not happy with Tom, but especially Lucas and Martin, about the clean-up. The two eggheads argued against any implication of the Australian Wizeria since they would seize not only
the prisoners and animals, but also me, possibly Lua, and want to obviate the minds of the survivors from De La Porta's massacre. On top of this, Jenna argued against any revelation to governmental authorities since they could use the fell research to steal the Bloodline and Magical Heritage of Labarre and afferent Families due to all the genetic samples and formulas contained in the vaults. Not to mention she wanted their dead ancestors to be buried properly once and for all, not end up exposed in a museum or the warlocks' academy in Brisbane. What got me exploding in anger was Martin; he wanted to clean out the place but keep everything as-is, in functional shape so that THEY could use the labs and materials, then use the damnable accursed research notes as well, regardless of who suffered what for it! I blew a gasket at Tom's face, accusing him of being no better than Lorna if he listened to those mongrels, and even worse if he really was friends with them."

Every member of the Assembly winced at the words pronounced by their sibling; that could not have ended well for him. 'Thomas/Tamara' were easy going enough as persons, until you ran afoul of the hard core of granite at the center of their soul. Then, you got a newsflash real quick. Smirking in self-deprecation, the young man shrugged it away, unembarrassed by old history, while Lua looked at him with a loving but amused smile of her own. She loved the boy dearly, but he certainly could dive into trouble like a champion.

"Well, I think you can guess that my outburst wasn't received happily. Tom reamed me out loud in front of everybody, just like I had done to him, warning me to hold my tongue to a civil tone or I'd get a red ass to remember him by, courtesy of his hand. Stupid idiot that I am, and depressive, self-destructive as I was back then, I reacted like a cocksure moron by challenging him to do it. His answer was to sucker-punch me in the jaw right there, then bend me over the backrest of the couch to inflict the one, single, harshest smack I ever got on the seat of my hunter's shorts. The hand print from that slap must have stayed on my butt for two days straight before it faded! But, he had made his point; he was the Boss and he could back it, if called to do so. It's true that in a straight-up bare-handed fight at martial arts he's way behind me, but he had been getting training from Martin for months by then, so he knew far dirtier, far more lethal tricks than me. In a tournament I would win; but in a street-fight, I would get killed by him. I recognized that fact, and apologized without being asked to. That prompted Tom to cast a small lay-on-hands prayer on my jaw to erase the bruising and ease the pain. The nasty brat refused to do it for my poor maligned rear, though; something about lessons that needed to be learned the right way to stick with me, or some such tripe..."

After letting the Assembly laugh a bit, the 21 year old male continued, with a small discrete smile on his features this time.

"It took us several days to hash out the morality, then the legality, of keeping anything from Lorna for any usage whatsoever. It was Lucas who came up with several examples from World War II, when the Allies recovered not just work notes and materials from the nazi camps and manufactures, but also recruited hundreds of their surviving scientists, technicians, mechanics, architects, chemists, etc... He explained to us that America's NASA space program had been initiated and brought to greatness by the top nazi in charge of the V-II rockets, who applied all his capacity to create the first orbital flights and manned expeditions to space. He was just one of a slew of inhuman bastards the Allies had secretly ferried out of Germany and liberated countries for their own uses. Then Lucas gave us a list of critical sciences and technologies used today that were the direct result of nazi experimentations on living humans in the camps. I had to surrender to reality, and admit pragmatically, that neither humanity nor our Clan could advance and prosper if we erased each thing we found that we thought heretical, or was produced by disgusting, criminal means. Since the vast majority of mundane, magical, and alien discoveries were done for military or police usage, we wouldn't have anything else to live with, even the bows, nets and yokes invented by our ancestors 2,300+ years ago. It was an arduous discussion, with heated exchanges, but it also allowed us to get a crash course in the personalities and priorities of our kin and allies in
"So, it was finally decided to simply clean everything the best we could, dispose honorably of the cadavers instead of the damnable trench, euthanize the animals as humanely as possible, and put the humanoid prisoners in a healing slumber, then inside individual storage seals specifically designed to transport living rescue victims to keep stable until they reached the hospital. Once everything was devoid of life, they used wide-area packing spells to secure the components and preserved specimens, then cast several camp-cleaning charms all around the catacombs before it was all sealed under Blood Wards by authority of the Clan Head. The few remaining survivors in the village were subjected to intensive memory modifications then set out on Lorna's old 200 foot landing ship, after it had been inspected, emptied, and made to look like it weathered the storm that had passed through the region, a month ago. After all that, Lua and I moved to Atlin in Canada, at the Labarre hermitage, to continue with healing our minds."

Jason completed their shared story: "We lost Lorna, Eric, Kong, all of Lua's adoptive family, and many friendly others, in the short time we have known each other. Barely 11 months by our clock. After all that loss, we were now both true orphans; alone, forsaken, destabilized, hurting and uncertain about anything in life anymore. We needed stability, and above all else, an emotional anchor. So, once we had lived about 5 weeks in the peaceful, safe context of the hermitage, Lua and I talked about what kind of relationship we wanted to share. Since we had seen how the people in the house acted with each other on a daily basis, and what relations they had formed, we felt free to have an intimate, heartfelt conversation about a lot of stuff, including our previous lives. This resulted in my signing the Family Charter, Lua signed a guestship agreement, our accepting fully the rules in the Clan Hold, then establishing a similar system between us as friends and lovers. We were then, and are now, always equals, regardless of culture, age or gender, but we also need a helping hand occasionally to remain good mature people."

"Since those turbulent days, we have evolved towards a deeply intimate relationship, on top of being true friends and having a sibling-like bond the way I had with Tan, the rest came naturally. We aren't body shy and don't hurt each other, despite how painful it feels during and right after a spanking. And if it happens once in a while that we're aroused during punishment, we just hug and kiss, make the other person feel better about themselves, then the rest depends on the circumstances; you can guess the rest. And yes, after I punish her, I take the time to rub her beautiful, well toned buttocks and kiss her neck and make sure she feels safe, loved, and not in anyway demeaned by me or my actions towards her. I want an equal in life, honest and forthright like I am, and Eric had been. I know Lua wants the same, we just take that extra step in our relationship that most people are too prideful or afraid to take."

Lua smirked a shit-eating grin, saying playfully "Not to mention that he has taken the habit of putting a soft loving kiss on each buttock after my spanking is finished, while I'm still across his knees recovering my breath and drying my eyes from crying. He is a truly kind and attentive lover in little ways like that." She finished with a great deal of true satisfaction at having snagged THE good guy before another girl got him.

The young woman's finishing comment started a wave of laughter that took a good five minutes to tone down and recover from. The five 'Lua' and three 'Jason' were ribbed a lot by their new siblings but in a friendly, supportive way as many had lived similar things in the past or had currently similar situations. Nobody was interested in humiliating or demeaning anybody here tonight.

The fourth Lua that had been brought out of time raised her hand to obtain the right to speak for the consideration of the entire Assembly. The interrogative frown on her face indicated something was amiss. Once she was pointed out as the next speaker, she rose to question her spiritual-sister from another reality.
"Excuse me, both of you, but what happened to Chiros? Was he imprisoned again? Or did you manage to avoid his release in the first place?"

The young couple exchanged looks then shook their heads in tandem. "Sorry sis, but what is 'Chiros' and why is he important?" Lua asked of her counterpart.

"For the love of the Elders!" exclaimed the fourth shaman, "Do you mean that the tribe never taught you of the great inter-dimensional demon Chiros? He who is born by usurping Gaea's cleansing flames? The devourer of worlds? The profanator of fleshes? Does nothing of him remind you at all of any legends you learned?"

Shrugging helplessly, the couple again denied any knowledge. "Sorry Lua, but in our world, that beastie you talk about sounds like one of the thousands of 'Dreaded Great Elders' that travel space, dimensions, time and realities to devour the flesh, magic and knowledge of the living. Most similar creatures enslave entire populations to insure a steady supply of such sustenance, but it doesn't remind me of anything else. We have honestly never heard that specific name."

Turning to Younger Lucas #18 at the center table, the Fourth Lua spoke clearly; "We need to compile the differences between our realities promptly, this could either save or cost lives by the millions. If we had not been capable of keeping Chiros from leaving the Temple of Kong where he was imprisoned and anchored, he could have left the island through the active volcanic lava ducts in the Earth's crust to reach the continents to wreak havoc and misery upon everything he saw. I will tell you how we proceeded, but it is imperative that our diviners plumb anew the realities to determine what is the exact status of Chiros in all our worlds."

In a state of angry anxiety, the young child typed feverishly multitudes of fresh notes and repetitive alerts into his portable workstation so that many seriously damaging questions would get asked again and again, until they were answered fully with solid facts in hand. The survival and stability of their familial group depended on it most immediately, across every reality they inhabited.

First of all; The Elder and Exalted Empire of Mu? The Occult and Celestial Atlantean Empire? Holy Power Stones, Laandcrafting and volcano or solar array steam-power technologies. Orichalcum, electrum, red gold, solar quartz, vulcanomancy, pyromancy, heliomancy, crystallurgy, alchemy, dweomercrafting and magical smithing of artifacts. Planetary control systems, world climatic grid, etc... And so much more inferred...

Secondly; Chiros, inter-dimensional demon or god? Volcanic domain, pyroclastic passages, banishment.

Thirdly; GENEALOGY – again, again, and again, dammit all! The more things went, the more it became obvious that there was a common factor that united the principal boys or sibling groups together, emanating from an ancestral root or cause, several centuries in the distant past. The Labarre were 2,300 years old, just in their recorded (written) history; there was bound to be some shared blood and heredity between them at some point along the descendancy lines. What were the influences and consequences of such?

Fourthly; W-T-F? Seriously, people! This was the third time that one of their group described child abuse and exploitation so bad it counted as enslavement and repetitive attempted murder through slow, constant torture of the person or sibling group concerned. Lorna was clearly a naturopath & eugenicist of the first order of depravity to treat her own family and children that way. How the Hells had she gone undetected for so long? How many more crimes, betrayals and felonies against Nature had she committed before she got killed by a bloody dumb lucky shot from an amateur merc
on his first job?

Fifthly; Cyber-Link – study, analysis, reconstruction to prove the concept works as well and easily as explained to fit all members of Assembly with customized unit ASAP. Then put the damned thing under a fucking Fidelis Solus, Fidelius or similar class of protective masking enchantments post haste. This device and all subjacent technologies should be bundled then classified and compartmentalized as 'Family only' and 'technomagic crew only' from now on. Their survival and escape tactics could depend very strongly on it.

Younger Lucas #18 was not in a happy mood anymore. The stories Martin and Alan had told them had made him want to give their families the 'Chicago Home-run' with a wooden baseball bat to the teeth one after the other, but Jason and Lua really took the damned fucking cake and then some! How was it that they were still sane at this time of things, after all they endured? Especially Jason with all the potions he inherited by biological transference from his grand-mother and mother, plus those inflicted directly on his person from the womb forward by paid minions. This young man would need extra loving care and health services to recover his true personality and stability, no doubt after years of arduous efforts and therapy.

Crappy, insane, undeserving bastards and bitches, the whole lot of their parents up to date...

After the usual quarter hour pause to use the bathrooms and set a new course of snacks and drinks all around, they freshened up the spells that conjured the overstuffed patio furniture they were using. When everybody was back in place, it was the oldest Jonny Quest in the Assembly that shared the story of his siblings and their relationships.

Memories 5; Jonny, Hadji & Jessica

(The Real Adventures of Jonny Quest - opening theme)

Sunday February 10th of 2301 – morning, around 12:00am - noon
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Motorpool garage building

Adult Jonny #5 raised his hand to get the people's attention and then began. "I wish that Hadji was with us to help spell out our tale, or at least one of his incarnations. If that bastard Wise-Bridger-Aberration hadn't been so focused on the skinny little white kiddies, my spirit-brother would be here now. Oh well, can't fight the way things are, can we? Oh yeah! That IS what we're doing!" he finished with a shit-eating grin directed at the central table and the triumvirate of 'Lucas' deciders.

Younger Lucas #18 rose from his chair, taking a facetious bow, full of affected manners and snobby pomp.

"I take full and unlimited responsibilities for our families and allies challenging the Multiverse in its eternal infinities. You may now address me as the 'Lord of the Irrealitives' in honor of my exalted station as the bearer of all guilt and faults. Thank you, peons, for basking in my glory. Thank you."
He completed with a triumphal wave and blowing kisses at the crowd whilst the whole Assembly devolved into giggles and loud guffaws of belly laugh. The runty little gremlin certainly had an exaggerated sense of theatrics!

Jonny needed a good five minutes to recover from his fit of convulsive laughter and grab a drink to soothe his throat. After everybody settled down enough, he began his family's tale as an example of how things happened to his group.

"As you all know, my dad was accounted a left-leaning liberal who completely refused pain, physical interventions or confinement when dealing with kids. He believed in hard work and comprehension resulting from discussion and research as the best way to educate any mind, of any age or social status. Race Bannon thought otherwise but never laid a hand on us, except a few times he might have squeezed an arm a bit tightly, but even dad did that occasionally."

"I was eight when mom died, ten when Hadji joined our home and twelve when Jessica came to live with us full time. Hadji saved my life from a stoned out mugger who thought he could ransom me from dad, or else sell me to organ harvesters in Calcutta's slums, so he'd have enough money for a whole year of fixes. Either way, Hadji fought him and killed him in defending me. Dad asked what was the most valuable reward we could give him and I answered 'a family like mine' right off the top of my head. Well, we brought home the stray. And he cleaned up so well!"

Jonny looked down to the floor in misery despite his joke, as neither Hadji nor Jessie from his reality had been brought along. He missed them and the fraternity they shared.

The surrounding chorus of grunts and jeers that answered his lame joke was funny for everybody, and it was a good thing to instill some levity in the atmosphere after the very sad and angry testimonials from the preceding hours. Jonny continued his tale with a playful smirk well in place, his blue eyes twinkling in mirth.

"We had a lot of fun Hadji and I during two years where we were the only kids in the house as there's a host of things to do in pairs. And you saw the memories of the Quest Compound in Maine; we have an entire cliff with forest, river, several large beaches and an entire maritime dock with lighthouse all to ourselves. With all that space, those buildings and equipments at our disposal, Hadji and I invented our own little sports competitions with some sort of symbolic trophy and bragging rights at the end. Sometimes, when we got really energetic or competitive, we would bet a forfeit of hand smacks on the butt for the loser of the game. We were both boys and adopted brothers; slapping each other on the jeans or swim shorts wasn't even registering on the 'gaydar' or the 'gross-meter' because we weren't even passed puberty yet. It was a huge blast going around the world with Hadji, dad and Race as we could go pretty much everywhere easily since tables with four seats and vehicles with four places are standard all over the globe."

"Then Jessica arrived. Her mother Estella had accepted to lead an archaeological dig site in South America, in a sector of Columbia renowned for its machismo, gangs, and several hundred disappearances of girls and women each year. There is literally a market for female slaves to do house chores, farm work and prostitution in brothels or privately at home. Doctor Velasquez didn't want her daughter in that kind of risk, so our dad told Race that he would love having a girl in the house, if only to counter-balance the excess of testosterone floating around with both of us living puberty at pretty much the same time. Man was he ever disappointed!"

There were bouts of laughter as the few 'Jessica' in the Assembly vigorously nodded, confirming
that the good doctor had been at his wit's end by the end of their first month in the house.

Jonathan continued his funny story. "Now I love Jess like a blood-born sister, and I would never let go of her, but man, can she produce trouble and mayhem just by breathing! I thought the stuff Hadji and I got into in those two years before was weird, but we were amateurs compared to her! She might have worn dresses and skirts, but she was a bloody tomboy to the point some of the guys we met from Rockport Academy, when we went for our trimestrial testing, asked us if she was a queer guy in drag!"

Another round of laughter welcomed that proclamation as one of the 'Jessica' from a different reality playfully beaned her spiritual-sibling-by-alliance on the shoulder, then wagged a finger at him threatening some dire bodily harm to him if he kept goading her. His bratty smirk and babyish "Nian-han! Can't catch me cuz I run faster than you!" Caused another round of laughter as poor Jess was palming her face with both hands at the sheer childishness of her friend. Okay, her issuance of a 'double doggy-dog dare' wasn't the summit of maturity either, but we digress…

"Anyways" Jonny continued, "Now they were three... And the world was doomed!" he pronounced in a cheesy horror movie narrator's voice, causing more laughter from the other 'Jonny' and 'Jessie' in the hall.

"Well, no, we didn't doom the planet, but we certainly buried poor old dad's hopes and dreams of a calm, quiet household in his lifetime. You should have seen it! No matter how benign or banal the events of the day, putting us three together rendered the whole thing into a mess of glorious proportions. Honestly though, neither of us ever could figure out just why it was things happened like that. We certainly never got up in the morning, telling ourselves 'Jeez, let's make a mess today!' like we had nothing else to do with our time. Well, Reality and Nature never bothered to ask our opinion in these things, they just happened when we were present to weather through the tempest. And that is the reason we sailed through the worse, and most bizarre, events of our lives like they were more of an amusement park ride than catastrophes. What a trio of gormless idiots we were..."

Passing weary hands through his short blond hair, the young adult sighed as he mentally rifled through his memories to line up the ones he wanted to speak up, while deciding which ones weren't important enough to say aloud for now, in the meeting they had.

"The first two years that Jessie was with us were incredible for us, and sometimes the adults too. We were all getting older by small measures, not really seeing the time pass around us as we traveled the planet, attending several digs, conferences, and diplomatic events per year. We met national leaders, scientists in rarefied domains of technology, and explored far remote places that had long thought to be only myths created by the superstitions of the local populations. We certainly sung a different tune when we encountered actual genuine aliens at the Nazca holy lands, or had to fight off the high priests of the Malenque whose mummies came back to life to chase us out of their temple. Those two years, when I was 12 to 14 years old, were truly some of the best, most memorable I lived. Then things got weird fast."

"As far as I can remember, the first event to balls-up everything was the trip that took us to Bangalore, in India, where a series of clues led us to believe that the old man who had raised Hadji in infancy had been kidnapped for reasons unknown. Race and dad were certain the man's feeble link to us had been discovered, and this was nothing but a base attempt at extorting a ransom, either for money, exclusive science, or getting dad to use his influence with some government or other."
Anyways, as soon as we got the suspicious tip-off, we took the Dragonfly and flew to India. We arrived in Calcutta where Sahib Pasha was last seen, then investigated until we were directed to a mysterious group of reclusive Thuggees based in the high mountains of Bangalore. Despite several bad feelings from Race, the five of us plus our dog Bandit took the plane again for a short hop to land directly at the Bangalore City airport. Once there, we used the Land Rover and dirt bikes to explore the town and its surrounding countryside, looking for clues or possible informants. This was like the fiftieth time we had to do a search grid to scout the surroundings and make friendly with the dwellers; even though we were just kids, we were already old hands at it. Often enough, the people from CIA / section I-1 who still kept an eye out for us would mention it to dad, that we were naturals at finding and solving 'situations' outside the normal daily routine that ordinary municipal police couldn't handle.

Jonny took a few minutes of pause to eat a very nice little fruit curd tartlet with meringue and vanilla ice cream, while sipping hot tea served in the Hindi style that Hadji had taught him to appreciate as a digestive or nightcap. After finishing his minuscule snack, the teenager leaned back into the large beanbag sofa he occupied, holding his conjured porcelain cup and saucer under his nose to inhale the spicy warmth.

"We weren't in Bangalore for long that problems found us. It was all a trap, just like our fathers had feared, but not for a ransom; instead, it was to kill us all. After barely four hours of running around after ghosts, Dad and Race were carjacked, leaving the Land Rover pristine but empty, except for the emergency recall beacon which had been triggered voluntarily to lure us to the truck. When the three of us got there in the following hour, we found a note, finger-drawn with mud on the engine hood of the Rover, in hesitant Sanskrit gutter-slang. That message warned those who read it about our fathers being foreign profanators, arrested and imprisoned to be judged for their sins against the Deva that protected the town since its founding. Upon this blatantly transparent clue/trap, Hadji figured out that our dads must be held inside the catacombs under the Sultan's ancient castle, on the outskirts of town, perched right on the edge of the mountain's worst slope."

"Jessie, Hadji and I all knew this note was a blatant bait for an obvious trap to reel us in. But, just as obviously, we couldn't do nothing. We took the truck back to the plane to secure all our stuff inside the Dragonfly, leaving Bandit as guard. We geared up specifically for a high mountain climb, with lots of snakes and spiders and other animals to deal with besides the thugs we expected to encounter. While we were in the Dragonfly, we called CIA / section I-1, telling them about the situation, and admitting that some armed back-up would be useful, and welcome, if they had any in the area. Unfortunately, they only had aerial drones for high altitude recon; their closest ground agents couldn't be present before about five days at the earliest, so we were alone for the foreseeable future. Quite obviously, we couldn't wait that long, so we left on our dirt bikes with enough gear for 5 people in harsh terrain."

"Approaching the castle was easy, but we couldn't get inside by the above-ground levels as they had always been in use by the Sultan's ruling family, being it had been the seat of power for Bangalore's administration for over 5,000 years to date. Luckily, we had foreseen we would need a covert, illicit entry, so we weren't surprised or disappointed. We simply went along with plan 'A'; trekking & free-climbing down towards the castle's lower levels, along the mountain's goat trails and dry creek beds, until we found the inevitable outflow tunnels that carried out either sewer sludge or the excess clean water from the aqueducts in the monsoon season. Since this was the hot/dry season, we had to really look a while to locate the damned drainage tunnels since there was precious little free-flowing water to be seen. When we found the damned pipes, we wanted to smack ourselves silly. We had spotted them about an hour before but dismissed them as small votive chapels built by monks or farmers to honor mountain spirits. No! The damnable rectangular edifices with all the columns and statues were in fact the decorative outlet caps for the bloody pipes! It so happened that the Sultan who ordered the castle's construction had such a vaunted
opinion of his person and family, he had wanted even his fucking toilet drains to be decorated in marble and alabaster, just like the upper castle itself! Dumb idiot!"

Jonny waited a minute for the Assembly's laughter to die down before continuing his adventurous tale.

"Well, we just had to admit were were a bunch of confounded fools. Especially for having been educated by archaeologists most of our lives. Then again, Hadji should have guessed faster than us, what with being native to the country and culture to boot. Boy, did Jess and I tease him about it! - You can betcha we did! Then we toured the structure to confirm we weren't wasting our time again, and set up a small cache of emergency supplies as a fall-back position before going in. We used the portable satellite telephone to check in with CIA / section I-1, to tell Assistant-Director Philip Corbin, our usual handler, about the deep shit we were about to wade into, but their manpower situation hadn't changed; we were still alone. These were our dads at risk, so we girded our gear and courage, and trooped into the underground labyrinth of crumbling drainage pipes, haphazard tunnels and unplanned illicit chambers that had been modified or blocked off along the centuries since the castle's foundations and catacombs were built. We had been exploring the claustrophobic passageways for over two hours already when we heard noises that guided us towards a sets of large chambers, hand hewn out of the mountain's natural rock."

"In these forsaken underground tunnels and chambers we found dirty, smelly, uneducated and uncouth thuggees by the dozen, only hindi men from barely 5 years old to truly elderly crones. All were congregating around open camp fires that spewed fetid odors from both the rancid food they cooked, and the fact they were burning animal & human dung and carcasses amidst the rotten wood and wet grasses. The three of us had a hard time crawling around the place unseen, but we managed it because of how they had dug through the mountain until it was like an ant colony, with three to six tunnels accessing each illicit main room they had carved. The thuggees had not made any chimneys or venting pipes upwards to the surface, nor horizontally to the mountain slopes, so there was thick pungent smoke wafting around the actual passageways in several zones of the warren. As we made our best efforts at discretion, we often hid in small, dark, uneasy nooks where we found had hoc cesspits, battered old copper chamber pots or worse, the human offal just splashed all around the alcove we wanted to use to be out of sight, until the coming group passed out of the sector. It didn't take long for our hiking boots, pants' legs and gloves to be disgustingly soaked and stained with organic dejections from the cave dwellers. Strangely enough, nobody said anything about being in deep shit anymore. I wonder why?"

After a minute of contemplative silence, mostly to let his stale pun 'air out', Jonny continued his tale.

"We were honestly lost in those accursed tunnels. The castle's official sewage and outflow pipes were made of quarried masonry blocks with mortar, so they were easy to recognize, and just as easy to navigate. All four official pipes were in straight lines from their intake points to their drain chutes, without any side tunnels or deviations. There were clearly visible aeration wells that climbed up through the foundations to link with the castle's own chimneys or vent ducts. A few isolated stone staircases barred by thick wrought iron grills would let maintenance workers come down to survey the pipes without rappelling the mountain slope. These were all easy to see, understand and manually map out on a piece of paper as we did the preliminary survey in the initial two hours. It was the illicit add-on's that we explored that were so damned hard to make sense of, since we were guided only by instinct, trials & errors, and occasionally eavesdropping on the conversations of thuggees when they walked by our hidey-hole."
"In many ways, what we lived that day, Hadji, Jessie and I, resembles what Martin did in his missions for CIRPA, and what Jason and Lua lived when they exhumed Lorna's depravities. We were crawling around the underbelly of the lowest debased crass that had ever disgraced Bangalore and India with it's presence. We saw things in these tunnels, inhuman, unnatural things that still give me nightmares to this day, 5 years after I left the blasted tunnels behind me. There had been effigies graven into the rock walls of the hand-made caverns, icons of old barbarian deities best forgotten to the depths of time and darkest night... There had been artifacts crafted from the bones of humans and other... abnormal... entities left as offerings on dark, blood stained altars in the remote sectors of the cavern network. We saw written with offal strange cosmogonies adorning the ceilings of small caves, studded with luminous gems and lit by stubby candles made of fat from sources we dared not question aloud, even whence we had left. Twice we encountered creatures – animals? – our minds tried desperately to comprehend, just as our self-preservation instincts fought against even perceiving the existence of the queer abominations from the Void... This was not a good day for us..."

"We fought valiantly, stubbornly, through the airborne miasma, the dank darkness and mental confusion until we reached a large chamber that was built under the deepest part of the castle's original foundations. We could see this by the fact the doorway and walls around were constructed of chiseled stone blocks with mortar. The access was barred by a thick wooden door covered in bolted metal slats, with the only thuggee we had seen in the entire warren who carried firearms instead of just blades. We tricked and knocked out the guard discretely, without being seen, then placed him so that he was sitting against the wall, as if he fell asleep during his shift out of boredom. We jimmed the complex ancient lock, then entered the dark dank room only to have to hold our noses and mouths to avoid retching from the incredible stench wafting from the four 40' wide pits dug in a line along the length of the odd huge hall that was 120' wide by 300' long with 50' high oblong ceilings."

Jonathan looked outside, to the soft morning sunlight, such a contrast to what he had to say. It had been five long years since he had left that dark, evil, warren of monsters, and still, he just knew that a part of his mind and soul was still inside there, prisoner of idols, icons and creatures that shouldn't be allowed amongst mortals.

"What we saw in that hall of horrors... It was worse than just medieval... It was worse than those ISIS videos where the terrorists execute or mutilate people in the name of their debased version of Sharia. Suspended above each fetid cesspit was an old wrought iron cage, rusted by centuries passed, closed shut by multiple chains and padlocks, just as old and rusted. Each cage was about 20 feet in diameter with a flat bottom, by 15 feet high with an ovoid curve to the top part, at the apex of which a single large eye-hole was set. This allowed to attach the hook, chain, & tackle system that ran along the ceiling, then down the wall to the floor, to four large wooden capstans that served to adjust the cages' height above the pits. Inside the third cage was a mature but still young hindi woman, although her hair had grayed out long ago by the looks of her. In another, the fourth at the far end, our fathers were imprisoned together. All the cages were kept at 12 feet or so above the floor, because that was the highest they could reach until the upper sides of the cages struck the in-curved ceiling."

"As we crawled low on the floor in the angle of the wall's base, on the outer edge of the room to stay hidden in the shadows, we heard unnatural hissings, like unholy murmurs, coming from the pits as we passed by them. Even though we were some 40 feet away to the side, I thought I heard small reedy voices calling to me to look over the edge of the stone-built rims to behold the unnaturalities at their bottoms. It took all three of us a while to be able to shake ourselves of the weird effect of those shushuring sounds to continue our crawl towards our dads."

Jonny took the time to drink some warm hindi tea to offset the sudden marrow-chilling cold he felt.
Every time he told this story, he felt as if he was bringing the attention of abnormal, otherworldly beings unto his life again, and that this would continue for the rest of his life. Hadji's mom had asked in her testament to not be buried beneath the ground, but in a stone crypt, on a masonry dais, built on solid bedrock surrounded by a moat that was wet all year long. To this day, they hadn't found out why she made such a weird, oddly specific, request.

After draining his cup of tea, the 19 year old continued. "We finally managed after a quarter-hour of painful, dirty, smelly, hurtful belly-crawling like worms to reach our dads. At this point, we had no choice but to get up on our legs and walk out of the shadowed zones to approach the well and cage. When we stood on the edge of that accursed cesspit, we realized that the masonry work was only as thick as the floor, forming a perfect circular rim over what happened to be a hand-hewn well. The pits weren't masoned in any way, just irregular, asymmetrical shafts dug through soft brown earth and live rock until they breached the roofs of a set of natural caves and tunnels."

Closing his blue eyes in despair, Jonathan clenched his hands together then put them between his knees to keep them from shaking. This damned story never got easier to tell, no matter how many years passed since. He spoke the harrowing tale like this, not opening his eyes, lost in the tenebrous meanders of his memories.

"Then, after fighting through the fetor wafting upwards from the shadows, our eyes finally adapted enough that we could see them some 60 feet down; the dwellers that caused this ruckus and stench. There, living debasedly in the crapulent crass and offal, in all-consuming penumbra, with many diverse vermins crawling around their diseased twisted bodies, were the women and girls of the thuggees... Some holding babes barely weeks old. Like animals in a swamp, the thuggees had created pits to hold and shield their weaker members, but with even less comforts or civility than what the upper cavern warrens afforded the men. The females 'things' kept up a queer whispering amongst themselves that sounded like the 'white noise' on a miss-tuned radio when it is between stations. The beings were all coated in a sheen of liquid offal, soft moist earth and animals without a care in the worlds for their appearance or the results on their health. They had everything from small purple beetles, to long chalk-white earthworms, to fluorescent blue toxic spiders, to massive green toothy snakes, mixed amongst their nude bodies and the muddy trash they dwelt upon."

"As we watched, one young girl, about our age, pushed the little baby in her hands towards a large serpent that must have been some relative of the python or boa. Before us, as we watched with tears flowing down our faces, the reptile opened its maw lined with hundreds of poisonous fangs and bit the baby around its torso, then retreated to the dark quagmire. The things around seemed excited by the animal's gesture and their odd weird cacophony changed rhythm and pitch, like they were celebrating something. We couldn't take it any longer, we all three puked our guts out straight into the pit at our feet. The worse part was when we saw the creatures at the bottom of the well raise their hands in praise, trying to catch the vomit, like what we retched on them was manna from Heaven, or some grand gift of riches."

Jonathan shuddered at the sudden chill that seemed to swirl gently around his person, as a vague indistinct sound passed through the back of his mind, reminiscent of the primitive drums and bone flutes the thuggees had used in their unholy ceremonies when praying to otherworldly powers that should never be bothered, let alone brought into this plane of existence. Startling hard, the young man blinked his eyes repeatedly, finally being able to focus on the young woman that had moved to sit next to his own seat. The young Polynesian shaman Lua was ending a deeply guttural chant just as he got his bearings back properly.

"There, my brother. That protective ward should shield your soul for the rest of the day, until the sun sets behind the far away hills. Then, I will have something else readied to keep the dark taint away from your nights so you may sleep at peace, even if that peace is but an illusion for now."
What you have lived and felt in those warrens, it came from beyond the dimensions and realities, traveling through the obtuse angles and swimming through the vastness of wild space... There is but little protection to be had against the cruelly depraved desires of the Dreaded Great Old Ones, if not to make yourself disappear from their perceptions. If they cannot find you, if they forget you, then you will be safe. For a short time, at least. If not... Well, Lucas and the rest of us are a stubborn bunch. We will not let you be claimed by madness or ravenous beasts without a fight."

Smirking weakly in appreciation of the girl's efforts, the teenager snarked back "Well gee, Lua! After a pep talk like that, how couldn't I feel invincible? Just like a regular super-hero, you made me!"

A short burst of uncomfortable laughter from the Assembly followed, sounding hollow and strained to everybody's ears. Jonny wasn't the only one to have felt a chill around his person, despite the warm Florida morning sun rising in the horizon above the swamps. This would demand a determined investigation and emplacing defensive measures ASAP. Younger Lucas #18 was typing away madly on his work station as the family passed around warm drinks and more food, and conjuring a few pieces of warm clothing or blankets when needed to offset the eldritch chill that had set all about the great garage complex during Jonny's retelling of his harrowing adventure. The worse part was that he wasn't even finished yet.

After about ten minutes to resettle in place, the troubles youth took up his tale of crass horror. 

"We managed eventually, Jessie, Hadji and I, to spit out the last dregs of bile and shake ourselves into a semblance of functioning order. In reality, we were far from functional, let alone 'okay' in any ways, but we still had to get our dads and that other prisoner out before the thuggees came back to torment them some more. As you can guess by now, it was all a giant trap. Back at that time, the only magic we knew about were the few building wards and hauntings we had experienced during our travels. None of us was a practicing arcanist of any type, and Hadji's mental powers were less than budding. He was trying desperately to develop his psionics by himself, but had no teachers, no role model on TV, not even any credible books, so he had a few childish tricks that saved us many times, but nothing to be used in a fight or to get out of a cave-in. We were never prepared to face off against the depth of arcane might and extra-planar influences that the thuggees used in their daily lives."

Swallowing past the hard lump in his throat, the blond male continued to speak, almost in a trance by now as he walked down the shadowy warren of his memories. "The guard at the door hadn't been knocked out in the least, he just made us believe that we'd gotten him. He had waited to see what we did then alarmed his masters for that was his real job, to be the first layer of detection. The wardline in the walls also circulated through the doors and yawning pit apertures so we were felt to enter the hall of pain through them. Queer religious icons crudely drawn with human offal on the walls were actually magical glyphs that detect enemies and sneak-abouts like us, sending warnings to the masters that their sanctum was breached. And each cage had a small piece of dull cracked human femur graven with runes stuck in the floor grate to act as a presence sensor to warn the guards if the prisoners moved too much, or became excited by something, like rescuers come to let them out."

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"Just as we were trying to operate the damned wooden capstan to lower the cage to floor level, a bilious green cloud flashed into existence right across the pit, in the space between our dads and the woman. The masters had committed the first act of real, powerful, studiable magic we had seen to date: they had teleported into the hall. Then one of them howled like an animal and we heard the entry door groan, locking itself into the frame by expanding until it could no longer be moved. A
A series of torches along both longitudinal walls lit to sputtering weak reddish flames by a shouted curse, then several skull-shaped bluish witch-lights appeared, bobbing around randomly on the air currents. Everything was now well lit, the only shadows that remained being down in the foul pits themselves."

"The masters were three men. Two who, by their faces, were obviously close relatives despite the age difference, and similarly dressed in richly crafted American-style green business suits with a white turban. The last one was a weathered, wrinkled old crone that was so primitive, hirsute, and covered in crapulent offal that he could only be one of the thuggees' leading fakirs. He carried a bone wand ornated in gold runes and topped by a snake skull that emitted little green arcs of power every so often all on its own. His head was covered by the skin of one of the giant snakes that dwell in the pits, its glazed yellow eyes still aglow with sentient malevolence despite being dead for decades. It was him that, just by moving an idle hand, had all three of us suddenly trapped inside a fence of giant sharp dirty bones that rose in a circle from the stone floor, braking through the masonry from the dirt beneath, closing around us at waist level like some deformed, hellish flower trying to eat us. We were captured, packed too tightly to try any acrobatics. Just climbing over the pointy bone fence was easy enough, but it would make us so slow and exposed that either of the attackers could finish us off without effort. Especially that damned fakir, priest or shaman, whatever the Hell he was..."

Trying real hard not to cry his eyes out, Jonny spoke out the incredibly emotional revelations they suffered then: "It was, to our great shock, the jailed woman that spoke first, from the depth of her cage. She called out to the man in the middle of the masters, addressing him as Deepak, then 'brother' and 'kin' with strongly palpable scorn in the words. But it was this so-called 'brother' who floored us and our dads when he answered her verbal lashings without a care in the world. He spoke to us directly: 'Come now, Hadji and Jonny! Be good children and salute your good mother! Isn't nice of your old uncle Deepak, and cousin Vikram here, to have worked so hard to reunite our family like this?' Then he burst out laughing like a demented loon while our world collapsed around us. We learned that Hadji was the only son and heir of the last lawful sultan of Bangalore, the woman was his lawful first wife Neela Singh, Hadji's birth mother. The crazy middle-aged man was the sultan's brother Deepak, Hadji's direct uncle, with his barely adult son Vikram next to him. Our dads got noisy at that, so the fakir waved his crooked fingers, spelling a zone of silence around the cage so his boss Deepak could pontificate at us without being bothered."

"And pontificate he did, making even Vikram roll his eyes many times during his speech. He had a lot on his heart to spill out, that guy... He was the sultan's younger brother, almost 12 years younger, and from a second wife so he couldn't inherit anything as long as the sultan's direct bloodline existed in this world. So, ya guessed it in one; this was a good 'ole family feud over the money, castle, title and power of the sultanat. And as long as Hadji lived, the felonious uncle couldn't get the throne he dreamed about all his life because the family's Blood Law was fighting against him, repelling him as a traitor. He even tried to make us pity him for having to live in poverty in the castle's Dowager Tower with his wife and son, on the farthest side of the isolated tertiary courtyard, where the sultans used to house their harem of whores with the bastards that inevitably got spawned, whenever nobles and soldiers were allowed a woman as reward for their loyalty and good services. Deepak was so deep in his insanity that he openly admitted to having paid the thuggees to infiltrate the castle to kill his brother. He bragged about being part of the raiding party, and plunging the fatal dagger strike into the victim's head with his own hand. Then he bitched a storm about Neela having fled on one side before he could finish her off, and shouted a slew of swears about some nameless servant having grabbed Hadji to run the other way without leaving clues to where he was going."

"The plot had been simple in the extreme; kill the sultan and his wife then publicly cry a river of fake grief as he held the infant child to console him at becoming an orphan. He would then have
been named legal guardian to Hadji until he was 21 years old, and been the power seated on the throne until then. Which of course meant that Hadji would have lived a few months until he had an accident, or maybe a few years if he were a quiet docile child that didn't bother his uncle too much. Although, Deepak did admit quite blithely that the moment Viprak was born, Hadji would have needed to 'accidentally' disappear down the mountain slope, then wind-up in one of the Breeding Pits at our feet. The man's feelings toward Hadji had actually been real ambivalent too, with desire, grief, rage, envy, sorrow and broken hopes all mashed up together. We got the weird vibe that if Deepak could have spared the little kid back then, that he would have tried. His anger was directed at their father and the laws, not really at Neela or Hadji."

"Strangely enough, he toned down when talking about us Quests. In his mental picture, we were unfortunate collateral damage he wished he could have avoided because we weren't bad people, just trying to give an orphan a decent family, despite the racial and religious differences. The truly bizarre thing is, in that moment, as I looked at him, I think that I believed some of that. I think that in the depth of his broken soul, Deepak did have regrets and wanted to end things differently. That's why he'd left Neela alone for a dozen years, imprisoning her only a few weeks before, when she'd found Hadji's trace again after all these years, instead of killing her the moment he had found her. As long as she was looking in empty air for long dead ghosts, she was just a pitiful harmless widow, too broken to be a threat, so, out of respect for the old friendship they once had, he let her waste her life searching. It was only when she found the trail of Hadji and Sahib Pasha again after all these years of running for their lives that she became a problem again, one that had to be resolved permanently this time around."

Blinking away a stray tear from his eye, Jonny tried to focus on finishing this part so he could then move through the rest of the time that would bring them all to the here and now. It wasn't easy, but it would get better from there.

"Well, uncle Deepak was so damned busy emoting all over the place that he never realized Neela had managed to link her mind with Hadji's and they were slowly amplifying each other's psionic powers until they had accumulated enough psy charge to mind blast the fakir so badly that it caused him a concussion right on the first hit, then bleeding brain injuries on the second hit. Those lesions would have kill him in his knocked-out state inside of minutes, if he'd been put down right. But he wasn't. The old thuggee crone's death was not a silent, sneaky affair in the least. He reared up, wailing a great inhuman scream of anguish, holding his head with both hands as he swayed and hopped around like he had his balls on fire. Then, with blood pouring from every hole in his head, he swayed - or shambled? - too near the lip of the well, falling down, getting struck by snakes, spiders, scorpions and other fouler beasts along the way. We glimpsed his end, through the murky miasma of shadows and wafting humid vapors, at the bottom of the pit, still screaming and spasming, even as the women and girls tore at his skin, his flesh, his organs, with crude bone knives, their fingers or even their teeth, ripping off great chunks that were bit, and chewed, and relished right away before another female or an animal got it instead. In mere seconds, the old man was nothing more than a pile of sloppy wet, cruddy bones being stomped and ground into the fetid morass under the feet of the churning women and things."

"That was when uncle Deepak laughed out insanely again, completely not giving a damn for his accomplice's death. He was still laughing like a drugged loon when Jessica pulled one of her father's spare Beretta pistols out from the folds of her soiled, torn skirt to put a pair of bullets in the traitor's abdomen, making him reflexively fold over in pain in a way that he overbalanced, tilting over into the well shaft, down to his horrid, cannibalistic death as well. The last criminal, cousin Vikram, tried to teleport away in a dark blue cloud of smoke before anything could be done for it, but he got mind blasted too and fumbled his spell badly. He splinched himself explosively in a wet shower of shorn parts, spread between here and the point where he wanted to arrive. What a fucking putrid mess that one was..."
Jonny accepted the stomach soother potion he was handed, then drank some cold water with a few soda crackers to settle his roiling stomach. He managed not to puke out, but it was a close call. Across the impromptu agora, many others were in similarly bad situations, so there wasn't any shortage of potions, warm tea, chilled spring water and dry acid-absorbing foodstuffs going around. Granola bars that had been mixed with flax seed, chia seed, shredded fruit, honey and covered in dark chocolate were all the rage at the moment, to the point even the 'Jonathan' telling the story managed to take a bite with his water and crackers, just to have something solid inside. Nobody was thinking about closing their familial overnight session with a huge brunch anymore.

Slowly, as if walking through a dense bank of drug vapors, the 19 year old continued his tale.

"We were now all safe and avenged, so we took the time to pick the locks on our dads' cage, then on Neela's. We hugged as best we could while the trauma, offal, grime and general mess we were. Neela insisted we stop besides Vikram's body to see if she could find something on what was left of the corpse. She did find; the Great Seal of Bangalore, the signet ring of the sultan with which laws and judgments are passed and stamped to become valid. It was also the portable ward-key to control the magical defenses around the castle and larger estate that surround it. Deepak had gifted the inert ring to his son in the hopes that it would somehow activate, even if he wasn't the rightful heir. It never did. Well, it belonged to Hadji now, so Neela put it on his finger, blessing him and his future household as she did, and the damned thing activated on contact without any wait at all."

Taking a long deep cleansing breath, the teenager's clouded blue eyes roamed around the landscape visible outside the wide garage doors, trying to find an anchor, a piece of solidity to attach his hurt, wandering mind to so he could finish at last.

"We had gotten rid of the traitors and freed ourselves, but we were still trapped inside the warren with several hundred thuggees all around us, ready to kill us if they caught us. We were lucky that the door had reverted to its original state at the death of the fakir. I pulled out my camping Bowie knife that Race gave me at my 12th birthday, a 10 inch long steel blade with a 6 inch pommel and thick, prominent guard, and assumed point with Race at my side. Neela was in the middle with Benton as the two weakest fighters, and Hadji and Jessie closed the rear. Race took one of my smaller spare knives, dad got one from Hadji's kit while Jessie kept the Beretta and her own Bowie in the left hand as back-up. We moved like a convoy, two wide by three long as much as we could, and defended all sides with as little noise as possible to avoid attracting a swarm of thuggees all at the same time. Taking out one to three fighters in the same skirmish was doable with our group, but more was courting disaster like a grave injury or an enemy taking a run to fetch support while his friends kept us pinned down, unable to escape."

Through shuddering breaths and full-body shakes, the youth retold the inhumane events of that night, five years passed, when he lost his humanity and sanity for ever. The best parts of him had been destroyed, rotted and abandoned in those filthy, savage caves. He would never sleep easily or look in the mirror at peace again.

"It started immediately as we opened the door to leave the Breeding Hall. We thought the guard was knocked out for a couple of hours, with a concussion too. He wasn't. He was awake and armed, waiting for a sign from his bosses as to what came next. The only fortunate thing for us was that he thought we'd been captured and dealt with; he had no inkling we'd gotten free or that his masters were already well and truly dead. As such, he didn't have his old rusty shotgun in position, instead he drew a pair of knives from his belt to engage Race right the moment we opened the door to see outside. Race shoulder-checked the door wide opened right into the thuggee, forcing him to backpedal to avoid getting slammed down to his ass in the muck, which gave Race the time to grab
the guy's two arms at the wrists and hold them up at shoulder level for a few seconds. That was all that I needed to act; I sprinted and grabbed a hold of his thin shoddy sash with my left hand while ramming the Bowie into his left side kidney, all the way to the hilt. He dropped to the mud silently as Race guided him down, immediately dead before he was even aware that I had been a real threat to fight off. Benton took the old 2-pipe break-action short barreled shotgun while Race took both trench knives and the chipped, rusted hatchet went to Hadji as a backup to his main knife. Neela was concentrating on her receptive empathy skills, to perceive enemy movements and alertness, to guide us towards the least dangerous path. From that moment, we all knew the danger we faced, and that it would be wetworks, manual killing up close and personal, that would allow us to leave without the entire horde of thugs coming after us. And meant that Race and I were the ram at the front of the galley, the point of contact, and those who would fight the most until we exited the Warren. I won't tell you all the details, but I counted them... I killed 34 thugs, 2 'humanoids' of unknown species near those bloody, unholy chapels, and a dozen of those weird, queer 'beastly animals from elsewhere'. Race killed about the same. The rest of the group killed about two dozen thugs and eight beasts by working together to take the pressure off us when we were already engaged in the front."

With twin streams of salty tears burning tracks down his face, the empty-eyed boy recalled how it all ended.

"We got out. Eventually. Focusing on the Signet Ring, Neela occasionally cast a spell to find one of the hidden escape routes built by the founding sultan, centuries ago. After almost seven hours of murderous, exhausting crawling around the den of insanity with enemies closing in inexorably, we finally found the accursed hidden doorway out of that labyrinth, with a long straight and steep masonry staircase going up through the castle's foundation plate, basements, and up into the Sultan's Dungeon Keep, in the very middle of the central bailey. We emerged from the hidden escape corridor in the dead of night, scaring the guards on duty in the royal chambers with our appearance but making them retch on contact with our smell. The vile stinking brownish goo we trailed behind as we shambled tiredly certainly wasn't helping them stay healthy and hale."

The young adult gave out a short bark of manic laughter as he finished that part of his life; Snort! "I think Neela was obliged to give them all raises when she took the position of Regent for Hadji, until he was old enough to assume the throne himself. One of the guys had complained quite vehemently that being a guard was dangerous enough, but having that much crass and stench deserved hazard pay and a gas mask as part of their kit. I guess the old gal agreed with him, cuz he was still working security for the estate the last time I visited the palace a few months back."

Taking a shuddering breath, Jonathan blinked several times, trying to dry out his eyes from all the crying he'd just done. The horrendous part was over, but the truly personally painful one was coming up. Given the awful contents of the story, well on par with Jason & Lua's own trip down Soulless Alley, Younger Lucas #18 called a fifteen minute break and asked the members to take some time to walk in the morning sunlight a bit. After all the crapulence they had heard, it would help them to air out their minds, especially since Jonny wasn't completely finished yet. He still had the breakup of his family to expose for analysis.

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It was a bit passed 11:00am when the Assembly gathered again to hear the rest of Jonny's story. He was now at the critical part when his family came apart for no discernible reason. This was the segment that Younger Lucas #18 wanted to hear and examine, despite all that excitement and gore from the previous exposé.

Seated anew on a plush cushy beanbag sofa, Jonathan #5 was surrounded by those from his reality,
receiving emotional support and anchors to hold him steady as he felt himself adrift on an infinite ocean of sorrow, sadness and abandonment. At this point, it wouldn't take much to lose what little endurance he had, to let himself drown in that tempestuous sea of madness and loneliness inside. With a great heaving sigh, he took up again the story of his misbegotten life.

"Back then, we all thought it would get better from there on. Our family was together, and Hadji had recovered his mother and lost heritage so he actually wasn't an orphan or abandoned anymore. Not that he'd been either while living with us in the last four years, I knew that from him first hand. But things were already not that well among us. Instead of being five people, we were six. It so happened that we ended up functionally with three separate teams of one parent & one child. Before that, it had been two parents with three kids, but all acting united, especially given the dangers we faced even when we stayed home for a lazy week. The number of times terrorists and spies had come calling was appalling, and it was a miracle we hadn't lost someone to date. But now, the differences were being emphasized far more than the similarities, and it became obvious we hadn't been as united as we had believed."

Taking a swallow of orange juice, Jonny swirled the juice in the glass as he contemplated how to best elaborate what was a very 'feely' thing, not hard facts that could be measured and tagged. Even with the psionic consensus running full force to link them, sharing memories was a chore if your feelings and thoughts weren't ordered to begin with. In fact, it could end up messing people's perceptions, like telling somebody to look at the index cards of a library when the drawers had been dumped on the floor and the cards were a messy pile. The information was present, yes, but how do you find it in all that?

"It started going badly with very small things. Since we all had nightmares and bad health effects from the mush, offal, drug vapors and beastly excretions that filled the tunnels, it took a toll on us. Emotionally just as much as biologically. Benton did as he always did when confronted to such situations; he retreated into science, getting blood and other samples from all of us to analyze for pathogens and parasites. Barely two days after leaving the caves and we had lost him to the hermetical meanders of his own mind. Hadji was being monopolized rather aggressively by Neela who was pushing weird potions and traditional healing rituals on him with little care for his opinion. She even told him flat out that "American culture had corrupted him, making him indocile towards adults, something his birth father would never have tolerated, nor his grand-father". She was basically blackmailing him emotionally to forcibly fit him into the mold she had imagined during their years apart, clearly not giving a damn for how much love, care and support we had given him. She wanted her little baby back, not this 16 year old young man who was autonomous, independent and ready for grown-up life without any input on her part. Race and Jessie were now mostly by themselves, on the sidelines, trying to recover from the grottoes, the things they had to do to survive. At first glance it seemed like they could do it, but that illusion soon exploded in full view of everybody, right in my face."

"At first, the thing that got to me the worse was how I seemed to suddenly be ignored, abandoned by everybody all at once. The other two kids had a parent to help them heal and recover, but my father was clearly preferring his damnable test tubes to my presence. So, I decided to be blunt as only a 14 year old boy in a snit can manage; I barged into his precious sanctum of science to impose my person on him, planning to get the emotional and social support I needed to survive all this damned shit. Benton was unimpressed, to say the least. He had always disliked being disturbed during research that he deemed private or delicate. When he was in a mood to have lab assistants or curious guests, he kept the door open or asked for us to come help. Barging in when the door was closed, especially when locked, was asking for punishment right there. Well, I jimmed the lock and barged in anyways. Knowing dad, it wasn't like I was in danger of getting beat up or sent to a reform school, so I was acting kinda cocksure, cranky and definitely arrogant for the situation. Well, I got the surprise of my life when dear old dad didn't even bother to let me explain why I
broke in; he ordered me via loud shout to get out while my hide was intact and not make myself present until dinner or later. As in, disappear R-F-N, runt."

Jonny looked down at the tips of his sneakers, trying to control the emotions while explaining events without blocking on small details. But dammit, it was those small details that kept ringing the alarm bells inside his mind, telling him that something bad was in progress.

"After getting booted out so rudely by dad, I decided to go see if Race and Jessie were free for a talk. I really needed to speak with somebody about what happened down inside that mountain, and I wanted it to be someone who had been there. So I walked towards the sector of the royal tower that had been set aside for them to have some father – daughter privacy, a suite big enough to have space if Estella Velasquez came to visit her daughter before we left back for Maine. Well, things weren't going well in that pair either. As I got close to the apartment's entry, I recognized the signs of a nasty argument in progress, mostly in the form of howling screams and resounding smacking noises. Now, I knew that Race spanked Jessica for punishment so I wasn't all that surprised by it happening. When she passed certain limits, mostly with safety or being plain insulting in her attitude towards parents or teachers, she would get a red ass that hurt for a few hours at most. But, for all the anger he expressed during the corporal punishments he gave her, I had never thought that Race would harm her or lose his self-control like what I saw that day."

"When I got in the suite's main living room, what I saw didn't look like punishment so much as torturing a teenaged girl. She was 15 years old at the time, nearing 16, but Race had somehow taken her jeans and panties completely off and thrown them aside on the floor. He was holding Jessie under his left arm with his elbow stuck in the nape of her neck, and held both her arms twisted up behind herself at a bad angle that was straining so much it was almost injurious on its own. They were also placed in a weird, disgustingly cruel straddle position, with both Race's legs over and across hers to pin her to the lounging chair under them with his entire weight in some type of submission hold that should only be used against prison inmates, not kids. What had me truly panic though was the sight of Jessie's butt cheeks: they were wine red, almost purple, against the stark whiteness of her legs and waist, with large bleeding lesions in spots where the skin was ripped off. What almost stopped my heart was the sight of the huge wooden paddle-brush that Race was using to hit Jessica over and over and over again. In the few seconds I was stunned immobile, he must have managed to strike her seven solid blows, added to however many others he had given to injure her that deeply before I arrived."

"Well, I lost my marbles and jumped at Race, punching him straight in the face and neck, aiming to knock him unconscious immediately because I was wise enough to understand that in a serious fight, he would beat and possibly injure me with great ease. I had barely managed to stun Race and remove Jessie from that despicable submission hold he had locked her in that I got the shock of my life. Jessica turned on me in a roaring fury and slapped me across the face hard enough to send me tumbling into the couch. The following clusterfuck still hasn't been explained to me satisfactorily, and I don't know if the people involved even have the capacity or stability to give that explanation. Anyways, to make things concise, Race had been punishing Jessie for some extreme disrespect and rebelliousness. He had tried to talk to her about safety issues due to the fact she had taken his spare pistol to come looking for him and Benton, but she hadn't followed half the safety measures she was supposed to, and never told Hadji or I until she drew the gun to shoot Deepak. Her dad had tried to start the conversation calmly, and honestly, he hadn't even thought about punishing her since that decision had in fact saved lives later on. But, Jessie has a nasty temper with a very arrogant, conceited streak to it. Her flippant responses quickly became insulting and Race lost his patience with her, resulting in a rather understandable tanning of her backside. What wasn't in any way understandable was his holding her down like a rabid animal, to the point he almost dislocated her arms, and using a weapon to beat her so much that he actually caused numerous bleeding lesions on her skin and deep muscle ecchymosis."
Shaking his head almost in denial of events, the despondent teenager valiantly plowed through the emotional miasma for he could sense that his extended family needed to hear this.

"The worst part of the situation was hard to determine, from my perspective at the time. Race was embarrassed to have been witnessed doing this to his daughter, especially since she was half-naked at the time. The striking thing was that he didn't seemed the least bit worried about her injuries, either to her butt or arms. Jessica was howling like a damned banshee, hurling insults at me for being a mannerless fool who had no idea of people's privacy. She also seemed completely uninterested in her injuries, or what it looked like from where I stood. Then Hadji and Neela came into the suite, alerted – somehow – that there was a scandal going on in the guest quarters. Neela sneered condescendingly at everybody, saying out loud "It's about time that red-furred barking bitch got broken and tamed! No daughter of mine would ever have been allowed to become such an ill-bred, unclean harridan! The shame! At least Mr Bannon shows good judgment in how to redress the situation. I see that the hairbrush I gifted him has been put to proper usage, at long last! Maybe now that strumping little hoodlum will heed adults in silence, as she should have all her life. A mere slip of a girl, having opinions and trying to have a career in armed jobs! Oh, the sheer utter shame her mother must feel!" and she went on like that for a few minutes before dragging Hadji back to whatever they were doing. Hadji just looked at Jessie like he thought she deserved that much, and maybe worse, which surprised me a lot since he loved her as a sister and always though Race punished her with too much strength when he tanned her ass. But it was the sneer of supreme contempt he directed at me on his way out that hurt the most. WHY did he ever look at me like that? I thought my friend & sister was being harmed, I tried to help her... He never said anything. But that look, that still haunts me when I have nightmares. Then Benton came into the mess and things went from bad to worse."

"Race explained tersely what had been going on when I interrupted 'rudely' his little heart-to-heart with his wayward daughter. He showed the bad bruising my attack had left on his neck and head, asking dad if he had anything to help alleviate the swelling. Again, nobody paid Jessie's injuries any mind, and she just shrugged it off, putting her clothes back on like nothing worth mentioning had ever happened. Benton saw the state she was in but blinked and turned away, as if he didn't see or didn't care anymore. Then dad got angry with absolutely everybody in sight. Firstly, he told Race to be 'more competent & discrete' when disciplining his spoiled brat of a daughter; any person of decent morals who heard that racket would have thought the girl was being raped and been legitimate in their intervention to stop him. He told him to close the windows and lock the doors, the next time around, so as to 'not bother poor honest scientists' with important research to accomplish on short deadlines. Then he badgered Jessica, telling her to suck it up in silence; she was old enough in some countries to have sex, be married, give birth, or have an abortion without parental consent, surely she could take her 'well earned thrashing' in silence without alarming the neighborhood. Then he turned to me. The look of utter contempt he sent me was raw, crude, completely written all over his face for everybody to see. And then he spoke. Not a scream, not a shout, no insults or anything vitriolic, just soft short words."

Sniffling and wiping his eyes in misery, Jonny wrapped his arms around his torso in a self-hug, instinctively trying to protect himself from what came next.

"He told me to pack my bags. Not to leave anything behind as I wasn't coming back unless invited by Neela, as she was the Regent for Bangalore. I was to be driven to the city airport, take a flight to the USA and stay at the Maine compound until told otherwise. I was officially 'grounded' for what he called my "clear lack of decorum and basic understanding of the limits between the families and people I lived with". I was supposed to stay segregated in the Quest Compound in Rockport until he called for me, or an emergency needed me to move. No further comments, no questions, no details, no nothing... Just 'get lost Jonny' and that was it. I even had to arrange my own flight reservations, pack my stuff, find a taxi driver to the airport, everything... I did it all myself. To my
shame and anger, all the people I had called my family abandoned me in a blink. Nobody helped me to pack. Nobody offered to come to the airport with me. Not a single person tried to reason with dad, to make him understand we were all going through some bad PTSD from the caves, plus finding Hadji's mom... No, I was left alone and kicked out like people abandon a puppy when they move to a different town. Too unruly, too sickly, and just too much trouble, so out with me and that was that."

Jonny took a few minutes to drink and nibble a bit while the members of the Assembly griped aloud or wondered about the circumstances the teen had described. At first glance, from an external perspective, there were quite a few things that didn't seem correct or fitting in the family's known profile.

"Well, since I had no support from anybody, I booked a flight, got transported to the airport, and left for the USA just as told. It's not like I could do otherwise, given that the bitch Neela had told me to my face that she would have the guards put me in a cellar and beat me until I learned obedience if I didn't submit and leave as my father had commanded. I had known her for just three full days at that point, but I could already tell you she was real big on that, traditional family roles and kids 'submitting' to adults at all times. And she certainly wasn't shy about giving her opinion aloud to anybody in earshot of her. She was the 'sultan's first lawful wife' after all, and that supposedly made her better than anybody else around. Fucking snob!"

"Well, I got to Maine and staid inside the compound for about five weeks. The Maine estate is big; with all the dependencies to visit, play in or do maintenance work on, it didn't get boring unless it was for an emotional reason. Like social isolation, or total abandon by people I thought loved me. Well, after 5 whole weeks without any calls or news, I decided to call dad in India. He never picked up the line, instead sending me a blithe email about not wanting contact face-to-face with me as long as I acted like a wanton savage. I tried to call Hadji but he had been appointed a personal secretary whom Neela had instructed to take messages, never transfer calls directly. Getting frustrated something fierce, I used our home server IRIS to find and hack Hadji's cellphone to talk to him without interference. He did pick up, talked to me for about two minutes, but his tone was shallow, his words shorter than usual, and he seemed vague, as if completely bored by me. When I asked if dad had given any idea of when my quarantine would end, he actually told me that he never asked as that was a decision to be made "between you and your father; I have no say in your family affairs" then he hung up without so much as a "Bye Jonny, I miss you" or any sort of polite closure. The backstabbing little bastard had not only let me hang out to dry, he had just told me to my face that he no longer considered we were the same family! He flat out abandoned me! Over the fucking phone, like after a bad first date that you dump the chump at a distance cuz he's such a loser you're afraid of him clinging to you if you're nearby."

The young adult was trying to use the heels of both hands to staunch the flow of tears from his eyes as his shallow, unsteady breathing wheezed loudly, worrying people because he sounded sick in that moment. After close to five minutes, the young male managed to get himself under control enough to continue.

"That was when I began to leave the compound. The weather was warm, I used my bike, scooter or even the hoverboard to go in town for short day trips for personal errands, or just to change my mind from the dull, boring isolation of living practically alone in the forested compound. Sometimes I took the old Catalina rebuild seaplane in the air for a joy ride, for a few hours of feeling the movement and freedom of high speed. Other times, I would spend a couple of days alone at sea, aboard our catamaran Questor I, to get out of the depressingly empty mansion. It was almost six months after being exiled that things in the house broke apart. The two paid housekeepers, the elderly Evans couple, were less and less visible as time went along. At first, Ms Evans did the laundry and cooked meals that she stacked in the fridge or freezer for me about once
a week. Her main task was dusting the furniture and vacuuming the floors, with keeping the bathrooms clean. It was especially important to keep visitor areas clean and presentable for when dad got important guests to come over to discuss contracts or research. As time went, the woman was less and less present, until it was almost three weeks since the last time I saw her. Her husband was supposed to wash the vehicles and take care of the landscaping, like mowing the few small areas of grass we needed for entertainment. Well, it had been almost six weeks since I had last seen the man and the grass was a foot tall all over the estate, with no groundskeeper in sight. I was curious so I went over to the separate cottage that had been built to accommodate the groundskeeper and his family, if the employee of the moment had one. Let’s just say that I wasn’t welcomed with open arms."

Taking a long pull from a fresh mug of coffee, Jonathan made a face as he remembered what had happened that day, four years ago.

"I found both Evans inside the small cottage, sitting in their living room, watching an old rerun of some godforsaken soap opera, the plates from their lunch still on the low coffee table near them. They had been lounging around, dressed quite lightly for the late autumn but the wood burning fireplace was already lit on the side of the room, giving plenty of warmth to be cozy. They startled so badly when I entered the room that the missus almost had a coronary on the spot. Then the fireworks started. They actually yelled at me like I was a thief in the night, trying to steal from their home. When I replied that I was here to ask why their jobs weren’t done, they sneered and laughed haughtily at me, saying "You’re a menial, nasty, ill-mannered little brat that should have gone to the woodshed a while back, for some lessons in obedience and manners. Get out there and earn your keep! You do the lawn, the dishes and the dusting, to see how you like having to work hard for your food and roof!" Then the fat tub of lard husband gets off the couch, putting his hand on his belt like he wants to take it off to beat me with it. Well, no, but Hells no! That ain’t gonna happen! I jumped forward the few feet separating us and grabbed both his arms and twisted as bad as I could until I heard something make a noise it shouldn't. I had just willingly broken his wrist and elbow at the same time, in the right arm. Then I backed off, taking out the long Bowie knife I had never really taken off my person since that day of horrors, down under the mountain. I told them they were fired. They were to pack and leave inside 24 hours or I would get the cops to remove them. Plus, I would then keep everything left behind as my due for the work they got paid for but never did. They bitched to high heavens awhile, but then the Missus started packing things pell-mell while her hubby took their car to go get treated at the hospital in town."

"Over that worrisome period, I barricaded myself in our private old stonework lighthouse, down on the concrete boat hangar piers. The tall narrow building was fully furnished, including a couple of bathrooms, a kitchenette, a cybernetics workshop, a games room, a full gymnasium on the ground floor, and three basement levels of storm shelters with three emergency generators, fuel drums, rainwater cistern and plentiful supplies. I holed up inside the ancient structure, using our domotics server IRIS to oversee their movements in fear they would vandalize or steal my property. They didn’t. In fact, they packed very little of what I thought they would. Apparently, other than clothing, hygiene kits and some knickknacks, everything else inside the cottage actually had been bought by dad so the hired people would have a livable space. When he said in the job ads that it was furnished and fully habitable, the old man had really been serious. Well, the two dead weights left, and I was finally truly alone. It didn’t last long. The two morons had the gallstones to call dad in India to complain about unfair treatment. He decided to rule like Solomon; they hadn’t been able to stand up to a child so they deserved to be fired and therefore staid kicked out. Then he called me, in the first contact we had in seven months, to tell me with his own voice just how disappointed, dismayed, disturbed and generally put-upon he was to have such a miscreant son. When he had the gumption to say out loud that he should start beating me like Race did to Jessica, I called out his bluff. I challenged him to come over and do it, reminding him that I had just crippled the last guy to
threaten me inside my own house. Strangely enough, and I do mean 'strangely'; dad seemed to mentally stall, getting a weird vague look on his face as he contemplated the distance he'd have to travel to wallop me. Then he got focused on me again, and told me that it was my bad. Since I was such a big lad, I could do the cleaning, cooking and land work all by my lonesome, in all weathers. He then issued this weird order that I was NEVER to leave the property, especially not by the boats or airplanes since I was too young and immature to know how to use them. Dammit! I had been flying those things since I was 11 years old, fuck it all!"

"That was the last contact I had with the man for a long time. A few years in fact. As I despondently thought about what to put on the list of stuff to go buy in town to maintain the house, I got an idea. We owned the building that Quest Enterprises was based in, in the middle of Rockport. And on top of the building was a large executive suite with full services. I was in the process of thinking through the logistics of moving my person and my life over there full-time when the doorbell rang. It was FedEx with a certified parcel for dad. He hadn't been home in close to eight months by then, so I robotically spoke to the mailman, signed for the reception and shut the door without too much attention. As I brought the thing to dad's private office, inside the ground floor's secured wing, to just dump the insignificant piece of foreign trash, the name of the return address grabbed me. It came from a guy who called himself 'Jenkins' like my mother's father. Feeling suddenly rebellious and without any consequences to fear from anybody, I reoriented my steps to the main kitchen for a hot apple cider and muffin as I quite disobediently opened the parcel. Thank all the gods that live under the boughs of Yggdrasil that I did! It was a full kit of government certified documents with a colorized highly decorated family tree that showed who this 'Jason Randall Labarre Jenkins' was, and how he related to mom and me. He was my second maternal cousin or such some tripe."

"Anyways, the guy was asking permission to come over to discuss the state of the Jenkins family before he went over to meet with Hoss, mom's father, on his ranch. I took the time to do some research over three days, until I was satisfied he was legit. Again, with nothing to fear from dad or Race, I called the young man's phone number and set up a meeting directly at the Quest compound. When he said he could come to Rockport by airplane, I sent him pics of both our land airstrip on the cliffs and the ocean piers with our cement docks and hangars. He asked if he could bring his friend Eric Tannenbaum with him, since it was his floatplane they would be using to move around. I knew the name from the company associated with it because dad did business with them occasionally, but I had never met any of them. I agreed eagerly, starved for social contacts as I was. Two days later, on a chilly Fall Thursday morning, I was happy to receive my two lively visitors. From then on we met a few more times until I felt comfortable enough to explain why dad was never around, and why I was left alone in a huge, empty house with nothing but old memories, sorrows and broken hopes. That was when they asked to bring over a few of our extended relatives from the Labarre Clan, Thomas and Jenna who wanted to talk to me anyways. After meeting them just once, I decided to accept their offer to be a house guest at their sprawling estate in Atlin."

"Since I would be gone a few weeks, and the Quest compound would be empty, plus the fact I didn't want to give up on dad and Hadji as a bad job screwed, I sent them an email to explain that I had been invited to stay with our newly found cousins on mom's side, for an undetermined period, up to several months if necessary. After a week of not getting any answers, I decided to call them by vidphone to make certain the message had gone through. It had. It was just that dad was so damned disappointed by what he called "my rebellious, unruly, borderline delinquent behavior, that he had given up on ever making a decent son out of me. So he didn't bother with writing an answer" and that was when he cut the line, without ever telling me anything about the others. You know, the others, like the brother I had lost almost a year back? Given the state of things inside my own family, I emptied out the perishables into the composting pile, shut down the plumbing, purged the pipes of liquids and gases, closed the storm shutters all over, and programmed IRIS into
bunkered configuration for the period the estate would be empty, managed remotely by me until someone physically came to take over."

"They never did come back. Four close to three solid years, I was living in Atlin or wherever the group was sojourning at the moment, separated from my father and brother without getting any news from them. Then, I got a message telling me that as Jessica had reached the age of 18, she had decided to marry Hadji, now aged 19, with the blessings of all three parents. They had settled on a date that was barely two weeks after my own 18th birthday so that I would be "older and civilized enough to attend without causing another scandal just by existing" as was so kindly put by dear bitching Neela in the short video email the group had sent me. Not even a live phone call! No! I got a dumb blasted email with a group film embedded! The fucking cold-cunted bint had the nads to say that I shouldn't forget to bring enough 'expensive' gifts to cover all the persons that I had troubled with my past delinquencies at my last stay, as well as the actual wedding gifts for the couple and the OBLIGATORY 'respect tithes' for the THREE parents who were celebrating the union of their children. As if somehow I could be expected to give precious expensive gifts to my dad who ignored and reviled me for four solid years just because my stupid betrayer of a brother was marrying the other backstabber who had abandoned me as well? And give similar expensive gifts to Roger Bannon and Neela herself, who expected to be wined, dined and maintained by me like she was my favorite 'putain' of the day? Oh Hells, no!"

Their 33 year old brother asked softly, with a deep sigh of sorrow "What happened?"

The younger blond haired male shrugged unrepentantly; "Martin and Jenna were getting ready for their own marriage. Since they'd showed me a fucking lot more kindness and human warmth in those three short years than anybody else during my entire life, I sent back a bitch-mail of my own, along with a group picture of my new composite family with the Labarre Estate as background image. Strangely enough, it was again Neela that contacted me for the whole group. With an actual vidphone call that time. Honestly, she hadn't aged well at all. Her hair was more transparent than white, her skin was wrinkled like my oldest pair of jeans, her eyes had an odd vaguely 'not all there inside' feel, and her voice was raspy like she had strep throat for months without any medical treatments. The moment I answered the line, she verbally assaulted me, making grandiose threats to never again let Benton or Hadji welcome me inside their lives if I didn't abandon my current situation and move everything I own over to India post haste. Then, on arrival, I was to publicly perform shameful penances, contritions and submissions to my Honorable Exalted Brother, the Na-Sultan of Bangalore, his Honored Father, and his Honored Regent Royal Mother. She even went so far as to say that she would convince Benton to disown me from my entire Quest inheritance if I didn't show immediately that I was civilized (docile) enough to use such powerful, precious things without causing shame to HER family and reputation."

The Tac-Chief asked aloud in amusement "Is she stupid or what? Under American Law, it takes a whole lot more than that to disinherit a kid. And of you were passed 18 when she threatened you, probably too late as well since most trust funds have multiple age plateaus that trigger automatically with the bank."

Snorting in dark, angry humor, Jonny #5 confirmed: "Oh yeah, she was pissed when I told her the same thing. But that was noting when I told her about the death of Hoss Jenkins and what he left me immediately upon his passing because he had no other issue. And what I got from the Labarre Clan because Hoss had in fact married into what was effectively nobility. And I may have mentioned how I had reactivated the Magical Noble and Erudite House of Quest with the Wizeria Hammerrika as well as the Wizeria Europeanis. You should have heard her scream of raw rage! It was like a rutting ox getting its cock rolled on by an eighteen-wheeler! Priceless! But, she shut the line down hard right then, and I would never have heard from them if I hadn't had to visit India to reactivate some dormant House of Quest properties in the old Britannic colonies, in Bangalore"
directly. That meeting went weird and weirder from the moment my team set foot in India. Then when I met with dad and the rest, none of them remembered me having been exiled, or at least they were trying hard to convince me they hadn't sent me off to get lost in the woods four years back. Also strange, was that Neela was still Regent for a year more but nowhere to be seen, even when I asked about her. And she never came to confront me about the lack of gifts, penances or continued disrespect towards her exalted authority. Our contingent left Bangalore in a strange state, which got stranger when I got a call barely three days later from Benton. His entire group had just arrived in Maine at the Quest Compound near Rockport and he wanted to know when I would be arriving. As if the last four years hadn't happened and we were all waking from a collective hallucination that was never real. And it was just a few days later, before I made up my mind, that the time vortex grabbed me to bring me here."

Younger Lucas #18 cracked his finger knuckles loudly enough to make his two older brothers near him wince in sympathy, then took to typing up a storm of data and questions in his spreadsheets and census table. He was just scratching the veneer atop the surface of this massively complex problem, but not worried. These notes were simple memorandum and virtual 'Post-It stickers' that would pop-up on his work screens every time he accessed the general census, data sheets or the House of Quest dossier itself.

Firstly; the Magical Noble and Erudite House of Quest. Redux – GENEALOGY – they needed to complete the cross-line schematics from the earliest ages of Labarre until now because Lucas was willing to bet his diplomas that there was both the cause and solution to all this in a shared communal ancestry, back in Antiquity.

Secondly; the Magical Exalted and Transcendental House of Singh. Redux – GENEALOGY – idem as before and the others before that.

Thirdly; the Bannon Family. What was their relation to the rest of them? Was here a blood-link or not? If so, what were the influences or consequences on the totality of their Assembly?

Fourthly; the so-called 'mother' of Hadji, Neela. Was she really his mother or a fraud? She had moved in and taken over everybody's lives and decision-making far faster than even a guru in a sect. She was a proven functional psionicist of some skill. Had she manipulated or brainwashed Jonny's family? The fact that Race suddenly beat Jessica so badly with a 'gift' that Neela had given him for just that usage was suspect.

Fifthly; why the Hells had Jonny never known anything from either the Labarre or Jenkins families while he was growing up? They were his grand-parents through his mother, shouldn't they have left him mementoes or items of sentimental value to help him learn of them? In the same vein, why did Benton know NOTHING of the magical origins of his long and illustrious lineage?

Sixthly; the thuggees under the mountain of Bangalore. What the ever-loving fucks had happened to them? According to Jonny's story, his family and Neela had never done anything following their violent exit to send in soldiers to clean out the filthy primitives and magical beasts from the tunnels. THAT stunk of complicity, and cast many doubts on the validity of Neela's story of woe.

Seventhly; speaking of doubts and suspicions, the mafia Don in him wondered. If the Singh were an ennobled House of Magic and psionics for THOUSANDS of years, how come they didn't have protections in place to save the Sultan from betrayal, or track and find the Heir when he was kidnapped? The Labarre, Mystère and Jenkins all had spoken of Blood Law, Family Magicks and clanhold 'blessings' to protect and cherish the family and allies. Why had Deepak not used these, or Vikram later on, to find and subdue Neela or Hadji? Doubts, younger Lucas #18 had so many
doubts but so few credible answers...

Conclusion and goodbyes

(SeaQuest - season 1 opening theme)

Sunday February 10th of 2301 – 15:26pm
NCQ, Florida (USA)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche;
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
Motorpool garage building

It had been 20 hours since they began their Assembly late last evening, but their tetchy littlest brother had been awake since 6:30am yesterday morning, so 33 straight hours of wakefulness and work for him. Even with pepper-up potions liberally distributed all during the period, it was pushing the endurance of everybody since most also had a day of activity in them before they created the impromptu Agora in the empty garage.

Standing tall to stretch his limbs in the hopes of getting some blood circulation back in his extremities, the 20 year old Tac-Chief grumbled nastily about mistreating old folks and asking too much of his aching bones. He didn't get any support from the pair besides him, considering they were too busy laughing at his expense quite loudly for people who were reputed as tired as he.

The rest of the hall very slowly got up, spelled away food crumbs, drink spills, stains and general messiness made by people when they have a gathering this big for several hours. The temporary furniture that had been conjured was left alone to expire on its own while the transfigurations or transmutations were quickly and expertly undone by their casters. Inside of twenty minutes, the entire garage was back to being just a large empty space for mechanical repairs and manufacturing. The tall wide rolling doors were triggered to slide downwards along their tracks, closing back into their secured setting.

Once everything was clean and safe, their suspiciously bossy younger sibling got on top of a step ladder to address the group again. "Alright, ye knaves! We'll let you go veg around soon enough! Lazy bums! It was only a mere 20-odd hours! And we were all sitting, eating and drinking like old folks in a country club. It's not like it was the most demanding job in the world!" he gabbed at them playfully, pulling their leg good and hard.

Amidst the groans and head shakes at his sense of humor, the child smirked in visible satisfaction at the effect he had on them. "Wheeeellllpppp" he said, exaggerating the pronunciation of the word to annoy people a mite more, "I have a lot of data and factoids in my system, but..." he dragged them along to the cliffhanger.

"I have no friggin' clue what it all means! I'm so far gone in the head that my brain is dryer than dehydrated soup stock powder! I can't concentrate, I can barely see in front of me, let alone think deep philosophical thingies, so... G'dnite ya'll! I'll see you in about four days, after I slept through two of them and got some fresh air into my mind to process everything under a clear new eye."

More groans and head shakes followed his diminutive form as he sprinted through the standing crowd towards the garage's connection corridor with the rest of the heavily fortified medical
building. He needed to use a toilet and take a warm shower before falling asleep on the spot without a care in the world for consequences. He was that tired that he almost thought of stopping in the ground floor ambulance reception zone to use the paramedics' washroom and a gurney to sleep on. It took a supreme effort of willpower to make it all the way to his own self-assigned room in the admin tower's second floor, but the boy was nothing if not stubborn. A trait that his many incarnations seemed to share in full, by the looks of their life stories.

After ruling like a king on the common man's throne, and almost falling asleep THREE times during his 'time in office', the boy managed a quick, hot shower for five minutes then dumped himself barely dried off, still naked and uncaring of it, under the warm, welcoming sheets. He would sleep for almost 30 hours before waking up truly rested and refreshed.

In a strange turn of events that he found amusing but meaningless, he had no dreams during that period.

Even the strange sounds of hissing, clawing, slithering and breathy moaning he thought he vaguely heard, just in those few moments before full wakefulness, were unconsciously attributed to the simple movements of small animals that roamed around the compound's grounds day and night.
Life improvement lessons

The author wishes to express thanks to anyone who may read his story and encourages them to leave reviews, comments or even flame it hard. As with any who try their hand at publicly expressing an idea or story concept, all feedback is important and welcome.

Disclaimer: I do not own SeaQuest, Star Wars, nor any other sci-fi or fantasy series, movies, comics, cartoons or news items used in this fiction as they belong to the creators or broadcasters or publishers who put them out for consumption by the public.

Created; September 2019

Revised on; ###

I give you warning that many of the stories spoken of by the characters will involve various degrees of corporal punishments, legal and criminal, from mild to torture having caused injuries, scars and handicaps. There are stories of imprisonment with psychological abuse and torment leading to the suicide of teens. There is murder, infanticide, fratricide and parricide. Various types of emotional and sexual relationships including hetero, gay, bi-curious and underage (willing). There are multiple cases of physical, biological, psychological & sexual rape as well as magical, psionic and cybernetic soul violations.

This story was, is and always will be rated a strong 'M' for clear reasons. Be advised.

This chapter is 65,000 words, all notes and headers included.

Justice for Lucas

Twelfth chapter; Life improvement lessons

Wake-up call

(SeaQuest - season 1 opening theme)

Tuesday February 12th of 2301 – 07:11am
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche, Florida (USA)
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)

Close to 30 hours of sleep, that was how long the young child spent dead to the worlds (plural cuz there were THAT MANY of those now, wouldn't you know) before having recovered enough energy to rouse from his warm comfortable nest under the many sheets and pillows. He had been so darned tired that he hadn't bothered drying off completely after getting out of the shower, preferring to let the warm afternoon air do that for him, as he slid naked under the pile of soft
polyester. The mental fatigue was such that he was unconscious on contact with the mattress, never moving an inch from his fetal position, on his right side, once he was fully into REM sleep.

Even the odd animal noises he heard (dreamt?) didn't bother him enough to incite wakefulness.

Now though, close to 30 hours later, the pressure in his abdomen was getting too much to bear, and the sunlight streaming in cheerfully through the clear window panes was quickly making the bedding too warm for his liking, even once the sheets had been thrown off in a spiteful turnaround, trying to stay asleep against adversity. Eventually, even if subconsciously, he had to give up the fight and open a bleary flint-blue eye, glaring at the yellow illumination that was bathing his nude form, trying to cook him alive. Growling nastily, the child yawned and stretched, scratching at his neck and shoulders that seemed to have become imprinted rather deeply with a copy of the folds in the mound of blankets that had covered him so tightly, all through his rest.

Yawning again, he sat on the bedside facing towards the bedroom door, noticing that it was closed and locked but not remembering committing the deed himself. No matter, since he had wanted the solitude to insure his peacefulness during his prolonged slumber, and no harm had come of it. Getting off the bed, he scratched at a few odd itches, here and there, as he walked to the en-suite bathroom to relieve himself then take a long soothing bath to relax his stiff joints and the pressure in his spine.

After finishing with the toilet, Younger Lucas #18 did as he usually did; he started running the water in the bathtub while taking a brief shower to lather off the sweat and grime of the long night. When he left the shower, he took a look at his back, at the surgery site for his marrow graft, as he normally did every time he washed. He stopped hard in his tracks at what he found.

The surgery site was inflamed, swollen and red, with several small whitish spots in the middle, like an acne pimple or the initial stages of an abscess.

This was most certainly not normal. Turning off the tub's faucets, he pulled the drain plug to empty out the useless water then marched to his dresser to fetch clothing composed of boxers, socks and the basic blue scrubs that he had worn the first day here. Given that he was heading for an immediate audience with whomever was the doctor on-shift, he could just bet that ANY clothing at all would be overdressed for what came next.

He'd be lucky to still be a virgin after the auscultation, given how invasive his siblings could be when they thought they were doing 'for his own good'. And they actually believed it, too, the little mongrels!

Snarking nasty imprecations about doctors in general, and those in his family in particular, the 11 year old walked determinately to the surgical wing on the same floor as his room, to get examined post haste. Nothing good would come of waiting, even for a much needed breakfast. The very limited experience he had acquired in his paramedic classes for his license had all emphasized the importance of never waiting when infections or adverse reactions to medical treatments were in cause.

It was all for nothing.

Two quick spells later and the 'Jenna' on call had confirmed to him that the swollen cutaneous eruption on his dorsal curve was in fact an ordinary carbuncle that was simply located at an unlucky placement. It was probably the result of sleeping so long inside a tight, hot and humid cocoon of polyester sheets, exposed directly to sunlight in such a fashion that it was like steaming a hot dog inside a microwave oven. The friction of the sheets and direct sunlight on the same spot had heated the epidermis to the point of causing a banal 'hot spot' which had opened the pores to
receive the sweat and oils coating the surface of his skin. This mixture then macerated inside the sebum plug which devolved into a minor dermal infection that was rather common at his age. Especially since he was at the doorstep of that "magical period" of human maturation called 'puberty' which meant his body was basically becoming a factory of unstable chemicals & hormones that were prone to explosions of the emotional, irrational kind.

Oh, joy. He had panicked for a damned glorified acne pimple.

Fuck! His 'loving' siblings would never let him live it down for the rest of his childhood, and most possibly the rest of his life either. They were just adorable towards him that way. Bastards, the lot of them!

Murmuring dire threats at empty air all the way, the boy marched back to his chosen bedroom to draw himself that well earned bath, but only after making a pit-stop by the cafeteria next to the cluster of VIP bedrooms. He would make himself a small coffee, also grab a mini-snack from the fully stocked fridges, then eat slowly in the bath as he relaxed. He'd go down for a late breakfast after he was clean, rested and at peace.

No need to expose himself to the rest of the madness before he was fortified. There was enough crazy going around the damned place without adding to it at this time. That, and he kinda valued what little sanity he had left after everything he had learned during the last couple of weeks.

Sitting himself in the warm soothing waters with his small meal on the sliding metal tray set across the bathtub, the child whispered to himself in weariness "I'm way too old for this shite anymore".

09:01am

After spending a relaxing 45 minutes seeping in the bathtub full of scented water like a giant teabag, Younger Lucas #18 got out of the tub, dried himself fully while looking himself over for other skin problems or symptoms. He got dressed in the set of regular day clothes that had been conjured by another member of the Assembly, since he was among those without dimensional storage. This was a simple set of straight black jeans and a dark blue flannel shirt with a large number 'C-18' written in white on the back like a sports jersey.

How considerate of his brothers to think of that.

What next? Little pink triangles or rainbows to specify which partners or lifestyles they had?

This 'utilitarian' method was starting to stink of concentration camp management systems far more than simple team membership recognition. They would need to do something about that soon. The question, of course, was what to use as alternative because he was clueless as to what that could be. Maybe they did have the best solution already, and just had to buck-up and live with it, all bad implications and memories aside.

Grabbing his work satchel from the desk, the child walked out of the room and down the glass-walled staircase to the ground floor so he could take a minute to chat with their night guard to see if anything had happened while he slept. After exchanging a few pleasantries with the child-aged 'Martin' on duty, he slowly made his way to the restaurant to check on the kitchen staff and get his real breakfast. He had really slept for 30 hours, so eating something more than the coffee and muffin from earlier was becoming a critical issue.

Entering the common area, he aimed straight for the kitchen to have a talk with the cooks to get the
most recent gossip that was doing the rounds of their kin. A few minutes well spent in socializing with his extended family had him up to speed on the necessities so he could be at peace, taking all his time to eat without stress. It took about ten minutes to crawl through the brunch buffet to assemble another of his famous batter & fruit confections with coulis and nuts on top, and by 9:40am he was sitting down to enjoy his first bite with his workstation active in front of him, to read through some of the basic psionic theory his family had prepared for their mundane kin to learn.

As he was halfway through his plate, the Tac-Chief walked into the restaurant, heading for the hot drinks dispensers while reading a datapad. His brother, the 'Martin' who served as chief of security, was with him, talking animatedly with wide energetic gestures as they marched side by side. After serving themselves some warm coffee, the two young adults looked around the room idly while sipping their first swallow of liquid fuel, apparently not in any hurry to leave. Spotting the youngest third of their leadership triumvirate, the two young men walked to his table, sitting down unbidden.

"Hey, munchkin!" Martin quipped playfully at his younger sibling, "How was the grotto this winter?"

Blinking owlishly at the older boy's phrase, Lucas asked, between bites, "Hun? What grotto?"

"The one you shared with the bears while you hibernated for a few months." snarked back the young adult, fully amused by the child's lack of farmland or forest social references. Him and their brothers would be having a field day teaching the tetchy little gremlin all about living in the wild country. It would do him good to put some dirt under his feet, instead of limiting himself to steel and lifeless concrete.

Waving his left hand in a dismissive gesture, Lucas replied "I slept 30-some hours. That's not so much, given how long I had been awake beforehand. I'm sure others in the Assembly did the same thing, but I don't see you razzing them."

The amber-eyed male smirked at his child-aged friend, replying gamely "Yeah, well, that's cuz they'd curse my poor hide to Hell and back with Dark Arts, if they didn't break out the bows and 'Slaying' arrows. You're a safer target than they are, so you get razzed. Get used to it." the twenty-one year old said, quite unapologetic about his teasing of their younger sibling.

Pausing with his fork mid-way to his mouth, the boy glared at his older friends, making it clear with just his facial expression what he thought of that particular proposal. Strangely enough, the two adults sitting with him were even more amused by his response. Pair of cads, the both of them!

"Alright, you juvenile twits! Why are you bothering my poor breakfast? Haven't I suffered from your dumb-assery enough this week? I want a straight answer, or somebody's getting a plate full of fruit coulis dumped on his empty blond head!" griped the child while pointing threateningly with his fork at his brothers.

The two laughing men couldn't help it; the little tyke was just sooo cute when he grumbled like that. They knew he was serious and would gunk them up in a blink if they didn't stop, or duck out of the way, but after the lives they lived, he just seemed more cute than violent in that mood. Not that they would tell him that. Both males valued their health, and they had a good idea of how creative the little runt could become if he was properly motivated to obtain the result he craved. Since the kid was gearing up to become a mafia lord, they could both guess that anything involving vengeance would be on the far side of creative, so they wisely shut their traps, trying desperately to bottle up the laughter that wanted to escape.

Finally able to finish his meal in peace, Younger Lucas #18 took his time to savor every last bite
slowly before sitting back comfortably, with his precious thermal mug held in both hands against his chest as if his life depended on the warm sweet contents. "Ah, Coffee! What would the world be without it?" he thought pleasantly. Now reclining at ease, despite that it was a rather ordinary cafeteria's plastic chair under him, the boy made a 'gimme' gesture at his older counterparts to hear what they wanted from him.

Exchanging a look, the two young adults shrugged in synchronous indolence as the Tac-Chief replied, quite amused; "Oh, nothing, really. We just wanted to say 'high!' then bug our little brother cuz he's missing out on it, being an only child and all."

The child frowned mightily at the older boys as they dissolved in spastic laughter at his expense. He would have to figure out something to punish them with, or else everybody would think he was an easy victim. Hummm... Something with a sort of sugary ooze or corn syrup... All good pranks need corn syrup to leave a lasting feel.

Ancestry and inheritances

(SeaQuest - season 1 opening theme)

Tuesday February 12th of 2301 – 08:21am
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche, Florida (USA)
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)

Younger Lucas #18 was finally finished with his brunch when his bubbly, exuberant older sister Jenna came by to plant a resounding smooch on her husband's cheek, to the amusement of the Tac-Chief and neighbors who cat-called at them happily. Once the bunch of rowdy brats had gotten it out of their systems, the child asked the girl "What can my measly self do for you, Oh exalted healer? Surely I haven't caught something just by sitting here with my food?"

Snarking amusedly, the young woman replied "Well, that depends who cooked what. I wouldn't let Jessie Bannon near the kitchen range, but she can handle a kettle or a micro-wave oven enough for now. Tom's the real menace; he takes after dad in that regard. He'll make something edible only if he uses 'Gourmet Mastery' spells to do it. Poor brother of mine... Bah, he's a nice guy and pretty good at a lot of other stuff."

Passing a weary hand down his face, the juvenile crime lord sighed deeply, still not adjusted to having that many people with so many differing attitudes in his immediate vicinity. The Matthew's at least had some baseline he could adapt to, but here, it was a bit much for him. "Come on, sis, I know you came to me for a reason, and since the complex alarms aren't blaring..." he completed his query with a hand gesture, hoping to make the woman get on with her mission at last.

"Okay, okay! Keep your blond mop on!" turning to the two older boys at the table she griped "Yeeesh! Bossy little thing, inn'he?" Sighing dramatically, the witch settled on a chair next to her man, wrapping a loving arm around him as he sipped his coffee with a big smile on his face. "Look kiddo, we need to start talking about magicks, Powers and the likes as a group. But the first part of that is actually an individual ritual that finds out what your ancestry & relatives are, as well as any active Bonds, Links, Contracts and Debts that Mother Magyck has recognized or sanctified. So, I came here to give you the spiel about how to prepare what needs done for the rites to work right. It's all pretty simple since you'll be bound naked on a stone plinth under the Blood Moon at the end
of the month, while we invoke Mór-Ríoghain's crows..."

Setting his left elbow atop the table, the boy set his chin on his hand, waving along with his right hand as the female joyfully wove a tale of pagan rites that only an uneducated fool could possibly be suckered by. Somebody like the teachers at a christian or muslim religious school, maybe, but not Lucas. He had already studied enough general religious history of the planet to see clearly that his older sister was having a go at pulling his leg, just to see how much she could scare him into a panicked reaction.

"I don't mind being nude. Were in Florida, spring is warm enough," the child replied in a haughty tone. "However, I'm not sure the other boys will appreciate seeing my full glory exposed. The girls certainly won't look at them with the same respect after seeing a real man for once in their lives." he affirmed with a shitty grin plastered on his face as the males in the immediate area exploded in laughter at his words.

"Aaahhh!" Jenna pouted dramatically. "How did you know I wasn't serious? It was a pretty credible tale."

Shaking his head in amusement, Lucas snorted out his laughter as he replied "After spending hours upon hours explaining to the entire Assembly what your family was, stood for, and the internal workings? I'd have to be daft and born stupid to not remember that this kind of rite wouldn't be something you would consider doing for real." Waving his right hand vaguely, he added "I'm pretty certain that there are some rituals or spells that require chaining people naked to altars under the night sky, but I'm also pretty sure they're all classed in the Dark, Black or Evil categories. Not the sort of stuff that a green witch specialized in healing, potions and homesteading would play with."

Martin laughed aloud at his poor wife as he hid his face in the crook of her neck, trying vainly to keep it to a dull roar but failing miserably. His outburst of mirth had gotten some attention from further in the restaurant and the other siblings were starting to come over to participate. Crossing her arms over her chest, Jenna huffed out a groan of dismay. "I thought I was acting the part pretty well. You're such a spoilsport. You could have gone along, just for the trip."

Bratty smirk well in evidence, Younger Lucas #18 replied "It would need to have been well acted, and funny to begin with, for me to participate. I used to get better jokes from the Hallmark cards I got at hospital, during my leukemia treatments, than what you did. Better luck next time, but I wouldn't try for 'America's Got Talent' if I were you. Not in the stand-up comedy category, anyways."

Jenna squinted her eyes menacingly at the snarky little gremlin as she pouted some more, eliciting a nice long hug from her husband. Not that she forgave him so easily for laughing himself hoarse as he applied said hug, no she did not. But it was a small bit of support that helped, until she could find a suitable vengeance against this coterie of brothers who took the mickey out of her so easily.

{ SQ } --- { A Gnarled family tree } --- { SQ }

08:30am

(The Godfather – theme)

Younger Lucas #18 was quite amusingly humming the renowned mafia song from The Godfather as he sat at the workbench he had been assigned. Given that he was busy mixing the basic ingredients for a Heritage Potion under the attentive gaze of their chief alchemist, one of the 'Diana Lombard' who served as apothecary or pharmacist, it really was à propos as choice of music. Famiglia first & foremost, in all things, afterall.
The child had been made to read the listing of the ingredients' properties, the abbreviated explanations of the diverse preparation techniques and why they influenced the brew, then the actual recipe with steps to follow for a complete elixir. Given that he had already reached professional grade capacities at mixing materials to produce circuit boards, processors and diverse chemicals, including many poisons and illegal drugs, the young boy had no problems following the written instructions by themselves, needing very little direct prompting to arrive at a passable potion. Diana then explained that his product wasn't the best, but not from lack of skill or technique. It was limited by his lack of Faith in Mother Magyck and his own internal mysteries. If he believed as well as Thomas or Jenna did from being born into an openly magical household, such limitation wouldn't occur at this period of his life.

The next step was to prepare the enchanted Genealogy Parchment; a piece of genuine animal skin that was scraped clean of all flesh, nerves, veins and fat, then pieced together to create a rectangular length of material that was more of a banner, given how long it ended. The parchment was made out of lamb skins, set to be 7 feet wide by 14 feet in length. This was the standard base shape for a Family Scroll since it allowed to inscribe all persons detected up to seven degrees on each side and 13 generations up or down. Each generational stratum was allocated 6 inches of height, but the spell adjusted the width of each strata according to how many members were to be included in the layer. This version of the spell produced a static image, unlike the master genealogists who could produce a parchment that you could scroll or zoom like a computer monitor, which was the basic enchantment used when creating the Family Head's succession tapestry to hang in their study. A newer version allowed to reduce the quantity of information displayed on the main tree graphic by only showing the names, dates and a unique 'membership number' that linked to the person's file that was kept separately from the basic chart. It was no big surprise then to learn that governments preferred to use the chart with the maximal information as it saved time by avoiding the archives, while many Families preferred the reduced version as it was devoid of animated images that sometimes gave weird opinions about anything happening in the room where the tree hung.

The parchment was actually easy to clean and piece together, since it could be done with a few quick methods involving alchemical elements and rune inscribed tools that even the mundane could use. Forming the lengthy scroll could be done by stitching the pieces with thread or at the molecular level with a 'Fusing Dweomer' that Diana helpfully explained as she cast it on the pile of fresh sheets. The young adult spoke in short, clipped phrases as she worked, her brisk gestures matching the terse manners she displayed. Lucas knew that her past history with her brother and parents had burned her badly, making her feel like a criminal more than a victim like Martin so clearly was. She had many traumas, many psychological injuries that she carried, thoroughly convinced that nobody would ever grant her forgiveness or an inkling of a chance at redemption. It angered the boy that his spiritual sibling could be so injured, so desperate that she believed the many worlds of the multiverse would be better without her, or her other incarnations.

Well, that wasn't acceptable, and the Family would work on changing that. Soon.

"Alright, kid," the brown haired, green eyed girl warned, "this is the part that usually makes people scream about Dark magic and demon worship." She handed him a heavily sculpted ritual knife called 'Athame' by those in the Nature cults. "You have to willingly give your blood, fresh, into the potion to prime it so it can latch onto your genetic & spiritual links. Once the elixir is primed, it will react with the parchment to sketch out the Family Tree that was & is, even those parts that you never knew."

Lucas observed the scalpel-sharp ritual knife of House Mystery. The metal dagger was shaped like an elongated bat with its body as the handle, the exaggerated tongue being the two-edged blade, and spread wings as guards. Small rubies gleamed as eyes in the face of the bat, with the Crest of
House Mystère inlaid in the guard-wings in alchemically shaped beljuril dust, shining an eerie green glow even under the white lights of the hospital's laboratory.

Diana made a face of disdain as she explained the limitations and powers of the potion he was about to use. The young woman was clearly having an episode of visceral contempt for her ancestry and culture as she laid out the details for the boy to understand what came next, and why. Upon hearing it, the kid understood her.

"You only need a small prick on the tip of your right hand index, then let drip a number of drops into the potion vial. Usually, magicals who have family traditions will give 3, 5, 7 or 13 drops according to how far back they need to establish ancestry. This also determines how far to the sides of each generation the enchantment will search and link connections for siblings, cousins and external relatives. To see the persons who were adopted or married into the family, you have to give 5 drops or more, otherwise the spell will only display those with a genetic connection, regardless of their actual link towards you. Please note that if you want to see the spiritual or magical inheritances to which you have access, you need to give 7 drops, no less. However, if you give 13 drops, the enchantment will automatically find & transcribe ALL familial or magical relationships, even those out of wedlock, rape spawns, procreates of botched experiments, friendship links, Soul Bonds, marriage contracts, Debts, and pretenders to your inheritances through long-shot claims like fake marriages, illegal adoptions, kidnapping & raising a kid as their own, etc..."

Lucas snorted, his contempt matching that of his older sibling. "In other words, I should give only as much blood as my weak mind can handle, or as is safe to avoid showing vices or betrayal of wedding vows. I'm betting that very few people ever give more than 5 drops unless they are pushed by an external force, like needing to prove themselves for getting some financial inheritance, rather than other pretenders."

Nodding her head slowly, Diana gave a small, tight smirk as she clearly perceived the open contempt in the young child's voice and mannerisms. Lucas very obviously preferred knowing EVERYTHING about any familial links or magical bonds to deal with them proactively, instead of playing the ostrich as so many other fools did. Then again, the boy had only been alive for 11 years; it wasn't like he had a closet full of depravities or crimes to hide from society, fearing that he would get ejected from his position or inheritance. Although, he was gearing up quite the little mafious operation in Buffalo, so maybe...? Meh... Not her business.

Taking a breath to steady his nerves, Lucas touched the athame to the tip of his finger, whispering softly "Mystra, Mother of all Magyck, I tithe thee these 13 drops of my living blood willingly. Show unto me, my kin and all whom need the full extent of the Allied Houses of Lucas Andrew Cadmus Holt Wolenczak. May Gaia, the Mother of Nature and the Earth abide thee in thine hallowed workes. So mote it be."

The turgid tepid potion slowly changed colors as the drops of warm living blood fell into the goblet, becoming a vibrant pink that frothed and belched on its own inside the container. After a minute of waiting patiently, the liquid calmed completely, the foam dissolved back into the elixir which was now a solid rust red coloration.

Diana picked up the plain pewter goblet to carefully pour the activated elixir on the top page of the prepared parchment scroll, delicately moderating the flow of re-warmed fluid to give the solid material the time it needed to absorb the potion fully. Once the entire goblet was empty, it was simply a question of laying out the scroll on a continuous flat surface to let the mystical reaction occur. This could take anywhere from one minute to an hour to complete the process, but given that Lucas had put 13 drops, the female apothecary was pretty sure they were here for 60 minutes
or more. Some heritage rituals had been recorded as reaching three full hours when large chartered clans were being mapped & surveyed.

It took almost four hours.

The top of the parchment began with naming the deep ancestors of the paternal lineage from around the year 1000 in the germanic tribe of the city Prague, in the Kingdom of Bohemia, going up to the expected reference of the Baron Haantonynus Wollen (subunct line of The Imperial House of Habsburg) who was born in 1667 and died in 1805 after 138 years of glorious, productive life. This was the last member of the paternal lineage to have active magick inside of his person, or to make a living from mystical skills. All other descendants from his Blood were members of the 'liberal professions' as architects, engineers or industrial chemists. The Wolen-Czech lineage fell on hard times due to the anti-jew sentiment ravaging Europa at the time, so they underwent a family-wide migration towards the USA, starting in the years 1790 until almost everybody was moved.

In a second color, the parchment indicated the genealogy of the maternal lineage, starting in 1000 also, but in the middle-east, in Palestine. There was a clear pattern of women migrating westward every two generations until they reached the eastern parts of Europa to settle down permanent roots in 1400. That process assured the slow but steady 'whitewashing' of the genome and physical appearance of these women, who had originally been dark skinned Mediterraneans, until they could now pass for pure-bred Europeans instead. In fact, the first intermarriage between the two families was actually the Baron Wollen and his (only) wife, Augustaurea Holtzenstein, the only female money-lender of the era. From that marriage onwards, the women of the family changed their name to 'Holt' in a sustained effort at whitening their pedigree to deflect all attempts to associate them with Jewish peoples or cult, an effort that worked out well.

The storied family lines had three other official marriages uniting them along the epochs. In early 1810's in Boston, Massachusetts, between Menahim Wolen-Czech and Illiryna Holt, followed in the 1920's by Emil Wolenczak and Amadia Holt, then finally, in the late 1990's were Lawrence Wolenczak and Cynthia Holt who married to produce the child whose genealogy was being written out. It was important to read the family tree to see that both the men and women were always from the main title-bearing line of the family, but never closer than 3rd degree cousins to avoid inbreeding. The passage of roughly 75 years or more between these unions of alliance meant also that the Bloodlines could breathe and replenish, thusly alleviating fears of becoming stagnant, or defective, through inbreeding and the paranoid exclusion of potentially exceptional mates.

This clearly meant that Lucas had an iron-clad claim to the titles, lands, possessions and intellectual properties of both paternal & maternal lineages without contest, and all the afferent paperwork that they could now go looking for, when he returned to his own reality. He was the direct Heir to the main branch of both long-lived families, and their rich history, something he had never thought of looking up before it was explained to him by the Assembly of his kin, just how important such knowledge was. Well, he would find it, study it, then make certain his own descendants read it as well! Nobody would forget this again!

Diana Lombard was tracing her fingers along a set of lines, at the top of the scroll, her face set in a neutral way that showed how deeply focused on her study she was. Waving a hand in the air, she conjured a floating flat panel of pure energy that acted as a viewing screen to project her memories, for sharing to a group or working on them as if they were displayed on a computer. Lucas though the trick was incredibly practical, so he promptly added it to the growing mental list of things he wanted to learn. Diana put on the floating screen a copy of the Labarre genealogy, which she quickly noted with colored tags on specific names or dates that seemed to be showing 'blank' frames where a person should have been indicated. Diana then flipped the memory screen to show instead the Mystère genealogy, to which she also appended colored tags on 'blank' frames in the
The 22 year old apothecary blinked a few times to clear her thoughts then grabbed several packets of small colored Post-It! tags to write notes and place them on the Wolenczak family scroll, all in the very beginning, around the years 1000's. Lucas rapidly understood what she was doing; she had seen the points where the Labarre clansmen had diluted their Blood Law so badly that the resulting people were no longer considered 'family' even if they had the basic genetics. Being placed manually on the scroll were the proofs the girl had found, the names & dates common to several genealogies that showed HOW their families connected, passing from being branches of Clan Labarre towards being their own independent Houses with new names.

Amusingly enough, his paternal side was also from ancient Labarre blood, those that moved out of Palestine just a few years before the Romans began their systematic conquests of the area. These were young men from the area that would become Venice, in northern Italy, who had traveled to Palestine with their fathers to trade and find potential wives to cement alliances with the local noble merchants. Being lucky, the young adult men did indeed marry well, and brought back their wives to Italy's northern sector. After a few centuries of peace, they decided to move upwards through eastern Europa because the Roman Empire was losing cohesion, falling into the civil war that would split it asunder in two rival countries. These families of traders, farmers and rangers, whom had many different names, then lost their official contact with the Labarre clanhold rather quickly after moving into Prague, in the country that would soon become the Kingdom of Bohemia.

That was the missing link, that period of war-torn instability & exodus through the lands of the germanic tribes that had stripped the once-tight families of their clanic attachments, making them forget who they were, and whence they came. By some sort of amusing twist of history, Lucas's paternal and maternal ancestors had actually shared the same original roots. It would need a much more powerful ritual to delve that deep, but Diana admitted that she only knew the standard heritage ritual, not archaeology grade spells or ceremonies. Maybe one of the Jonny's or Jason's from other realities had learned some? They were the ones specializing in these domains, after all, and Jason had actual university diplomas about it. Surely, one of them could help.

"Whelp," Younger Lucas #18 said with a great happy smile, "I finally know where I came from. And it doesn't seem half as bad as I feared, given what we know about all the others." Making an interrogative face, the boy asked "Say, Di, did you ever figure out how exactly the Tracy's are linked to all this? Cuz right now, we can see a myriad of links between the Labarre, Jenkins, Quest, Mystère, Wolenczak and even Holt, but where in this do Alan's family connect? I haven't been given the genealogies for any of the other kids. Plus, I seem to recall being the only one from my reality that's present. So, where did these family trees you have come from?"

Blinking at the rapid questions, the medic answered "I only have the genealogy trees from my reality, as they were done when we first met, years before getting dragged through the time portal. And the reason we never saw the links between everybody was that the others, even Martin and I, preferred to give only 7 drops for the ritual, so we only received limited data. Honestly, we never thought that any of us were that deeply connected, not passed the few cousins that were obvious like Jason Jenkins with the Labarre and Quests. We had no way to suppose there was some ethereous, thousand-year old interlinks to consider. Besides, all those people were dead, so none of us thought it mattered any. Without motivation, we never looked again passed the first try."

Unconsciously making a cute pout as he thought of things, Lucas posited aloud; "Maybe we should have all our members process through a 13 drop heritage ritual, then feed the resulting scrolls into a comparative program. Let's not forget that somebody has been targeting the Labarre relatives for over 200 years, going so far as to kill their employees and burn down their industries or office buildings. There's a centuries old vendetta still in progress out there, and now we – accidentally –
find that most of those brought out of their realities by a bloody machine haunted by a pedophile aberration are all sprouted from the same Blood roots 2,300 years ago? Unless I'm an idiot of galactic proportions, that can't all be just coincidences and happenstances."

Diana thought on his words for a few minutes before she nodded decisively, pulling out her PAL-analog to log into their magical network to write down notes & recommendations for group discussions later tonight. The tetchy little monster had put his finger on something that demanded investigation. Her guts were feeling the same way they did during some of the worse, most dangerous CIRPA jobs she did with Martin, just before they learned about House Mystère and its vampiric heritage. No, this would not be something to ignore and let rot in the dark, hoping it would die a quiet death all on its own.

Younger Lucas #18 was silently contemplating the finer details of his family tree, deeply relieved to see that there weren't any rape-spawns anywhere in the direct, distaff or semi-direct lines, appearing only in the outer perimeter of the kinship. Since none of these were close to him, nor in his generation or his parents', then he could let this all lie at peace. An amusing fact was that the Matthews were inscribed in dotted line frames between Cynthia and himself, showing how solid the emotional bond already was. Lucas blinked as he realized something; the image frames were not colored to indicate treason, sedition or betrayal of vows & debts, nor were they showing as dead, agonizing or medically incapacitated. Plus, as Diana had explained, the tree would show any true absence of mystical potential with a specific color, just at it would for insanity and physical or mental handicaps.

Why were Cynthia Holt and Raymond Matthews showing on this parchment as being healthy, mundane adults who were, by all signs, still loyal to him, bound solidly by emotion, law and faith? Psionics, spells, potions, and all manners of methods could control a person:

* Closing his eyes in anger, the boy remembered all that he had learned about the manipulations of Martin and Diana by their felonious father, abetted by his Vaticanese fake-priest accomplice.

* Of course, let's not forget the biotronic brain implants used on the 33 year old Lucas from this world.

* All the Jonny Quests older than age 14 had reported an unexplained period of unrest in their homes. Their father Benton went from a gregarious, phlegmatic temperament to being standoffish, remote, emotionally distant from his son, to point of seeing him as an embarrassment and burden, all without valid reason.

* Race Bannon never truly harmed his daughter until she passed age 16, when he got violent with her in the name of keeping her 'pure', agreeable and sociable. This was not something his preceding attitude had ever let foresee as a possibility, and none of the teenaged girl's attitude merited such injurious treatment.

* All the Alan Tracys had lived through horror from age 8 onwards, until exile or death, and the Tanusha that accompanied him suffered similarly. Every act of evil seemed to originate internally, but then again it also seemed natural in Martin's family, and that of many 'Lucas' as well.

* Jason suffered mostly through abandonment until age 21, and Lua was an orphan from birth, having lived on Kong Island all her life until Jay & Eric came into her life. Besides the obvious depravities from Lorna or De La Porta, it was hard to see if any other external interference had occurred. Again, no real way to exclude external manipulations as they could have been done on Lorna or Jason's parents, all dead, or Lua's parents which had never been alive or investigated.
Yeah, it was starting to stink in this reality. No ways was this all coincidences.

And the proof his mom hadn't betrayed him, despite what was was going on when their Uber-Brunder had pulled his scrawny hide out of the time stream... No... This was not kosher in any ways...

{ SQ } --- { About Power } --- { SQ }

12:30am (noon)

(The Godfather – theme)

Putting everything at the back of his mind for further analysis when he was alone and restful, the kid looked towards his spiritual female relative while schooling his face into the mask of an amiable, innocent child. She must have been really preoccupied because she bought the story, despite knowing for a few days already.

"Okay, sister mine," Lucas asked the young woman who was bent over the parchment, browsing curiously through the lengthy, convoluted mess with a frown on her features, "What do we do now?" At least, his family history seemed to be devoid of illegitimate mongrels, even though a few mistresses had given birth around the 1400's and 1500's because some of the outer line's newly enriched men couldn't stop partying all year long. "Stupid, drunken, philandering twits." the 11 year old thought nastily about his wayward ancestral cousins.

Shaking her head in amazement, the apothecary pointed at a spot on the family tree, near the very top. "We start by informing everybody that you are 'distantly' related to the Labarre and Mystère lines from the period when their own ancestors were moving out of Palestine's war-torn lands. Your mother comes from one of the Labarre cadet branches while the paternal lineage shares a common root with House Mystère. Congrats, cousin! You're really stuck with us all for real, this time!" she smirked brattily at his expression of wonder.

Crossing his arms over his chest, the boy exclaimed "I knew there was a link somewhere to explain why all of us were all pulled out of time & reality the way we were! It's in the blood, or specifically the genetics! The sensors our Uber-Brunder uses must have a sensitivity problem that he can't calibrate out of the system, so anybody whose DNA is within a fixed variant bracket gets targeted as if it were 'ME', or at least the one original 'LUCAS' that they were looking to capture and exploit. That explains why there are so many Lucas, Martin and Thomas, then you see the sub-links from the Labarre to the Quest and Jenkins families, their presence in the catch-bracket becomes obvious. Now, we just have to dig deeper to find where exactly the link with the Tracy's appears, and we'll have a functioning theory to back-trace our enemies and their plans."

The young woman nodded slowly as she processed the information discovered, then smiled at her little relative with the type of smile medics kept for when it was time to pull out the large-gauge syringes for injecting vaccines into a poor defenseless boy's plump posterior. Imminently amused at the child's sudden face of distrust aimed at her, the apothecary placed on the workbench another flat pan with more prepared parchment for another ritual.

"Well, now that we've got your Blood-lineage to see where Nature – went wrong – in making you, we can cast the 'Legacy' ritual to see what parts of your ancestors' magical or spiritual heritages are waiting to activate inside of you. If you make the requisite ceremonies, prayers or training. These
things don't always come along on their own, you know! It takes a lot of effort and dedication to
become a magic-user of any sort, and psionics are just as demanding but with extra headaches and
muscle cramps, too. Nothing but joy, I tell you!" she teased him good & hard as she set up the
aforementioned rite.
Younger Lucas #18 just kept his arms crossed as he tapped his right foot, a (very manly) pout on
his face as he tried to glare impressively at the girl for laughing at him so much. For unknown
reasons, she wasn't impressed. That was the problem with all these self-important twinks, all
thinking that because they were passed 20 years old they had the right to condescend to his poor,
maligned person. Oh, the nerve of these cads! He'd show them good manners and respect, he
would! Just wait. Pouting a bit more pronouncedly, the child moved closer to the workbench,
glaring at the many vials and tools the woman was piling up next to the enameled pan.
"Okay, this ritual is actually a bit more modern, having been created in the 1500's rather than back
when the druids roamed the Isles of Britannia freely. That's about the year -500BC, if you care. So,
there was this old ritual called the 'Legacy Ceremony' that was used by wizards, magical True
clergies, and magic-using master craftsmen looking for apprentices, to determine the physical,
mental and magical potentials of a prospective student. The original ritual was extremely simple;
you only had to place your bare hand on the person's forehead while reciting the incantation, then
you would see the results inside your mind's eye."
Snorting, the boy shoved his hands deeply in his jeans' pockets, wearing a disdainful mien as he
commented "Well, that certainly isn't the image of high & mighty spell-casters history has taught
us, is it? Short and efficient, without having to burn the village down or offer virgin girls to a
demon lord? I'm pretty sure I can see why some people wouldn't want that sort of thing around
them, or their so-called 'flock of faithful'."
Smirking too, Diana nodded at his terse evaluation. "Indeed, kiddo. But while you are partially
right about that sort of magic being too easy & discreet to cast for the tastes of those in power, that
wasn't the real reason the ritual was relegated to the pits of history by a replacement spell. You see,
in the years 1200 to 1500's there came to be a cultural wave amongst those families who had
always been fully magical in some way. They began to use the 'Legacy ceremony' on babies that
were barely a week old to see if they had magick inside or if they were the undesirable 'squibs', or
even worse, the magicless 'mundane'. The usual result of finding a squib/magicless was intense
horror and shame, sometimes to the point of nullifying a marriage. The families accused the
woman, and only ever the woman, of having committed shameful acts or sins against Nature to
explain how a squib could exist; it was righteous punishment from the offended Gods. To avoid
the dramatic consequences on complicated inter-clanic alliances that a divorce implied, most
families resorted to silently killing any infant squibs & magicless they found, calling it instead a
miscarriage due to poison by their numerous enemies."
Diana growled angrily as she continued the impromptu history lesson. "Infanticide became such a
prevalent situation in those three centuries that the Wizeria Europa had no choice but to get
involved to stop the self-destruction of the magical enclaves by their eugenic drive. The problem
was that the initial ritual was completely private, only the caster saw the result. Further more,
because the rite took so much spiritual energy out of the person that was scanned, nobody could
cast that same ritual on them again in their life, thus locking the information gained inside the mind
of the person who cast it. This caused bad problems in small poor villages, when a master
interviewed several students to select only one, or none, since nobody else could ever have the
knowledge he received from those kids, and most masters never accepted to share what they saw."
"The solution was imposed around 1497 by the Wizeria Europa who commissioned a new spell
that would emulate the ancient rite, but by putting the results on parchment with enchanted quills &


multiple colors, displaying standardized variables in a set scheme nobody could cheat. This meant that any wizard, cleric, master artisan or parent could cast the spell to make a permanent record of a child or adult employee to keep and reuse at will. This of course meant that rich, elite schools would now demand to have this done to every employee and student that wanted to become part of their institution. The Wizeria also used the new spell to evaluate current & future employees, then obliged it on any suspects of criminal activity arrested by the aurors, warlocks or Unspeakables. The private hospitals that catered only to the rich immediately required it for their staffers to guarantee competency, and of their patients to see clearly what the problems were."

Diana ground her teeth harshly as she spat out venomously "The new reusable spell & record combination seemed a panacea at first glance. Except for a small problem; it didn't stop the birthing of squibs & magicless children. What really happened now was it forced families into admitting their existence publicly, and suffer their shame for it in full view of the community. Such children never fared well, being shunned by their kin and tormented by neighbors, or even the aurors that occasionally encountered them."

Lucas grunted a nasty little noise, commenting glibly "And so the families utilized the existing system to get rid of their sick, defective or unwanted kids. They used the catholic church's orphanages and monasteries, didn't they? The stupid muggles had that god that didn't exist, with a cult of many millions of worshipers, all following the perverse, lying ecclesiastes who peddled these debauched lies. Since the Catholic Inquisition was in full force at the time, killing anything that threatened or questioned the priesthood's Power, the families who donated the squibs probably gambled that the church would kill them soon enough, never tracing back their unnatural births to the point of origin. Problem solved, despite the Wizeria's alternative."

The brown-haired girl nodded slowly, her face grim as she tried to stop imagining the fates of those children held in catholic slavery from the crib. Most of them being nameless, the priests & nuns who were entrusted with caring for them had been cruel, tyrannical, and almost never supervised. Because that was the epoch of the Black Death, any given orphanage or abbey could have a stupendous amount of deaths on record while neither the local government nor the Vatican would actually care. If you wrote down 'Plague' or 'Smallpox' in the register, not a single person in authority would ever question you about it. Diana also knew that many kids who were street urchins had actually been safer and better fed than those who grew up in the church-run buildings where daily beatings, injuries and rape were the norm. Not a single version of christianity had ever been different, not when it came to lying and exploiting abandoned, vulnerable children.

"You are correct, Lucas," she whispered as she finished placing the necessary components on the bench. "The government of magical Europa did its best, but the believers of magical purity never relented. These were the same who tried to wage wars of extermination on non-human species, and pushed both the Britanic and German empires into the colonization and exploitation of the less developed parts of Earth. Much of what England did from 1500 to 1900 in terms of colonial policy was influenced illegally by wizards using mind altering spells to control the mundanes, including the Royal family. A similar situation occurred with rival magical clans on the continent who wanted to stifle the British expansion, so they began to manipulate the German Kaisers, then helped push for the creation of the 3rd Reich under Hitler. When the Nazis claimed they had occult powers, alchemists and alien technology, they weren't lying. The mages were not-so-secretly giving them partial blueprints to devices & potions to make the average German soldier able to match a dozen mundane men, or three wizards, in an effort to compete with the massive population basin that was aligned with the Anglo-Saxon kingdom & colonies. But in the end, it just blew up in the faces of all the magical species all at once, when the Americans bombed Hiroshima. No seer had seen that coming, nor what followed next."

Signaling for the young male to come closer, she took a deep, calming breath to explain what
would happen in the following minutes. "This one is simple. You need to put drops of blood in each inkwell so that each specialized potion will bind to your Blood, mind and Soul to properly scan for any abilities. 3 drops for what is present (inherited), 5 drops for what is dormant (ancestral), 7 drops for what is vestigial (Legacy), or 13 drops for those incredibly rare & special capacities needing specialized rituals to activate properly. You just prime the potions, I cast the actual spell, and the enchanted quills will do the work for us. It takes less than 15 minutes."

"Why can't they invent something like this for homework or admin? Managing my hotels would be so much more fun if the paperwork got done automatically like this!" griped the pale skinned boy as he again took the House Mystère's athame to willingly give 13 drops of blood in each jar for the magicks to work. It only took a few minutes to prime all the inkwells, then Diana cast the lengthy chain of spells that activated the complex ceremonial. After that, it only took ten minutes for the multiple dipping pens to write or draw the results in a language that the juvenile crime lord had never seen before. The mix of colorful texts, sigils and figures was quite artful despite being so alien, he thought.

"Well, that's a surprise!" exclaimed the apothecary as she studied the pages of spelled data. "You, my friend, have a whole lot of potential, if you put your mind to it. Energon classes! Man, what I would give! You have the capacity to learn how to cast spells all the way up into the Power Realm of Energon, and a great inborn aptitude for mathematics, languages, scriptural magicks, alchemy and transmutation. You might suck at the medical side of things, but mechanics and higher techs will definitely be strong all your life. In fact, you have all the markings of a dweomercrafter, mechanomage, engineer-magus, mechanologist transmuter, or even going all the way up to arcane networker or shipwright. Man, some people are gonna hurt when they see your results! Oh, the jealousy!" she crowed happily as she contemplated the lists of potentials the child had.

"Since I have no idea what you're blabbing about, I'll take your word for it. But it would be nice, you know, if you could explain a little so that I could, maybe, see for myself how good this all is?" he snarked at her in a bout of fine adolescent mood.

Putting her index to her lips in thought, the young woman made as if to think about it for a minute then replied just as brattily "Nah! I think I'll wait till dinner to tell everybody what kind of a magicless rocks-for-brains you are! Then you'll have all the explaining you need!" she teased him good & hard right back. Grabbing all the sheets from the rituals, she took off at a run, sprinting as fast as she could before the boy had even realized the trouble she planned.

Blinking twice at the sudden turn of events, Lucas swelled his chest like a balloon, screaming at the top of his lungs "Git back here, varm'nt! Gimme back ma papers!" he screeched like an offended little schoolgirl as he ran after his spiritual sibling through the corridors and stairs of the medical building. Just you wait till he got his hands on her! She'd learn not to mess with him just cuz o' his age!
Younger Lucas #18 ran into the public dining hall at full tilt, aiming to bring to heel the traitorous girl before she could spread her vile fibs about him, but the moment he saw her, he knew she'd won the race. She was standing, bent in half and panting hard from her exertion, next to the waiting line at the serving counter where the bloody 20 year old Tac-Chief and 33 year old version of himself that resided in this reality were waiting their turns to be served lunch. Diana had already handed the sheets over, and the two men were garnering quite the attention from those around them, both in the line and the food counter staff.

Damn! He wanted to understand those before blabbing about it all over the place. Now he'd never get to study the numbers and explanations in peace before every busybody in the compound tried to shove their opinions down his throat. Ah, crap! Well, that girl would just have to see her shampoo replaced with a fluid of his own device, and enjoy it when it happened. He was only 11 years old; he was entitled to some brattiness, especially if it was justifiable retaliation for breaching his 'medical' privacy.

Deciding that since he had lost the current fight and was already in the restaurant, he might as well eat something at a reasonable hour for a change. The boy went to get a tray then shamelessly walked back to the front of the line where his genealogy reports were being ogled by all & sundry in sight. Giving the multiple relatives and siblings a patently fake “S'cusez-moi, priority VIP coming in! It's for quality control!” with a matching snarky smirk, the 11 year old playfully shoved open a place at the serving counter so he could order a meal while hearing the older crowd gab about his stats.

The 33 year old glanced amusedly at his little brother's antics; the kid's attempt at proving he had chutzpah bigger than the plebes was tickling him pink. Snort! He was sooo becoming parental around the runt that it was getting funny in its own right. "Almost cute" as the guy next to him would say, if he were made aware. Which, given the amount of hazing the mongrel would put him through, was never gonna to happen. Some secrets needed to be taken to the grave, if one wanted to keep their reputation of manliness intact.

"Oi! Runt! You know you can become a practitioner of the High Harkys? Not bad. Most of us in the group can only cast at the Arcane level, and not everybody has their psionics activated, let alone the Virtuals." the Tac-Chief said with obvious pride in his voice. "Man, I wish I had some of those capacities. My transmutations are good but pretty ordinary. In comparison, you have a natural affinity for it so you could follow one of the training models based on that mystical art as your primary tool, then take it all the way up to Energon Power Realm. Do you have any idea what that kind of magick can do to reality?" The older male was clearly approving of the report, but that didn't tell the younger boy what it all meant.

"No, actually, I don't know." He pointed at Diana who was now recovered from her improvised sprint with a nasty glare, accusing tersely "That traitor-knave took off with my heritage sheets without explaining a single thing before she disappeared into thin air! Some medic she is! Where's my confidentiality? Aren't these things private anymore?" Oh, yes, he was in a fine tetch, he was.

The Uber-Brunder smirked in true Lucas fashion as he replied shamelessly "Nopppe! You're under-aged and in a different reality. I serve as stand-in parent, so I have the right to see these things, and diffuse them as needed by the Assembly. It's a question of 'The Greater Good', you see?" he quipped, bratty as when he was a teenager.

"Whaaaat? I never signed up for that! Since when exactly do I have a bloody stand-in parent? I'm old enough, and nasty enough, to take care of myself. I certainly took care of cleaning you up when I arrived, didn't I?" the boy griped as he took his plates from the serving staff. Strangely, he didn't think he'd eat much, nor that it would go down all that well, no matter how much coffee he washed
"Settle down, munchkin," the 20 year old version of Lucas mumbled distractedly as he riffled through the thick stack of colored schematics, "I'm trying to make sense of some things in here and you're bothering me." Funny comment to make, since it wasn't his own genealogy he was monopolizing at the time, no matter how much they looked alike despite the age difference.

Sneering contemptuously at the group of older kin, Younger Lucas #18 took his loaded tray, sniffed snottily at the mob of backstabbers, then made his way to a table in the middle of the room so he could eat his food while it was hot. It only took another ten minutes for the principal – delinquents – to join him at a cluster of tables around the one he chose. As had become their unofficial custom, the dimension's oldest resident and the Tac-Chief, sat directly at the young boy's table while the oldest Martin Mystère, Diana Lombard, Jenna & Thomas Labarre took the table next to him, then the oldest Alan Tracy, Tanusha Bellegant, Jonny Quest and Jessie Bannon took the table on the other side. The oldest Jason Jenkins and Lua were actually asleep as they usually worked the night shift to keep the youngest workers that shared their shift safe and well surrounded.

Lucas took a liking to his meal of pan seared sole fillet & veggies, mashed potatoes with herbs & butter, a hearty beef & barley soup and warm bread roll directly from the oven. It was almost worthy of his beloved Burgundy Velvet Lounge. He hadn't picked up any dessert as he wanted to see first how the conversation would evolve, that way if things went pear-shaped he wouldn't be wasting food for no valid reason. After having worked with so many homeless, poor and derelict humans in the last year, the last thing he wanted to be guilty of was wasting food the rest of the group could use instead. The younger male ate at his regular rhythm, knowing full well by now that the crowd around him would explain the results of the heritage rituals when they were sure of their own comprehension. Since he had far less knowledge or experience than any of them with these things, he had little choice about waiting for their convenience, no matter how much griping, bitching and accusations he bleated aloud.

Meh! Relatives... What can you do?

"Yeppp... It's official; we're related by Blood, even if it's diluted some here, here, and here again," the oldest Thomas Labarre mumbled around a spoonful of hot soup. "I guess our ancestors did travel around the mudball quite a lot, back in those days. 'S pretty normal they'd drop a few sprouts along the ways." The man shrugged after his comment, not knowing what else to say. These events were nearly a thousand years old so it wasn't easy to be emotionally attached to them, especially in light of how new the revelation was. Back in his reality, their team had never thought to do the genealogy rituals with that much power as neither had any interest to look back that far. Apparently, that could have been a mistake, if the little kid's face was any indicator.

Speaking between bites as was polite, Younger Lucas #18 posited "Well, that could explain a lot about the unseen war that has been directed against the Labarre clan for the last 200 years in all our realities. The root of that tree has spawned so many branches, twigs and leaves that if somebody wanted to be the last inheritor of the lands, monies and libraries, they would have a massive amount of – pruning – to accomplish, so to speak." Chewing on a piece of fish for a few seconds, the boy continued "And I have enough experience at depravity and criminality to know it has got to be about three things; Power, money or destroying knowledge that threatens the immoral Power some people have accrued over the centuries. The 'reserved' familial archives of each branch must have some pretty damning secrets or blackmail material accumulated in those 2,300 years, and I can see at least the Vatican being interested in burning it all, or seizing it to use against others."

Jenna shamelessly filched a thin julienne of boiled turnip from Martin's plate while his attention...
was on the magical parts of the kid's 'Legacy' report, knowing he didn't particularly care for that specific food. She'd only try to get a carrot stick if he was paying attention her way; it was always more fun to see his reaction to his favorite passing under his nose without prior assent. Munching her ill-gotten gains, the young woman asked a question niggling at the back of her mind. "What kind of census data do we have about the whole Assembly? How can you actually infer, or deduct, that this shadow vendetta has something to do specifically about our family, or that it's what is spilling over into the lives of people like Martin, Jonny or Alan? For that matter, are the Quests and Tracys even related to the Labarres? I don't recall seeing anything about that..."

It was Jonny seated at the table on YL-18's left that replied pensively, "In recent times there has been some intermarriage between us, but it was never talked about inside my house. My mother's father, Hoss Jenkins, married a Labarre, and his brother married Lorna Labarre who is Jason's grandmother. So we have that partial tie-in three generations back, but Benton & I never really checked any further than that. Even during that blasted period of messiness when I was 14 to 17 years old, moving around on my own a lot and met these twerps, we just never thought of checking it out. They did help me through the rituals like you did, but I only gave 3 drops for the 'Heritage' and 5 for the 'Legacy' spells." Chewing a ketchup-drenched french fry thoughtfully, the young man's blue eyes were glazed as he contemplated the choices he did back then. "You know, Benton had always been pretty sure of where he came from but almost never spoke of his ancient roots like his parents, grand-parents or further back. I know he was born in the states, in Florida, but nothing else, really. I remember one rare detail he spoke of; it was with Race Bannon at the time, during a rather slow-mo camping expedition. His gramps were Brits on both sides, then his parents migrated to the USA just after high school, and they were already married before the trip. I really have nothing else from his side."

Alan frowned angrily as he cut through a particularly recalcitrant piece of chicken breast, immediately in a bad mood at the thought of his family, ancestors and what it all came to. Sighing in misery, he exchanged a short glance with Tin-Tin before saying "I know Jefferson was spawned by combining Tracy and Hardale lines, and mom's birth name was Evans. She never said anything about her childhood, parents, grand-parents or anything about her life prior to age 22, when she graduated Oxford University, then migrated to the USA for a second set of classes she needed. She met Jeff just weeks after graduating her second diploma. It was a whirlwind romance, with quickie a marriage and first kid barely a year after they met." Smirking nastily at the thought, Alan added "We kids were always 'encouraged' by dad to never truly calculate how much time elapsed between their marriage and Scott's birth, cuz it'd come short by a couple months, if y'all get the meaning... So much for christian morality about staying pure & virginal before the wedding night! Stupid, lying bastard!"

Collective snorts of contempt echoed the young man's feelings as the portion of the Assembly present tried to think back at their own roots and just how they interconnected with each other. The collective musings were interrupted by their young crime lord's next comments, blowing their minds in the process.

"Oi! Old guy!" he snarked as he addressed their 33 year old brother. "Haven't you told us already that every time you activated the time-dimension portal it was to target 'US' specifically? Not just some blond haired, blue eyed kid walking in the street? Then the solution is simple; we redo the Heritage and Legacy rituals for each and every one of us present, not just the 'Lucas'. That way we might have a chance to figure out what exactly those bastards wanted with 'US' and the rest of them. It might also tell us why most of us wound up being hunted by strangers or beaten to death by relatives. At this point, we just can't continue to live in a fog bank like it was a natural situation anymore."

The oldest Jenna sitting at the table next to him made a face, thinking about all the people and all
the spells to cast, and how long it would take to do. "It's feasible, sure, but it'll take a lot of time, effort and components. We're gonna have to start by taking inventory of all the materials we have on hand, then portion them to commit two rituals each person, then choose the volunteers according to what's been prepared. If we lack in any components, we're gonna have to select only a few people rather than the entire Assembly."

Younger Lucas #18 shook his head negatively as he chewed on a piece of vegetable, swallowing before he replied breezily. "Nah... You'll have all you need, and more people to help too." Turning to the Tac-Chief and oldest brother, he ordered them bluntly "Get that stupid Gate array working again. We're gonna be shopping around in the magical districts to get the stuff the casters need to get their assigned jobs done. And since we'll be trawling through time, space and the realities, we might as well bring in all the other versions of ourselves that are missing. All the Martin or Diana, all the Thomas or Jenna, all the Jonny, their many missing Jessica and Hadji since none are here... And of course Most of the Alan and Tanusha are missing, so we need to get methodical about them. Jason and Lua need getting here, and all the missing Eric that usually accompanies them. On the nose of it, I think we're actually missing half the people we need. Once we have everybody assembled in one single place, we can start doing the genealogy & capacity studies to figure out how deep a mess we're in."

The oldest 'Lucas' dropped his face on the table top with a groan of dismay while the tactical boss glared nastily at his little sibling, wondering anew "Where'd we get this runt?" Neither man seemed interested in the proposal, and the rest of the Assembly kinda faffed between agreement, opposition and interrogation.

The boy waved indolently with his left hand as he stabbed some fish for his next bite. "Oh, and to avoid any sorts of temporal anomalies, paradoxes or conundrums, you'll be picking up our relatives in three date brackets based on the 'Lucas' of the period, from the oldest at age 20, then age 16 and finally age 11, so we match the groupings already here."

The Tanusha seated on his left with her fiancé asked aloud "Why starting from the oldest? Why is that important? Sorry for asking, but I never studied magic or temporal effects in my life."

The youngest chief in the group waved her concerns off as he detailed "From what I can see, the 'Whatever' that was controlling our 'venerable sibling' into bringing us all here had started by grabbing people much older, then slowly went down in age bracket. I've never worked in a battleship in my life, but even I can spot a sensor fine-tuning sequence when I see one in progress. Whomever controlled our friend wanted to aim specifically at one person, but they were lacking critical elements to properly program the targeting array, so they had to run a sampling line before having enough data to calibrate the definitive Gate coordinates. Now, that does little except tell us that the foul job they wanted to do has never been finished or else we would not all be here, alive and healthy to talk about it. They would have killed us all in our frozen sleep when the mission was done."

Taking the time to eat a few bites and a swig of coffee, the boy continued; "Now, that doesn't necessarily help us, but it does prove something. If you grab somebody from a recent date then grab his younger version, the timeline does not destabilize. That's probably because the referential point of the change still exists to anchor that change, thus allowing to inverse back to normal, or else render the committed change permanent somehow. I see it a bit like a building; you can change the floors as you like as long as the foundations are intact, but you can only touch the foundations if the rest is secured, not undergoing any work at the moment."

The oldest Martin Mystère, seated on his right, shook his head in dismay, whining pitifully "I don't believe it! He doesn't have a bone of magick in his body, almost never touched any of the weird
stuff in his life, but he gets how time-space-dimension mechanics work like it's just setting his bloody cellphone! Who the bloody Hells is this kid? And somebody tell me the mold that made him was broken so we don't get another!"

That particular explosion of emotion of course set off the snarky little gremlin; "Look around you, moron! I think we're all way past the moment where worrying about having more of 'me' in the place was still important. As in, all of us are the same boat, and the storm's on the horizon. Whaddaya gonna do 'bout it?"

The collective groans of anguish were sweet music to the child's ears as he polished off his plate. Poking at his belly with his left index, he decided that yes, he did have space left for dessert. And after all the mental efforts he had endured this morning, he did indeed deserve his sweet treat. With a new coffee, of course.

Ancestry & inheritances; for real, this time

(SeaQuest - season 1 opening theme)

Tuesday February 12th of 2301 – 14:11pm
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche, Florida (USA)
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)

Jonathan Quest was smirking quite happily at the spectacle happening around the large eating hall. For once in his life, it wasn't his fault, no matter what his family could have said about it. Exchanging a knowing look with the young Jessica Bannon from his timeline, he smirked even more when the child-aged Lucas came back to his seat carrying a tray with a new coffee refill of his huge thermal mug, and yet another sugary sculpture that made his poor arteries clog just by looking at the damned thing. On the other hand, it looked like the After-Movie Special at IHOP; a stack of four thin pancakes separated by layers of vanilla icing, topped by fruit salad, a dollop of whipped cream and drizzled in a reddish fruit coulis. The child had barely sat down that he had already split his construct in 12 equal slices like a pie, with the first morsel on its way up to the bottomless oblivion of his mouth, with the coffee mug firmly grasped, ready to wash it down as soon as it was chewed.

The kid ate like a bloody harvesting combine processing through a field of wheat stalks.

The most disturbing aspect of the sight was his impeccable manners. The kid ate properly, in tempered movements, just as if he were sitting with notables and foreign dignitaries instead of a bunch of rambunctious kids, teens and barely adult relatives. Shaking his head in dismay - and a lot of envy, dammit! - Jonny concentrated on what was important for now, the results from the rituals the kid did this morning.

"Oi, boss!" Jon called out to his eldest sibling, catching the 20 year old's attention. "Can you please tell us what the little tetch got on his sheets? We need a pick-me-up after the crazy plans he dropped on us."

Smirking along with the nervous laughter coming from the Assembly, the Tac-Chief unfolded the sheets, smoothing them over on the table after the others had pulled back their trays and laptops to give him space.
The young adult version of 'Lucas' scratched at his shaven, scarred chin, glaring enviously at the 'Legacy' results then shrugging resignedly, deciding to just get out with it. To each his own life, and this wasn't his to pine after, nor regret. Besides, if he wanted a higher magical capacity then he could just ask Jenna, Diana or Lua to help him with some potions or rituals to get the job done, and a lot easier than the traditional method.

"The 'Legacy' ritual was done with 13 drops of blood, which almost nobody ever does... Just like he did with the 'Heritage' spell... Well, the little brat certainly doesn't do things by halves. It seems we have ourselves an Energon-capable caster in the making. In fact, it seems that all he needs is the Power Realm Activator potions to unbind Mana, Soul and Energon inside his cores as the rite says he's already got Primal Essaence, Mythal and Psionics available if he just trains enough. Damn, but his arithmancy, scriptural magicks and transmutation scores are way above anything I ever saw... And he's got Virtual Psionics almost active on their own!"

Thomas Labarre whistle in amazement at his younger sibling, extending an arm to pat the kid on the back loudly, whispering encouragements in his ear as he wrapped a half-hug around the disgruntled boy. On the other side of the still eating child, the oldest Jonny was completely agog as he tried to understand the full implications of what the Tac-Chief had just revealed, exchanging looks and faces with Jessica who was also dumbfounded.

Martin set off a sparkler spell to calm down the crowd, before taking over the discussion. "Alright, give the runt a moment to breathe," he said with a wide smirk, "Then you can jump him for all he's worth!" The blond male was laughing himself hoarse as his fiancée Jenna was desperately holding onto his shoulder, also laughing herself into a tizzy.

After five minutes of collective hilarity, the part-vampire steadied himself enough to aim a – friendly – toothy grin at the basely grumbling boy, who was still busy finishing his dessert without audible comments. "Okay, let's take this from the start so you can understand how things work."

The amber-eyed young adult waved a hand lazily to create a 'Vid-Win' like his sister used in the infirmary, setting some basic textual informations on a chart, with colored animated images next to several lines. "Now, were gonna start at the bottom of the list so all those who have no idea how magic works can get an easy read on this. These are the Realms of Powers, starting with the lowest;" the male pointed at the floating chart.

* Electricity
* Basal Realms (Channeling – Essence - Mentalism)
* Lifeforce (Bio-neural electric energy)
* Primal Essaence (Emergent Element / Rituals / Exotics)
* Psionics (Psychotronic Spectrum)
* Mythal (Pseudo-Paradoxal Element / Old Rituals / Arcane)
* Radiation Spectrum (Multi-Spectral Polyphasic)
* Soul – Web of Life (Paradoxical Spectrum)
* Mana – Web of Powers (Paradoxical Element / Antique Rituals / High Harkys)
* Energon – Framework of the Universe (Proto-Paradoxal Element / Metamagycks)

"You don't need to write this down or even memorize it for now." Martin said in a bored tone. "Eventually we'll give you a few copies of the books we have, some in computerized format in fact, so that you can read and practice at your own rhythm."

Jenna added helpfully "This is just an introduction so you can see where your potential is, and what
you could unlock with a bit of effort, and maybe a ritual or two." She gave a warm encouraging smile, pointing at the chart's lines that said 'Mythal' and 'Psionics' to focus his attention. "This is where you are proven to be situated, even if you don't know or feel it yet. Maybe you have been bound by outside forces like Martin was, or you have a natural blockage so you'll be a 'Late Bloomer', which happens with some people. On the other hand, your magic could already be active fully, but turned inwards, which is a valid concern as your tests show you have specializations towards a lot of mentally, psychically and spiritually demanding specializations."

Martin picked up the thread in a kind tone of voice; "Arithmancy is the magical science/art of mathematically codifying Reality, Biology, Thoughts, active spells and Place Magick, and a test result this high is usually seen in introverted mages or Psionic Virtualist types. It's a set of skills & spells that also helps a lot with all divinations, potions, alchemy, spell creation and setting wards. Scriptural magicks covers everything from writing mundane languages & music, to runes, sigils, glyphs, circles, Figures of Power, astral charts, dimensiongrams, temporigrams, as well as paintings, photographs and even digital imagery or virtual reality systems, if they were built with enchanted inter-modal parts then programmed magically or psionically."

Younger Lucas #18 asked "So, the extreme mathematical, programming and business skills that I have proven up to date are just expressions of my magick manifesting on its own, since I don't actually cast spells?"

Nodding happily, Jenna confirmed "Yes. In the first few weeks that happened it would have been termed as 'accidental magic' or 'Primal Essaence bleed'. But, now, after you instinctively learned to channel that energy through your mind, applying it in material reality for so long, it has become the foundation of how you perceive and exert your will upon your innate Powers. That's not bad though; it just means that you're already comfortable with a manner in which to exteriorize magic & psions, so you should be able to learn other casting methods."

Martin added on, meaning well as he spoke "Not to mention that introverted spell users have a much easier going of it than regular extroverted types. Yes, casting freaking huge fireballs will take you more time than the average guy, but once you master the spell you'll be able to change the parameters or learn variants much quicker than ordinary practitioners. Plus, people in your situation usually develop mental organization schemes, psychic defenses and a mindscape much faster than even the regular psionicists do. Not to mention just how fast you'll eventually get at processing all information; visually, audibly, by touch, vibrations, mind-link or eventual neural interfaces with machines. You sure weren't under-equipped by Nature when she made you." the tan skinned male said with a big smile, happy for his younger friend.

The 20 year old Tac-Chief took up the pole as his younger 'self' was frowning at the floating colored chart in deep thought. Waving around his coffee cup left-handed, the Second Boss pointed at some texts that Martin had put in the right-hand margins of his image. "As you can see from that column, these are the Power levels needed for transmutations. The higher the Power level you have activated, the better and more complex your art can become. What you need to know about the transmutational sciences & arts is that they are the highest echelon of accomplishment in three great branches of magic; arithmancy, scriptural magick and alchemy. A basic transmuter is always an arch-mage, and it goes up from there. The most capable transmuters are Energon alchemists, metamage, metapsychist, networker and shipwright, or basically any of the learning programs that need you to be able to actively cast spells in free-wave Energon."

The war-worn young adult roughly passed a weary hand through his long blond mop of hair, exhaling deeply in emotional tiredness as he contemplated the situation. It could go very well or very bad, with not much room for an in-between given who was involved. "There's another tidbit you need to know about transmutation. When you reach those lists of spells that are Energon-
based, you can actually create and maintain 'Crystal Spheres', that is the same system of energy barriers and weaves that maintains the solar system alive & functional. In fact, if you learn enough magic and grow enough in experience, Power, and erudition in the Celestial Arts, you could eventually create your own solar system, enclosed inside an autonomous sphere that is invisible to outsiders unless they were keyed into your ward scheme. It is rumored to be what the Atlanteans and Muans have done, and it's a fact that the Seldarine, the ancestors of the elvish races, have done just that. So, it's a proven method that simply needs over-mortal levels of magick, components and planning to do right. But it can be done."

Donning a face of utter blandness, the 11 year old child gazed pensively at his older spiritual sibling, letting nothing of his inner thoughts appear on his visage. After several minutes of what looked like a silent glaring contest, the two broke it off and the boy frowned anew, clearly not impressed with something he heard.

{ SQ } --- { Debts to pay } --- { SQ }

14:41pm

Seeing that nothing catastrophic was happening right away, Martin took back the lead. He wiped out the 'Vid-Win' with an indolent wave, replacing the Power chart with another complex graphic that had multiple colored lines twisting, sometimes even intersecting, at different levels of the drawing. This was a combined Family Tree with properties & items, wards, bonds, debts and active magical contracts shown.

There was a bloody crap-ton of stuff to look at, and not all of it bad, just not all good either.

Jenna spoke softly to rouse the boy from his deep thoughts. "Firstly kiddo, it's important to remember that only those things linked to one of your family lines by Blood Law will show up in the graph. Secondly, most monies, investments, trades, patents and such can only appear if they were bound by a magical contract at the moment of acquisition, or a magical patent certificate for new creations. Some items, even mundane, can be enchanted with just enough Essence to be tagged by the Blood Law without real effects, while others were built as portable focus for the Family Magicks so you can sometimes trigger them at a distance, or use them as divination node."

* Blood Law; Family, relatives, kin, vassals, bannermen, indentured servants, slaves, beasts

* Properties; lands, buildings, vehicles, patents & royalties, corporate investments, enchanted items.

* Wards; any permanent enchantment linked to the Blood Law or an individual who gave it to the Family through lawful magical inheritance.

* Magical Bonds; usually Oaths that were sworn to (by) a member of the Blood Law then transferred by lawful magical inheritance to the central lineage at the person's death, or if they were removed in shame. In some cases the member can willingly give the Bond/Oath to the Family in exchange for monies, materials, status or privileges that their station in life would not usually afford them. In Noble Chartered Houses, children of all branches & status were taught young to seek the creation of such Bonds for the strategic positioning of the entire House, then received great rewards when they brought back such an Oath to their Patriarch.

* Debts (Due & owed); These were specifically non-commercial Bonds, specifically 'Life debts' and 'Debts of Gratitude', as well as the 'Monarch's Consideration'. Only Bonds & Oaths bearing a standard of moral obligation.
Magical Contracts; These were only those commercial trades, barters and agreements that had been made with the appropriate ritual to be registered by Mother Magyck as valid enough to survive the passing of the initiator, then transfer to the Family Lineage despite the absence of physical documents or items to record the Deed. Something as simple as the old 'Spit-in-the-Barter-Hand' ritual was enough to seal between two magical persons during their lifetimes, but not enough to transfer passed death. The 'Bloody Thumb Signature' ritual is the minimal magic required to make an ordinary verbal agreement into a magically transferable Bond passed death. That means that even mundanes can do the Deed, but not actually feel if the rite took hold. It is needed in all circumstances to use pre-enchanted contract parchment sheets with alchemic ink to create a truly magical contract. Negotiations that are designed to affect inter-generationally or Bind to the active Blood Law will normally be written on the skins of animals raised by all Families involved, then written with ink that has the Blood and Blood Law of each signatory mixed into the pots of each color, and in each wax used to Seal.

Because he had willingly given so much blood for his two rituals, the age, quantity, richness and detail of all the information revealed was amazing. In fact, it would take a professional archaeologist to produce anything of better quality, let alone obtain more information, for the centuries displayed. To get anything truly better would really mean going deeper in the past, and laterally beyond the 7 degrees of kinship already on the chart to reach the 13th degree of separation beyond which the natural Blood Law no longer connects. If, by some miracle, the specialist could find relationships or kin passed the 13th degree, that would mean that somebody in the deep past had established multiple Blood Law Nodes or chartered the Family structure above Clan status, which would demand an immediate investigation.

Taking a deep breath to center his emotions, the young child asked in a resigned tone "Are there any important debts or contracts that I need to worry about? Like an unsatisfied marriage, or owing some forgotten Deity my first born son? If I go by the way the fantasy novels usually start, I'm gonna have some pretty shitty mess to handle soon."

Laughing mildly at the boy's concerns, Martin shook his head as he tried to stop himself from letting out more than just a short chuckle. The kid was just so damn cute when he pouted like that! For an emerging crime boss – slash – warlord, that is, which they really shouldn't forget if they wanted to avoid a nasty surprise, later on.

"Okay, guys!" Thomas called out, "Give the tyke a break. He just learned some pretty big stuff." Then, with a wide bratty smirk he added "You'll have all evening to razz him anyways!"

Frowning most mightily, Younger Lucas #18 crossed his arms over his chest, tapping his foot in an angry staccato, as he gripped at large "Is there any reason why any of my incarnations like any of yours, Tom? Cuz, you know, right now I can't see the why." If anything, the kid seemed to be getting even more tetchy as he spoke, his glare taking on an ominous shade of dark that Thomas had seen quite a few times on the face of the Lucas from his own dimension, usually right before he got an atomic noogie while his other siblings laughed themselves hoarse at his expense.

Deciding that retreat was a valid tactical maneuver when faced by overwhelming opponents, Tom raised his hands defensively in front of him, giving a patently fake, placating smile as he tried to defuse the juvenile time-bomb before he detonated on him the same way his older version tended to.

Damn, but these Wolenczak guys had a temper on them! Sheesh!

Now that the boy's frown had converted to a minor sneer of annoyance, it seemed safe for all involved to make the conversation progress beyond where it stalled. Martin Mystère was newer to living magically than the Labarre but his Family had a much worse, more convoluted situation
therefore he was the better choice to explain most items as he had to endure a similar wake-up himself just a four years ago, at age 17.

"Okay, man." he started in his easy, friendly voice. His slightly nasal tone and underlying French accent quickly obtaining the kid’s attention, pulling him out of his funk without undue explosion. "If you look at the 'contracts' section, you have only good news. There's a few deals still piling money into a vault at the Hebraic Magical Bank of New York City – USA, so you have currency that's legal amongst magical peoples coming in every Friday evening. All of them are interests on large inter-generational loans or profits from stocks in diverse magical businesses. Luckily, you don't have any outstanding obligations or trade agreements that are in abeyance on your side of things. Although, there are three different contracts where the other parties are the ones who defaulted on their obligations, so you have to react on that relatively soon to have your rights respected by the Wizerias and society."

Martin smirked playfully as he pointed the 'debts' section, as it was the turgid mire where all the mines were floating placidly, waiting for the unsuspecting child to swim so they could trigger. Well, okay, nothing so damaging or serious, but the emotional fallout could probably be comparable to mines going off. "In terms of debts, you only have two that are still active as the rest were either personally owed by the debtor, or else the entire Family that should receive compensation had ceased to exist in the eyes of Mother Magyck. It didn't mean that there weren't any living relatives or kin, just that they had stopped infusing sufficient willpower and rituals into their Blood Law to keep it active, so their Charter fell to abeyance then dissolved."

Squinting his flint-blue eyes at the text, YL-18 pursed his lips tightly as he read through the short, not so informative blurb under the House names that he was linked to by ancestral dues. "Does anybody who the Clanhold Hevander of Britannia are, and why they owe a 'Clanic Debt' towards my maternal line? Cuz it seems to be a whoppin' huge pile o' cash to have that still hanging over them like this."

Diana Lombard pointed at the names who had initiated the debt; the Lady Augustaurea Holtzenstein, money lender in Prague, lent the money necessary for the House Hevander to pay off its other debts to ascend unto the status of chartered Clan under the Wizeria Britannica. "That right there is probably an immense risk to the finances of House Holtzenstein, depending how they were chartered. That means that there was a lot of trust for them to publicly back the rise of a small House into a Clan, despite the political fallout that came with the acts. And it was a deal across national borders when travel between countries was tremendously difficult, even with gate, portal or teleport spells available. No, this was a big, long-term investment that this woman did, and it must have had some majorly positive impacts along the way, for the debt to still be active today."

Jenna spoke very softly next as she pointed at the other active debt. "This is the real kicker. Your paternal lineage owes either major familial services, help for elevation of House status, or else a 'Patriarch's Favor' to be paid as requested upon demand, up to and including the life of a second-born son/daughter as marriage alliance or sacrificial offering in ritual. This is owed to the paternal lineage of the Irish House O'Beornon for them having rendered life-saving assistance to the matriarch of House Wolen-Czech during pregnancy. No further details are shown, but both debts are big enough that the Family Grimoire or main bank vault would have all the relevant documentations." Jenna shrugged helplessly. "At that point kid, it depends on how many banks your ancestors used while they were magical, and which one they distrusted the least. Most magicals don't really trust their family & kin, trust the bankers less, and the Wizerias not at all. For good reasons, too."

Snorting in amusement, the young boy passed a weary hand down the side of his face, making a grimace of emotional tiredness at all this mess. "At least the physical and commercial properties
are pretty straight forward, and mostly automated so they can wait a bit. The debts, that'll be data-mined as soon as I can find the damned bank information back in NYC, in my home reality." The child blinked a few times then snorted again. "Are any of you starting to feel just plain ordinary when you say 'my own reality' like it's nothing weird? Cuz I'm starting to feel pretty much blasé about the whole thing at this point."

His off-the-cuff remark was answered by bouts of laughter, chuckles and head shakes all around as the Assembly began to calm down from the uncertainties his test results had shown.

{ SQ } --- { Intermediary plans } --- { SQ }

15:05pm

Getting up from the table with his tray full of empty dishes, the thoughtful child told the Assembly "I'm gonna put this in the cleaning area then go do some Internex research on a few thingies that have been put back enough to become important again. In the meanwhile, you old guys really need to start charting the reality tree to see which of our members are missing people so we can bring them here & now."

Shaking his head sideways in a strong negative gesture, Younger Lucas #18 continued roughshod over any objections that some were trying to bring up. "DON'T! Just don't try to tell me that it isn't feasible with the resources we have. The presence of all of us clearly demonstrates that it IS in fact achievable, if some people just get off their ass and change gears on their brain. Plus, the other piece of work to get done ASAP is bring the control systems for that damnable Temporo-Dimensional Gateway to the hospital, instead of always going into the blasted mausoleum New Cape Quest."

Taking a deep calming breath now that he could see the members were thinking on the proposal rather than just having knee-jerk reactions to the size & complexity of the work, the boy explained a bit more of his thinking process. "We all know about the World Management Grid, the defunct Humania AI, and the virtual reality cybernetics that have been built into every edifice, vehicle, piece of furniture, article of clothing, and personal item over the last 100 years that America existed in this reality branch. There is only the lot of us plus whatever quantity of the basic andromorph robots we can reprogram to clear out these poisonous, psychotronic malwares out of our living & working zones. Think about it; we can realistically clear out the sanitarium in a reasonable time frame, but the town, we'll never completely clear that much unless we start demolishing wide tracts of the cityscape to make certain the bloody WMG droids don't re-plug or reinstall the malwares behind us. Because, yeah, while we have some robots reconfigured to help us, the bloody Grid has several thousand more that can be brought from other locations, plus the manufacturing systems aren't off-line, so the basal maintenance AI can always make more of the same shite if we steal or destroy any."

The Tac-Chief grunted nastily as he ran a scarred hand through his hair, making a grimace of comprehension as he processed the information and gut feelings the kid had shared with them. "Fuck... The brat's right again... If we leave the hospital compound too often, or try to colonize the towns around here too much by removing the Grid's sensors, malware projectors, tools or weapons arrays, the central system will eventually detect us as some form of intruders then send something mighty nasty to convert us into servitude, like the wrinkled crud besides me suffered, or just kill us off if we resist the mind-wipe. Anyways, we have to start taking the environment around us a lot more seriously as the threat it really is, regardless of the absence of any other people. Empty of living humans doesn't mean safe. We know about undead, energy entities, elementals, monsters, beasts, hundreds of basic animals that are predatory or toxic, plus thousands of plants or maladies that are dangerous without any human activity required. We were really out of whack, to all be
going around with our eyes closed and our hands down our shorts like it was recess in a schoolyard. Damn, but we're lucky nobody got killed or attracted the attention of those stupid, walking armored behemoths!"

Alan Tracy smirked brattily as he added sotto voce "Yeah, it would have really sucked some major ballsack to figure out how close to a fully functional 'Gundam' humanity got before croaking by having said battlebot crashing into our evening BBQ. Not that having party crashers is ever really fun..."

Laughing aloud like a loon, the 18 year old dodged the magical 'Slap' spell the Tac-Chief tried to send at his shoulder by way of jumping out of his chair to dance around the table, picking up his and Tanu's finished trays to escort their little 'Lucas' sibling over to the cleaning station. He would now have to reschedule his workload and studies differently, since he would no doubt be amongst the tech-heads tasked with finding how to move the damned Gateway control node to their current control zone. That in turn would shunt the responsibility for creating the defense manatites or watching the surveillance network to other, younger and less trained members of the group until the big projects were finished.

SimWorld© for amateurs

(SimCity video game - opening theme)

Tuesday February 12th of 2301 – 18:26pm
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche, Florida (USA)
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)

In the mortuary building, Younger Lucas #18 stood up from the plush director's chair he had been occupying for the last two hours. He'd concentrated so much on his work that he'd moved almost nothing but his hands & eyes as he typed away on his prototype workstation and multiple extra tablets commandeered for the task. Installing the custom setup on the desk had been easy, but then he lost himself in the data streams far easier than he thought would happen, given how much excitement was going on around the rest of the complex. Although, come to think of it, the morgue was pretty isolated, and nobody visited the place unless they had rotten meat (or bothersome evidence) to dispose of so it didn't stink up the place.

The child had spent a half-hour patching physical cables from wall sockets to hubs, to the CPU’s, then to the mortuary director's master console, ending at his new laptop. His improvised daisy-chain of systems had yielded as secure a network tie-in as anybody could presently have on this Earth, given that the dregs of the WMG were still actively looking for unbelievers to convert. Then, once he was safely ensconced behind the sanitarium's main switchboard IP, he completed his anonymity by converting the morgue manager's identity into a nameless 'interim bureaucrat' to avoid suspicions by the Grid's automated sniffers.

Then Lucas got lucky beyond any expectations. As he searched the abandoned office for paper, pens and other work supplies to jot down his results outside of the network's purview, he had found several 'secret' engineering backdoor codes illegally handwritten in loose folios, all hidden inside the secondary file cabinet. Apparently, the manager of the morgue had about as much faith in the WMG as the members of the Assembly, which is to say none. The man had collected copies of the badges, personnel files and security certificates from each maintenance worker that had ever come
to Grosse Tronche to fix their servers, internal network, or access to the Grid at large.

Lucas was quite amused – sarcastically, of course, – at how religious tyrannies always preached about faith, belief, trust and worthiness in public, but practiced paranoia, deception, betrayal and sedition everywhere else. Oh well, at least it made establishing the psychological profile of such fools easier for people like himself. And once the profiling was done, finding the rest of their private secrets would be a lot faster, which in turn would fuel the rest of what needed to happen for their family's long-term success in this dimension.

The deep Internex dive that Lucas had put off so long since arriving in this epoch had finally begun at full strength. And then promptly given him a migraine the likes of which he'd never felt in his life. How the bloody hard pumping fucks had the fools organized anything in this blasted archive?

Oh, crud!!!!!!

The defective imbeciles had redone the entire archival system by abandoning the standard alphabetical & chronological notations for 'converting' everything as if they were in fact 'converting' people. The topics were now ordered by how 'purely christian', how close to the Bible, how close to canon law, how close to the dogma of the ecclesiastes, and how supportive of 'American Exceptionalism' it was. They had invented a completely demented system that started at the 'blessed number' of +777 going down to =0 then further down to -666 to indicate the 'unholies' inspired by Satan.

As example, a natural river rock was attributed +50 or so because it could be carved into stone blocks to build houses or churches, so it was seen as slightly positive instead of just neutral. In comparison, a wooden matchstick was attributed +333 because it was a source of 'pure light' and 'cleansing fire' while also being a proof of humanity's superiority over Nature & animals. Guns, despite being used for crime, were attributed a solid +555 because they were the tools of God's Power by which adult white men commanded civil society or committed Crusade against the infidels. In contrast, books about secular law or the primacy of civil society over sectarian madness were downgraded firmly towards the -555 and worse, while anything about other gods or faiths was passed -600.

It had taken Lucas those two first hours just to wrap his head around the concepts & values that founded the logical underpinnings for naming the files, folders, classes, branches and technical trees in the system. The boy couldn't write a direct query, let alone a complex search algorithm, into the default search engine because it was so damned esoteric compared to anything else. At some point way back, the American government had succeeded in nationalizing their section of the Internex, then set an officially approved replacement for Windows & Google and all other similar programs created by private companies since the Digital Age began. Barely a decade later and the newly enacted biblical theocracy had mandated that the entire American filing system shared by the government, army, web, schools, public libraries and private book stores, be changed into the religious insanity that Lucas now saw in front of him.

On top of everything else, there was precious rhyme or reason in how the ecclesiastes had rebuilt the technology trees, and attributing the so-called 'moral value' on each item was rather blatantly done by a committee of worshipers chosen for their proven obedience to the church, not their erudition. All of that religious inanity could be dealt with after some adaptation into the culture, but it wasn't the real problem.

The mathematical system they based everything on was a weird, hard to get idiocy; Base 1-7-17.

There was no logical basis for such a system, and no mathematician worth his diploma could ever justify such an idiocy in public. Lucas should know, given the that he did have such advanced math
diploma himself.

How do you create a 'logical/formal' search algorithm inside an operating system that was programmed on math more suited to a Harry Potter or Artemis Fowl story, and running proprietary apps coded the same way, to manage a filing system even stoned-out drunkards would consider off-kilter?

"Whelp... Such is my life..." the 11 year old mused in mild annoyance as he got off the plush wheeled chair to stretch all his limbs and spine to avoid getting sedentarity cramps. After 5 minutes of light stretches, he smirked at the wall mounted clock and grabbed his large thermal mug to go for a refill. His mind needed fuel to work properly therefore coffee was in order. As he'd finished his lunch passed 3 o'clock in the afternoon, he wasn't feeling the need for a solid dinner right away, and honestly, once he got into the guts of the WMG – OS all thoughts of food would leave him. Anything about sleep too, if he were to be realistic.

"Note to self," the boy thought aloud as he strolled to the level's executive cafeteria, "Make certain to program my cellphone with an alarm near 22:00pm to remind me to eat a solid meal then get some sleep in my own room instead of crashing on the manager's waiting room couch."

Sneering in deep disdain at the sight of the cheaply designed, and poorly assembled, distributing machines that composed the entirety of the cafeteria's service counter, Lucas also grumbled that he needed to have this room stocked with better provisions. He wanted to use this floor as his personal workshop & office because it had some of the best Internex access in the entire compound, next to the newly built command belvedere or the security offices. Those two places and the garage edifice had good network & web signals, but far too much people & activity going on for him to be able to concentrate fully on his screens, especially once he got into programming apps or security passes.

Sighing in contentment at the smell of freshly brewed coffee, some vanilla cappuccino lookalike the machine made all in one go, the child took the time to mentally order his jobs list as he rifled through the 'vending' machines for a solid snack, just to not have only liquid sloshing in hid gut. Thankfully, the machines here were not for the open public, they didn't take cash or a credit card, rather they processed the employee badges with a point system, and automatically managed the inventory. The moment Lucas had accessed the morgue director's office computer with the illegal codes he found, he had been able to remotely reprogram the machines to give out anything to anyone without needing a badge swipe, then rerouted the inventory updates to the Assembly's newly created quarter-masters' department. They restocked the main restaurant and cafeterias around the complex as well as all the public bathrooms, so they just needed for YL-18 to send them an email to inform them this sector was active, then they would see to everything else.

It really was nice to not do everything all by himself, and having competent staff was truly a charm.

Now, what did it say about the multiverse that he had to assemble an army of 'himself' to finally have that group of competent workers? Food for thought, just like his precious warm black gold in a mug. And, honestly, deep philosophy wasn't something that he needed to spend any real time or effort on for now. Taking a packet of oatmeal cookies, he opened the aluminum foil to give it a doubtful sniff, but found it had been sealed under vacuum so the food inside never rotted. Then again, by the list of ingredients written on the packet, there may be more preservatives and cellulose binding agent than cookie dough in this thing than was healthy, even for a single snack. Shrugging off his concerns, the boy took a small bite just to taste and found it was drab but edible, especially if washed down with warm, java goodness.

{ SQ } --- { Ah, that's better } --- { SQ }
Returning back to his multiple screens, the boy hummed a slow Viennese tune as he began the virtual equivalent of bushwhacking his way through the forest of useless apps and semi-hidden games or films the manager had stashed on his console. After yet another hour of time wasted at cleaning up the mess of another idiot, Lucas finally managed to pare down the system's useless processes enough to start identifying then neutralizing those routines or phantom apps belonging uniquely to the WMG's religious surveillance unit.

As he worked, concentrating deeply on the sanitarium's intranet, the child was never bothered by phone calls, emails or psychic contacts. It took almost four hours, until he needed to find a washroom, for him to remember to check his custom messaging app for anything his relatives might have tried to send. Strangely enough, nobody had tried any sort of contact at all, and it was almost time for his alarm to sound, calling him to a late dinner. After finishing in the bathroom, he decided to simply reset his dinner alarm to later, towards midnight, as he was certain a breakthrough was near, albeit a small one.

Boy was he wrong.

After digging around the World Management Grid's applications for another hour, he finally saw something that made him pay attention to the way the OS pages displayed on the screens seemed to flicker every now & then, on a rather rhythmic frequency. Using his smartphone, he filmed a panoramic view of the entire setup, then replayed the film in slow speed. Yes, the monitors were in fact cycling through 'something' every 59th second of every minute on the clock. But it wasn't some religious icons or alien calligraphy as they had discovered elsewhere when they had started to purge the sanitarium's livable areas. This was different.

It took two more hours, until he was well passed 01:00am, to finally find what was really going on in this badly put-together mess of a system. It was a user shell. To the child's everlasting relief, the manager's console was programmed differently than he had initially perceived. For everybody else, especially amateur coders without a government-vetted CPU, they would see the mishmash code that seemed built on Base 1-7-17, as Lucas had found in his first hacking forays. But it was a lie. Like the old MS-DOS & Windows 1 combo of 1985, what the users saw and interfaced with was just a floating shell formatted to be appealing for the ecclesiastes and their followers. The actual WMG operating system was a completely different layer, buried deeply underneath, and specifically hard to detect or access without a governmental terminal that had special Tier-3 Mil-Web access built into the circuit boards.

The WMG was coded on good old Binary, just as all the computers Lucas had learned on.

The shell was just a decorative window that served to discourage civilians from digging too deeply into how the system was organized, making it appear as if you needed a diploma in theology alongside high-tech formation to understand the inner workings of the programming. In reality, all you really needed to access the real workable portion of the OS was to open what was called the 'DOS console CONFIG' module in the control panel where all the user parameters were chosen, then type in a security code which the last manager of the morgue had been kind enough to write in his illegal folios. The damned twit hadn't said where to input this particular code though, probably to have a small bit of safety in case his writings were discovered by a true loyalist who would denounce him.

Now that Lucas had unlocked the pathway to the core Binary code of the WMG, he was able to backtrack inside the default applications pre-installed with the official WMG's american OS, thus figuring out quickly that they were also just religiously themed window dressing floating atop
standard Binary coding. The boy would give them points for keeping up their single-minded thematic scheme, but not for making anything easier to configure or synchronize. Truthfully, with so many small programs that were eating up so much processing power, RAM buffer capacity and bandwidth in the main-board buses, it was a near miracle that anything could work together at all, let alone have any ways for a maintenance tech to service the system when it did crash.

And boy did it crash often!

The ecclesiastes needed their little peons to be constantly immersed in religious dogma, iconography and promotional materials, or else the brainwashing would undo with little effort from anyone. So, to insure that the broadcasts always reached everybody at all places, all the time, they had demanded that industrial production standards be changed. By governmental laws, in order to have the right not only to sell to the government or army but to civilians as well, all companies needed to receive a church sold 'Purification Certificate' or else they lost everything in the company's name, including buildings, patents, royalties, etc... In other words, the churches told giants like Microsoft, Apple, IBM, Acer, ComCast and all other purveyors of consumer technology that they needed to create a circuit board with six independent processors that each had a clock, battery, micro antennae and hard wire bus directly to the built-on network cable connector. These new circuits were supposed to keep on receiving and displaying on screen the religious & governmental propaganda, even if five of the chipsets burned out, or the other parts of the CPU assembly had fatal defects that usually resulted in an automated shut-down of the workstation.

However, making those 6 processors so completely independent, yet able to work together on the same task without the user being aware of just how schizophrenic the machinery was, was not by any means an easy task, even for large teams of conceptors. Between running the actual WMG-OS, maintaining the illusionary shell at the same time, plus juggling the horde of bi-cephalic apps, then adding all the user's data processing across multiple programs meant that you had several crashes per week on each machine. In fact, Younger Lucas #18 managed to access the maintenance logs for the morgue manager's console to study the device's performance records.

"Oh m'ah gawd in a fickin' tree!" slowly whispered the boy, dumbstruck at the sheer number of crashes and system reboots the workstation had to do each week it was active. Even during the decades nobody used the office and all the apps were closed, the system still found ways to commit fatal errors that led to 'blue screen' conditions and an automated reboot of the entire console. No matter how many chipsets they plugged on the circuit panel, the basic conception of the hardware was clearly deficitary, and the program code was just as badly made.

No wonder they put so much religion in these things! You had to be a religious zealot to believe that something so obviously designed by nutcases could ever work enough to anchor your national development to it. That, and nothing short of low rituals involving blood sacrifices would ever get this steaming heap of manure anywhere close to working order. It explained why they built the Grid's server nodes in old neighborhood churches; the users had needed all the miracles they could find to get anything done on this shoddy network.

{ SQ } --- { Ugly sleep } --- { SQ } ---

Wednesday February 13th of 2301 – 04:17am

Lucas passed a hand roughly through his mop of long blond hair as he yawned widely. Blinking his eyes to get rid of the sleepy feeling, he ended growling in aggressive contempt at the unstable barge of bitch-crap that they were trying to pass-off as a working planetary Internex. Some idiot had obviously been paid to lie in public about the qualities & performances of the thing, as even back in 2015 the average user would have been outraged at the sheer mess of conflicts and short-
circuits that happened all the time.

There was almost no reliability whatsoever to be found in between countries' communications, even amongst the dregs of the NATO alliance. Each country on Earth had done like China; they built around their population a cybernetic citadel with armed towers that kept out the 'barbarians' and their 'heathen' culture. This meant that contacts between universities for medical research crawled along at the rhythm of the automated censorship programs, which all kept panicking at every word referring to body functions, sex, hormones, gender or worse, concepts like patient's rights & confidentiality, free treatments for the poor, and limiting the influence of politos in the standardization of medical processes. Contacts for other types of research like engineering, architecture and industrial electronics was slowed to almost total idle, stagnating dangerously in many countries. Financial transactions were kept alive by the World Bank for a few more decades, but eventually even that venerable institution was scuttled by paranoid religious mugwumps that pined after total dominion of their plebes.

It therefore becomes quite obvious, even for an amateur, that when American or European countries cried foul about being kept out of 'closed' territories immorally, they really meant that their christian missionaries were being defeated in cyberspace just as they were being bounced away at physical border crossings. For decades, the USA's churchmen had used the anonymous depths of the dark web to finance secret basement chapels, emailing free written materials for the religious homeschooling of 'wildlings' in those countries that were not primarily white skinned, or didn't kneel before the Vatican or Washington DC. Now that the equilibrium of technological supremacy had shifted in favor of those seeking to destroy, or severely limit, all religious influence, be it foreign or local, well now the white-power ecclesiastes were bitching up a storm of moral outrage. That is what led to the US government, through the church-whores in Congress, to pass several laws that obliged the national Intelligence agencies and the Army's Signals & Comms branch to assist any christian church that asked for help in bypassing foreign cyber borders. The elected fools told the soldiers to illegally push through sovereign soil the 'salvation' dogma & self-styled moral authority of the churchmen, or see themselves demoted then kicked out as being 'anti-American' or 'anti-Jesus'. Not surprisingly, several countries retaliated by financing fascist militias, crime gangs and terrorist cells on US soil in a manner so blatant that it was almost as open as when the French helped the USA against Britain during the Independence War.

Shaking his head in complete disgust at the situation in front of his tired eyes, the young child gripped under his breath as he typed away a set of orders into the WMG-OS maintenance tab to see if there wasn't a lower layer of the network that could be accessed. Normally, in cybernetics, the closer to the BIOS of the circuit boards you were, the less interference from the OS shell or scrappy signals from user apps you had to endure. If Lucas could get down deep enough through the signals & codes, he could maybe access or initialize a sub-layer where all the religiously mandated brainwashing crud wasn't present, therefore the speed, accuracy and reliability of the data streams would no longer be as hazardous as hang-gliding through a tornado.

--- ALARM --- ALARM --- ALARM ---

Jolting awake in the plush director's chair, Lucas looked around in a panic, 12 inch long dagger in his left hand while the right hand was palping around his waist for the holster with his small pistol. Blinking owlishly at the room around him, he saw he was still in the morgue manager's office but things had changed weirdly.

There were cobwebs dangling from the ceiling and furniture, and a thin layer of dust had gathered over everything in sight. In fact, he seemed to have spider webs in his hair and around his upper torso as something very soft was tickling his bare skin. He used his free right hand to rub off the offending silk strands, noting how grey they were. OLD webbing, then. But just how old could it
be, since he had been asleep but woke up healthy as ever? If he'd been asleep so long to have webs made then age until discolored, then by all logic his body should have starved to death, or at least become quite ill.

Walking around the room, he saw that there no footprints in the dust covered carpet. The windows didn't open but hadn't been forced out or damaged. The office door was closed, but he couldn't remember whether he'd shut it when he returned from his last bathroom break & coffee refill stroll. The ceiling's cheap canister lights and the desktop glass lamp were both turned off, but again he had no memories of whether he had actually lit them while he was working. Often enough, when he was deep diving the web, the simple glow from the monitors was enough for him to move around safely, eat, drink or write down his notes, so it was probable that he had never activated the lights.

Opening the door, he walked outside, only to witness the continuity of the scene; dangling cobwebs, dust everywhere and all lights or computers turned off. Tapping the magical PAL-analog in his shirt pocket, the child called out "YL-18 to Belvedere. YL-18 to Belvedere. Come in, over." He peered outside the window to look over the sector of the hospital compound in this angle, confirming it was daytime, no rain or storm in progress, and no attackers in sight either.

Getting no response, he tried something else; "This is Younger Lucas #18, calling the security office and patrols. Something's wrong with Belvedere station. I'm inbound in 15 minutes. Send up a team for back-up, over."

Still getting no response on any channel, the boy pulled out his smartphone to verify if the mechanical airwaves were cooperating better, but stopped cold when he saw that there was no signal. No signal AT ALL. The bloody cell towers were no longer active, not for as far as the mobile device could reach to tag a system. No cell, no satellite, no wi-fi, no Blue Tooth, no nothing at all.

The communications grid was out of service in all of Florida, it seemed.

Passing by the executive cafeteria, he swore aloud as he saw that the vending machines were all dark, the processors offline and the food partially rotten inside the containers. Taking a chance, he turned on the hot water tap on the small sink used by workers to rinse their personal mug or utensils after a meal. The water that came out was completely cold and brown with sediment from having lain still in the pipes for months, maybe years. This confirmed for him the level of shutdown he faced. It wasn't just an accidental tripping of a breaker inside the morgue building. He knew for a fact that all the sanitarium's potable water was purified and heated in a central machinery hub then pushed across the compound. It was the same hub that served boiling water for the radiant heating systems built into the cement floors of each building, and the secondary system of water radiators placed next to each outside window. The old early 1900's method had been reviewed and given a jolt of modernity. The radiators were slim coils of copper-alloy encased in decorative cast-iron cabinets but the water pipes were high-strength thermoplastics coated in insulation foam then wrapped in isotherm kevlar weave. On top of three sets of hot water plumbing to service across the complex, the hub also had five massive diesel GE 2Mw generators to supply emergency electricity with enough fuel in the bunker to last for a month in case of massive floods or swamp fires.

No hot water, power or comms meant that the central hub was either compromised or shut down willingly.

Changing course from the main admin tower he had thought to go, Lucas aimed instead for the hub, intent on reactivating the survival systems to give himself a chance at enduring through
whatever had happened to leave him alone and bereft yet again. As he walked out of the morgue to
cross the terrain towards the garage edifice and utilities hub, he could see clearly just how empty of
humans, animals, or even plants, the entire fortified compound had become. All visible vegetation
was colored rust-brown, clearly dead & rotten which he could have told, even if he had never
learned to distinguish edible matter from filth when he was being taught survival by Izuku Shu and
George Brown-Fowl-In-The-Bushes. There were no animals in sight, he couldn't hear any noises,
and he saw no bones as he walked to the garage sector. All traces of human inhabitation that had
occurred in the weeks since he had been lodging here were gone. All traces that nearly 300 humans
had lived together in this hospital for the last month or so were undone, as if nobody had ever
woken from the crypt to walk, eat, talk and live in these halls.

He reached the garage edifice only to hit himself on thick armored doors that wouldn't budge. The
vehicle doors were completely motorized. Electric motors controlled by computers, neither of
which had any electricity to power them. Walking around, the boy knew there was a personnel
access that led straight into a lobby composed of a waiting room, management counter, food
machines & public bathrooms. Those doors were small, manually moved panels, and at worse it
was just thin glass that could be broken easily enough. He found the personnel lobby and promptly
saw up a storm. The steel storm shutters were closed over the fragile valve, making them almost
as armored as the vehicle bay roll-up doors. Squinting at the shutters, Lucas saw they were made
of two vertical slabs of steel, an inch thick, with a thick, heavy mechanical lock in the seam
between them. Okay then, this he could handle. Taking out his set of lock-picks, he squatted
besides the protected doorway to work on the lock. It took him a painfully long twenty minutes
but, eventually, the lock's tumblers aligned correctly enough to give a loud 'thunk' and let the
cylinder pivot to the open position. With the shutters opened and pulled back, all Lucas had to do
was take out the ring of master keys he had made in the security office the second day he had been
in the dimension, find the garage key and let himself in. Glaring at his set, the boy realized he had
never thought to make copies of the storm shutter keys because he believed he would never be
cought out in weather bad enough for the protections to unfold and lock him outside. Fool that he
was, he learned his lesson and would promptly get the missing keys as soon as he was finished
here.

Walking across the vehicle bay of the garage was an emotionally draining experience for the lonely
child. He had always been very sociable, needing human contact even when he tetched about
wanting to be alone to finish his work. Finding so much family alive had been a balm on his heart,
healing injuries he had never realized he was carrying around ever since George and Vratsina had
died. Now, he was alone again, abandoned again, and it sucked a bloody load of balls, and the
wrinkled sacks they came in.

Sighing deeply to steady himself, Lucas made a short detour to enter the only 8-wheel WMG patrol
truck that remained in the workshop, apparently functional but abandoned just like him. The huge
white hull was covered by a layer of dirty dust, thick enough to discolor the stark white it usually
showed. The windows were grimy, and the internal sun-curtains had been pulled so he couldn't see
inside. Trying the door on the driver's side, he lucked out as it was unlocked. Unfortunately, the
poor child only needed to open the door to see what awaited inside. The vehicle had been stripped
clean. The tool cases, weapons cases, electronics consoles & parts, survival rations & med-kit,
everything had been taken out in an orderly manner when the people left.

Letting the truck's door hang open uselessly, Lucas sat on the built-in steel steps that allowed to
climb into the truck from the low ground level. Hanging his head in despair, the young boy was
barely aware that the wet splotches on the skin of his hands were warm tears leaking from his face.
Closing his flint-blue eyes so he could push away the cruel world that had dumped him like trash
again, he tried desperately to anchor his thoughts to the most important items he needed to bolster
his flagging morale against the tidal-wave of depression.
* He was alive when everything else in sight was dead & rotten.

* He had no electricity but knew full well how to survive off-grid anyways.

* He had no computers or comms but that also meant that Humania/WMG was offline so no killer drones were inbound to eradicate or convert him.

* If every living organism had degraded during his 'sleep', then at least dehydrated or canned food should have endured far longer, and much better, since mold spores would also have died out, thus safekeeping those items.

* He was all alone, but that meant no human enemies and no animal predators to fend off, so he was safe.

* The only real threats he could perceive were contamination from the rotten vegetation if he cut himself or his immune system became compromised enough for the spores to take hold inside his organs.

* The hardest threat to fight off would be loneliness, as he knew from being trained at interrogation techniques by his mentors, that a few weeks of isolation will break any mind, no matter the person's erudition, training or character, even if entertainments like books, TV or video games are available.

Loneliness slowly breaks a person's will, then kills their mind, then they commit suicide.

He would need to find ways to entertain himself quickly, and ways to keep his powerful brain from running dry of things to process. He would need to create himself a schedule with tasks, physical labor and chores to fill the empty void of passing days, until he could figure out a way to change this damned mess.

"Fuck it all to Hell and back! Just how is it that everybody left without waking me up? How did they all pack up all the usable stuff and leave without causing enough racket to wake the dead? The trucks alone would have been enough mechanical movement, vibrations and noises to wake me up, given how stressed this entire damned place makes me. And why is it nobody bothered to try to find me, to warn me of what was happening?"

An answer came from the stark emptiness of the vehicle bay, clear as the bleak daylight itself.

"Because you never mattered to them!" a strong voice echoed across the barren garage. In a burst of golden light that almost burned the boy's tired eyes, a tall white skinned man with golden hair & beard, lightning blue eyes, ivory white teeth and garbed in wide flowing white robes appeared. The humanoid literally manifested out of total emptiness, like a sudden wind across an open plain.

Lucas blinked his eyes twice before snorting in disdain at what was obviously some sort of hallucination induced by head trauma, drugs, spells or just plain old mental fatigue. Yeah, that's right. He was just having a good old fashioned nightmare about being abandoned, and now he was imagining some mystical savior figure to pull him out of his misery. No biggie.

Sighing in utter exhaustion, the 11 year old asked "And who might you be? The Archangel Moroni?" he queried with a prominently displayed sneer of contempt. "Is this some sort of Mormon proselytism video? Cuz I could swear I told everybody I wasn't religious. Besides, I just learned recently about magic and True Gods, which Moroni isn't. So, who the ever loving fucks are you? And why should I care, anyways?"

The man walked towards Lucas until he stood five feet away, his pure white vestments slightly
moving along invisible winds that nobody felt, his head wrapped in a golden halo of pure light. He looked incredibly good for a thirty-something human male, although he was very obviously some idealized version of a north European whose ancestors had never mixed with anything else. The apparition smiled in a way that set his teeth ablaze with alabaster glow, lighting up the gloomy cavernous garage as if all the electrical lights had been triggered all at once.

Striking a pose of glory and exaltation, the apparition exclaimed "I am Jesus, the Lord God, the Redemptor of sins, and your personal Savior, if you but accept me inside your wayward juvenile soul!"

Putting his face into his hands, the boy was thankful that he was already sitting or else he'd fall to the cement floor like dead weight. As it were, he still might just abandon his grip on wakefulness and try to sleep his way through this entire clusterfuckery. Man, wasn't his life weird enough as it is without adding this?

"And how exactly am I supposed to believe this?" asked the forlorn boy. "Every proof I have seen shows that you don't exist."

Smiling in utter condescension, the man replied in a voice that oozed disdain "You are only 11 short, miserable years old. You are a CHILD, beholden unto the adults of the world. You are under authority, as per the Law of the Christian compact, not autonomous or independent, regardless of what you are defective enough to believe."

At this, Lucas stood from the truck's built-on stairs, stretching his arms, shoulders and neck in preparation for a fight or hard run, whichever became necessary. Gazing lazily at the gold light shrouded face of the supposed divinity, the child replied in a passive-aggressive tone "I'm Jewish descended. My people killed you off once, I'm pretty sure I can manage it a second time. As for being 'wayward', that's a bald lie on your part; I know full well where I am, and what my destination is. And you won't get my soul. If I ever need salvation, I'll do it myself, just like I always pull myself out of anything on my own. Nobody ever saved me from anything, even though I had a few tutors that have my gratitude." chuckling nastily, the child added "Since all those teachers I loved are all dead already, you don't need to bother trying to use their names to manipulate me. They're well beyond your reach, fraudster."

"But I am Jesus, the Lord God! How can you DARE think anything is beyond my reach?" the male bellowed in such way that his voice echoed against the cement walls back at them. "Truly you are dispirited, my child! No wonder I was attracted to this desolate place!" The blazing white figure reached out his right hand to the child, trying to lure him into his grip with his supposedly solicitous platitudes "Come to me! Accept me willingly into your heart, mind and soul that I may heal your broken Faith in Heaven's Holy Guides! Once I hold your hand, you shall know the ecstasy of obedience and submissiveness to the creed promulgated by the Men of the Christian Christ!"

Lucas smiled widely, every instinct of combativeness he'd been taught by Izuku Shu, George Brown-Fowl-in-the-Bushes and Vratsina Ityolisk in their short time together, becoming active and lethal. Putting the left hand with the dagger in front of himself, the boy found the holster with his hatchet on the right side and brought that out too. Now armed with solid sharp steel, the young child openly sneered at the self-styled divinity.

"You're a fake! I call bullshit! There is no Jesus! All christianity is a fucking hoax, and you just proved it with your own words, fucktard!" Making a wicked smiled that showed all his teeth, snarling at the apparition, Lucas commanded in a shout "GET OUT of my damned head, illusion! I know what you are! You're the bloody Christian Spiritual Accompaniment agency's spyware &
conversion program! Well, you won't get a piece of me, even if you win the whole damned war! I'll destroy my own soul before I give in to you!"

The image of the fake divinity shimmered, changing into that of the nordic female the 33 year old had spoken about when he had explained how the World Management Grid presented its avatar. The image's moonstone toned skin, luminous golden hair cascading down to the middle of her back, lightning blue eyes and aristocratic facial features perfectly matched what his oldest sibling had described during that first evening together.

"How do you know it is the central system accessing your mind?" asked the avatar in a perfectly toneless, genderless and noninflected voice. The question was clearly intelligible, but the 'thing' speaking it was missing several key features to make it believable that Humania was reactivated in any part.

Smirking nastily, the armed boy replied "Let's be coy, here. We're enemies, so I have no obligation to give you anything but pain worse than what you plan to subject me to, and then some more on top. But now that you've confirmed for me that you are indeed simply a cyber-tech fraud being pumped right into my mind, getting you out will be easy enough. After all, programs have inputs, outputs, databases, image & sound files, and so forth." Wagging his finger chidingly at the illusionary invader, Lucas affirmed blithely "You are not going to enjoy what happens next. But then again, you mind-raped me so I think it's fair come-back for that little faux pas. Going inside somebody's personal space without an invite is a big no-no, and you should know that already, given that you're supposedly a law-keeping program. Like burglary or vandalism, in fact."

The female avatar tried to walk closer to the child to touch him with her outstretched index finger but hit a pink colored energy shield, shaped like a bell jar, that suddenly appeared around her intended target. She tried to push her digit through the obstruction only to withdraw when the first phalange of the finger disintegrated then refused to regenerate, no matter what she tried. He programming was completely unable to comprehend the situation, as it had never encountered anything that could resist penetration and viral overtake by her command routines.

Concentrating strongly on what he wanted to achieve, Lucas thought about the floating 'Vid-Win' that several of his spiritual siblings seemed to use without real efforts. Whelming his considerable willpower, the budding mafia lord tried to access those special psionics Virtuals talents that supposedly awaited inside his mind.

To the great surprise of the WMG avatar, a flicker of energy occurred inside the pink bubble, next to the child's left side. The flicker stabilized, becoming a flat rectangular image similar to a computer monitor. On the screen, text began to scroll, with the image splitting vertically into several columns that indicated programming code in three languages, Binary equivalence, and the last column had many colors that showed which apps or processes were active, paused, idle, or faulty.

Placing his left hand on the floating screen, Lucas sneered at the machine-made humanoid, declaring "You should have staid in your own little box. Now that I'm aware you exist, I'll move all of Creation to destroy everything you represent or try to keep active. Screw you, procreate of a christian church's man-whore! I know how to deal with priests and their slaves when I find them!"

Before the computer generated entity could respond, a burst of light emitted from the boy's hand, converting to text, icons and pictographs when it touched the 'Vid-Win', instantly affecting the climate, building, and all of reality inside the synthetic mindscape. Including the artificial human that began to pixelize, then destabilize until her particles were floating away on the photonic winds, never to coalesce inside his mind again.
With one last burst of mental commands to the cyberscape, Lucas overrode all the processes and apps that were being employed by the WMG to keep his organic body unconscious, triggering his own wake-up reflex without an adrenaline jolt or disorientation. It was a bit disconcerting, as he saw himself in both the fake garage building and sitting in the morgue manager's chair at the same time for about 2 seconds before material reality took over completely.

{ SQ } --- { On the wrong side of the bed } --- { SQ }

06:01am

Standing up from the wheeled swivel chair in a towering rage, the 11 year old child glared at the clock above the door, reading the time as somewhere around 06:00am on the same morning as he had accidentally fallen asleep. He had been so concentrated on his hacking job that he never realized just how tired he had become, then the tiredness had made his forget that the office may not be as secured or sanitized as the parts of the complex being used by the Assembly for common projects.

He'd made a stupid beginner's mistake, and it almost cost him his sanity, freedom and life.

Above all else, it could have cost the rest of his family the same or worse, if the Grid had managed to get a hold of his mind enough to start understanding what went wrong and how. Although, given that Humania had supposedly become 'sentient' and understood her part in the downfall of humanity, it was also possible that the system would have felt guilt and liberated him as well. Possible, but not very probable, not if controlling him created a set of variations in key variables that could alter the fundamental processes by which human life was lived and managed. Something that, with his experiences to date, was actually a possibility more than he liked to compute.

Kicking the fake-wood desk in anger, the fuming kid shut down the CPU's, disconnected his workstation and packed every piece of work product he had done into his satchel for safekeeping right at hand. On a hunch, he used colored Post-It! stickers to tag the tablets, chair, desk and write a small message about what had happened in the room, in case somebody other than himself came in for a stroll. He didn't want the bloody program to be reactivated by accident only to start spawning cyber-zombies at them with abandon.

Now that everything was clean, ordered and in his bag for transport, the boy closed and locked the door then went to the main restaurant for an early breakfast. He would eat a small, short meal before plunking down for a truly restful sleep in his chosen bed, in a room that was completely safe. He could explain what happened to the group later on. At dinner would be soon enough. Probably. If he woke up by then.

Delvings into Science, Mysticism and Experimental Technologies

(MacGyver – 1985 opening theme)

Wednesday February 13th of 2301 – 08:00am
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche, Florida (USA)
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)

Being one of the most mathematically inclined members of the Assembly had some serious
drawbacks, the 19 year old Jonny Quest mentally griped as he munched on his tepid breakfast, a trio of tablets spread in front of him so he could work as the food went in. In some convoluted manner he still could not explain, he'd been drafted by the group to serve as coordinator of their effort to find, scan, evaluate and selectively grab their missing siblings from the multiple realities whence they lived. Now don't get him wrong, he was all for the idea as it made the most sense in terms of efforts, resources and results for their common survival plans. But did it have to be him? And right away this very morning?

Sheeesh, some people were pushy...

The young male was mumbling foully about the questionable good sense of his relatives around a mouthful of syrupy waffle dough when two of his younger 'self' sat at his table with their own meals and tech tools to commiserate their shared burdens. Apparently, the Assembly had decided, in its vast wisdom, that the 'Lucas', 'Jonny' and 'Alan' of the group were the best suited for crunching the starting mathematical workload that would serve as rough draft for the specialists in teleportation & gates to finalize the targeting tables. So, there was a sudden influx of blond boys swarming around his table, each bearing food and tech enough to last through the entire damned day, and probably into the night if nobody stopped them to sleep at some point.

How was that different from their other days?

This was becoming repetitive, in his humble opinion.

The eldest Jonny griped goodnaturedly as he was poked & jibed at by the crowd as they settled in for a very arduous day of processing various equations. Firstly, they had to learn what exactly was doing the actual 'sensing' part of the process, and what variables were being scanned for. After that, they had to understand each detectable variable as an autonomous phenomenon, with its own matter, energy, rules and cycles. Once each machinery part, program, variable and decisional criteria had been retro-engineered, then the work group would be able to finally start moving forwards with trying to refine the existing parameters, and then establish new variables and sensing systems to further refine the discrimination & targeting algorithms.

Easy-peasy for a bunch of kids, most of whom never got a high school diploma.

Okay, they had each gotten much better qualifications than HS diplomas through homeschooling and remote-learning programs. In fact, the few living 'Alan' that joined the group this morning had some pretty solidly defined opinions on what sensing apparatus should be made of, and why it should be compounded into several clusters instead of being all inside a single aggregated module. Then a couple of the youngest 'Lucas' joined the mess of yapping blondness so everything went to Hells and back when they started talking about interference from 'obtuse angles' and 'dimensional curtain' refraction quotients that both needed taken into account. Then the scurrilous traitors that were his own younger selves added their two cents' worth by piping up about Native Americans contacting weird aliens, some Inca undead, and the strange cybernetic phenomenon that sometimes struck the QuestWorld system when they were navigating between networks outside of QEI purview.

A spontaneous sub-group gathered around one of the teenaged 'Alan' began discussing the utility of adding Velocium alloy components into the scanners to detect Velocion particles, thus allowing the users to better understand the movements, orientation, and gravity fluxes around the objects targeted for retrieval. This led to a discussion of upgrading all chipsets & circuitry with Velocium to increase the raw processing speed of all the wires and cables implicated in computing & networking. This immediately led another 'Alan' to pull out the tech sensus the Assembly had done to point out the crystalline and synthetic DNA bio-tech chips invented by Lorna Labarre Jenkins to
create the Animus Unificat. If they were about to do an overhaul of how the basic molecular structure of CPU's and RAM chips were done, they might as well go for it all the way.

At the same time, a secondary group centered around a teenaged 'Lucas' began to discuss converting what they saw as an entirely deficient computer network over to mathematics Base 3-13-39 to integrate fully the new languages, drawings, schematics, mechanical parts, bio-neural parts, and mystical elements of the system. Then, they could convert & recompile the BIOS, OS, application and all databases by using the latest version of Wollon 10th generation programming language. They would complete the hardware rebuild by converting all the consoles to gaseous isomorphic displays with a HoloWarp shroud around each podium. Then, the group spoke of adding a brand new complex of linked neuroplexic chairs to create a psychotronic conclave to manage the machines and Time-Gate's targeting.

By rebuilding the programming code from Binary base into Trinary base, then converting all from regular C++ and other systems over to Wollon-10 which was exclusive, the 'Lucas' wanted to essentially render that sector of the network unreachable by the WMG's religious conversion & domination programs. Furthermore, it would make any hacking, including by living people, extremely hard to accomplish since they would be fighting through multiple degrees of novelty and non-standard practices.

Two of the older Jonny Quest had managed to copy safely an archive of their father's secret Time-Gate project, code-named 'Rachel' after his dead wife. They had taken to carrying this block of tech in a dimensional pocket that was Blood-locked and integrated into a Storage Seal tattooed on their left calf, just in case. This gave the Assembly an instant leg-up (pun intended) on starting the retro-engineering as they now had something reliable to compare the WMG's creation with. Benton Quest had been quite OCD while he compiled his list of variables, integrating copious amounts of virtual Post-It! tags & blurbs all over the data charts. Everybody was ecstatic as it showed that over 75% of their basic job had already been processed for them by the old guy. Anything else they needed to comprehend the Time-Gate could probably be derived from its lesser cousin, CIRPA's portal machine.

By common accord, and because it was the logical sequence of actions, the swarm of technobabbling boys decided to grab a couple of the more magically inclined members to start writing them translation tables for a runic language called 'Elongated Graphay' which was supposedly the most widely used magical script & tongue when traveling around the vastness of the River Styx demi-plane or the Phlogiston connective plane. One 'Lucas' had posited quite logically that they needed to establish a basis for translating tech/psionic, and also tech/magyck for the finished machinery to be fully enabled. As many of their siblings had mystical powers that were often asleep inside of them, that might explain why the system in its configuration could not always spot the proper person or recover them without accidents. This meant that they had to finish the halfway done interlink between circuitry and organic mind, then complete the triangular relation by connecting magical programming, which needed to be derived from scriptural spells to work.

So, the massive work-flow order became, by themes;

Linguistics & math compilation

* Compile a preliminary mystical English Versus Elongated Graphay translation chart
* Integrate musical notations & sounds
* Integrate Binary (Base 2-8-16)
* Integrate Trinary (Base 3-13-39)
* Add traditional arithmantic notations, principles & rules
* Add Transmutation Sciences, mathematics, rules & formulaic script
* Add Figures of Power, dimensiograms, temporigrams and astral charts
* Compile & arbitrate new linguistics for written, spoken, musical, gestural & programming
* Re-compilation of Wollon-10th (neuroplexic) programming language into Wollon 11th (neuroplexic)
* Make compatible with Wolenczak Universal Vocoder to use as translator & vo/com
* Add Quest cetacean vocoder database to translation matrix
* Integrate new math/language/scriptural to known translation spells & Legendex Archive

The Assembly decided to name the new system of spoken, written, sung and gestural language with its appended mathematics, drawings, schematics & charts: "Labarre Symbography" in honor of the Family that had originated all of theirs, then brought them together again. They needed something to call their work product other than 'Grammatical Convention #7' or worse, 'Committee report #11'. Nobody wanted to have to refer to bureaucractic nightmares like those in the multiple daily conversations to come when they developed their sciences, technologies and know-how farther.

Material sciences compilation

* Establish aggregated Table of Elements, including alien & mystical concepts from Legendex
* Create/obtain exemplars of new particles/molecules/energies
* Calibrate existing sensors to find limits & deficiencies
* Attempt to create prototype sensors; 3 tries per item to be scanned then pass to next item
* Convert new Table of Elements, databases & notations to Labarre Symbography
* Compile into Legendex Archive for immediate usage during other projects

After looking at the work needed just to put together the new common work language, math and technical drawing conventions they needed to develop hybrid sciences & tech devices, the young man in charge of the project had never been so happy for the existence of centralized computers & automation. They would never manage to produce anything in reasonable time if they didn't have the servers and tablets to help along the raw data crunching.

Now, add to that already huge mess all the new elements & energies they had to tabulate and codify, and the oldest Jonny Quest was almost at the point of crying his eyes out. But that was only the most basic preliminaries of the real job to be accomplished by their limited population. Then, they would still have to merge all the new technology items from their families or companies with those of this reality's year 2300, plus all the alien biology & tech they encountered or had archives about, and finally add & merge all the mystical elements, plants, creatures, spells & technomagic the Assembly members had any experience or records of.

The entire workload he anticipated was such a massive, herculean job that it had to be broken down further into smaller blocks to spread between teams to stay manageable, but even those chunks were still titanesque enterprises in their own area of expertise for such a minute group of people. Even with magic, the psionic conclave thingie they used and the WMG's time-machine, Jonny really wasn't able to figure out how exactly it was all going to happen in any reasonable or usable time frame. They did have to return to their own home realities & epochs at some point. Yes, they
would (eventually) bring the missing members & friends of the Assembly into this reality to heal, educate and equip them to survive before everybody went their way. But if the Youngest Lucas #18 had given them any indication to date about his temperament, the process would not be that simple, nor that limited.

Sighing deeply, the young adult turned his mind to the task of determining and ordering WHAT actually had to be done by the teams in each sector of technology, biology, psychology, psionics and magic to begin the process of concatenating & fusing all these disparate concepts, items, parts, chunks and gizmos into what could look passably close to usable tools.

"Aaaahhh! Why me?" he whined piteously. Strangely enough, all the others just laughed at him.

The new "Psychotronic" devices chipset & firmware standards

*** Based on; Wollon-11th for all programs & coding
*** Based on; Labarre Symbography & Wolenczak Universal Vocoder
* Integrate Jenkins crystalline chipset innovations
* Integrate Tracy Velocium alloy into all parts to increase all energy & processing speed
* Integrate Jenkins neural-fiber chipset innovations
* Merge & Integrate Wolenczak/Jenkins Psychotronic signal/interface through all programs & parts
* Integrate neuroplexic free-wave & bio-wetware connections to all parts & devices
* Standardize U-Watch "holo-feel screen" as basic interface for all newly designed devices
* Upgrade program system Wollon-11th (neuroplexic) into Wollon-12th (psychotronic) and recompile
* Integrate into Legendex Archive for immediate usage during other projects

This would be the moment when everything either worked or exploded in their faces. If they could manage to create a theoretical mathematical model of completely integrated metal, crystal & live synthetic DNA nerves inside a processor chipset, then the rest would follow suit. If they couldn't find a way to make that first chipset, that all-important initial building block, work properly then the project was dead in the water. They could not fail at merging magick into their hybrid tech. Unless they could firstly merge tech, bio-tech and neuroplexic signals (psionics) into one functioning unit, they would end up with two, or maybe even three, styles of networked devices functioning concurrently, taking up space and power that could be better used. If, however, they did create a 'psychotronic' chipset, then elaborated a computer circuit-board around that, then the door was well and truly opened to incorporate magick into the prototype, and then for the rest of their theories to happen in reality.

Given that they already had in hand several examples of working psychotronic or tech+magick devices, they had a reasonable position to base their hopes on. In truth, a lot depended on doing a careful, exhaustive retro-engineering of these unique items & programs to then create their own building standards to guide innovation and prototyping. It didn't make this particular step of the process any less stressful, or heart-wrenching, for those who would be in the middle of accomplishing the tasks. At least, they had the bloody huge Legendex Archive to trawl for solutions or inspiration when they hit a wall. Probably that most of their initial databases, catalogs and inventory will be coming straight out of that hellish cybernetic Pandora's Box of malice.
The new "Hybrid" devices chipset & firmware standards

*** Start with results from the three previous jobs; language + matter + new BIOS/OS chipsets
* Complete the integration of bio-tech & active psionics in all softwares & chipsets
* Synthetically generate Psionics Virtuals through psychotronic systems for all users
* Integrate scriptural magicks to BIOS, firmwares, OS & apps
* Interlink active magycks & active psionics/virtuals through all software, chips & circuits
* Upgrade program system Wollon-12th (psychotronic) into Wollon-13th (hybrid) and recompile
* Integrate into Legendex Archive for immediate usage during other projects

If this step worked well, then the Assembly would have in hand all the tools needed to look to the future with high hopes, allowing them to dream of a moment where they were in fact free of tyranny, oppression and unseen assassins hunting them from the shadows. If they could actually produce the "Hybrid" programs and chipsets, then they could honestly say that half the job was done, giving them enough security and technological options that even the non-magical members of the group could go back home while still being relatively safe.

Having the capacity to transfer raw cast spells or psionics through a specifically created network of wires and antennae was pretty much the best any of them thought they could reach with the tools, materials and people's skills such as they were. In reality though, even if they worked no further, this point of science, technology and know-how would already tip the scales in their favor well beyond the comprehension of any outsider.

If you don't mind burning out the regular mundane Internex and machines, any person trained with their new language, programming system, and used to feeling Power flow from their body, could then brute-force his psionics or magicks through the wires to emerge from the unsuspecting user's device at the other end. Such a transit of raw Power along an unshielded, not-conceived for active magicks, mundane network would create massive short circuits, explode fuses or breaker boxes, overheat transformers, detonate lighting devices, and eventually get out from a poorly built consumer electronics device that would die in spectacular fireworks as that one single act of Power passed through towards it target.

A desperate, self-destructive, one-shot trick that left a fucking huge smoking trail from exit to origin.

But it would work.

In a life-saving bind, or against an overwhelming enemy, it would work. ONCE. But it would work.

So the next phase of research & development was critical. If they failed, they would not have a stable, reliable, and above all else – reusable – network of wires, antennae and devices to send Power to needy allies. They would however still have incredibly boosted CPU's and peripherals, which in most cases would be enough to tilt the balance of power in their favor, but not as often or decisively as truly technomagical devices would. For their survival, for the chance at some shred of prosperity out of the shadows, they NEEDED this project to bear fruits. For them, and for any children they could, maybe, someday have.

The new "Inter-Modal" devices chipset & firmware standards
*** Final integration of bio-tech + psychotronics + magicks in all progs & parts
* Create keyboard, mouse, e-stylus & touchpad capable of channeling mystical energies
* Create vari-cam & microphone capable of channeling mystical energies
* Create LED/Plasma touchscreen & speakers capable of channeling mystical energies
* Create telex/printer & fax/copier/scanner capable of channeling mystical energies
* Create hard/floppy disk, CD, DVD & Flash chipset capable of channeling mystical energies
* Upgrade program system Wollon-13th (Hybrid) into Wollon-14th (Inter-Modal) and recompile
* Integrate into Legendex Archive for immediate usage during other projects

This was the secondary stepping stone after creating the consolidated Power signal and the hybrid CPU's to serve as cores for the new generation of devices. If their work teams managed to recreate all of these well known and already standardized parts, then assembling the lot into a functioning desktop or laptop computer would be easy enough. After that, people would adapt existing applications to their needs if the suite of common programs supplied with the new OS wasn't enough. With that first completed PC online, building more would be child's play (Hi Hi Hi! He made a joke about the little runts running around). When enough regular desktops, laptops and tablets were active, creating smartphones and PAL-analogs would be just another chore in their long list rather than the pipe dream it could be considered presently.

A single standard system for all signals/domotics/network & interface; "InterPlex"

* Make U-Watch "holo-feel screen" capable of channeling mystical energies
* Make Quest HoloWarp capable of channeling mystical energies
* Make Wolenczak Gaseous Display capable of channeling mystical energies
* Make Tracy Holonet capable of channeling mystical energies
* Concatenate signals & interfaces of U-Watch, Holonet, HoloWarp and Gaseous Display
* Reprocess all elements, energies, programs, chipsets & circuits until Certified Standard IPX
* Upgrade program system Wollon-14th (Inter-Modal) into Wollon-15th (Interplexic) and recompile
* Integrate into Legendex Archive for immediate usage during other projects

This step was critical for both centralized & decentralized network computing to occur. They needed to have a reliable system to manage the household affairs, inventory, security and calls for help inside the buildings of the hospital compound they shared. But at the same time, they needed each device to be able to log-in or log-off at will to respond to the necessities or threats around the users. There were times when you needed a tablet to stay active but disconnected, same for a smartphone. Thomas Labarre could tell them easily that waiting for a day or two in a hunter's blind with nothing to do was mind-blanking. At the same time, the hunter wouldn't want his device to ring or vibrate with an incoming call or periodic GPS ping when his prey was barely 20 feet away.

Given the number of enemies they had all accrued from their ancestors, the fanatical cults, or just by being their own obnoxious selves... Well, it wasn't prudent to live in buildings or vehicles that weren't watched over and serviced remotely by some sort of domotics & sentry system like the Quest Iris or Tracy Max robots. Magical wards were well & good, but not always quick to respond, not that flexible to use, and configuring or changing them out was rarely an amateur's task. Usually, for quick & flexible security & rescue you needed people or robots. So, the Assembly HAD to create and spread out an AI of their making similar to the World Management Grid with an
interface Avatar, but keep it limited and fettered enough it wouldn't try to decide for them.

Yeah, riiiiight! Because overly intelligent AI's never, ever develop autonomy and personality...

But reality left them little choice. With limited numbers of living humans, and not all had the same competences or experiences, so they had to find a palliative method. An AI with central, regional, local and individual segments was really the only manner to create and manage such a critical mess as theirs was. And when they returned to their home periods, they would be even fewer members, with less resources and far fewer allies to help them, so they needed to go the way of a massive AI server net. Not happily, but nonetheless.

The new "Magical-Utilities" or "MU-" construction, network & usage standards

*** Labarre Symbography for all communications, user interfaces & notations
*** Wollon 15th (Interplexic) programming language for everything analog or digital
*** "MU- Interplex" consolidated signals & computers manufacturing standards

* Integrate CIRPA U-Watch matter storage/replication matrix through all programs & parts
* Integrate Tracy nanite creator/manager module into all chipsets, parts & modules
* Replace all obsolete plugs/wires by upgraded Tracy IPX-Konnect sockets & cables
* Adapt standard blueprints for matter replication & nano-forging in all programs, parts & devices
* Incorporate Interplexic blueprints in all firmware, parts & devices to speed-up local repairs
* Integrate into Legendex Archive for immediate usage during other projects

** Design & prototype novelties by using MU-replicator and MU-nano-forge

If ever, in this lifetime or some other, they managed to achieve this, then they would have reached the Saint Grail of all technocratic societies and sci-fi nerds in the multiverse.

The creation of mnemonic materials and energized devices that held their own blueprints therefore could repair or rebuild themselves by electro-radiation, psionics, magicks, flooding themselves with nanites, or just disintegrate the defective segment then materialize wholesome parts to replace what was lost.

Saint Grail indeed.

This was Star Trek meets Dungeon & Dragons kinda stuff.

But if it worked... And the U-Watch created by CIRPA certainly proved that it was possible.

Put enough eggheads on it, give them the building blocks and lab space, and they could do it.

Somehow, as he looked at the sea of blondness that surrounded him in the restaurant hall, the oldest Jonny Quest had a vague premonition that neither the multiverse nor True Gods would thank their group for bringing this type of technomagical system into being. Especially in the hands of mere mortals, most of whom hadn't yet passed puberty or been weaned off their adult caregivers completely.

"Ah, bloody fucking Hells!" he groaned silently in misery as he understood the enormity of what his familial enterprise was about to let loose. 'When', not 'if', they succeeded at completing their research, they'd all be so damned screwed that it wan't funny no more! The entire galactic cluster
would want them deader than dead so that even Hades couldn't resurrect them unless a dozen Gods granted Holy Miracles from their thrones for it.

Bheurk!

Trying to get his sudden bout of nausea to pass with a swig of fresh warm coffee handed over by one of the 'Thomas' that decided to play busboy today, Jonny tried to drag his fuzzy head out of the ultra-theoretical back to the imminently practical applications they would need ASAP.

Honestly, he shouldn't have gotten out of bed this morning, the way things were going.

From what the young adult saw, all the work before was just preliminaries to the coming two humongous batches of work their familial group would need to complete.

Priority one; connectivity between live users, everyday devices and network servers

* Create cybernetic link between 'Spell-book/Scroll/Card' and Interplexic devices or users
* Create cybernetic link between 'Lore Crystal' and Interplexic devices or users
* Create cybernetic link between 'Scrying Mirror' and Interplexic devices or users
* Create cybernetic link between 'Pensieve' and Interplexic devices or users
* Create cybernetic link between 'Lorne Sphere' or 'Soul Jar' and Interplexic devices or users
* Create cybernetic link between 'Manatite' & 'Ward-stone' and Interplexic devices or users

* Re-create fundamental mechanics, hydraulics & pneumatics according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create gear, cog, spindle & spring clockworks (analog) according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create mechanical tumbler-cylinder lock (analog) according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create pin-drum & spindles automata (analog) according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create J.M. Jacquard machinery manager (analog) according to Interplexic standards

* Re-create phonograph, cylinder & vinyl disc (analog) according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create metallic wire recorder (analog & magnetic) according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create film reel & projector (optical-analog & digital) according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create VCR tape recorder (Beta-max style for quality) according to Interplexic standards

* Re-create photographic paper & camera (optical-analog) according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create microfiche, microdot & reader (optical-analog) according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create block-press & rotary press printing (analog) according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create C. Babbage Analytical Engine (analog computer) according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create database reel & reader (analog, magnetic & digital) according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create credit card & PoS (analog, magnetic & digital) according to Interplexic standards

* Re-create wired telegraph & telephone (analog & digital) according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create radio & CB system (analog & digital) according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create wired & free-wave television (analog & digital) according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create cell & satellite telephone (analog & digital) according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create subspace communicators (digital) according to Interplexic standards

* Re-create 8-color drums rotary press printing (digital) according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create Imax immersive cinematography (digital) according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create normal desktop, laptop, tablet according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create WMG's contact lenses, earbuds & meta-glasses according to Interplexic standards
* Re-create U-Watch biometric & ectoplasmic scanner according to Interplexic standards
That was the final analytics, retro-engineering and recompilation of EVERYTHING the Assembly had ever put its eyes on, or gotten from an encyclopedia somewhere. They would basically raid this period's Internex archives, then the Legendex Archive, then those private stashes their kin had kept back until they saw the results, and now all individual items or concepts would be upgraded into 'Interplexic' variations for usage in their new clothes, tools, vehicles and building materials for edifices. In truth, they would be doing the theoretical & simulator equivalent of re-writing the entirety of the Universe they were aware of. From the basal energies going up through atoms, molecules, elements, DNA, math systems, machines, etc...

NOTHING would be left unaccounted, untouched or unaltered by their work teams.

They would be able to follow the idea given to them by Younger Lucas #18, the Labarre siblings, Jason Jenkins, Jonny Quest (others) and Alan Tracy of multiple realities. All of them had lived through messy situations where not only computers & smart phones gave out, but all electricity had blacked out as well. When you live through one or two of these situations in two decades, you don't panic about it. When it happens at least three times per year that you live like it does for their members, then you start to adapt your life, skills, tools and dwellings to reflect that imminent possibility.

YL-18 had shown them in that first mental communion some interesting thoughts about how his hotel in Buffalo was built, and how reliable it was, even without being magical or upgraded to 2300 standards. That had led to similar thoughts from the Labarres about their clanhold hermitage with its many wood-burning steam powered machines that were dweomercrafted, runed, enchanted & embedded, yet also capable of functioning in completely mundane fashion as ultimate back-up resource. The Quest, Tracy and Jenkins had similar machines or systems in their lives, although usually reserved for hunting lodges, forest cabins or laboratories that housed Benton Quest's more esoteric study materials in remote, wild areas.

So, with these good ideas in mind, the Assembly had decided to do a complete and THOROUGH upgrade of all mundane know-how, mechanics, technology and sciences until they could rebuild anything to survive a planetary I-C-B-N war merged with a planetary magical war, all happening in record-setting winter storms, during catastrophic solar flares that hit the Earth's biosphere directly. In other words, his kin wanted to turn into a bunch of doomsday preppers like you saw on reality TV shows, on the History or National Geographic channels.

As one tetchy little gremlin had commented early this morning, "What's so wrong about prepping? It's going to come in handy. You know it will. You've lived it several times already, and you know damn well it'll happen again before the year is out, once you're back in time. Not to mention that if you can be grabbed out of your home space, dimension, time & reality, then seeing what's in the Legendex to boot, then WHY would you ever think we're all being paranoid or excessive about being ready for a mess when we know it's coming?"

Jonny didn't remember who had told him that cuz, honestly folks, they all looked the same at that age, and he wasn't even sure what time of the morning it had been. Just that it was a long time back. Like, five cups o' joe back, and the crew had already set up the lunch-time favorites in the buffet counter. Where was he at, again?

Priority two; centralized security, rescue & maintenance

* Redesigned Quest Iris domotics & management mainframe; named "Fruitful Vineyard"
* Create central genealogical, Heritage & Legacy archive for Assembly; named "Blood Well"
* Create central AI & humanoid avatar to help the Assembly; named "Lady Grapevine"
* Create manatite/ward-stone + IPX server + omnibian defenses; named "Raisin Totem"

* Redesigned underwear & over-clothes with MU-IPX wearables as necessary per person
* Redesigned IR field suits upgraded for inter-modal construction work, rescue & full combat

* Merge Quest Hoverboard & IR Spaceboard as basis for personal light vehicle; named "Freefall"
* Merge Wolenczak 'Stinger' with 'FreeFall' to create enclosed seated vehicle; named "Buzzer"
* Make certain 'FreeFall' and 'Buzzer' are omnibian, armed, autonomous & remotely controllable
* Create 'Buzzer' versions with 1, 2, 4 or 6 seats to cover most civilian & combat situations

* Use 'FreeFall' as basis to create 'small' omnibian drone; delivery, recon & combat; named "Stirge"

* Use 'Stirge' as template to create set of omnibian self-guided missiles for heavy warfare;
  Short range (25Km @ subsonic Mach 0,65) interceptor "Dart"
  Medium range (800Km @ subsonic Mach 0,80) anti-ship "Quarrel"
  Medium range (1,500km @ hypersonic Mach 1,25) cruise missile "Bolt"
  Long-range (7,500km @ hypersonic Mach 3,5) tactical "Javelin"
  orbital (20,000Km @ hypersonic Mach 7,00) tactical missile "Partisan"
  Inter-system (9,000,000,000Km @ Sublight Speed 55%) assault vector "Halberd"
  Extra-systemic (12,5 light years @ Warp Factor 3,25) assault vector "Corbellière"
* Each class of missile has interchangeable payload module affixed on IPX-Konnect mounting
* 'Portal Generator' built into the launcher frame to give missiles surprising departure points

* Redesigned WMG humanoid droids as 'small' omnibian robotic worker; named "Serf"
* Use 'Serf' as basis to create omnibian S&R paramedic; named "Yeoman"
* Use 'Serf' as basis to create omnibian 'Battle Android Trooper'; named "BAT-man"
* These robots have integrated systems but they can use externally any human clothes & tools

* Redesigned Tracy Max as 'medium' omnibian robotic worker; named "Harvester"
* Use 'Harvester' as basis to create defensive sentry with integrated weapons; named "Blight"

* Merge UEO SeaCrab & MR-shuttle specs with IR Workpod to create multi-seat, long-term capacity
* Redesigned shuttlecraft; omnibian, 4 benches, washroom, airlock, weapons; named "Fruit Basket"
* Use the new 'Buzzer' and 'Fruit Basket' standards to create other vehicles, pods & trailers
* Redesigned TB Workpod as 'large' omnibian robotic worker; named "Wine Press"
* Redesigned TB-2 & cargo module as omnibian mobile workshop; named "Wine Cellar"

Shaking his head in a last ditch attempt to clear his mind after so much mental effort that got worsened by the emotional burdens piled on at the end, the oldest JQ of the Assembly tried hard to not think in too deep detail about the advanced vehicles and weaponry that his family was gearing up to create, then let loose upon the world. And all that was backlit by the birth of the 'Vineyard', 'Raisin Totem' and 'Lady Grapevine', their very own counterpart to the christian ecclesiastes' World Management Grid, control substations and Humania.

Jonathan had sudden chills of dread pass down his spine, as he wondered if they weren't stupidly repeating the same sordid depravity the worshipers had committed, only being based on a different philosophy. He didn't think that their system would lead to an Inquisition, mass enslavement, serial
rapes and collective massacres, but the present members of the Assembly would not live for ever. And nobody, not even the most gifted diviners, could say what their successors 500 years from today would be like.

They were gambling with their family's entire reality in one go.

And that was what promised to give all of them nightmares in the coming years after their choices were done and made material. The entirety of their magical and technological assets would be locked to their basal DNA strands, connected incontrovertibly to the 'Blood Well' Genealogy, Heritage & Legacy archival & management system they would enact to make certain none of them ever lacked education or had their full potential locked due to the fear of strangers, foreigners and paranoid sectarian fanatics. The Blood Well's concepts and protections promised much, but what would the cost be? Like all the other over-arching systems they had begun to draft, the idea of a centralized database-cum-biological sample archive that was connected in real-time to the rest of their network and servers was revolutionary, and breathtaking.

Breathtakingly scary, in what could go wrong if a madman or cybernetic virus took control.

And what if the interface avatar, the presumptive 'Lady Grapevine' ever became sentient? Linked directly to their Living Blood Law through bio-tech, psychotronics, psionics & magicks as her processor core would be designed, it was a distinct possibility.

Designing floating boards, workpods and flying haulers was peanuts compared to the profound alterations, and existential risks, that such technomagical creations implied. Even building the mindboggling inter-system assault vectors to carry chemical, biological, nuclear, Synthium or anti-matter warheads didn't seem so far fetched or inconceivable, when compared to the enormity of the societal management architecture they could come to build and depend on. Forget warp-capable exploration ships, those could wait! Then again, with the number of hidden or avowed enemies they had garnered in so many realities, could they really afford to be squeamish, fearful of their own potential, or paralyzed by the false judgments of others?

Some of the things they could build, if the Assembly chose to pursue them, would affect not only them but all of their friends, acquaintances, business partners, neighbors and even complete strangers they never met. And not all of these changes would be negative or cause conflicts and violence. The designs he had listed in his drafts were mostly industrial, supportive or defensive, rarely oriented towards raw warfare & first-strike attacks unlike all those religious fanatics who targeted them for centuries.

Acht, this can't end well!

(MacGyver – 1985 opening theme)

Wednesday February 13th of 2301 – 19:00pm
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche, Florida (USA)
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans’ Support Services (VSS)

The oldest Jonny Quest was gently rubbing his temples with the index fingers of both hands as he held his head in his palms, elbows set on the table before him. His eyes were closed and his face set in a scrunched frown that indicated clearly the strength of the headache he was suffering from
all the planning and listing he had finished.

Exhaling slowly in attempt to regulate his breathing, the young man kept his eyes shut as he accepted the glass of ice-cold water and 'potion of migraine relief'. Accidentally, he had used up too much psionics and mentalism energy during his tasks, so he was exhausted spiritually as well as physically. Damn. Seeing little choice in the matter, he took out of his dimensional pocket a small vial of luminous purple elixir which he quaffed in a single, long gulp. Sighing in relief as the 'Potion of Power' hit his magical cores to fill them back up at high speed, the male told himself that one dose of this draught in the month was enough already. He had no intention to let himself become such a workaholic that he depended on potions to go through a normal day.

Yawning widely, blue eyes hunting eagerly around, he saw that the buffet counter had in fact changed over to the dinner selection. Hells! Where had his time flown to? Looking at the clock, he saw that he'd spent close to 11 hours in deep concentration, single mindedly organizing the coming workload and teams.

All by himself.

Snort! "You're an idiot", as his older brother Hadji would tell him lovingly if he were here.

The Assembly had told him to create a generic basic outline of their research necessities, then submit that to the group to guide the collective reflection process. Nobody asked him to do it all alone. Chuckling at his own attitude, 'Jonny' thought that somewhere, somewhen, his father was saying to Race Bannon "He's my boy! I made him that way!" And sure enough, his dad would have done close to 90% of the job himself, exactly like he'd just done for the group. Snickering aloud, 'Jonny' told himself that he came by it honestly, so no biggie.

The young adult was jolted out of his thoughts by some commotion at the service counter, where he saw that their most troublesome youngest sibling was having a go at the cooks about their choice of foods. Their Younger Lucas #18 was apparently in a fine form this evening, as he gesticulated animatedly towards the buffet pans. Why in the world was he harping on about coleslaw and salads? Wasn't he the group's worse sugar & caffeine addict, anyways? Why was he insisting so much on green stuff? Deciding to get his answers in person at the same time as a hot meal that he desperately needed, the exploration & survey expert got up from his table to join the sparse waiting line at the food counter.

Jonny took a tray with paper napkins and metal utensils, putting his favorite porcelain mug with the kit before taking his place in the queue as they moved in front of the fully loaded buffet. His mouth watered as he smelled the odors of freshly baked foodstuffs. At the beginning of the file were the cold & soft drinks dispensers where he took a tall glass of lemonade. This was followed by the vegetable and chicken-rice soups which he skipped, then the salad bar where he took a small Caesar salad with extra stuffed olives and dill pickle slices. Then came trays holding diverse warm breads, from plain white slices to garlic toast, and even some that were baked already filled with melted cheese or creamy sauce. He decided to try a small baguette filled with an alfredo, parmesan, garlic & onion sauce that smelled so heavenly he bit into it right away, to give himself some solid fuel to keep going on his buffet crawl.

The main course section held the classic north-American rotisserie chicken, oven cooked pork roast and pan-seared salmon fillets. There were permanent side meats like fried bacon and grilled hamburger patties to create combination plates for those who wanted a surf & turf or 'deluxe' meal after a hard day of work. Likewise, the usual cold cuts for quick snacks had been refilled, with a smiling 12 year old 'Martin' standing by, ready to make anything from a simple cold ham & butter sandwich to an all-dressed hot submarine. Besides the proteins were Greek style rice, mashed,
wedged or scalloped potatoes, and hot vegetable mix with the option of a stir-fry. Pans of pasta offered plain rigatoni, cheese tortellini or sausage-meat sacchettini with four choices of sauces with olive oil, spice & cheese shakers and garlic butter to dress their plate to taste. Jonny asked the 'Thomas' for some of the smoked pork roast and mashed potatoes as he took a mini portion of tortellini with marinara sauce, just to have several varied tastes together.

Having completed his food raid, the young man decided to just eat what he had then take a dessert much later on in the evening. He was running on coffee and finger-food he'd munched on automatically all day, almost never getting off his chair unless he went to the bathroom. He took the time to stretch out his neck, arms and back before sitting again, this time to a full warm meal and companions ready to speak with him about his day.

The people sharing his table were their oldest 33 year old sibling who wore an expression of mixed anger, resignation and tiredness. Their Tac-Chief was present, looking drab and morose as was his usual wont. Martin and Jenna were joking about Tom's turn as a serving-cook at the counter, laughing about the fact that handing out already baked goods was probably the safest option for the poor boy. The Jessica Bannon from his reality was now sitting down near him with a tray holding enough red meat for a squad of militiamen. She really did take after her father that way; no dieting or rabbit food for that all-American girl! The blond couldn't hold back a smirk as their friends Alan & Tanusha arrived, with Allie bearing both trays while simpering like a servant in a snobby restaurant as he did every little request Tin-Tin asked. Snort! He must have done something dumb again, to work that hard at getting forgiven that fast.

Then their table got a lot livelier as the irate Younger Lucas #18 arrived, bearing a full tray of chicken soup, coleslaw & dill pickle slices, garlic bread, chicken breast & bacon strips atop a bed of rice with a small side of sacchettini in bolognese sauce. All eyes gazed speculatively at the food sculpture sitting triumphantly on its separate plate; a piece of tiramisu cake surrounded by small-cut raw fruits, three rolled-wafer cookies, topped by small chocolate morsels and drizzled with salted caramel sauce.

"Where the Hell does he put all of that?" asked Jessica, utterly outraged at the sight. "And why does he stay so damned thin all the time? It's not fair!" she griped with a mighty frown as the mentioned boy ignored her, due to diving into his meal at full tilt.

"I know," commiserated Tanusha, shaking her head at the sight. "There's no justice in this world, or the one we're from either." she quipped playfully at her spirit-sister, getting snorts of humor from everyone around.

Martin smirked as he stage-whispered "He can eat that way cuz he burns through it by all the tetching, griping, cussing and being a general pain in our asses all day. That's how he stays so thin and reedy"

Ignoring the self-called 'adult' mannerless louts around him, the child concentrated on his late dinner, knowing that he'd need the energy for just after, when their oldest JQ would officially submit his first project draft to the Assembly at large. If all the emoting and dramatic head-holding he'd witnessed since waking up from his 8 hours of truly restful sleep were any indicators, it was gonna be a doozie.

Good. The bunch o' noobs could use a wake-up. The entire group was treating all this like school summer vacations at a beach club instead of the life-altering event it was. Precious few were using the time to actually train combat or hunting skills, and that was mostly because they were not technologically erudite so it was pretty much only the 'Thomas', 'Jason', and 'Tanusha'. The few 'Lua' in the group were good healers and potion brewers so they normally gathered ingredients in
the swamps, thus these girls were getting decent practice in hunting but almost no fighting. And no matter who said what about exciting relationship conditions, having sex with their fiancé didn't count as combat exercise!

{ SQ } --- { Some projects are discussed } --- { SQ }

20:26pm

Now that most had finished their meals, or at least their first plate, the group established again their communal mind-link to get a first rough draft of what their eldest Jonathan Quest had been straining on all day. The more psionically inclined members of the Assembly had felt brief echoes of images or concepts during the double shift he spent on his arduous process, but never anything definite as the young male was quite adept at hiding and shielding his mind, after so many years spent with Hadji and the rest of his composite family group.

The young man finished stacking his utensils, plates and goblets on his tray then used a vague gesture to cast a basic 'sending' spell to banish his tray to the cleanup station to be recycled. Using a small cantrip from the tip of his index, he re-warmed his coffee, taking a short swig before using the few psionics he had managed to learn to bring forth the sum of his work to the fore, sharing it with the communal complex.

It took near fifteen minutes for the incredibly powerful and adaptative over-mind to seize, palp, perceive and understand the contents of what their spirit-sibling had intellectualized during his bout of concentrated work. The results took their breath away, stunning many into physical and psychic silence for nearly a full minute before any attempted to comment on the magnificent opus.

This was exactly the central directive that their Assembly needed to galvanize their collective organizational and survival instincts into high gear. At first, quite a few of them had been unable to truly appreciate the benefits of coming together into such a large gathering. Even if intellectually they could grasp that the historical proof was clear that greater groupings had better chances at winning or passing through adversity. It was the emotional component of having so many people in one place near them that caused the hiccup. After getting humiliated, often beaten, sometimes raped, by those living in proximity while the rest did absolutely nothing to protect them, being able to trust a large team was demanding a lot of stability and fortitude which they may not actually have left to give. Now though, the factual proof was before their collective mind-eyes; banded together, this community could, and would, produce veritable miracles to help all of its members. All these efforts wouldn't benefit the health and welfare of just the most popular, richest or least different, as it had been the norm in their shared past.

Yes, today they had received a well needed dose of raw hope, and some direction as well. Because that was necessary too, if all that positive emotion was to be made useful in any way. Hope alone, without arm strength, tools, plans and a guiding vision, would never amount to anything but empty good feelings, like a pipe dream.

The main artisan of the project still had a few things to add, and several caveats to impress upon on the group, before everybody got their hopes too high.

"Wait before you get carried off by the feel of it," the 19 year old sent through the mind-link. "A lot of work in this is purely speculative at this point. Sure, the existence of the U-Watch and Animus Unificat devices shows the way that merging tech, biology, psionics and magicks can be done functionally, but we're gonna need two things for this to happen in a timely fashion."

Looking all around the dining hall of the restaurant to closely inspect those members he could see for himself, JQ said "We need to give serious thought to who we bring in next, cuz we'll never
manage all this on our own, not with the numbers we have. Secondly, we have to create an 'Ethics Committee' to review all the research plans, R&D methodology, prototype creation, testing grounds safety & reclamation, Etc... But above all else, we have to supervise what is done when testing our new principles or devices on plants, animals and, eventually, higher sentient peoples. When it comes to clothing, cooking utensils and hybrid medical tools, we really won't have any choice. And we don't want to start acting like the people who hurt or exploited us, all of our lives. We want to do better by ourselves, and by others too."

There was a period of ten or so minutes during which almost all communications in the mental union stopped as the individuals absorbed both comments at their full value. The scope, complexity and duration of the collective efforts needed to produce so much science, technology, know-how and teachable skill-sets was astronomical.

It was now obvious that what Younger Lucas #18 had said all along was true; there was an absolute need for them to summon their remaining kindred to this epoch. To save them, yes, but now also to have the workforce, the social interactions, and to stabilize those who were missing their spouses, or fiancés, due to magical conjugal links established prior to their passing the time-gate event.

The secondary point he made, about having supervision & audits at all steps of each great branch of research or individual project, was also a capital awakening. If they didn't take precautions from the onset, they could end up deciding/acting like the Nazis, Soviets, or Japanese of World War II. Or worse even, like the Americans during the Cold War period, when they tested poison gases, bio-weapons and lobotomies as mind-control on their own populations in the name of surviving their numerous, overwhelming communist enemies. It never takes long for a group to fall irreversibly into the abyss of thinking that anything they do is 'better' than the adversaries, or that it supports 'The Greater Good of All' compared to the political or religious 'others'.

Jonathan's warning that they were already dangerously on the cusp of wading into the same cesspool as those that had assaulted or enslaved them was a big punch to absorb emotionally, both collectively and individually.

Snarking aloud, YL-18 declared "What? Those little colored tags with our names, universe of origin, sexual orientation, age and all didn't ring any bells, yet? Haven't you people ever seen WW-II documentaries in school or on TV?" Shaking his head in disgust, the 11 year old boy condemned them tartly "Incults! You people are all a bunch of iconoclastic incults! Mark my words on this!" he claimed, with an accusing index finger pointing all over the Assembly as many sank into their seats, trying to disappear on the spot.

Thankfully, their Uber Brunder decided to call them all back to the subjects at hand, meaning the workload and scheduling mess it would imply, besides how to bring more people to this dimension & time. Again, their youngest crime lord in-waiting had the answers.

"Start off simply," the young boy chimed in with a clearly annoyed tone of voice. "We have several dozen people here who are alive and healthy. That clearly means that the targeting array can reach their home-world safely, and thus could repeat the task as many times as necessary. As long as the coordinates and protocols aren't wiped out of the hard drives." Waving his left hand indolently, the child expounded "Start by making a survey of all our present members, to see who's missing from their extended family, like which 'Alan' or 'Tanusha' are dead, or the 'Eric' when talking about Jason & Lua. Compose a list from the oldest down to the youngest, and then just summon them in that order."

Accepting yet another large thermal mug full of black liquid bliss, the juvenile male inhaled deeply
the aroma before gulping down his profit for five long seconds, ending with a lip-smacking smirk of satisfaction. "After we have brought in all those that are missing from our present membership, we start scanning the other realities where the 'Aberration' didn't want to take people. We analyze the climate, society, familial relations and each person itself, then compare versus the reasons the monster & WMG system had to skip those persons. We can then decide piecemeal which we bring, ignore or tag as dangers, then just repeat the first phase in terms of survey list and scheduling."

Several of the older 'almost adult' members of the group were rubbing their forehead in despondency when they realized how simple the job could be, if they just stopped looking at the overarching, and overwhelming, big picture of it, but instead concentrated on processing the small bits one at a time. Yes, they needed to have a global plan, a big picture, but not at the cost of becoming paralyzed with fear or mental constipation due to the total workload implied to get it done. "Rome wasn't built in one day," as the saying goes, and this would be the same thing; a communal, long-haul effort towards a perennial wealth for the entire family to build upon.

The Tac-Chief grumbled, irritated "Whelp... Guess there's no two ways about it anymore. We'll have to find a way to make the damned time-gate work from this compound, even if it means wrecking it and rebuilding it in a new edifice on the grounds." The scarred young man shrugged lazily, as he added "Or making a walled annex right outside the existing complex walls. We have enough elementalists and crafters in the group to make it happen in a reasonable time-frame, while the boffins figure out how the damned gateway works."

Younger Lucas #18 interjected through the mind-link with a decided tone "That last option is both the most practical for accessibility, and the safest in case of enemies hijacking the gateway aperture to invade us. We have to remember that unless the gravity, or tractor-beam thingie, is active, that gate is just an inert pipe hole through the dimensional curtains. Matter can go both ways at will, and thus move in or out against our desires if we don't gear up the portal chamber correctly."

One of the 17 year old 'Martin' said in incredulous tones "You want to build an armored redoubt with gunnery, flame-throwers and poison gas nozzles to repel enemy breachers? What do you expect, some swarm like in a bloody StarCraft game? Is it the Zerg or Protoss you're worried about?" the teenager queried nastily.

Repying in a matching venomous tone, the younger child explained "Do you remember the womb-tuber plant that was trying to create a humanoid to house the 'Aberration'? Do you remember the mess of small insects that we found outside the armored door, or inside the room, all over the dead plant's pieces? How many were mutated? How many were species, races and sub-races we'd never encountered? What did CIRPA's Legendex have on them about origins, ecology or dangers?"

"An absolute nothing," replied blithely the oldest 'Martin' in the group. "None of our botanists or zoologists have anything on either the plant or insects. We don't even know if they're together or separate things that just happened to coexist by accident. We've only been able to determine that Doctor Wise encoded the plant DNA inside a spore that he willfully put in the implant to make a sort of 'escape pod' for himself, but not much else. Yes, the ectoplasmic or alien radiations from both 'Aberration' and brain implant mutated flora & fauna into developing weirdly like that, but was it also voluntary or accidental? The analysis are still under way."

The oldest Jenna Labarre chimed in "Since we're at the end of the conventional technical and magical methods, we were planning to start a series of divinatory spells and rituals over the dead pieces to see if we can't get something that way. Any little bit would be better than the big fat zero we're working with at present."
The Assembly assented mentally to that declaration, as most had in fact forgotten about that oddity that had been revealed when they tried to reclaim the WMG control hub in New Cape Quest. Now that they would have to return there to analyze the time-gate in minute detail, figuring out if they had biological threats waiting outside the walls would become important. The hospital complex was isolated in the middle of the swamp, away from the WMG's robots and tool trucks, but animals tended to roam a lot for food or shelter. If some mutated beastie got a good smell of them on a stray wind current, it could decide to come loiter around their home-base. If it were a single animal, they could handle it, but a pack or swarm would pose challenges, especially given how sedentary their defensive plan was. Not that they could actually move close to 300 people to a new location all at once that easily, nor make them all live under the same roof with the same sense of family and community as they were creating here. If they had to break the group in multiple small compounds to endure through the long-term workload the collective projects would impose, it would end the fragile basis of trust and mutual support they were painstakingly establishing.

NOTHING could be allowed to end their familial trust & support. If that happened, they might as well each go back to their universe right away with what little they had learned and muddle along on their own. The end result would be the same limited, unreliable, non-finished devices & protocols as if they wasted a few years here without the group unifying for real. And if they never actually enacted the Living Blood Law system, then they might as well lie down and die in silence, because they would have guaranteed their enemies' success for them by sheer incompetence & paranoia.

The final consensus of the Assembly for the evening was to sleep on it for a few days to absorb the monumental and multi-varied nature of the task, instead of deciding when they were emotionally burned out. The only genuine decision with an effect was when their local mafia boss told them his conclusions about their lack of minimal combat & survival training for all members. One of the 'Thomas' took the idea and submitted that they could simply establish mandatory expedition schedules so that each person was obliged to go out in the swamps at least once a week for survival & hunting classes, and to bring back a bigger harvest of natural produces than what they were getting now. Similarly, they could plan mandatory athletics & combat classes, like an hour apiece, to be done three times per week at the beginning of each shift. Since they had three working shifts per day, they would need to have multiple expert tutors for day or night variants, including hunters.

Then the 'morally elastic' child suggested that when they had a team of four truly competent survivalist – fighters, they could send them out on remote explorations via truck or magical portal, as needed. To make most of the long projects they had work out, they would need stones, metals, crystals, woods, resins, animal parts, and maybe even some emplacements Blessed by Nature itself. They needed to get off their collective asses to establish a comprehensive survey of the countryside, and farther afield, because the bloody WMG scan results could clearly not be trusted. Further more, they were in America, whereas the USA's white christian crusaders had publicly declared the entirety of the planet, even Europe, as enemies of the Faith & Creed. With how powerful and all-invasive the censorship programs of the Grid were, it stood to reason that a fascistic, paranoid government would never want their population to see anything that made their army or religion seem less than penultimate, unbeatable by heathens or other competing christian sects.

So, having one or two teams of field specialists going on prolonged exploration missions was another of those long-term survival techniques they needed to come to terms with, and practice for. Which meant camping, first aid and fighting against predators or any humanoid or other sentient they could encounter. It specifically meant they needed urgently to develop a set of methods to disable or destroy any robot, truck or weaponized machinery the WMG and its foreign cousins could eventually send at them. Not to mention that when they eventually looked for a drydock complex to build the final version of the 'Grendel' omnibian industrial ship, they would irrevocably
come face-to-face with enemy mechanoids. If they weren't equipped & practiced by then, it would mean a long line of funerals for very little durable profit, because nothing they did here would be worth going back home with less people than they brought over.

A small bit of bad weather

(Natural sounds – Everglades thunderstorm)

Thursday February 14th of 2301 – 08:00am
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche, Florida (USA)
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)

Younger Lucas #18 was humming an epic tune along the pounding rain that had woken him near 7:00am, just before his alarm clock had a chance to do it. It was nice. The rain was bringing down the temperature from a torrid humid mess to something that was almost livable, for a change in this muddy mess of a swamp.

After doing some basic exercises for flexibility and muscles, he had taken a short shower and gotten dressed in some clothes that had been crafted for him by their more artisanally inclined kindred. The group had decided that sharing their existing wardrobes with spirit-siblings would be acceptable for a few days, while they got settled in, but as things progressed into long-term, it quickly became preferable to make a kit for each person. As events progressed, it was decided to keep all those newly created garments simple as a manner of enticing those who were learning the basics of arts & crafts or magicks to learn faster, in order to customize their kits to their own tastes. As an educational method, the self-reward system was well proven and worked just fine with multi-genial prodigies as they had gathered here. Even the older ones were content with being told to suck it up until they could produce their own cloth, leather, jewelry and accessories.

As he was toweling himself dry, the boy logged-in to their family's alternate network to see what was in store for the day. Good thing he did. He had been scheduled, without being asked, to do a planning & strategy shift in the belvedere atop the management tower. He had an hour for breakfast then his 'work' period began at 9:00am.

"I'm eleven friggin' years old and they have me pulling 8 hour shifts!" griped the child in a stage whisper as he tied his sneakers. "Where's my damn Union Rep? I have some words for him!" As he packed his portable station in his satchel, he mumbled "I don't remember signing on for this job as a mill mule, and the only time I wasn't sober was the first night I spent with the oldest guy. Man, was that space-cake good... I should try that again sometime..."

The young boy marched at a clipped pace to the restaurant hall, taking the time to comment on the selection to the serving staff as he crawled his way through the buffet, piling up a modest meal, for once. He had limited time to eat and reach the overwatch room, so he had to sacrifice quality and artistic flair for simple quantity to insure he had enough nutriments. After eating his lackluster meal almost at the speed of a marathon, he dumped his tray in the cleaning station then jogged to the admin building's elevator core.

Two minutes in the motorized cabin saw him setting foot in the glassed belvedere where the night shift was slowly giving way to the day shift. Workaholic and more than slightly paranoid, their Tac-Chief had trouble to sleep a complete night uninterrupted, so he had already eaten and been
present for an hour and a half when the juvenile crime boss entered the wide open hall atop the edifice. The child entered just in time to witness a spectacular lightning strike come down about 800 yards or so beyond the compound's faux-brick walls, shattering a tree with so much force that incandescent wood shards could be seen as they were propelled outwards, away from the detonating vegetal.

Coming abreast of the 20 year old male, YL-18 quipped playfully, as he gestured towards the heavily runed glass panes, "The Nature channel? Anything good to watch, this morning?"

Snorting in good humor, the older sibling replied "That, my friend, is the result of Jenna and Lua having a climate control spell tutorial session." Shrugging it off as unimportant, the scarred blond waved an indulgent hand as he detailed "The weather was already bad for the day, so it doesn't change anything to anybody's plans, unless they wanted to erect metal structures outside. I reckon that's not a good idea, right about now."

Making a completely deadpan face, the younger boy asked blithely "I don't see how you could think that," just as another powerful lightning strike fell to Earth, a bit farther out than the initial bolt. The thunderclap was truly monumental, and the vibrations in the elevated structure reminded the child of the kiddie rides at the county faire he visited with his mother when he was six years old.

Taking the bull by the horns, YL-18 asked pointedly "Okay, old man. Why is it I was set for tactical planning today, and without asking me ahead of I had anything else planned?"

Smirking in his large thermal mug, the adult answered teasingly "Cuz it's your fault, so you'll be fixin' it."

Dropping his satchel on an empty swivel chair, Younger Lucas #18 crossed his arms, glowering mightily at his elder, ordering "Stop pulling my leg and be clear, man! Why am I here, and couldn't I do it elsewhere?"

Snorting again, the senior sibling teased again "Whaaattt? You don't like me anymore?" the male whined, "I thought you'd want to work with me instead of the snarky little moppets downstairs... snifff"

Putting a palm over his face, the prepubescent Lucas shook his head in despair, wondering silently "Will any of us ever be mature before we die?" Aloud, he snarked "Get it in gear! You can go emo later after dinner. Like, when I won't be around to hear you, whiny bitch."

"I'm hurt," came back the eldest, all the while wearing a wide grin, "right here, I'm hurt so deep by those hurtful words of yours" he claimed as he pointed at his heart with his right hand, since his left was busy bringing the mug of coffee to his mouth for a swig.

"I believe you, I just don't care." deadpanned the younger boy quite glibly, "Now, what am I supposed to work on today? And why do I have to do it here, of all places? I could be more useful in the garage calculating stuff, in the admin offices running the inventory, or even in the infirmary while learning new first aid stuff."

Nodding his head in agreement, the Tac-Chief replied easily "All true, little bro. But not the most optimal usage of your exceptional mind. At least, not in the situation that we're living. We were dragged kickin' an' screamin' to another bloomin' dimension and time period. And now we have to bring a whole n'other bunch." Waving indolently at the consoles, terminals and monitors strewn around the airy, busy room, the young adult detailed what was expected of the younger boy; "So, we need somebody with a bright mind but cold judgment and hard eyes to order the list of people
to bring back, and elaborate the reasons for each. Supplemental to that, we’ll also need to look at all
the other alternative dimensions to see if we aren't actually missing a few people that the WMG
and 'Aberration' decided to skip. Just as you yourself reminded us, yesterday evening."

"Damn," the boy mumbled as he wiped a weary palm down his face anew. "I never realized that
my natural talent at management, admin and worker relations would stab me in the back like this. I
never had problems like this back at BVL in Buffalo." Glaring most venomously at his older
sibling, he asked tartly "You do know that I hate your skinny, albino guts, don't you? I just want to
be sure," he growled with pursed lips and squinted, angry eyes.

Smirking brattily, the older male replied "Yeeppp! I sure know that. But as you yourself so
intelligently said a few seconds ago; I just don't care. So get your scrawny ass to work, if you want
to get paid this week."

Stunned into inaction for a second, the child wondered aloud "We're getting paid? How? And more
importantly, why the Hells do we care? We have absolutely no need for anything more elaborate
than basic barter & trade between siblings, not regulated commerce. So how are we getting paid,
by whom, and what the bloody blue blazes are the salary tables? Cuz if I'm not on top, things are
gonna be ugly. Oh and, mafia boss an' all, I want my 3% on everybody's take or I'll start breaking
kneecaps by sun-up."

Exploding in laughter, the older man wrapped an arm around his younger counterpart, guiding him
to a free console on the outer perimeter of the hall, towards the inside of the compound where
direct visual overwatch was less necessary as the internal yard was almost never empty. It would
take a good fifteen minutes more to explain the necessities of the work to do, but the 11 year old
understood very quickly and had no real compunctions about being the first arbiter to start the
process.

{ SQ } --- { Illuminating the masses } --- { SQ }

(Nightcall – Stuck in dreams)

Outside the walls, about a thousand yards into the swamp in front of the main entrance of the
hospital's compound stood a pair of young women, one 22 year old with twin blond braids, blue
eyes and fair skin while the other was 21 years old, tanned skin with Polynesian features, red hair
and green eyes that shone in the light of the thunderstorm. Jenna Labarre gently touched her
cousin-by-alliance on the shoulders and elbows, guiding her stance to widen more openly as she
used a newly learned druidic prayer that had as many differences as similarities with the shamanic
traditions she was educated with.

"Take it easy, sister," Jenna instructed, "The power you're molding isn't made for subtle works, just
raw effects in large areas. Don't try to actually control it. Simply tell it where it needs to land, then
let it find its own path down to Mother Gaia. The lightning will know what to do, even without
your touch on it."

Lua tried to blink the sweat and rain water out of her eyes as she squinted, orienting towards the
spot she wanted the massive natural currents of electricity to strike. She had to be particularly
careful as the pounding rains made mundane visibility almost nil passed ten feet, and the images
were blurry, covered in a haze of rebounding water droplets. The other difficulty was that the
environment was incredibly wet; not just swamp wet, where the water was at ground level in
defined channels, but all-around in the air wetness that permeated every thing and being in the
zone. And, in case anybody forgot, electricity is not only conducted by water, it is also attracted by
it. And in conditions like this storm, you could not predict in any ways what path the blue bolt
would follow to reach its destination. That made practicing this prayer incredibly dangerous as
anything that was in the sector near the target point could accidentally attract the incoming lightning, making it deviate from its natural path to instead hit the unplanned grounding pathway.

Lua was used to hot, humid, tropical rain-forest climates since her birth so the Everglades didn't bother her, not even in this not-so-hot February morning. What did bother her was flinging electric charges powerful enough to burn out the energy grid in an entire city district repeatedly as if she were just throwing softballs during a backyard game with her siblings. During her training as apprentice shaman, the young woman had been told on several occasions that praying the ancestors for Divine Light during a heavy rainfall or thunderclouds was foolish in the extreme. In one case you could not control the path or destination, and in the other the prayer could call down two or three bolts that struck randomly, instead of just one single, precise hit. The Polynesian woman understood why her spirit-sister was making her learn her version of the spell, and why it was important to cast it in such climates, since living in British Columbia full-time would expose her to much wetter weather all year long. Tropical climates were wet, yes, but also had many hot weeks with practically no rain, only morning dew sluicing on the plants and rocks. In BC, there would be rains, thunder, clouds aplenty and heavy snows for four months every year. And snow was water, also prone to attracting lightning if there was some to be had in the area.

Lua simply had to open her mind a bit more, and control her 'received' instincts to not always flinch in fear when the lightning answered her call, coming down with an almighty crash of thunder and white fire that scalded the air around, leaving an overpowering stench of ozone that could be smelted despite the pouring rain.

"You're doing great! You don't need to be afraid of the spell, or the Divine that answers it, Lua!" Jenna was shouting in her left side ear, fighting against the drumming of the rain to be heard even this close. "Trust in yourself to know the prayer correctly, and have faith in Gaia that she'll not send her power in a way that could hurt you willingly, since you've never insulted or injured her."

Jenna moved to stand closely behind the other girl, placing a cold, wet hand on each shoulder to hold her steady and lend reassurance. The tired shaman tried for the fifth time this morning to implore the attention and power of Mother Nature herself unto her poor, human self to mold the raw elemental force. A force that had historically been proven too powerful, too temperamental, and far too imprecise to be used by people who had other, simpler alternatives in their repertoire. But for Nature cultists like druids, witches, animists, shamans, elementalists and several sorcerers, basically any who dealt with Gaia and the Nature Divinities directly, mastery of the thunderstorm & raw lightning was a benchmark to be recognized 'graduated' above just a basic priest/cleric. Likewise, the completely artificial and tame – Lightning Bolt – spells employed by most basal wizards and mages were not true forces of Nature, just moderate, pulsated forks of electromagnetic force nowhere near comparable to a true druidic strike.

No matter how much she wanted to try, Lua couldn't gather enough energy inside her magical cores to attempt a sixth prayer. She was drained physically and completely worn out emotionally, barely able to stand upright against the exhaustion, let alone the pounding rain and storm winds whipping about their testing ground. Closing her eyes in surrender, the young woman leaned backwards into Jenna, trusting the other girl to hold her safely in her arms as she concentrated on regaining enough energy to walk back to the asylum complex.

Honestly, Jenna's idea to practice in a raging storm may have been logical from a druidic theory standpoint, but Lua thought her teachers back on Kong Island had the truth of this particular subject. Casting lightning during rainfall was incompetence personified, and trying to wrestle against Mother Nature over who controls a storm was worthy of having one's apprenticeship canceled for life. Now, if only she could convince Jason's cousin of that small, mundane little point.
Snort! Who was she kidding? The older witch had cast the 'Call Natural Lightning' prayer four times in demonstration without seeming to even strain against the elemental forces. And wasn't that a swing in the teeth with a tree branch, that ease at communing with Gaia and the Divines, compared to Lua who was a shaman and Nature cultist as well. The younger spell-user was trying real hard to not be jealous of her older cousin, but it was becoming painful right now. Especially since Lua did have a rather boiling temper, despite all the faith and meditation platitudes she told Jason about being calm, composed and at peace with oneself, so that they could truly connect with Gaia, the Divines and ancestors.

Meditation and faith in the Earth Spirits wasn't really working out for her right now. Maybe she could try praying to the Water Spirits instead? Maybe that would be more appropriate, given that they were being flooded out of their comfy little nook of greenery by the rising bayous. Well, that or the Air Spirits, to get some reprieve from those gusts so they could walk the short kilometer back to the safety of the fortified medical complex.

Anyways, Lua certainly understood why the people who designed this place put such tall and thick walls around the cluster of edifices. Their military may have thought it was keep trespassers and traitors out, but she had a nagging feeling it was to serve as breakwaters and wind deflectors during these Spring and Autumn storms.

A sudden calming of both winds and rains created a sphere of 20 feet around them in which the winds barely moved at the speed of their breaths, and the only water falling down was their clothes dripping off the accumulated liquid from their folds. Jenna was slightly less exhausted than Lua so she had been able to cast a nifty 'Storm Shield' charm centered on her belt buckle so that she could ignore it for its duration. The spell would last two hours easily, guaranteeing them a relatively easy and less wet passage back to their temporary homestead. The spell was even able to remove humidity from inside its zone, while increasing the temperature and acting as a transparent barrier all around them to give them at least those 20 feet of visibility. It was just too bad that the spell couldn't remove the ground water nor split apart the quickly rising tides that threatened to overflow out of the canals near the embattled safe-house they shared. There were spells for that, yes, but Jen was too tired and busy holding up Lua to cast one when a little less than fifteen minutes of walk would see them at the gatehouse of their refuge.

The two sopping wet girls arrived back at the complex at 9:30am, shivering from having been in the cold rain for close to two and a half hours before retreating. A simple swallow of 'Booster Fluid' had them both able to fight off the impending swamp flu with just a few sniffles and runny nose for an hour after they had returned to their rooms for a dry-down with a fluffy towel, change of clothes, and a hot morning tea afterwards. This had really not been the tutorial session of the century, both young women thought glibly as they walked to the small cafeteria on the same floor as their bedrooms to get their hot drinks together.

I love you so hard

(Two Steps From Hell - Victory)

Thursday February 14th of 2301 – 12:00am (noon)
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche, Florida (USA)
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)
"Hooowwwww!" moaned pitifully Alan Tracy as he lay in a crumpled heap on the gym mat, with his ever so loving wife Tanusha Bellegant standing over him, wearing a bratty grin that made him regret ever accepting this little sparring session with her. He loved her incredibly strongly, don't get him wrong, but there were days like now that he wondered if she returned the feelings, or just used him as a punching bag to evacuate stress. Which, given that smirk on her gorgeous face, was very probable right about now.

Tin-Tin wasn't even trying to stifle her amusement as she beheld the results of working out her frustrations at their existential situation on her poor, loving husband. Honestly, she should go easier on the boy. The 18 year old was five years younger than her, and not the specialized CQC fighter that she was. In truth, he was much better a combatant than any of his brothers or father, but still only about ¾ of what she had trained to reach and maintain. In normal times, the other Tracy siblings would never be caught dead on the same practice mat as her unless their dad or Hiram forced them into a full team exercise, which was never about fighting, just rescues.

Alan was the only Tracy to ever accept to get into a tussle with her, and the only one to ever win against her in a spar. Fermat had tried just once to practice with her, when he was 10 years old, then swore it off for the rest of his life. Given how badly he had under-performed, she understood his decision. So had poor Hiram who had to pass close to three days in the island's infirmary, to patch his son back into shape. It was from that period of their youth that Tanusha had been nicknamed 'Kayo', as in 'K-O' like the boxing term for 'knock-out', by the older Tracy men whom gave her strong temper a wide berth after that. Snort! Cowards, all of them!

It was also what brought her to give a second, third, and fourth look at Alan despite his young age compared to his brothers. Unlike them, he wasn't afraid of her strength or willpower, and never shied away from confronting her when she was wrong, pigheaded or just plain bratty which, given how young she had been back then, happened quite a lot. After all, what girl wouldn't take advantage of four big, athletic boys when they're such wet chickens that run away just at the sight of little her? Her parents were extremely strict with her, but only if they were made aware of what she did, or were told by Jeff Tracy that they should yank her back in line. Most times, neither adult were ever told what happened between the kids, so Tanusha got away with a lot of things because the four older siblings never dared tattle on the pranks she pulled on them. Alan, however, never backed down, and he didn't complain to his dad or her parents. No, the measly little 9 year old fought back with the same weapons and deviousness she did, right until the teenaged girl had no choice but to grant her respect willingly, if only because he was as stubborn as her.

Alan was also the only boy she'd met that didn't hesitate to tell her off when she was bullshitting him or trying to hide her small, inane mistakes that happen to everybody in life. Because of how they had all been raised on Tracy Island or boarding school, they had learned to keep as much as possible away from adults in positions of authority, which translated later in life to having one of two attitudes; extremely laid-back like the older Tracys, or borderline OCD like Tanusha, Alan and Fermat. On the Island, when Tanu was passed 18 years old, she had been able to make it look like she was "Miss Perfect" compared to the four senior brothers, but Alan never bought her story. He caught her in several compromising situations, from skinny dipping in remote tidal pools in the evening to stuffing her face piggishly with a midnight snack larger than Virgil's dinner had been. In many cases, they just shared a good laugh because of how different from her public character the event was. In others, he had shown more sensibility than all five older Tracys put together by never uttering a word to anybody, including to her unless she brought up the subject. And in a few cases, he had used pictures taken with his phone to blackmail her mercilessly, just the way she herself would have done, obtaining quite a few well strategized payments in the process.

The enterprising young boy had gotten her to accept their first date and first kiss when he was 12, their first skinny dip when he was 13, and their first time having sex at age 14, following some
splendid timing on calling in the payments she owed him for keeping quiet the secrets she wanted protected from the rest of the world. She had gotten her revenge on him a few times since, but she was just as certain that he'd gotten back at her as much in the same time. He was tenacious like that. Given how much fun they both got out of one-upping the other, that particular game wasn't going to be stopping any time soon. And even if the rest of his family found out, their opinions had stopped mattering a long time ago, when they got married.

Blinking her soulful golden eyes to clear away the woolgathering mood, she carefully approached the moaning teenage male on the mat. He could be truly injured, because that did happen during practice sometimes, but he'd pulled the old possum trick on her too many times for her to trust him that much. His choice of tactics and weapons was truly far too similar to her own for them to have such a beginner's attitude as trust on the mat during a spar. She lost way too many bets and forfeits to the blue-eyed boy-wonder to believe he wouldn't pull the 'I'm injured and helpless' card, nor the 'dumb blond rich kid' card either. Countless kidnappers, thieves, thugs and crooked businessmen trying to take advantage of ASET had learned differently, and painfully too.

Carefully kneeling on the mat four feet away, she analyzed the agonizing boy, making certain to have enough room to bolt out of the way, if he were to try jumping on her. He was lean, muscular and surprisingly fast for a male, compared to his other brothers. Only Gordon had similar reflexes, but none of the capacity to sustain that speed through a prolonged fighting sequence. That was all Alan, and his stubbornness. Her caution paid off.

In the blink of an eye, Alan was fully on his stomach, legs bent to shunt himself right at her like a leaping frog aiming for a tasty roach. She barely managed to dodge out of the way as the 180 pounds of muscles stomped where she had been squatting, converting her stance to a low leg sweep that he anticipated, jumping over her passing limb, trying to bring them close enough for fists or hand grabs to be used. She did not want that to happen. Unlike his brothers, Alan would not hesitate to land a few bruisers on her in the name of making sure she could stay sharp, lethal, and able to beat any opponent she faced. While she was very good at dodging, skipping or avoiding altogether most of his leg movements, Alan put a lot more efforts into training his hands and arms for all the activities he did. Getting punched, chopped or jabbed by him was not a pleasant thing, as she had experienced during the spar a few times already. As a pilot, an astronaut, an S&R tech for IR, an engineer, a cook, or as the only long-term lover she ever had, he always made certain his hands were better than anybody else's, including hers. And while that did annoy the life out of her in a fight, she was incredibly proud of him for having the nerve and tenacity to put in the hours needed to reach this level of ability.

Tanu had to also admit that it gave the younger man an advantage that he needed every ounce of during their weekly spars, or else he'd be hopelessly outclassed like his brothers, not that the low benchmark was hard to achieve. In all honesty, she had seen a few professional mercenaries get their asses handed to them by the teenager when they should have made mincemeat of him, but failed to realize how high in the performance ladder he scored. The number of times he had to hold back when fighting his brothers' bullying was astounding, due to how easily he could break them if he lost control of his emotions the way that the infamous 'Tracy Temper' did with the rest of his kin.

Both young people startled when the buzzer sounded it was 12:15pm – noon, and time to hit the showers before going to lunch. They had decided to wait a bit later in the normal lunchtime before going to the dining hall to avoid the stampede of children and younger teens that were invariably led by their guts or noses. Being older and more mature (hem, hem...) both partners felt they could wait until the crushing mass of hormonal kids had been served to get their own trays in a more peaceable manner. That, and the gym was empty so nobody wanted to fight them for the shower stalls or clean towels while there was hot food waiting in the buffet counters.
As the pair went to the communal washroom adjacent to the practice rooms, Tanusha looked sideways at her husband of four years with a discretely sly smirk. She always set their match clock at two hours max for their training sessions because she knew full well that passed that limit she would start lagging behind in endurance compared to her husband's exceptional stamina. In order to win a fight against him, she now had to put him down inside of the first hour or it would end in stalemate. If they went passed two hours, he would keep on getting good hits on her legs and arms, draining her speed, agility and endurance until he managed to land that single solid blow to her neck or head that would put her out. Waking up to a two-day migraine was not something she planned to repeat any time soon. So she ran the stats to set the match clock inside her own limits, knowing that if she didn't win decisively in two hours, she had lost anyways. Now Tanusha wasn't blind or stupid; she knew that Alan would figure it out at some point, but she'd keep the only advantage she had over him while she could. As for what it would cost her when he found out... Well, she'd deal with it at that time.

Alan was working hard on lowering his breathing back to normal as part of the post-fight recovery routine. He saw the side glances his wife sent him, thinking that he was either blind or too occupied to notice. He did see, and had a pretty good idea of why she was spying his facial expressions and body language so closely. The young man may be a less capable CQC fighter than his wife, but he was in counterpart an exceptionally gifted engineer, a prodigy from a young age as attested by the creation of ASET when he was 9. And you don't build a massive edifice to manufacture consumer goods without having a definite grasp of planning, timing & scheduling to make your customers' deliveries on time. Alan had realized about a year ago that his beloved Tanusha was using their gym's match clock to insure she never actually lost to him worse than a stalemate, instead of a full-on defeat. He did manage to take her down hard a few times, but never repeatedly or reliably because she did outlast all the usual thugs or mercs they saw. That didn't mean that he was weak when he compared himself to her, only that the bar was that much higher than normal when she was the benchmark. And that was why the playful little she-brat thought he had never put the facts about their spars together. Well he did, and he'd be making her pay for it... When he felt like it. When it would be memorable. He was a good husband like that, wanting his wife to have good memories of their time together. He He He!

Now arrived in the communal washing hall, Alan slowly stripped off his sweat-soaked T-shirt to examine the colorful patches of skin around his torso and upper arms where Tanusha had proven again that she took his efforts in their shared combat training seriously. The fair skinned male couldn't quite keep the smile off his lips as he saw that her own body and legs had a few similar patches that she was busy looking over, just as a precaution. He had been powered by anxiety and stress as well today, and had managed to land a few solid punches on her hamstrings when she tried a few leg sweeps or kicks that should not have been the chosen move at the time. Neither of them had used weapons or spells today, but it was still a good idea to go over one's person after any spar, just in case an accident happened. It was also during such a routine inspection that they had found foreign tracking & spying spells, tagged on the surface of their skins by drops of invisible sticky ink that had stuck some leg hairs into clumps. They had both been much more careful with their periodic health inspections since, especially because they never found who had tagged them, or why.

Fully appreciating each other's forms as they finished taking off their gym kits, they decided to take separate stalls side by side to go faster. If they shared a shower together, they were certain to get frisky enough to miss their appointed lunch period, and set off all the rest of their loosely scheduled day. They were both supposed to start a shift around 14:00pm, with Tanu in the overwatch belvedere and Alan in the garage edifice to craft devices. Both took the jobs given seriously, even if there weren't any visible enemies. The group conference from last evening was still fresh in their minds. They would be going home at some point, just not yet since nobody was
healthy enough, or emotionally ready for it. Plus, in the meanwhile, they would be boosting their total numbers of population by almost 200, maybe more, if the draft plans were put into effect when the time-gate's control functions were fully mastered.

After cleaning off the sweat and grime from two hours of hard, serious fighting, the two spouses applied a few quick spells to heal the few superficial discolorations or deep tissue bruising they had found. They got dressed back into their regular day clothes while sending the soiled pile to their quarters via spell for cleaning, later this evening when they got back 'home' for the night. Like many other couples that were married or engaged, they shared a room & bed, without any complaints from the rest of the Assembly. Well, except maybe for a few jealous grumblings by the singles, and sibling teasing from the truly young kids. Those happened whichever reality you were in.

Another step forward

(Two Steps From Hell – Star Sky)

Thursday February 14th of 2301 – 18:00pm
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche, Florida (USA)
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)

The skies were still pouring down over Florida's Everglades, the rainfall having slowed down a few times during the day, but never stopped completely. According to their nature cultists, they were due for three full days of the stuff coming down o their heads because there was a hurricane spinning lazily off the western side of the Panhandle. The massive storm formation was climbing up the Gulf of Mexico at a slow crawl, aiming for the mainland USA sometime in the next three to four days, when it would hit ground somewhere between Pensacola and Tallahassee. The four hundred mile wide spiral storm system was amazingly powerful, and the satellite images they managed to get out of the automated weather monitoring stations were breathtaking.

For weather geeks and cultists.

The Tac-Chief and Crime-Boss of the family were not impressed. Weather was weather, and as long as it didn't hit on their turf, they didn't care much. Sharing some time together, they were both standing by the small service counter that had been built in the belvedere to accommodate the watch crews. Not a single one of them wasn't a caffeine addict, and don't you believe them if they say otherwise. Half the counter was taken by the massive automated drinks brewer that a teenaged Jonny Quest had pulled out of his dimensional backpack to loan them for the duration. In testament to how strange their existences were by now, nobody had bothered to ask the 15 year old why he would have that machine in a backpack, dimensional expansion or not.

No, people were too busy queuing for an espresso or mochaccino to care.

The construction crew had put two mini fridges in the cabinets under the counter, and one was used almost exclusively to store the machine's refills and beverage condiments. The other was for fresh snacks that were easy to eat with just one hand while working, like vegetable sticks & dips, or candy bars. Yeah... Teenagers and healthy food choices. They were lucky to have so many health conscious athletes in their Assembly or they'd all be 12 pounds heavier already by now, after just a week of collaborating together.
With their new hot coffees in hand, the two that were seen as the leading pair of the family moved to isolate themselves at the back of the observation gallery, at the work station the younger boy had been using. It was time to revise what he had compiled before closing the day and going for a well earned supper followed by a restful evening. It so happened that both siblings felt refreshed by rain, the sound helping to clear out the jumble of thoughts from their overactive minds.

Since what YL-18 had done was mostly archival analysis and ordering a list of candidates to bring in, making heads & tails of it was pretty quick and easy for the older brother. And, on the nose of it, he didn't see any surprises or outrageous suggestions. What did surprise him though, was that the 11 year old had already finished treating all the family files of each reality-group present in the Assembly. Tomorrow he would begin analyzing the potential candidates from parallel dimensions that hadn't been brought into this epoch.

As they were packing in the close of their shift, the elevator cabin 'dinged' open, allowing a group of four to walk into the vast glass walled room, just as an errant bolt of lightning sundered the heavens horizontally through the cloud ceiling, just on top of them.

"Well, that wasn't ominous, wan't?" snarked the oldest Martin of their group, wearing a wide smirk as he wiggled his fingers like the legs of an alien beastie looking for something to munch on. Given what his side-job had been for CIRPA, he' know more about these things than them, but still, you had to be pretty superstitious to correlate lightning and occult phenomenon. Even Jonny's father had never managed to prove a direct link.

Snorts of sibling amusement aside, the mission team returning from New Cape Quest had news to give about the main focus of the current planning. Their 33 year old 'self' had been able to access the time-gate controls from the WMG substation without incidents, despite not being haunted by the Aberration anymore. While the ectoplasmic entity was linked to the crystal processors and console podium in the audience hall, it had never been in real control of it. Instead, they had now proven once and for all that it had mentally influenced their oldest brother directly into his soul via the leech-link that connected them. With that leech severed, and the Aberration exorcised, the Lucas from this reality was completely free and the servers in the WMG substation were nothing more than regular cybernetics, if more advanced than they were used to working with.

The end result was that they had found the specific set of engineering programs, scanning apps and targeting apparatus buried deeply into the heart of the Grid's mainframe. To their surprise, the time-gate was actually a freakishly huge machine built all the way back in Ohio, on the northern tip of the state where there was nothing but the vast expanse of the Great Lakes all around. The precious device had been built in a small town that could be accessed by only one road, one railway, or by floatplane to land on the lake. It was the perfect defensive emplacement as it meant any attacker would have to punch through half the entire North American continent, whichever side he attacked from. It also meant that the ability to command the machine was not linked to a specific command station or control node, but only the programs & apps. In other words, if you could access the hidden directory of restricted programs with the proper pass-codes, you could activate and manage the time-gate from anywhere on Earth. The only security limitation in place was that the orders had to come from a console, station or command node that was already included in the WMG's central directory of authorized management posts. This was because the functions used to add new command-level posts were locked-out since humanity had officially ceased to exist. Their group of newcomers didn't count as 'humans' in the perspective of the WMG because they refused to convert and accept the sectarian mind-control wearables and programming still fundamental to its core functions.

The good news in all this was that Grosse Tronche Sanitarium was classed in the WMG as a command node from close to a century before humanity was declared officially extinct. The Grid's
security modules had confirmed the fact when they were at the NCQ substation, and they had just been in the garage edifice to use the Internex' main entry cables to test the hypothesis right at the source, so to speak. To date, it all panned out.

Which meant that as of tomorrow, their older brother would be installing himself a brand new gate control console right inside their homestead, and be able to work on the project without the damned religious crap being beamed into his head all day long. He would also not be alone since there would be a bunch of reliable helpers to carry a large part of the workload alongside of him. The best guesses were that the time-gate would be operable from Grosse Tronche Sanitarium in ten to twelve days, if nothing went completely wrong, like that hurricane hitting Southern Florida instead of going on north as anticipated.

As far as their Uber Brunder could see, all that was really needed for their uses was to establish a dedicated command center with consoles specifically to diagnosticate or activate the gateway machinery. As he told them, he agreed with their younger counterpart that having a segregated command node would be safer, prevent accidental use of the system, isolate the gateway in case of attacks or contaminations, and allow to train more specialized techs so he didn't do everything alone each time the transit was opened. As all the points were valid and had already been agreed upon in principle by the Assembly, it would now simply be a planning job rather than arguments and doubts. Their family really didn't do doubts very well, so having only technical issues to work through would be a blessing for all of them.

Another card in the deck

(Epic Score - Liberators)

Friday February 15th of 2301 – 14:00pm
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche, Florida (USA)
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)

The garage edifice was feverish with anticipation as the large family's members were cleaning out and storing everything in the place to make space for what was coming. After several days of hacking and searching, the official network recon team had finally found something that would be a major boon to their exploration and supply expeditions that were quickly becoming a vital necessity.

Arriving in the parking lot with enough noise that even the rainstorm outside didn't dampen the sounds that much was the first long-range, extended autonomy vehicle that would be the basis of their push outwards.

The Halo class heli-jet airframe.

Product of the Pentagon's strategic planning to set up the World Management Grid across all of North America without any dead zones or blind angles, this aircraft had been designed to have massive lifting and hauling capacity up to 400 tons while having up to 90 days of autonomy between supply stops. The solutions used in the design of the airframe had been both simple and innovative at the same time.

Like the name indicated, the Halo was circular, shaped like a giant doughnut. The main body was
300 feet in outer diameter, but the hull itself was 30 feet wide by 20 feet high all around, with eight large bulbous protuberances 7 feet high to house the rotor motors on top. That meant of course that the center of the craft was a gaping hole 240 feet wide that had eight trellis catwalks leading to a central annular trellis platform. The platform was 40 feet in diameter but only 10 feet wide since it had a 20 foot aperture in the middle. This system of walkways was completely enclosed in steel trellis with locking hinged panels all around, mostly to keep people from falling out of the ship but also to avoid getting hit by flying debris during construction work.

The basic principle of the ship was this; take 8 massive Chinook helicopter engines spread equally around a wide circle. Modify the rotors to be double stacked, giving two rows of five blades that counter-spin to make certain each air-flow vortex is self-stabilized, thus automatically stabilizing the ship itself without effort. Exactly under the places where the rotors are set were quads of small jet engines, with each individual motor being articulated with its own skirt of thrust adjustment paddles too. Surrounding the underside of the airframe was a set of two bulbous, 5 feet diameter, rings that circled around the internal and external edges of the ship's belly to act as fuel tanks and floats for landing on water, swamp, snow or sandy dunes.

The ship thusly had the capacity to tie a massive load under itself through 16 industrial winches spread around the underside, plus 8 more positioning winches spread around the inside of the middle ring, up to a total of 300 tons. Then the ship showed the use of those jets when it pushed itself high enough that it could float and steer with only the rotors. So, at high altitude the Halo cut off its liquid fuel jets to employ only the mechanical rotors that were powered by a single, ultra compact cold fusion reactor, to let it hover around as long as it needed.

The purpose of the Halo was to serve as a flying / hovering construction platform that carried the fully prefabricated antennae, reactor & server systems that were the anchor points of the WMG in remote, hostile areas of the continent's far removed reaches. The steel antennae was attached by its lower quarter and lifted up through the central annular walkway, then attached by its third quarter for transport. This meant that a bit more than half the prefab structure hung underneath the mammoth helicopter for its journey to the wild natural zone where it would be installed. The antennae was brought in only after a first Halo ship had been by to flatten the landscape, dig a pit and cast the concrete foundation level by using a set of automated, specialized machines that were designed specifically for those jobs. Afterwards, it was the same generic Halo ships used for installing the antennae that were tasked with the limited annual maintenance each node required.

All in all, despite being an ugly flying green doughnut, the Halo airframe had proven itself quite robust and adaptable over the course of its 60 years of service. The internal 100 tons of cargo meant the 16 crew & passengers could live pretty easily for close to 3 full months without setting foot on the ground. That could actually be a lot longer since the US Air Force and WMG central authority rarely put more than 8 workers aboard any of the ships, even for setting up the antennae in windy, snowy mountain tops. The ship had also proved useful as large cargo carrier for supplying oil rigs at sea, bringing palletized loads from shore to ships for the US Navy faster than small boats or docking would have managed, and getting over flooded or snowed in zones with rescuers and their specialty equipments in one go.

According to the WMG registry, the Halo had been built in five preconfigured styles to accomplish specific missions;

* Generic cargo hauler / all uses passenger airship

* Automated digger & builder; shot-crete structure up to 200 feet wide by 40 feet high, with as many separations and partitions as needed as long as it fits inside the total workable area. Any & all infrastructures or furnishings need to be brought in and installed by another ship & team.
* Building completion workshops & materials; used to finalize edifices for human habitation, like bringing and installing the antennae for the WMG nodes.

* Rescue barge & flying ambulance with small-sized EMS / S&R vehicles in the middle.

* Exploration & long range scanning flying outpost (LRSFO) with small mission vehicles in the middle and gunnery sponsons around the outside of the main hull, mostly pulse rifles or plasma cannons.

* Dedicated amphibious assault airship for bombardment or area defensive gunnery; carries 96 soldiers on foot, meaning 8 squads of 12 men with individual gear, separately from the ship's permanent flight crew of 8 pilots/gunners.

As far as the Assembly's mechanical or vehicle specialists could see, the Halo airframe was huge, clunky, ugly, and ungainly when it was on the ground or air, but what it lacked in maneuverability it overcompensated in cargo and hovering capacity like nothing ever built could. And that 3 month autonomy away from home was a real kick-start to any exploration or construction projects they could come up with when the rest of their extended kin was finally brought in.

Then again, they did have a tetchy little gremlin with criminal inclinations to contend with.

"Why the ever loving fucks did those mongrels in the Pentagon get shot off the map if they had those things flying around?" Asked Younger Lucas #18 to the cast of kindred all milling around him in preparation for the final touchdown of the massive bagel-lookalike hovering next to the hospital complex. "All they had to do was put a few missile launchers or pulse cannons on the most generic frame and they had a champion gunship. Why the bloody Hells did the little kiddies with the giant walkers manage to kill that many people when these things were floating around?"

The Tac-Chief replied blithely "Ask the Jason's in the group to find out. They're the expert historians, so it's their job anyways. Just stay away from the Jonny's cuz they're computer & vehicular mechanics specialists; we need all of them on exploration from now on." Thinking a bit, the second oldest 'Lucas' in the group added "Same for the Jessie's, Martin's, Alan's, and, ah, oh yeah, the uses." he completed with a finger wag at all the Lucas's in sight.

The younger male glared mightily at his senior sibling, replying "We are not amused, sir," in a tone of royal annoyance that usually forewarned of heads rolling off the block. Strangely enough, all he got were guffaws and snorts of choked hilarity. Uncouth peasants, the lot of them!

All their attention was suddenly called out to the front of the building where all six massive garage doors had been opened wide to be able to see the giant aircraft land on the concrete staging zone despite the pounding rainstorm blowing water all over the insides of the building. The first thing they perceived was the noise as all eight duo-prop engines worked in unison with the 32 mini-jets to keep the ship in a perfectly stable descent as it parked. The good thing about the design was that they had not needed to prepare anything for the landing other than make certain nothing got crushed under the hull when it touched down.

Once the massive metallic belly had touched down, it occupied almost all of the space that had been initially created to serve as the hospital's emergency triage & evacuation zone. The concrete pad was 400 x 400 feet, so the 300 foot wide ship had to land right in the middle to avoid hitting anything with its rotors or jet-wash as it came in. To say that it dominated the landscape where it was present was quite an understatement!

"Crap, but that monster's big!" exclaimed a passing 'Thomas', as he helped moving a jigger full of supplies and consumables for the future exploration team.
The Assembly had gotten lucky in that they had managed to get their hands on a brand new Halo that had just been built when the WMG was partially shut down by their 33 year old brother upon his arrival. The ship had sat patiently in silence in an underground hangar for close to 15 years, never actually activating the main engines, reactor or central processor because it was connected to the factory's power systems until it was called to service. The second stroke of luck the assembly had gotten was that the model was a dedicated LRSFO so they had several solutions built into a single package to answer practically all the problems they currently faced.

The ship finally landed completely, letting the humongous rotors stop on their own inertia instead of using the mechanical brakes built into the motor assemblies. The jets were already cooling down, the thrust vectoring skirts closing until they formed tightly sealed cones to protect the turbines during the period of unuse. Now fully grounded, the circular vehicle looked like a green metallic castle, visually crushing all else out of the field of vision by its sheer size and, in truth, plain old ugliness.

Yeeeppp, she was fugly, alright.

"Get the robots inside now!" shouted the Tac-Chief at a Jonny who was manning a console to his left. "I want every scrap of the Grid ripped out before we do anything else with this fat whale!"

On his order, the newly painted blue robots of the Assembly lined in front of the cargo ramps that were lowering to receive their pallets and crew. The robots had belts around their waist to hold a set of specific tools dedicated to finding and destroying any piece or presence of the World Management Grid from any place they were tasked with cleaning. Quite judiciously, the Assembly's control team had realized that any ship tasked with installing & configuring the Grid's nodes would be loaded with mobile transmitters and surveillance devices to insure the crewmen stayed loyal and obedient to the mental programming, like the rest of the continent. That meant the group could not make any investments of renovation or retooling on the flying ring unless every last speck of the WMG's deleterious systems had been found, removed and sanitized from existence.

A small monitoring team would stay on watch to guide the robotic crew overnight, then report in the morning to the Assembly at large. At that point, a human crew would go in to find what the droids missed. Given what Younger Lucas #18 had lived in the morgue manager's office, despite the fact it had been declared cleared after a robotic sweep, the rest of the family didn't trust the droids fully at present. Somehow, the damned Grid could access a sleeping person's mind without it being all that obvious at first. If it hadn't been for the fact the slavery apps had been written by fanatics, even their paranoid little brother would have fallen for it, in time. As it was, if the program hadn't been so bloody obvious, they could have ended up with a wannabe crime lord turning Jesus-nut on them without any explanation. As that was not something they could afford, the group was being more careful with the smaller details, this time around.

{ SQ } --- { Ring, Ring, Ringing around the Ring! } --- { SQ }

(Dunkin' Donuts – advertisement theme song)

Saturday February 16th of 2301 – 9:00am

"I hate that ship's design like nothing else I ever saw!" moaned the 15 year old 'Jonathan' as he glared at his stack of pancakes with pure malice. Having just finished the night shift that supervised the robotic sanitation crew, the teenaged male had gotten the chance to enter the weirdly shaped vessel, and regretted doing so. The bloody hula-hoop was so damned split-up inside that it wasn't funny! Yes, ships of all sorts needed to be partitioned to avoid losing atmosphere or taking on water when the hull is breached, but that usually meant having a – rational – system of
bulkheads and doors. Jonny was certain the shipwrights in the group would tell him the whole thing was perfectly logical, but he didn't buy it for a minute. To his eyes, and his experience with lots of boats or planes, there was just not enough to the design to justify building it.

"Still stuck on the flying tin can's looks?" queried idly a 16 year old 'Thomas' as he sat next to the other boy with his own tray of food before going to bed. The night shift's perimeter patrol around the compound's walkways, atop the faux-brick walls, still wasn't the most interesting job in the group since there were no other humans around to be a threat, but it had to be done regardless. "You should get over it man, t's just a boat. You won't be living in it all your life," he added glibly, not really interested in mechanics that much.

Sending a glower at his spiritual sibling, Jonny wondered how much trouble he'd get into if he dumped the entire plate of syrupy pancakes on the twit's head. He could understand that some people didn't share his enthusiasm for aeronautics or vehicular mechanics, but to be this disconnected from the obvious was beyond human understanding. The young man was saved from his own self by the arrival of the night shift supervisor who placed his tray down before pulling out a pair of chairs so he and his fiancée could sit side by side. 'Jenna' blew a playful air-kiss at her boyfriend as she sat with her food, 'Martin' taking the chair on her left.

"Whelp, I don't know how you guys found the flying saucer outside," Martin said in his slightly nasal tones, "but I certainly didn't see much to get excited about." He took a french toast in his right hand, biting a piece out of it then waving the rest as he chewed, to emphasize the point he had just made.

Shaking her head at her fiancé's questionable table manners, Jenna smirked silently in her coffee mug as the poor Jonny in front of her seemed to be relieved beyond belief that somebody thought the circular ship was an ugly piece of motorized crapulence. Jenna had no inclinations whatsoever for mechanics or engineering, so she didn't care either ways. It was just funny to watch the boys emote over a pile of metal like their entire world depended on it conforming to their standards of normality, which, you know, nobody really cared about.

Unaware of his cousin's thoughts, Jonny exclaimed "Exactly, man! That damn puke-green doughnut is giving all airplanes and helicopters a bad name!" The teen dropped his knife through the pancakes repeatedly, like a guillotine going up and down, as if he were administering justice on a whole team of criminals. Bitting down angrily on a mini-stack of syrup coated batter, he chewed with a grimace on his face that showed clearly he was going to be upset for a good long while yet. After three more large bites, Jon said nastily "Even the Russians didn't create prototypes that funky back in the 1950's and 60's, during the Cold War. And they were studying the dregs of the Nazis' Wunderwaffen projects based on damaged Alien tech recovered from crash sites."

Martin shrugged idly, not emotionally involved like the other boy. "I can't say I really care. It's just that the inside looks like a bigger, longer version of CIRPA's tilt-rotor troop planes. Which means it's not made to be pretty, or comfortable, or all that easy to use despite all the supposed optimization and proofing that went into the design." The amber-eyed male stuck some egg with his fork, biting it off and washing it down with orange juice, thinking that it was just as good a meal before sleep as the heavier, meat & creamy sauce options that were normally offered at dinner.

Thomas and Jenna exchanged amused glances as Jonny looked crestfallen that his support in the argument had suddenly deserted him. His possible comeback was set aside by the device of the Tac-Chief and YL-18 coming to sit at the table besides theirs, needing to hear the night's report on what was removed from the ship in terms of WMG proselytic crap-wares.
Sighing forlornly (or like a diva) Jonny got into a short but detailed explanation of what happened with the robotic cleaning crew. "We got the bots inside and they needed about three hours to go through everything, then we sent in the human follow-up team. I guess the bots got about 90% of the scrap, live people got another 10% that was hidden way differently than we'd seen before." Pointing with his fork at the youngest boy while he drank a mouthful of coffee, Jon said "They must have taken lessons in betrayal and backstabbing from this one, cuz they got competent at hiding stuff, unlike inside the hospital buildings. These things were small, high tech, and completely integrated inside the thickness of metal panels or plastic parts that you'd think were stamped in a die-press, not molded around a circuit, battery & wires."

Swallowing his bite of syrupy waffle batter, the Tac-Chief asked in his usual unemotional tone "Where were these special pieces hidden? We'll need to reprogram the bot crews to go through the hospital complex all over again, and follow behind to make sure we get everything this time. We can't afford to have dead zones or blind spots when the new people get here. Even with telepathic surveillance in progress, it would be all too easy to have somebody drop out of contact without realizing it only after they get jacked in the head."

Jonathan shrugged, not too frightened by that possibility anymore. "The truly hidden emitters were like our tetchy gremlin found in the morgue manager's office; free-wave devices placed near the heads of workers. That means in the headrests of piloting chairs, and in the metal walls or plastic lamps right next to the bunks the crew sleeps in during long-haul trips. We also found some embedded inside the plastic shells of the wet baths, to get into the crew's minds when they were trying to get a few moments of solitude to rest and re-center themselves."

Snorting in amusement, the 11 year old commented dryly "Sit here, close your eyes, let your body move at its own rhythm while we instruct you on the glory of shitting white nuggets in a white throne to the glory of a white god fluttering aimlessly in a white cloud. Yeah... That sounds about right, for these guys' mindset."

While the boys were laughing, Jenna palmed her face with both hands, despairing that they would ever grow out of it at some point in time. Maybe that WMG neuro-education principle had a good point? But since she was a witch, she would try with potions and traditional mental domination spells first. Then she heard The 20 year old's follow-up and wondered silently if there really was that much to dominate and program to begin with. They were just boys, after all, not like if they were girls. Then, there would be some brains worth controlling.

Knowing full well the look on his fiancée's face and what it meant, Martin quickly directed the conversation back towards technical items. While there were plenty of empty rooms to sleep in comfortably, getting kicked out of his own bed that he shared with the young woman was not something he wanted. Tom could risk his own teenaged hide if he wanted, Martin had learned well enough to at least try to pretend being polite and mature when his intended was present. Unless she was the one cracking the lewd jokes. Her sense of humor really wasn't that different from the rest of the group, she just tried to lift up the speech level more than the rest of them cared about.

Younger Lucas #18 suddenly asked a significant question at Jonny that had the teenager pause as he thought about the answer. "Hey, old guy! Were there any robot charging bays in the ship? Or at least a few sockets to plug the power cables? Because if they always insisted on short crews of 4 to 8 people per ship, that meant only 3 people working on 8 hour shifts, with 2 pilots for night flight. Were there any bots aboard, and what were they used for?"

Chewing slowly on a piece of pancakes, Jon blinked a few times as his tired mind replayed for him what he saw in the corridors and rooms of the circular aircraft. Shaking his head negatively, he affirmed "Nope, kid. No robots at all. And I didn't see any charging pods, bays or chairs of any
sorts. It's possible that they could use some portable module to plug into the ship's power grid then jack the bots on it, though. So that could explain why they never bothered to have built-in dedicated stations for them." The teen shrugged one shoulder indolently as he sipped some coffee. He was starting to need the short-time wake-up boost to process through the conversation capably; the call of his shower and bed were getting harder to ignore.

YL-18 shook his head negatively, countering "I think it's a different reason. Just from looking at the calendar dates, the Halo airframe was designed almost 40 years before the humanoid robots became active. The ship had been in service for a longer time than just setting up WMG outposts. I checked on the detailed history over night, to be sure of what we had. These were initially developed for S&R at sea in heavy storms, and in the far flung parts of continental America's wilder areas, away from urbanization. It was almost 15 years later that the Pentagon ordered the first Long Range Scout version to be prototyped, to be used for close-in inspections of places that satellites couldn't see clearly. It offered also the advantage of being able to drop SEAL's or CIA agents on the target at need. Then the full-on combat version was prototyped some 20 years after it first flew."

Jenna saw the problem but asked, just to confirm; "But the first batch of information we got was that these were designed specifically to transport & build the antennae nodes for the WMG's coverage. Why do you have a second set of infos?"

Smirking nastily, the juvenile crime boss replied "Because we all forgot that the WMG still controls the basic elements of the Internex, from the fundamentals like the raw databases and access websites, to the user shells and search engines. Even when you hack through a system, you rarely think about the entire 'web-scape' around your probe or virus. So, when we asked about the ship's design, the WMG automatism's took the raw data from the Pentagon, the design companies and production factories, then re-ordered it to match it primary objective. To look as all-encompassing, primordial and irrefutable as the faith, creed and dogma of its creators. Therefore, it claims falsely that the ship was built 'specifically' for its own construction & spread, when in fact any second or third search directly into the calendars, schedules and production orders shows clearly that it wasn't the case."

The 20 year old 'Lucas' made a face, realizing just how bad, hostile and unreliable, the entire technological environment that surrounded them truly was. Not trusting Wikipedia because any nutcase could post anything as if it were factual truth was one thing, but not being able to rely on the OS or raw data sheets themselves was on another level of headache. Their group did not need this, but they had no choices, did they?

Thomas asked, uncertainty audible in his voice, "Can we actually trust this damn system to tell us the weather outside, or is it always sunny with golden light and white fluffy clouds cuz that's what Heaven's supposed to look like, if you're truly faithful?"

Nasty guffaws of dark humor resounded around the table as the relatives had to come to grips once again with how hostile and anti-human the entire planet had become in the past 300 years. No, their species hadn't done anybody any favors.

{ SQ } --- { I see you, as you see me back } --- { SQ }

(Epic Score - Liberators)

Saturday February 16th of 2301 – 11:04am

The Tac-Chief was sitting in his assigned chair in the belvedere, atop the administration tower, going over the second/final draft of the master list of people that were missing from their current
kin groups. A few feet away, the grumblings of the younger 'him' could be heard as he was working on plowing through the long, chaotic list of alternate realities and timelines that needed to be evaluated, to see if any other kindred could be brought in from those places the WMG and Aberration had rejected. It was also primordial to figure out 'WHY' these particular realities' – times' – persons had been scratched off the target lists. They could have some pretty strong allies out there, or it could be they were so damaged or unstable that nothing could help them, let alone make them useful for the Assembly. At that point, they would need to decide if they got involved or let Nature follow its cruel, uncaring course unaffected by their touch.

Three guesses which way the little mafia Don wanted to go, and the two first ones don't count.

Yeah, another bloomin' headache on top of all the rest.

Well, in due time. (Hi Hi Hi! Time! Funny thing for them, time!)

"Boss!" came the urgent call from one of the 9 year old 'Alan' who often ended up with daytime monitoring duty in the tower. It was a controlled climate, safe and removed from all dangers, so almost ideal for the little tykes to do something useful, when they weren't drafted to the garage to craft stuff. Friggin' little MacGyver's on steroids, the lot of them! Not that he would ever admit to what he could already do, back at that age. None of it was legal, let alone moral, so nope! No ways was he telling tales! Hi Hi Hi!

"What is it?" the older male asked tiredly, already feeling as if his thin reserve of patience would get spent on a single item, this early in the day. It couldn't just be another tropical storm coming in, could it?

Replying excitedly (not a good sign) the young boy pointed at his screen "We got company! There's an aerial drone doing recon in our area! It appeared from over the Atlantic, and it's crossing over New Cape Quest as we speak. On the vector it's traveling, it'll be through the city in about five minutes, then through the swamps and on top of us about two minutes after that."

Without a single word of reply, the young adult smacked the – stereotypical – glowing red button next to his own monitor to trigger the general alert, calling the Assembly to defensive stance to face possible invasion.

Barely one minute later, the elevator opened to let in a few older, more technically and magically capable teens and young adults who took over the consoles, relegating the kids to the roles of watchers and running errands when needed. The Tac-Chief himself exerted his considerable psionic abilities to found the basal node for a mental consensus, then reached out to all the members of the family to start a survey and inform them of the situation developing.

All their aggressive preparations were stopped cold by the reedy voice of one specific, tetchy little gremlin, who yet again interjected himself into an unfolding mess. "What are you big louts panicking about, this time?" asked the delinquent child with a bored attitude. "I mean, if that drone passed over NCQ without getting shot down by the WMG's last defensive automatons, shouldn't that tell us right away that it's not a threat?"

Palming his face with both hands, the Tactical Leader groaned aloud as sniggers and titters of childish amusement rang around the cavernous glass hall. Why in the world didn't he think of that? "Fine then! You pair of bozos, over there, can get out in the air and tag that drone with comms jacks. I want to know where it came from, and what it's doing in our airspace. NOW!" Bloody siblings... If he weren't so lonely most of the time, he'd have stayed in his room to sleep the month away. Well, he still had time to decide that, later on.
The two aforementioned siblings were one 'Thomas' and 'Jason' who immediately used a simple 'portal' spell to send themselves in the open air, right in the path of the motorized vector. Both were staying aloft on the soft eddies of a well timed 'levitation' spell, cloaked in 'climatic' and 'invisibility' dweomers so that the aircraft didn't see them as it passed under them.

Using a low-level 'flight' spell to give themselves some mobility & agility in the air, the 16 year old 'Thomas' and 21 year old 'Jason' placed themselves just inches above the drone's path so they only had to shift down a quarter of a foot to make contact. A quick 'spider climb' spell had them attached firmly to the metallic hull of the turbo-jet machine, yet fully mobile without any loss of manual agility.

Tom set the electronic and magical beacons in place, then wired them to one of the short stubby antennae that extended from the missile's fuselage. Jay was busy casting 'identify item' and 'detect functions' spells on the vehicle to make certain he knew who designed & built it, where it was from, and what capacities it had. The immediate results were both appeasing and encouraging, so he was able to calm himself enough to signal mentally to his cousin that he could calm down as well.

Once their jobs were done, they simply dropped into open air, with almost 15,000 feet of empty sky beneath them. A second later saw both males transformed into winged animals to fly back home leisurely. Thomas had used a ranger's prayer to become a small falcon while Jason used the Animus Unificat to become a seagull. Both avians winged it playfully back to the hospital complex, taking the fifteen minutes to exercise and take in some clean, fresh air as they flew.

Landing on the flat embattled roof, the two men transformed back into humanoid shape to climb down the stairs and back into the glassed belvedere. "Job done!" claimed Jason with a wide grin aimed at the older version of his genial cousin. It was incredibly funny how all the 'Lucas' were all the same drab, morose attitude when confronted with strange or unusual events. Poor guys... They certainly wouldn't be getting it any easier in the coming months, when more of everybody started arriving by the boatload.

Ignoring the unspoken barb of the other boy, the Tac-Chief instead concentrated on the hackers who were trying to punch through the military grade encryptions that shielded the drone's comm systems.

Shaking his head in amusement even more, Jason told the room at large "You guys do know about this little thingie called 'identify item' don't y'all? Cuz I kinda cast it on the missile, when we were traipsing on it."

Glaring at him mightily, the TC made an aggressive gimme gesture with his left hand, just as he flexed his right hand in preparation to administer the jokester a well deserved smack – somewhere. Jason was muscular all over, built like a champion sportsman and martial arts expert, which he was. It didn't particularly matter where he got hit, as long as he felt it happen, and Lucas didn't hit around the other male's head or neck. You did that only to an enemy you had to put down. No, that bicep looked mighty appealing, right about now.

Feeling that he was flirting with danger, Jason promptly grabbed his expedition partner to push him in front of the growling menace, getting an "Eeeep!" of panic from the teenaged hunter as he was suddenly moved without having wanted it. Ignoring all the guffaws and comments about his lack of fortitude emanating from the crowd, he slowly relocated nearer the smirking 'Jenna' that was from the Tac-Chief's reality. It was well known that the girl had a knack for calming him with just a few kind words, so he should be safe here. For now, anyways.

Raising both hands in mock surrender, the black haired archaeologist explained quickly "The
missile is French, it was made in the region of Nice. It's owned by the European Union's Directorate of Environmental Management. It's on a scheduled monthly patrol to inspect the planet for symptoms of climate change like deforestation, desertification, altered water levels, active volcanoes, earthquake damages, etc... It also tracks some migratory patterns for animals big enough, or exposed enough, to be scanned & counted on the fly."

Sitting back in his chair with a feel of immense relief, the older man asked for confirmation. "You're telling me that it's just a glorified jet propelled weather balloon? That thing isn't armed or aggressive?"

Shoving his hands in his cargo shorts' pockets, Jason replied glibly "This one isn't, but it is sending all its findings back to a central server in Europe. The EU's climatology analytics labs in The Netherlands. What happens from there, if it triggers an alarm of any sorts... The drone did pass over the Grosse Tronche complex, and our presence isn't really hidden. Even if we managed to cast a few localized dweomers for discretion and deflecting scans, the bloody big, green metal toilet bowl in the middle of our backyard kinda stands out."

Younger Lucas #18 waved a hand dismissively at those paltry concerns. "Who cares about alarms? The Euros can't come on American soil without the WMG's last functioning automatons reacting negatively. Like, shooting beams and missiles at them, negatively. The only reason we're all moving around freely is because we were brought in by the grid's avatar, Humania, so she logged us into the system with a minimal level of citizenry rights. Otherwise, we'd have gotten shot by some remote controlled gun-truck a long time ago. The good news means that if that thingie managed to pass through safely, and does so every month, then there must be some sort of international agreement still programmed in the servers, and we could exploit that loophole..."

Walking over to the consoles dedicated to long-term Internex hacking projects, the criminal genius asked "Did the comms jacks manage to penetrate the signals yet? I want to see what's happening in European soil. The WMG in America is blocking pretty much all of our attempts to see across the oceans on either side, but now that we have an actual European machine in our grasp, it should be easier to access & penetrate their sector of the web, to see what kind of mess their version of the World Management Grid has become."

Rubbing both hands through his short blond hair roughly, the Tac-Chief griped out "Okay, kiddies! New jobs for everyone! Put the routine monitoring aside to focus on drilling a hole in those firewalls. We need to see what's happening in Europe, especially if they have world maps with recent statistics. If the WMG in America let that drone pass unmolested, then there's a chance that its data-stream was allowed to go through unchanged. If that's the case, then we could have ourselves a humongous trove of raw, reliable data, that we've been needing but unable to get. So, mush! Go get it!"

A short burst of mental argumentation later and several people went back to their other jobs in the complex, while a few remained to help the cybernetic effort. They really did need those databases and system accesses for their long-term planning, and it was becoming a pressing need. They were only days away from having a fully enabled management console for the time-gate positioned locally, next to the current walls. The group was working on the architectural & engineering blueprints for an extension to house the fully enclosed transit platform and its minimal machinery, with the gate controls being placed in a bunkered room just underneath the glassed belvedere, to make the overall governance of operations easier to keep in hand. Already the walls were being demolished, infrastructures being changed or added, and new furniture crafted specifically to house the dedicated monitors and security apparatus that would cover the portal's area.

That European drone was a new headache, yeah, but it also brought answers and opportunities, so it
balanced out. And if that thing could pass peacefully in American airspace, then maybe there were other things that could pass as well. Maybe they would have more freedom of mobility and activity than initially suspected. It still remained to be proven, of course, but it seemed like a promising event. For now.

When a door closes, dig through the wall

(Two Steps From Hell - Victory)

Monday February 18th of 2301 – 17:00pm
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche, Florida (USA)
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)

The command crew of the Assembly were gathered in the command tower to watch the activation of the gateway's consoles, the prelude to engaging the time-gate itself in just a few days. Before their eyes, all the panels came alight, the LED's glowing strong in the windowless hall, each diode linked to a specific sensor or monitoring device in the newly constructed addition to the compound's perimeter walls. Once the plans had been drafted, it had taken only two work shifts to get everything erected solidly. Even the series of rainstorms that had taken to battering the region over the last few days didn't stop the work because the crews deployed 'storm shield' spells anchored to the manatites, as soon as they were positioned at the corners of the site.

The screens lit up, showing the diverse control zones, all completely finished and ready to serve. The large main screen was a transparent crystal ball hung from the ceiling, that merged a Tracy Holonet projection coming out 2 feet all around the sphere, with the Wolenczak Gaseous Display's variable density and U-Watch's feel-touch system as direct input/control. It was also already equipped with the ports and sockets to connect any future add-on's or system expansions that the InterPlex standards would generate so they could keep it until a true MU-IPX version of the machine was available.

In the main monitor, the command team could see the central, circular embarkation platform where the gateway would open. The portal threshold was elevated eight feet above the chamber's slanted concrete floor, completely enclosed by 10 feet thick, 30 feet tall concrete walls topped by vaulted & coffered ceilings from which hung sensors and defense turrets. The gate's archway stood at the far side of a 30 feet diameter platform from which extended a retractable 10 wide by 50 feet long driveway, strong enough to pass tractor-trailer trucks repeatedly each day, to reach the armored doors in the wall that was shared with the hospital complex.

The gateway itself was a simplistic 1 foot thick construction made of alchemically synthesized metals, crystals and stones, shaped into a 12 feet wide, 15 feet tall rectangular frame to center and hold the active aperture when the WMG time-gate or CIRPA portal device were engaged. The dark purple frame was inlaid with cool minty green runes and glyphs that glowed eerily even under the harsh white lights of the overhead projectors. A pair of armored full-length hinges ran down both sides of the archway, holding a set of fire extinguishers, Chryo-Blast cannons, and ten feet long power-swords. These hinges were the first line of defense to block enemies or wildlife from forcibly penetrating the embarkation dock through the gate's external aperture since the thing was always completely open when active.

Other weapons included several types of force-fields, a set of glyphs that could remove all air &
The group's best technicians had been working in overdrive, trying to create a replica of CIRPA's portal device and they had finally succeeded, just in time to include the new machine in the building. The actual generator that created the doorway was located in a new basement level under the machinery hub next to the garage, far away from where the portal aperture would appear, to give a false sense that the device was in the wrong place. This illusion could defeat an invader fully, or at least slow them enough to allow the Assembly's people the time to flee.

The Tactical-Chief nodded at a young 'Alan' that sat at the wide, airy console that controlled the portal array, telling him "Okay, kid, rev it up. Let's see this famous mechanized version of a 'wizard door' in action."

Typing quickly on the flat crystal keyboard built into the console, the 'Alan' brought up coordinates in the south Pacific ocean, where Tracy Island was supposed to be located. A few taps on the feel-touch crystal screen allowed him to make an orthopter drone activate, lifting slowly from under the elevated platform, passing over the guardrails and into the portal's aperture. Barely 20 seconds later, the drone sent through the still open gateway a live stream of images & sounds showing the ruins of the once great Tracy Estate.

On one side, it was incredible to see that they had managed this feat of merging technology and magick with so few resources and even less time. And they all knew it was just a patch-in job, not a genuine intermixing of principles. But still, the building additions worked, the command center's new floor worked, and most importantly, the new remote doorway bummed off CIRPA's archives worked as they hoped. Now, they just had to see if anything truly useful came out of all this effort they invested on such short notice.

The 20 year old Tac-Chief crossed his arms over his chest, glaring at the images from the faraway drone as if they offended him personally. Turning to the young crime lord besides him, he asked in low tones "Do we know what happened to the 'Alan' and 'Tanusha' of this dimension? What can we expect if we send an expedition to that rock? I don't want to waste man-hours and resources only to have an emotional bomb explode in our faces, not without some sort of profit from it."

Younger Lucas #18 replied softly, under the din of happy exclamations and high-fives celebrating their group's new success "Not much. The 'Jefferson' of this world was a bastard to all his children. Enough so that 'Scott' actually petitioned the courts for guardianship of his younger siblings and the trust funds left by their mother at age 20, so that 'John' would be 18 and able to help as another responsible adult. The 'Alan' of the period was 9 years old but already badly damaged, as was the 14 year old 'Gordon' who was hospitalized for grave injuries. Virgil was barely so-&so, forcing them to hospitalize him as well when it was found out he had been hiding unhealed injuries and a badly spiraling pain-pill habit."

Shrugging idly, the child morosely detailed "When they abandoned their dad, all his projects about International Rescue were scuppered. 'Jeff' fired the Bellegant's and Hackenbacker's the very moment the court papers were filed, before the judge gave his decision or even heard the case. He then tried to use the automatons Hiram had used to build the IR hangars to transform the island into a Christian Borstal from the 1800's, dreaming about beating and raping his kids back into submissive obedience to his much vaunted will. The courts gave the team of 'Scott' and 'John'
reason to keep their siblings away from him, so none ever returned to the island. Mostly because 'Jefferson' never showed up in court, sending his usual THI lawyer to argue that they had no authority in "Jeffersonia" or international waters off Australia's coasts. That argument killed off his reputation and capacity to influence the US government towards his views because he now looked completely crazy."

Giving a small careless wave of his right hand, the child ended "The US public civilian archives and WMG's military dossiers don't actually say what he did from then on. He just disappeared from all media or governmental awareness, managing Tracy Heavy Industries from the Island by emails. His kids all moved in together in their mother's old ranch, near Kansas city, going on to do diverse ordinary things. 'Alan' and 'Tanusha' hooked up when he turned 15 because his small company – ASET – needed him to have more technical qualifications to grow further. So, he began taking advanced engineering & architecture classes at the same Uni she attended, and an old friendship evolved. That's what I got from my time-dive to date."

Grunting in acknowledgment, the older male declared "So, except as a mine for resources or a fall-back hole, it has nothing to be worried or happy about. Good. I'll prepare an expedition to go fetch some clean fish, maybe some venison, and establish a fall-back encampment in case the bloody WMG reactivates. We know at least the IR hangars exist, so that's a huge cavern system already in place to build in, plus the vertical shafts for air, stairs, lifts, plumbing and wires are all dug out for us. The remote team will just have a lot of clean-up to do, then design a remodel big enough to house around 600 people split by dimensional groups with a large meeting hall to get everybody together when we plan or vote on stuff."

Nodding absently, the younger boy replied "Sounds about right. Plus, if we don't find a shipyard good enough to build the Grendel, we could always use Tracy Island's natural estuary, converting it to an industrial base fitting for our project. With a couple of Halo airships and a few Thunderbird-2 omnibian haulers, we should be equipped enough to do everything we need without feeling cramped or lacking. The rest can be added or customized by those who feel the need as personal projects, or trade with their neighbors for some help."

Clapping his hands together, the Tac-Chief shouted over the excited crowd, getting them to quiet down so he could start issuing the orders to form their first major expedition not in NCQ. That included establishing a planning group and the three field groups, with some sorting & recycling stations in the garage edifice. Time would tell how profitable this endeavor turned out, but at least it wouldn't be negative.

Oi, twit! Take a break!

(Two Steps From Hell – Never back down)

Friday February 22nd of 2301 – 10:00am
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche, Florida (USA)
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)

"Are you sure that you're ready for this?" asked the 21 year old 'Martin' from his much older Uber Brunder as he checked for the sixth time the programming and targeting data.

The 33 year old was stressing out over the first activation of the time-gate from a location other
than the substation in New Cape Quest. Everything to date seemed to indicate it would work without any hitches, but the oldest 'Lucas' in the bunch was proving to be real good at imagining catastrophe scenarios every few minutes. The fact that some of his panicky ideas had actually made the construction team find & repair potentially fatal flaws, defects, and alignment issues in the gateway frame they had built in the compound's extension had not done anything good for his nerves. Now, if only the programmers could manage to convince him that everything would be alright.

Trying for some dry humor to defuse the situation, 'Martin' asked brattily "You do know that this is a TIME machine, right? Like, if you mess up the first shot, you can just send yourself a message in the past to explain what the mistake was and avoid it altogether. Like a video game that you save every few minutes so that if your character dies, you just boot your last save and continue on. No biggie."

Cracking the knuckles on both hands, the older blond male glared at his younger spiritual sibling, replying quite tartly "You know, it's runts like your smirky self that make me rethink my position on corporal punishment, and at what age a kid is too old for it to be useful."

Smirking even wider, 'Martin' came back gaily "I know. It's what Jenna says to me and Tom every week." Then he scratched his cheek, adding pensively "Our own 'Lucas' says it to us too, come to think of it."

"I wonder why?" snarked back the eldest sibling, thinking strongly that smacking his head into the hardwood console would hurt less than trying to reason with a bloody twink when he was running on coffee, instant ramen soup and less than 8 hours of sleep spread over the last three days. Not that he would admit that last part aloud, lest the smarmy little buggers try to make him sleep, on account of caring for his health, or some shitty rot.

"Are you still up?" came a reedy voice that intruded his thought process.

Asking 'Martin' for details, YL-18 demanded "Did he go to bed at any point last night? He's been at this for over 19 hours that I counted."

"Shoot!" mumbled the oldest member of the Assembly as all heads in the control hall swiveled menacingly towards him, blue and amber eyes alight with nefarious intentions towards his poor, maligned self. There was no ways in tarnation that this was ending well for him, no sirree!

"I see..." spoke Younger Lucas #18, through tightly pursed lips overshadowed by squinted eyes and mightily frowned brows that spoke of impending corrective measures being enacted to all & sundry. "Save your work files, pass the console to your relief tech, and follow me. I just had breakfast, but you could obviously use some food before a long soak in the bath and twelve hours of sleep. And I mean truly 12 hours, even if I have to drug or spell you to slumber. Dropping you from the belvedere unto your thick noggin isn't out of consideration either, at this point." Sniffing loudly in disapproval, the 11 year old snarked "Stubborn brat!" at the older.

"Hey! I'm not a brat! I'm 33 years old, mature, responsible and hard-working! That's not being stubborn!" the adult replied, trying to save some dignity from the five foot tall, beanpole-thin monster who stood with crossed arms and a scowl on his left side.

Blinking incredulously at his older version, the child seemed to glower even worse as he affirmed "I may be young and lacking in the life experience department, but even a kid fresh off the schoolyard wouldn't believe that load of tosh you're pushing at me. So save your work and get moving or I'll ask the ever so helpful 'Martin' to spell you into a zombie state till you're eating your brunch."
Taken aback by the bossy child's retort, the adult concentrated on saving and closing his work product then reset the console for the following shift crew. He took the time to pack all his paper research notes and tablet in his newly crafted satchel, reviewing the work area to make certain he had left nothing behind. When he was younger, he had always made efforts to keep his publicly visible bench or desk completely clean to avoid the stereotypes about messy teenaged boys and disorganized, chaotic geniuses. He wasn't about to stop now, especially not with as many blabbing gossip-mongers as surrounded him.

As the older male stood, finally ready to leave, the younger boy smiled sadly, speaking softly as they began to walk in tandem towards the elevator. "It's a good thing that you're going to eat and sleep afterwards. I finished the archival inspections of this reality to figure out what happened to all the members of our extended family that should be surrounding you, as each 'Lucas' is in the other dimensions."

The older 'Lucas' took one glance at his younger 'self' and it was enough to make him understand that the following conversation wouldn't be a happy ending for his life-story. He decided to stay silent until he had some food in his gut and rested enough to have a better disposition to hear out this mess. "Make it wait until tomorrow morning, I'm not in shape to hear this. Tomorrow, I should be."

The younger boy stayed silent, escorting him to the restaurant hall then walking away to the garage edifice.

Hard facts of life

(Two Steps From Hell - Blackheart)

Saturday February 23rd of 2301 – 07:30am
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche, Florida (USA)
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans’ Support Services (VSS)

Older 'Lucas' woke with a startle to an annoying sound that no human should ever be submitted to in life, death, or between; the scratching of finger nails on a chalkboard. Loudly. In his ears. Both of them.

Swearing roundly and quite loudly, the scarred man yanked off the sheets and jumped out of his bed, ready for a fight when he saw the source of the bloody, ear-splitting noise sitting on the dresser besides the door. A damned mini-tape player! A fluo Post-It! note tagged on the device said "Get washed and meet us in the restaurant."

He recognized the handwriting as his youngest sibling. Smarmy little gremlin that he was, despite being five feet tall and less than half his weight. Most of it in raw snark too, not muscle. He knew the kid well enough by now to affirm that without any doubts, take his word on it.

Groan!

That warm shower helped wake him, true, but it wasn't as helpful as just staying asleep for three more hours would have been. Even the mug of hot coffee that had been placed in the bathroom to entice him to move his carcass around was – almost – not enough to motivate his wakefulness. If
only the damned dreams had left him alone last night.

Sigh.

At least grooming himself was easy; by staying bald and shaven, he could let it all air-dry without any effort, then he could just throw on some jeans, a t-shirt and flannel shirt, toe-on his sneakers then tramp his way down to the restaurant hall. Armed with his work satchel on a shoulder and half-full thermal mug of coffee held in both hands, the barely healthy man was finally able to march to the bloody meeting that couldn't wait.

Upon entering the ground floor hall, the oldest 'Lucas' easily spotted the command group seated all together at their usual table, right in the middle of the great room. He went to drop his bag but kept his mug so as to refill it when he passed by the buffet's beverage station. A quick walk-through with his tray landed him a premade meal of over-easy eggs, white toast, hash browns, bacon and a small bowl of fruit salad. He accepted the tall orange juice that was handed to him along with his freshly topped-off mug because he had some healing potions to drink and 'Diana' had told him that the particular recipe worked better with orange or grapefruit juice in his stomach.

The group were amused to see their eldest member walk over to his seat with a triangle of toast half-eaten in his mouth, sticking out as he chewed on it with every step. Taking his chair with a sigh of contentment, the adult popped the cap of the first potion vial to let it air out as he opened the second one to drink straight from the bottle as the medic had told him. The small dose was highly concentrated but acted over 16 hours to make his body metabolize all materials he ate, inhaled or received by IV line at a better ratio. It was the bigger vial that held the nutritional enhancer, for which he needed the fruit juice. That hospital grade elixir was designed to contain supplemental concentrated nutrients and also make the patient's stomach and bowels absorb better, all the while regulating acid, bile an insulin production to avoid nausea or diabetic shock. It was the most important medicine he had to take, and the most effective at reestablishing his overall health.

The spiritual siblings spoke softly around him, discussing education programs, training hunting & fighting skills, and the flourishing barter & trade system that was coming alive between the members of the Assembly. The people around him were basically ending their meals, having an easy time until he was done with his own breakfast before the serious conversation began. The older male took his time to enjoy his meal, and wake up properly, since nobody was pushing him to go faster.

It was near 9:00am when he finally pushed back his tray stacked with soiled dishes. By common accord, all the leaders went back to fetch some fresh coffee, juice, and plates with muffins and cookies to have some finger foods during the hard conference that was about to happen. Sometimes, having a bit of munchies at hand could help to pass through the rough patches in the discussion without having to take a break in the bathroom.

Now that everybody was back in their usual seats, the Tac-Chief established the psionic consensus then ceded the lead to Younger Lucas #18 who began the discussion. "Wow! This is still amazing, even after a dozen times I live through it!" exclaimed the 11 year old as he smiled widely at his extended family.

Ignoring the smirks and chuckles around him, the boy turned his attention to the painful subject he had to speak of with their oldest relative. "I have finished the fourth revision of the list of people we're planning to bring in from the different realities, including some that aren't represented here currently. It brought me to a series of painful conclusions about the state of our kinship."

Taking a breath, the boy placed his hands flat atop the table, looking at his finger nails for a few
seconds as he tried one last time to find a less harmful way to reveal this. "I have no way to dampen the blow of the findings, no matter how hard I try." Looking at their Uber Brunder directly, the young child said "You have nobody to bring in that is your age. We have scanned the records from the USA as thoroughly as cybernetics allow. I even went the hard way of asking our few technomancers to use magic on the consoles, to pass through firewalls and hidden partitions in the data stacks. The results haven't differed either way. Any siblings or kin we had in your dimension don't live passed age 17 for the most part. Only indirect relations like Tanusha Bellegant, Lua or Fermat Hackenbacker live up to age 20. Absolutely none of our group's core people and immediate blood or adopted siblings survive passed adolescence. In fact, if you had stayed in your original epoch, the bastards who enslaved you aboard SeaQuest would probably not have allowed you to live to reach your 20th birthday."

Nodding glumly, the oldest male admitted "From what I remember of my spying aboard ship, the last few conversations between Bridger, Ford and Smith were that 'somebody' high in the UEO had a conference call with another 'somebody' in Washington DC. These 'leaders' had agreed it was necessary to terminate me before the half-time mark of the boat's current patrol cycle, so I had maybe another five weeks to live when the gate activated in front of us."

The Tac-Chief asked as gently as he could "What happened? From what you told us a few days ago, the Tracys had all survived in relatively good health by dumping their deluded bastard of a dad when Allie was eight years old or so. Why didn't they live any longer?"

The juvenile crime lord sighed despondently as he glanced at all the faces aimed towards him. "They were murdered. I have positive proof that each and every one of our near and extended kin in this dimension were all killed in criminal acts. Usually it was passed off as a banal traffic accident, or a random bout of violence during another crime that got botched, like a mugging or car-jacking. In essence, when you know where to look, and how to analyze police or CSI reports, you can spot the overall pattern easily. The perps weren't all that good at hiding their tracks, mostly because their victims weren't in any ways united or supported by anybody. With completely isolated targets and no witnesses to worry about, they usually did only the most minimal effort at dispersing evidence or hacking lab servers to falsify data sheets. On the positive side, we can now confirm with absolute certainty that 100% of all killings were done with magical means, by magical beings, and magic was used to screw the police results."

The oldest 'Martin' asked in a low tone of voice "You kept all those analytics, yes? Because we need to do some retro-engineering to find the bastards and warn our kin BEFORE they get offed. We have a bloody time machine; it's about damn time we put it to good use for ourselves, for a change!" Then he grinned roguishly "All puns were thoroughly intended on that one."

The oldest Jonny smirked as he commented "Nice, bro! But I see what you mean, and I second the feeling about it. All our lives we've played to kindly, too defensively. Basically, we played by the rules others imposed on us to make us sitting ducks that were easier to find, attack and destroy by cowardly, traitorous ambushes. Like they did with my mother, or Jason's parents, or Tom & Jen's parents, etc... We need to start seeing this like our little gremlin says it is; a trench war with us stuck in the middle, surrounded on all sides with most of our -supposed- allies having been bribed to turn against us."

'Thomas' grimly added "At least now, we've got a methodology to look out for, and a timeline that these guys seem really bent on following. If the five main guys of our core group and their immediate siblings are all killed before age 20 at the latest, that can indicate either an event set on the calendar, or they really want to avoid letting one of us reaching their 'Magisterium Ascendo' at age 21, with the power boost it unlocks. It might even be that some of us have weird magical inheritances or contracts bound to a minimal age of 21 to activate, so killing the entire family
before that would prevent the inheritance passing onto the surviving relatives."

Younger Lucas #18 explained "It's not just the kids or teens that got targeted; our members' living parents, even if they were criminalized or indecent, were executed all the same. Nobody could ever claim that Lawrence or Cynthia from your life were good people, but they were killed in the five days following your passage into the future. According to what I read in the archives, the perps thought that the attraction of inheriting their fortunes would be enough to drag you back into a visible area so they could finally end you. There were a lot of men with lengthy criminal records stalking around the court houses where the testaments were read and arbitrated, and they all seemed frustrated when you never showed."

Several grunts and nods of assent responded to his words. This was exactly the sort of thing the Assembly had been expecting to hear, after they saw that the Tracy brothers had escaped their father's sect, only to separate and disappear into anonymity, the very moment they reached their high school diploma.

'Alan' agreed mildly with 'Tom' as he sipped some orange juice, to change from all the coffee he tended to drink when things got nasty. "The nitty-gritty of how my brothers and I died is important, yes, but not immediately, not when we could focus on the younger, child-aged versions to bring here. We all posited that we had to bring the older versions first, followed by the younger so that all the mental & magical compiling occur in the proper order. Likewise, we have to send them back from the youngest to the oldest so that all the acquired knowledge doesn't get erased by some temporal paradox or loop. What if, for this dimension, we take only the very youngest and the adolescents? Leave out the young adults and anybody who would be 33 years old? How would that affect the balance of what we're planning to do here, in terms of reeducation?"

The oldest 'Diana' replied slowly as she thought through the complex temporo-dimensional strategy. "Well, speaking in purely theoretical terms as we never tried this with CIRPA, your argument is valid. If we concentrate on the youngest living versions of us in universes that have completely eradicated our kinship group, we could produce an alternative pathway for that reality to follow. Since our presence together here is in itself the proof of 'multiverse theory', then it should be possible to – force – a bifurcation or branching-off in the realitive tree that was established ahead of our intervention. As for how much control we would have on the process, or what results would be produced... That's almost as random as basal Nature itself."

'Jason' put in softly "But it would still be better than what we have found out to date, no matter how randomized the result. After all, it's a choice between certified extermination and a small possibility of those newly educated kids surviving long enough for them to have a real chance at enduring through a shadow war. Maybe even long enough that the enemy's calendar gets scrapped, or one reaches 'Magisterium Ascendo' to unlock whatever event the hidden perps want to derail. In any case, it gives them a fighting chance, instead of being fish in a barrel."

'Tanusha' interjected blithely "We keep accumulating proof that our people were manipulated, mind raped, set against each other to rip apart their family units, or flat out murdered. Yet, for as much as we found, we're still critically short on details like WHO and WHY. The HOW is nice to know, but unless it leads further, then it's not much help. We need to investigate this more profoundly to have a clear, final determination of the enemy."

YL-18 agreed with the golden-eyed woman, with a caveat. "While in principle I can agree that knowing our enemies, and therefore their goals and methods, is paramount to our survival, we have bigger and more immediate considerations. Finalizing the summons list then bringing more kin to our domain is the penultimate goal at hand. We need more workforce, and the incredibly capable, precocious minds they each have. Plus, to run the investigations any further, we need more data
points, spread across more dimensions. The problem is that what I saw to date shows there are factual variances in the calendar years and period of life at which our versions are abused, damaged or killed. It doesn't follow a rigorously replicated pattern, just a basic outline."

It was 'Jonny' who saw the problem and the solution the child was coming to; "You want to do an exhaustive census of all the possible dimensions the Aberration and WMG surveyed during their search, including those they rejected. You want to try a brute-force statistical approach to finding the earliest common event that links all our abuse, running away or deaths. You think that if we dot-map the timeline of each person's existence, we'll be able to create a multi-D graph to see where/when all the lines intersect. We could find the locus in the timelines, the flexure that crosses through all the lines at the same moment in each dimension."

'Martin' ran a weary hand through his crested blond hair, exhaling in anxiety as he tried to fully comprehend what the kid was proposing. "You have any idea how much computing power that'll take? We're talking Cray stacks linked by a physical backbone of crystal wires. Not to mention custom-built apps for all the specialty data crunching to collate the temporo-dimensional cartography, calendar and lifeline plotting. Where on Earth do you think we can find that kinda gear?"

The youthful mafia Don shrugged indolently as he answered "Nowhere. Even with the WMG running on all cylinders, I'm pretty sure she didn't have the capacities or CPU power we need. But that's why we're planning to build our own, isn't it? Like I said to Kayo, priorities in the proper order. We need to get our kindred here, scan & heal them as we did to each other, then process the Assembly through the collective reeducation program. Once we're all at a standard level, we start the heavy research projects into intermodal tech and bio-tech, then add psionics, then magicks, until we reach IPX standards. Only then, can we build the computers, scanners and programs needed to finish the bloody investigations. Between a new slew of drones, inter-realitive comms and brand new softwares, we'll be able to send probes back into the far past of each reality, accrue raw data on each person's life & habits, then plot their lifelines in the master map until we see the locus or flexures forming."

Shaking her head in both amazement and despair, 'Jenna' exclaimed "You want to 'time-dive' through each reality to spy upon each and every member of our family, hoping we'll either see the clues outright, or else the statistical mapping will reveal it by virtue of sheer, hard, number crunching power? Am I the only one to be flabbergasted by his approach? Or is he on the right track? I don't know anymore."

TheTac-Chief responded to his spirit-sister's dismay with a slow but firm answer: "Yeah, he's gone in the head, that's a given. But it don't make him stupid or useless. And lack of active psionics or magicks don't make him unable to learn the concepts, the lore, and work it the same as we aren't all spaceship pilots but we understand the basics of what's needed for a ship to work and keep the crew alive. What he doesn't know yet he can learn, practice, then put it to work in the real project when he's ready. Just like we'll be doing, and just like we've done all our lives to date. We identify the problem, determine the tools or skills missing, then acquire them by learning or renting a contractor. Same as always. The scope's a lot bigger than usual, yeah... And the endgame's a lot more emotionally implicated for all of us... But still, it's the usual anyways."

Their Uber Brunder said in a determined tone "The time-gate is ready for its first dry run. I was planning to summon some inert materials from the homes of each one of us, so our experts can match the biological and spiritual signatures to the living people we have present. When that's done, I was planning to do a series of remote cross-reality hacking to grab some databases to help along the investigation into our hidden enemies. Our design group thought that after all that was done, bringing living people could happen. Do you think we can work with that line of events, or I
need to rewrite my project calendar?"

Negative head shakes and short vocals replied all around the tables as they agreed with his view of how to proceed. Not only did he have the most experience with the device, his methodology assured the least possible chances of failure, as in grabbing the wrong person or killing them in transit. The idea to do a massive data grab along the way to test the comms capacities when the gate is open was pure genius, and it would really give a boost to the entire investigative endeavor part of their plans.

With a new, firm view of what was necessary, the command group of the Assembly bent their unified minds to the task of planning the expeditions to Tracy Island to create their fall-back base, as well as the remote hack going on against the European Union, and the new hunting & fighting practice drills to put in the daily routine.

Younger Lucas #18 added a strategic point: "When you hack the web, go back to the beginning of DARPA-NET to infiltrate some physical adaptive jacks into the military servers. Since they can adapt they'll hack through the codes and file architecture on their own. All you have to do is open the gate on every 10th year of the calendar to get an encrypted, compressed data packet from the drones without further effort. That way, you can harvest the data from the low-speed, low-processor networks then work it inside our high-speed systems. It also means that we'll be able to see the innovation, evolution and spread of the world's cyber strength from a truly objective vantage, without being seen ourselves. Oh, and don't forget to tag the Europeans, Russians, Chinese, India, Israel and North Korea, along the good ole USA and its CSA systems. Since the WMG is perverting all the data, we need as many unfiltered outsiders' views as we can get."

The older male groaned in misery at the size of the job that had just dropped on him. Especially since it really was the best, most viable tactical plan they could follow. Drats! More paperwork and data-mining tonight.

Breaking limits, then hitting new ones

(Two Steps From Hell - Winterspell)

Wednesday February 27th of 2301 – 10:00am
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche, Florida (USA)
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)

Five days later, the command group assembled again, this time in a conference room situated at mid-height in the administration tower. Heavy construction had been going on in the restaurant to enlarge the floor space while adding a mezzanine balcony that would be mostly above the kitchen area and additional bathrooms. Two extensions from the balcony going towards the new wall of tall accordion windows ended by shallow grade ramps to allow people with wheelchairs or walkers to access it without having to go to the elevator core. The renovations would leave the interior space some 24 feet tall with reinforced coffered ceilings that would support their new green roof dedicated to growing medical herbs. The dining hall would end up with twice the floor footage at ground level and a quarter of that across the balconies. They would pass from the original 400 seats capacity to 1,000 seats combined. The architects, engineers and ward masters had taken the estimated number of folks that would be present when all the gate summonings were done to guide their planning. The resulting chamber would be quite nice, for an institutional setting, when it was
finished crafting in another three days.

In the meanwhile, people had to eat in smaller groups, using conference rooms, offices, the garage's berths or just finding a shaded spot outside. The temperature had finally relented on them, giving some days with a pale, weak sunlight after almost a solid week of rainfall. The plants were green with life, and the smell of fresh sap was hanging cloyingly in the air all around the hospital compound. The Tactical Team had decided to use a conference room on the tenth floor, well above both the construction work and human traffic at the clinic's walk-in cabinets on the third and fourth floors. The room's one big advantage was it could hold 24 seated persons easily, had a full presentation system, and windows oriented towards the vast Everglades swamps rather than the banal cement buildings of the complex.

Everybody having eaten already and finished their pressing paperwork or crafting team supervision for the moment, the command team took a few minutes to just get situated, gossip a bit with their siblings, and mentally order the subjects they had to bring up in the meeting. They weren't taking time to physically meet like this just for fun; there were genuine reasons vital for their collective survival.

"Okay people," called out the Tac-Chief, "Settle down a bit, we're starting." Turning to their oldest sibling, he waved a hand vaguely at him, stating brattily "Go ahead, man. Make yourself interesting."

Ignoring the snorts and guffaws around the room, the Uber Brunder stood at the central podium to use the presentation equipment to aid visually his exposé. "My gate control team has spent the last four days arduously combing through all the realities represented in the Assembly's current format for material samples, along a systematic wide-net data grab of everything we could think of that held strategic relevance to our cause. We followed our beloved mafia boss' idea of opening the gate way back, in the early 1940's when the first magnetic reels of database footage were created in the USA, to plant autonomous drones in the army bases. We have been able to recover nearly 350 years of computer monitoring and wiretapping across a dozen countries, in each reality we could reach, including many that don't have representatives amongst us presently."

Taking a huge, deep breath, the 33 year old looked around the room as he dropped "We were able to plumb ALL of these relevant universes inside these passed 4 days, with nary a pause between closing, targeting and reopening the gateway."

Silence was immediate and heavy, almost oppressive throughout the room.

'Martin' asked testily "What about the phat-assed 29 days of delay between gate openings to recharge the bloody capacitors? Wasn't that the minimal safe delay or some such?"

Pursed lips and eyes ablaze with venomous wrath, Younger Lucas #18 confirmed "Yes, almost. I was clearly told we had a non-compressible 30 days of delay because the system had such a long charge cycle, which was due to the energy requirements of punching through both time AND dimensional curtains."

Their older sibling shrugged powerlessly as he explained "Well, about that delay... Yeah, but nope. Not 30 days after all. The capacitor set is actually a series of massive sodium-in-fusion-state batteries attached to a network of 'hot' fusion reactor cores that keep the salt-alloy liquid enough to capacitate electrical charges while also supplying said energy. Therefore, the actual delay between opening, closing and reopening the time-gate apparatus is roughly on a scale of five minutes, though it goes towards fifteen if we have to reach into another dimension."

Blinking his eyes rapidly as he tried to wrap his conscience around the mastodontic size of the
system implied, 'Jonny' shook his head with an exclamation of dismay as he began to rub both temples in an effort to thwart a possible migraine. "How in fucking Hell Everburning did you manage to pass from 30 days to 15 minutes?"

The older male shrugged again, giving his family a weak, innocent smile. "We didn't. The system never actually needed that long to recharge between openings. When the diverse 'Jonny Quest' in the group shared with us the specs & data sheets for Benton's 'Rachel' temporal device, we saw that he had managed to create a localized time dilation effect, followed by a temporal punction, that required a MUCH lower initial cost in resources and power to activate the machine. Since we all know the quality and reliability of Benton's work products, we took it as granted he had a better design, so we used 'Rachel' as baseline to try to find where the WMG's design was flawed or ineffective. That was when we found the answer we didn't want. The machine wasn't ineffective, or badly designed, or damaged, or anything hardware related."

Younger Lucas #18 suddenly stood up in a towering rage, throwing his 6" dagger at the wall where it embedded a full inch deep into the acoustic paneling. Swearing profusely like a tavern full of drunken sailors on a bender, the boy tramped loudly to the wall to recover his blade, slamming it home in the sheath before he prowled back to his seat, still furious at life, the WMG, and everything else around.

Nodding his head in sympathy, the oldest adult said blandly "Yeah, what he said. I had that reaction too when I found out the problem. The machinery for the time-gate is actually pretty advanced. It also looks like somebody did get access to both Benton Quest's 'Rachel' project files and the CIRPA portal device at some point, cuz the thing has a lot of elements common to both. No, the problem was the blasted World Management Grid. The AI needed a crapton of time to analyze the social, judicial, political and religious effects of each person brought in, not what they could do in term of ecology, climate, energy, technology or weapons. In essence, the stupid Grid was trying to figure out, one pawn at a time, if it had -guessed- the correct person to grab or not, then try again."

'Diana' asked slowly, uncertain she understood, "You mean that it wasn't the Wise-You-Bridger Aberration that was deciding who to bring over? It was the bloody Grid's botched AI that was playing dice with all our lives?"

Giving the group his best, most sincere face of sympathy, not practiced for some 14 years, the man at the front replied gently "That's the conclusion we have. The gateway's open-close-open cycle can be as short as 5 minutes because that's the minimal time needed for the radiations and exotic particles generated to disperse enough to have a safe activation for the next set of coordinates. The capacitor and generation complexes are numerous, massive, and able to supply energy to multiple gateway machines in parallel, without any delays, lags, or sudden power variations in the cables. Technically, we could build hundreds of temporo-dimensional gate arches and work them simultaneously without any significant accidents or radiological events occurring."

The heavy, oppressive silence reinstated itself for a good fifteen minutes as the Assembly's leaders digested the news they had just been given. It could, and would in fact, change a great deal of their tactical planning since the schedule for off-world contacts could now be accelerated by 1000%. Instead of grabbing one small familial group of 3 – 5 persons per month, they could probably raid all of their kindred from one world in the same day, then do it again on a different world the following day without any fear of ruining the network.

Which meant faster acquisition of people, with a lot more pressure on their medics and quartermasters, then a friggin' lot of stress on the new people as more of the same kept coming every day, for the same reasons.
The older brother tapped his podium with a metal pen to produce a small noise to get people's attention focused back to his presentation. "Pursuant to the tasks allocated, my team has already managed to get all the solids, scans and data grabs required on our project ticket. And we can confirm that the gateway will function as much for local teleportation in the same time & dimension as it does for traffic across both barriers. So, we now have complete control of a gateway device able to pass an aircraft carrier through, to whichever place, dimension or temporal lineage that we want. That's my report's end."

Before anybody else could speak, YL-18 entered the fray swinging hard; "We need to get the new rooming arrangements ready ASAP or we'll have chaos in the halls and between buildings. We need to re-position all of us by reality of origin, to make 'home-groups' based on the 'age' or 'generation' of the people coming in. We need to have a structure of management set in place, ready to welcome new guests before they arrive. If the new guys come in only to be parked forcibly on folding cots in the agora or garage's working floor, we'll lose whatever small bit of trust they could be disposed to afford us. We need to show a clear, palpable level of organization, skills and competency for these newcomers to believe us long enough to get our message through without a fight. Remember that they'll be as damaged as you all were on first awakening. Remember that if the Old Guy and I hadn't shown to have solid heads and clear plans the moment you opened your eyes, you'd have all scrambled off into Nature as soon as you could move without face-planting in the floor."

'Jenna' agreed with the 11 year old quickly, explaining "He right on that. Martin, Diana, Tom and I wouldn't have wasted a lot of seconds on listening to the pair of you if we hadn't perceived a good outcome on first glance. And you had the advantage that we were all coming off some bloody powerful sedatives, so we were a captive audience. These new people won't be asleep or drugged, they'll have all their fully stocked gear and healthy reflexes when they pass through the aperture." Then the young woman teased the group by adding in a bratty tone 'Unless you want to make it look like some alien abductions from 1940's Roswell, and plan to grab the poor siblings in their beds at night. That could make for an awkward family gathering, the morning after."

The group let out a few chuckles or snorts of amusement at the blond girl's joke, clearly needing the stress relief she provided them. The Tac-Chief playfully poked the girl's shoulder in guise of reprimand, or comment on his non-amusement, all the while wearing a smirk that made him look younger than his hurtful, injurious life had left him. 'Martin' was simply shaking his head, trying to ignore his wife and her juvenile humor before he got dragged into it by 'Thomas' who was palming his face as he tried to keep from laughing aloud. The group took a few minutes to clear it from their system, benefiting greatly from the minutes of de-stressing they got.

"Okay, okay, we got that one out, so let's get serious again." asked 'Alan' while smirking in amusement at all the gabbing going around. "We do have to re-plan everything according to that new normal, so let's."

Their local crime boss groaned miserably, hanging his head as he volunteered "I'm the only one in the whole group with any experience at large-crowd hospitality and billeting. I'll take over allocating the residences and managing the food supply chain. Only an idiot would think that I can manage the psionics or magicks, and there's plenty of techies with better experience, or just more of it, than me. The only truly exclusive skill set I have is for the hotel, restaurant and managerial portions of the job, and maybe some of the security aspects. For everything else, the Assembly will need to find department bosses inside itself to complete the organization schematics before we start bringing in new people."

'Thomas' put on a serious face as he declared "We'll need some dedicated foraging & gathering expeditions into New Cape Quest or Miami cities to fetch whatever food stocks we can find. The
swamps will gladly provide fresh greens and meats, but we're in need of flour, grains, and premade stuff like vinegar, mustard, ketchup, and a lot of spices. Unless you want us to start teleporting around the mudball, we need to find the warehouses of the wholesalers that used to distribute the foodstuffs then raid them to build up our supplies. We've got about another month worth stored inside the sanitarium complex, plus about another month spread across each group's dimensional storage items, then it's daily subsistence from what can be grazed or caught on the go."

"Lua" chimed in with a positive detail that brightened their day: "Well, during my daily sorties to explore, map and stake the Glades around us, I have managed to ascertain a positive fact. Given that humanity has essentially been absent from Earth as a large scale occupation for close to 100 years, the majority of the ecosystems have managed to purge out the poisons and diseases produced by industrial activity and human organic wastes. This does coincide with a dramatic reorganization of the entire biosphere since humans have ceased their parasitic exploitation of resources like open-pit mining fields, clear-cutting forests or draining wetlands to build roads and office towers. All of this together means that there has been an almost total replenishment of those animals that we knew to be alive, and the reappearance of several that were considered endangered or extinct. All in all, we should be in a good position to harvest fresh bounties from Gaia wherever we try our luck."

'Alan' replied to her with a nod, "That's a good thing. We'll have a lot of people to keep fed, but also occupied so they don't get antsy enough to pull stupid stunts just for kicks. Given how many kids, teens and young adults that amounts to, and how many are actually adepts of extreme sports... Yeah, keeping their hands busy will be a necessity. So, having the possibility to assign gathering, fishing, trapping or hunting jobs to alternate with the mandatory self-defense or warfare training will ease a lot of nerves."

'Jason' added softly "It'll make bouts of homesickness and cabin fever rarer, and easier to identify, too. That' not something we can ignore. In fact, given how many of us already present were abused, beaten, tormented, raped, injured into a coma or almost murdered, we really need to put up some kind of mental health clinic with therapy and support groups."

The 20 year old 'Lucas' in charge of overall tactics for the Assembly grunted an assent, verbally specifying "Why do you think the little gremlin wants to place us by reality of origin? It's cuz only those from the same world have the cultural references and tools to help with the really deep problems. As a collective, we can offer some degree of help for superficial issues, or general pan-family situations, but not dive deeply into the particularities of an individual that was traumatized for two decades straight. Even our best healers are usually specialized as apothecaries, alchemists, organology transmuters, faith healers, pharmacists or surgeons, but nobody has truly professional psychology or psychiatry training. Hell, we even have a few neurologists that can do a reliable mundane brain surgery or implant tech inside your noggin', but no shrinks."

'Lua' confirmed the young man's evaluation, saying "The only people in the Assembly that have ever studied the brain's functions professionally are a few 'Lucas' who were trying to build a neural interface to help comatose or mentally handicapped patients to become aware. Many of the 'Jenna', 'Diana' and 'Lua' have some sort of medical training to supplement their traditional apothecary or witchcraft skills. But the truth is that if we can't heal it with a potion, enchanted item or manually cast spell, then we're screwed."

The oldest in the group asked curiously "Isn't there any mind healing or spiritual equilibrium potion at all in the catalog? What about spells to give somebody a more 'Zen' attitude or outlook on life?"

Shaking her head negatively, 'Jenna' replied sadly "Mother Gaia grants many lavish bounties unto humanity, but healing an injured mind or soul is always the longest, hardest, most perilous act."
Firstly because the relationship between the body, senses, memories, mind, Silver Cord and Soul is determined principally on the five branches of the DNA molecule, thus always implying a genetic component to all spiritual ailments."

"Whaaattt?" shouted both YL-18 and the Uber Brunder together.

Growling nastily, the child demanded "What do you MEAN by 'the 5 branches' of the DNA molecule?"

Giggling nervously, 'Jenna' ran a hand over one of her braids as she tried to explain. "Ooops? I forgot that we hadn't started the mystical reeducation programs and got carried away. You see, the mundanes have identified the two most fundamental branches of DNA, thus modeling it as a spiraled ladder. In reality, the molecule has a form composed of four strands linked to a central pillar strand, like a an old structural radio antenna in a hunting camp. The central strand manages the Soul, while the four lateral struts manage the physical body, Silver Cord that attaches the Soul to the body, the mind & psionics, and finally the magicks the person can learn to use. It's real simple to remember, and a lot easier to understand than mundane genetics cuz you can directly see the different genes and atomic differences on each strand of the molecule when you make an analysis with a spell."

The poor green witch was confronted by the matched glares coming from both the youngest and the oldest, neither being impressed by the little nugget of wisdom she had dropped on them without warning. It took a few minutes of silent treatment from the boys versus pleading faces, and an offering of freshly baked cookies she had been keeping for after the meeting, to get them to let the subject drop back into the background of everything else they needed to learn. Ignoring the laughter and teasing from their kin, the two males just thunked their coffee mugs together while chewing a hot, moist oatmeal & caramel cookie that was well worth all the ribbing in the world. A few minutes later saw the group, having snacked on cookies ahead of schedule, ready to move along to new items.

"Anyways, like I was saying before," the still amused 'Jenna' started back, "the magical populations have determined, thousands of years ago in some cases, that almost all mental conditions have a biological or even genetic component, thus the scarcity of treatment. Practically nobody wants to risk rewriting their DNA to fix what is usually seen as something to cure with a few stiff drinks, or a quick side-trip to the brothel to fuck it out with a whore. You have to both remember that most of the self-styled 'sentient' species had been toiling under the tenets of warrior culture for thousands of years before they even realized that they needed to take care of physical brains and cognitive processes, let alone emotional balance. Even where we come from amongst humans, illnesses like dementia, Alzheimer's or Parkinson's are seen as shameful, to be hidden in the dark, not discussed regardless of all the public awareness campaigns the governments have begun to run since the 2000's passed."

The young boy was not deterred for so little. "Magic potions are limited, fine. I can admit that not all solutions come from a bottle..." 

The child had to fume silently for a minute while his siblings got the laughter from his 'punny' out of their system before continuing. "Brats! I'm being serious, and the only one to do so! Given the age differences between us, you should all be ashamed." he griped at the team's younger adults. He was answered by them making a big show of folding their hands in front of their chests while making puppy eyes, trying to look contrite for their misdeeds in such a fake way that he just wanted the whole thing to end.

"Fine! Be that way! But it still doesn't finish the conversation. We need to know what the limits of
these damned elixirs are so we can plan our community medicine. What about spells? Or prayers, even? Aren't their some True gods that can grant the miracles to fix mental conditions without redoing a being's DNA? And what about all the alien cultures that CIRPA had contact with? Wasn't it a few thousand planets? Surely somebody somewhere came up with a few mundane or bio-tech remedies to mental issues."

'Martin' answered that part easily enough, but not to anybody's satisfaction. "Look, kiddo, I get that you care a lot about not letting down your newfound family and all, but the Multiverse just ain't geared like that. There are a few potions that can repair or completely cure mental conditions, true, but the recipes are practically legends that nobody has seen in hundreds, if not thousands of years. Plus, some components employed became proven extinct, while in other cases the provisioning chain was such a secret that when the suppliers died, the way to get these parts was lost along with the person. So yeah, some genius alchemists made miracles in a bottle, but you have to be such a high master brewer to recreate the elixir, plus obtaining the mythical parts, that nobody alive can do the job even if the original recipe is kept in a museum or university's collection."

Looking down at his scarred hands with a sad face, the amber-eyed male continued the litany of why's. " Spells in the sorcery or wizardry styles rarely deal with the mind at all, except to attack it or create illusions to control a person into servitude. I've heard of some loose-moral doctors using the Unforgivables, Unspeakables, or even the Irredeemables, to constrict the personality and mental processes of patients, without giving too much care for whether the being needed it or not. In some cases, Minor and Major Wish spells were used, to varying successes along with some galactically spectacular failures."

"The better spells for mental health are of course mentalism, but it takes as long to study competently as psychology or psychiatry, which must also be worked on to produce a competent mind healer. So, years and years and more years of studies. In reality, most mentalists who claim to be genuinely capable of permanent alterations of the memories, cognitive processes or personality will do so with a series of dweomers designed to affect a single item or concept per spell. They have blockers for physical or emotional pains, nerve regeneration, dream selectors, diverse mnemonic erasers, etc... It's never one, single, large effect spell that heals all that's wrong in the patient."

"As for prayers and miracles, that's always a bloody dice roll. Firstly, it's not all Divines or Celestials that have the capacity to affect the health of a patient for curative purposes. In fact, it's a pretty damned powerful skill-set that not many wield outside the Gods dedicated to modern medicine, alchemy, traditional apothecaries or shamanism. Plus, they only grant these Miracles to their own faithful, inside their own church. So not only must the priest be high level, high power and well trained, but the person being healed must also be considered 'Worthy' to merit the effect or the god will refuse the prayer. In some cases, a Divine was so insulted that a priest wanted to heal a pure stranger in exchange of money or privileges that they blocked his channeling for a month, rendering him mundane until he had performed penance in front of the whole congregation. While the greater gods who patron medicine like Caduceus are in fact 'True Neutral' and will sell their knowledge or services to anybody, finding his church buildings is hard and the prices they charge for magical effects will scare the remaining life out of you. On the other hand, if you can pay the price, or barter an exchange of services with the local clergymen, maybe you could get some competent, miraculous healing done. But at what cost?"

Giving a powerless shrug, the exploration specialist completed morosely "As for the thousands of worlds that CIRPA is connected to, and all their wonderful alien cultures... Well, they're just that: alien. Not just morally, socially, judicially or commercially, but in terms of basic biology and cognitive processes. Whatever remedy was ever developed for a gnoll, or a minotaur, or a beholder, probably won't work on a human's brain or mind."
Snarling nastily at his own shortsightedness, the child punched the top of the table where he sat. "Damn! I got so carried away by the overall potential that I forgot the bloody basics! Of course rarity of personnel and scarcity of components would affect the production rates, not just the purchase price or delivery dates. And the fact several types of magicks are deeply rooted in traditions or specialties was hinted at, but again, we haven't gotten through any of the reeducation syllabus so I was missing critical data. As for the aliens, I can only blame my own over-eagerness at finally having proof that they exist for skipping so far ahead of reality."

Despondently, the 11 year old muttered "I apologize for shouting at y'all. You didn't deserve to suffer my bad temper like that. If I'm lacking knowledge, I should read or ask before jumping to conclusions. It's just we have so many problems and so few solutions to work with... It looked promising from afar, but when you get the close-up view of the details, it's pretty different."

Unable to stop himself from being a brat despite being 18 years old, 'Jonny' whistled lowly, exclaiming "Wow! You could see the blood drain from his face and the negative energy make a miasma of hatefulness around him cuz he hurt so much from apologizing to us. Any more effects and we'd be looking at accidental magic!"

The athletic young adult easily dodged the cheap eraser that was thrown at his head by the tetching little kid while all the others in the room burst out in wild laughter at his well timed joke. He was right though; that did look like it hurt a lot coming out. Maybe the kid was stressed to the point he needed a vacation?

"Knaves, the lot of you's!" was heard to be grumbled in a reedy voice that hadn't passed puberty yet, as the boy crossed his arms over his chest defensively, now in a good and proper sulk.

Trying to stifle a few last snickers and chuckles of mirth, the rest of the team decided on a short recess to use the bathrooms and refill their drinks at the floor's small cafeteria, otherwise known as vending machines.

{ SQ } --- { Progress at long last } --- { SQ }

(Two Steps From Hell - )

Wednesday February 27th of 2301 – 11:15am

Returning from the small service counter after a trip to the washroom, the Tactical Team took their seats in the conference room to complete their management & planning session. Things were finally moving in the direction they needed, so they couldn't let small details or misunderstandings stall them, for fear of never getting back the momentum they lost.

'Jonny' was hiding behind 'Jessie' who was shaking with barely contained hilarity as her brother was looking fearfully around her, towards the 11 year old who was glaring at him malevolently. Apparently, his little bit of sibling ribbing had not passed all that well, and the kid was still miffed. As in, he wanted Jon's head on a pike without necessarily separating it from the rest of him before mounting it to aforementioned polearm.

Needless to say, the rest of the group were far too busy laughing at both boys to be of any help whatsoever.

"I hate you all." Younger Lucas #18 enunciated in as posh, snotty an accent as he could produce, which was actually a damn lot since he had practiced it for such occasions. It just didn't produce the desired effect.
"Okay, settle down moppets! We still have some business to dispense, then you can go in the schoolyard to play with your little friends." quipped the 33 year old at the central podium, earning guffaws from the group.

It was actually 'Thomas' who took up the conversation, asking "We were discussing all the housing, food and medicine needed to be on hand when we start bringing new people to us. Are we deciding to keep everybody here or split with Tracy Island, or even Kong Island since it's an hour's ride away from TI?"

'Tanusha' replied "We'd spoken about creating a mining and industrial colony on TI that could also serve as fall back position, if the WMG attacked. We never got into the particulars, but the expedition group was working on those. I don't recall anything being said about Kong Island other than a brief, passing mention as another possible mining colony. Maybe Lua spoke of going to harvest medicinal herbs she's familiar with, but that would be it. Some short in-&-out day trips for resources. Unless I wasn't paying attention in the last meeting?"

Quite a few amused snorts answered her doubts, since the young woman was well known to be incredibly mature and professional when 'The Job' was involved. That, or the health and welfare of their small community.

'Jenna' replied easily 'Nah, sister. You didn't space out on anything. We really never gave that mutated pit any more thought than day trips for gathering, fishing, hunting or excavating a few of the old temples for magical artifacts that still work. Nothing was even decided about Tracy Island, t'was only in the planning phase."

"Which we have completed handily," their 'Martin' affirmed while gesticulating between himself and 'Alan'. "We got together with a few of the other Tracys present to work out a list of quick grab-&-go missions to fetch some parts and cold stored foodstuffs from the catastrophe bunkers hidden in the mountain's core. We were looking specifically at some small S&R vehicles like the antigrav bikes and sleds, Hiram's mobile lab, and maybe find a way to complete Thunderbird-2, to have some modules and pods available to help us with construction here in Grosse Tronche. The Halo airship is good, but it has severe structural limitations, especially because its cargo holds aren't rectangular or accessible by anything bigger than a propane powered forklift. Yeah, she can sleep and feed a small army, but the carrying capacity for vehicles or prefab is, honestly, just barely so-&-so."

"No professional or familial preferences involved in that declaration, eh Allie?" teased 'Jessica' from her seat next to 'Jonny', a little ways off from said younger boy. The Tracy in residence shook his head in good humor, replying gamely "Nah, it's all true that our stuff is better. Scout's honor."

'Kayo' poked her husband, commenting aloud "Liar; you were never in the scouts!" to which her partner simply shrugged with a wide smirk adorning his face, not at all perturbed with being called on his fib.

"Diana' snarked out "Settle down, gear-heads! This isn't a product advisory for THI merch!"

More laughter rumbled in the room for a few seconds before they calmed down enough to continue. The oldest adult had a few questions to put on the table, then some reports. "Okay guys, firstly, do any of you think we should put permanent colonies or presence on either islands in the south Pacific? And if yes, then what kind?"

Younger Lucas #18 shrugged that one off indolently, declaring "Just put a few of our defensive menhirs in the critical or strategic locations that we plan to harvest or mine, plus a few high vantage points for surveillance, and call it a job done. We don't have the numbers to start splitting
the Assembly into permanent subgroups, plus we need a minimal ratio of kids-teens-adults to maintain some sort of societal stability. If we put a bunch of 9 to 11 year old's on a deserted tropical island full of weird animals and mystical ruins, you'll have some airheads getting lost in the jungle on the very first day. Then we'll have to run a S&R op to retrieve them, waste medical efforts & inventory to heal them, and then decide if there's restrictions or an actual punishment to administer to make them think before they act out like dolts. Just look at how easily the 'Jason' and 'Jonny' get lost in ruins all the time without planning it. All more trouble than any possible benefits we could accidentally reap. Plus, I'm thinking of all the negative emotions and ill will that happens if we have to start policing & punishing our own people – officially – given that the crushing majority come from abusive, violent or murderous settings. Better to avoid the mess altogether."

"Martin' nodded vigorously at the younger boy's words, agreeing verbally: "What he said. T's not because I allow my spirit-siblings from my home reality to set principles and rules to help me stay the best person I can be that I'd accept the same from those coming from 'foreign' dimensions, or a different age group. I know that we'll have to create some basic standards of behavior and living really soon before we hit a problem head on, because honestly, we're overdue for a blow-out or a fight between siblings to happen. We're incredibly lucky to have a group that's inherently sociable, altruistic, and good team players despite all the hardships and violence they survived to get here. But sheer dumb luck of the draw won't get us much further. We have to make an Assembly with a psychic consensus to pound out the subject, then write down just a few laws to begin with. We can think of longer, wordier laws, regulations and rules when all the newbies are arrived, scanned, and medicated enough to be cleared for participating in our Group decisions."

YL-18 tapped his left hand fingers on the tabletop as he spoke. "I had this situation in mind when I insisted on separating everybody by home reality & age groups. It allows to keep the immediate siblings together, while fostering a new sense of belonging and loyalty between those who have just found out about their extended kindred. Plus, if there was a real mess to arbitrate, I counted on the processes of each subgroup or familial unit to resolve it inside, without needing to go through an Assembly with a public trial and sentencing. Given the personalities and past life experiences of the people here, or on the way, I seriously doubt we'll face anything worse than bouts of misplaced childishness, prank wars, or teasing too aggressive or impolite to let it pass. Since the survey we did of our current residents clearly showed that each dimensional group had already established their own bylaws, or were in the process or doing so now they were all gathered, it seemed to be both economical and politic to just let them handle themselves when necessary. Plus, when dealing with married or engaged couples, it seemed to be the subconscious agreement across all groups to let the spouse or partner correct the person at fault. So, I just never thought beyond the native system because it already worked for the job needed."

Grunting in parts amusement, parts anger, the 20 year old 'Thomas' griped out "Not that it was ever YOUR job to make such decisions for US, to begin with. Thanks for thinking about us so often though. I'm sure I'll appreciate it all way more, once I'm done telling you to not mind our private lives so damned much."

A few uncomfortable coughs and discrete snickers were heard around the room, but none loud enough to identify the source directly without hunting for it. The child had enough integrity for himself, and respect for his family, that he nodded his assent at the older male without anger. Surprised by the gesture and the rare silence that accompanied it, 'Thomas' sat back in his well padded chair satisfied that he wouldn't be bossed around by anybody unless he accepted it ahead of events. Following the leader on an expedition or work site to build something was understandable, but it was always explained before it happened. Nobody liked getting dumped into a situation where they were told 'This is your boss, live with it,' so as long as the Assembly took the time to question its members then let them vote openly, the young man wouldn't make a scene. If they did try to impose a master or work boss on him without having a bloody good emergency to justify
acting over people's heads, then there'd be some harsh words thrown around, and a few punches too if it came to it.

It was their Tac-Chief who calmed spirits down with a simply said "Nobody's thinking of enslaving others to their will or playing big political games inside the Assembly. But you have to remember that the little guy was raised much more closely to Cynthia's law firm than either of the other 'Lucas' ever were, plus the multiple chains of hotels he inherited a year ago. It's what, something like 600 buildings or so? With anything from a dozen employees up to nearly two hundred for the big ones? Do you have any idea of how much blasted work that all entails? Land zoning & usage, business permits, vehicle permits, employee licenses for some jobs, taxes & audits, plus all the internal surveillance and disciplinary processes because we all know that 75% of all thefts are internal employee thefts or frauds, not by clients. So yeah, even compared to other 'Lucas' like me and the decrepit relic up front, he's pretty much the only one in the entire Assembly that has any competence or skills at managing large groups of people towards a common goal. Which includes writing rules and enforcing them from the top down through a tiered, stratified hierarchy like civilian governance or the military. It doesn't mean he wants to hijack your freedom, or mind, or soul; he's just MUCH better organized than we are."

Several nods of acknowledgment for this wisdom were seen, with even 'Thomas' after giving himself a few seconds to turn and observe the arguments in his mind before signaling that he grasped, and accepted, the underlying reasons for their youngest member to be so decisive in matters of societal regency. It wasn't done for evil or nasty purposes, but if they let it get out of hand, they could end up with a diminutive tyrant running roughshod over them, and that wasn't a pleasant idea. Fortunately, the 11 year old didn't seem to be phased by the critiques or displeasure of the other members, only satisfied that they took the time to think and discuss the concepts before making statements or decisions to present the general Assembly later on.

With everybody appeased once more, the eldest took the lead again with some reports that needed to be accepted before the work groups could be assigned to new tasks. "Okay, plebes! Firstly, we've got the finalized list of who we bring in via time-gate, and the reason they're in that order. If our good Tac-Chief could officiate, a mental consensus would go a lot faster to parse the data sheets. After that, we have the hunting & gathering tallies for the passed week, followed by the kitchen crew's production of preserved, fermented or distilled foods to hoard in our bunkers. Then you have the production schedules & tallies for the crafters that are making pretty much all the communitary appliances and small devices that we depend on to communicate or defend the place. Then finally, you have the preliminary results of the basic athletics, hunting, self-defense and warfare training sessions that we instituted a few days back."

The command team processed the arduous job of reading and analyzing all the data generated by the diverse activities or programs that their micro-society had put in place to survive. It was all going well, sometimes going beyond the very basic requirements stated when the team decided to enact something. With so few people on hand to do tasks, and most of them being so young without the strength necessary for heavy jobs, all projects had been designed with a loose, low bar for success to avoid blocking everybody all at once. Plus, to keep the group's morale from plunging, they had to be careful what kinds of tasks were assigned to whom, and that the person had a reasonable chance of success. People who were condemned to systematic failure at each attempt will eventually demoralize, abandon their posting and maybe even leave the group completely. They needed to keep the people moderately happy and satisfied, to avoid a societal collapse in their small village.

After the managerial chore was finished, with all the projects closed, continued or initiated, and their lot of people moved around to fill new postings, the Tactical Team was able to relax a bit. They got to a bit of friendly gossip about who was doing what amongst the larger grouping, and
what effects this had on their small society.

It was near 13:30pm when they reached a common accord that nothing else needed discussing, so they broke for a late lunch, scheduling another meeting for two days from now.

Into the breach, we brave souls charged

(Stargate SG-1 – opening theme)

Friday February 29th of 2301 – 14:00pm
Bayou de la Grosse Tronche, Florida (USA)
Military sanitarium for handicapped & comatose soldiers
UEO Veterans' Support Services (VSS)

Taking every advantage of the calm climate before it changed again, several of the Tactical Team members assembled in the glassed belvedere, just after the lunch hour, to enact their boldest, most significant plan yet. The Tac-Chief stood by the outer wall, looking down through the warded glass panel at the large extension that had been added to the compound's outer wall, right where it could seen the best from this exact vantage point.

The entire overwatch hall was crawling with people feverishly checking on all the remote sensors, local cameras, and running one last census of all personnel on the grounds. All expedition teams had been kept inside the hospital territory to make certain they had maximal capacity for defense or succor in case of enemy breach.

A series of small red and purple LED lights came alive all over the complex, to indicate that they were now at combat alert while the time-gate embarkation room was activated to allow passage through realities.

Across the comms came the fatidic order from the floor beneath them, in the gateway & expedition oversight hall. "WARNING! – temporo-dimensional gate activation! – WARNING!"

Barely one and a half minute later a less harsh, but no less commanding, follow-up declared "Incoming time travelers! 3 teenagers! Two males, one female! Close gate now!"

All over the Grosse Tronche complex the low-frequency humming vibration that had been heard for the last five minutes receded out of anybody's hearing range, the power draining from the massive capacitor and breaker arrays to leave the gate-arch arrival platform as devoid of energy and exotic particles as possible.

The comms chatter began in earnest between the recovery team and medics as the armored defenders rushed into the fully lit embarkation hall to surround their new arrivals, secure them from any hostile influence, then keep them at peace for the first of three medical and mental scans to come.

Up in the belvedere, the Tac-Chief had his right arm across his chest, his left elbow resting on top of his right fist, so he could keep his left arm upwards to gnaw on his left thumb's nail, a bad habit he'd tried to get rid of without success. The levels of stress, anxiety and fear for their survival implied in the current operation certainly wouldn't do anything positive for his capacity to find healthy coping mechanisms today.
Coming from the speakers spread all around the belvedere, the containment team's report reached all the living population of the sanitarium who were all incredibly excited, and stressed, at the possibility of not being so limited in numbers or capacities anymore.

"Attention gate oversight!" the voice of their oldest 'Martin Mystère' came through clearly from the embarkation platform. "We have three arrivals from the current dimension. 15 year old Jonathan Quest, 16 year old Jessica Bannon, and 17 year old Hadji Singh Quest. All are naked, at critical health, multiple grievous injuries, covered in unidentified organic materials, and I can see cyber implants embedded all over their bodies. We need paramedics with secondary aid kits in the arrival hall ASAP!"

Immediately, the extraction leader screamed out a second, panicked message: "ALERT! - My team has put them in stasis fields, but the machines are straining! The organic goop that's all over them is emitting some sort of neutral polarity bio-energy that's destabilizing all generated shields, fields and dweomers! We need alchemists and organologists to be ready for samples! The U-Watch's ecto-scanner isn't able to identify because the random wave is blocking scanners! Get me some biochemists to crack this shite, STAT!"

The voice from another member of the retrieval team sounded out "Lombard to clinic! We have HAZMAT rated for BL-3 conditions! Sound quarantine on the embarkation hall! Cloister the extension until further notice! Inbound by teleport only, materials only! Keep all personnel out of the gate-arch hall!"

In the glassed belvedere, the Tac-Chief moved to punch several glowing red buttons on his console, triggering armored bulkheads to drop shut over the regular blast-doors, new supplemental force fields to coalesce extra layers over the existing shields, and the magical wardstone menhirs activated to pulse a strong, sustained wave of positively charged spiritual energy to counteract known dark curses and mind control effects.

"This is Diana Lombard, from the embarkation hall. We lost Hadji. The organic mass that covers his body has entered a maturation cycle; it's becoming chitinous, opaque in colors of red, black and purple. There's a few small flower buds that just broke out of his eyes, nostrils and mouth. Red flowers that are maturing and opening at an incredible speed! Get the cameras a direct line of view! The oversight has to see this!"

In the gateway control hall, the 33 year old version of 'Lucas' was sitting rock-still in his chair, looking at the gaseous hologram that displayed the dead corpse and two barely alive teens that were supposed to be his extended kin from his own dimension, in his generation. He was so fatally emotionally unbalanced by the sight that it crippled his capacity to perceive reality or react to it anymore.

Seeing his older brother stunned insensate in his chair by the traumatic events, Younger Lucas #18 yanked the whole heavily built, thickly padded assembly backwards, out of his way as he took over. The 11 year old began to punch buttons and pull levers as he yelled in the wireless comms, ignoring the rest of the desk jockeys in the oversight room.

"Oversight hall to embarkation! Womb-tuber plant! That's a womb-tuber plant! I recognize the vegetal from the shreds we took under the World Management Grid substation in New Cape Quest! There's parasitic plants trying to gestate humanoid clones inside their chest cavities! Kill & Sterilize! REPEAT – KILL & STERILIZE! That's an order!"

The child was desperately trying to aim the Chryo-Blast cannons to freeze the damned vegetation zombies before they could mature enough to contaminate healthy people, or worse, give birth to some humanoid aberration like tried to emerge under the WMG's feet. Finally hearing his pressing
shouts through the comms in their isolation suit helmets, the retrieval team and paramedics backed away from their fallen kindred, out of options and needing to save their own selves.

The juvenile warlord triggered the heavy, structurally emplaced weapons turrets to shoot powerful, sustained streams of freezing energy rated at -150º Celsius over the three poor souls, including a ten foot zone around them. The metallic deck plates creaked dangerously as they reacted to the catastrophic change in temperature, a few joints letting out loud 'PING!' noises as the bolts that kept them together snapped, exploding out of the holes where they had been riveted. Suddenly, a loud 'CRACK!' was heard as the solid, 3 inch thick tempered steel plate bulged unnaturally enough to snap upwards in the middle, without giving any forewarning it was about to react that way.

It took almost five minutes for the metallic arrival platform's structure to stop reacting to the environmental changes imposed by the weapons discharges. Small popping or cracking noises continued for much longer, even after the main structure stopped moving, due to micro-tremors from all the material stress in the pylons. The retrieval team and paramedics were on guard, kneeling on one knee with their physical glazed ceramic shields and beam weapons aimed towards the pile of ice shrouded corpses. The corrupted bodies' vivid colors could still be seen through the five inches of almost transparent, diamond-like ice. Worse of all, the bloody, accursed plants kept on moving for almost four, gut-wrenching minutes, before finally stopping and going into some sort of protective hibernation, the small flowers closing in on themselves.

Nobody was stupid enough, or newbie enough, to ever think those plants were truly dead.

The team leader called out "Get me all scans on that pile of cold shite! I want sit-rep! And I want to know how the bloody hard-pumping fucks we messed up so damned much! They were supposed to be in a safe, non hostile situation, when the time-gate opened! What the fucks happened to the targeting algorithms? And the bloody mongrel fool who was manning the scopes, when they chose the extraction coordinates? Answers! Get me some damned answers, so we can lift this quarantine and get back to civilization!"

In the communal comms came the voice of the youngest command officer the Assembly had. Younger Lucas #18 spoke tersely as he detailed the cause of the mess they were wading through; "We didn't muck-up the targeting. This was the closest safe zone for that particular time period to get the Quest family unit in their teenaged years. It's in the WMG records that they disappeared from public circulation in that specific month, so our calculations team established coordinates a bit before what we estimated was the date of death, to have a chance to grab them ahead of the fatal event."

Sighing deeply, the child continued blithely "The reason we were never able to target them earlier was that for a period of almost 13 months preceding the date we chose, they had been blipping in-&-out on the temporal scanners, so we couldn't get a truly positive lock. At other occasions, they were surrounded by unidentified lifeforms, not always human either, so we couldn't risk even a small opening to drop a probe to get visuals. This was the only point of the time-stream at which we got clear scan-echoes and ID's to grab them, and the only moment they were together but unescorted before disappearing for ever."

The recovery team leader scuffed his combat boot, covered by the yellow plastic HAZMAT suit, on the decking, growling; "Yeah, well now we know why they disappeared. They got kidnapped by the fucktard Franklin Henry Wise, who injected or sprayed some of his artificial plant seeds on them, to see what kinds 'o Chia Pets he could grow out 'o them. Well, we have some of questions answered. But was it worth the blood & guts we're stompin' in?"

The child replied firmly over the comms "Yes, it was. We now have determinative proof that the
'Lucas' of that period was not the only prodigy targeted by Wise for experimentation, nor was he the only one the UEO or US tried to brainwash into slavery. The geographic area they were brought from is a patch of wild, flooded jungle near an active US navy base that is situated on the northern point of the island of Ni‘ihau, in the Hawaii archipelago. Supposedly, it's officially being used to survey the build-up of Micronesia’s new naval capacities, including the development of nuclear weapons and ICBM's. In reality, the base serves as a cover for the UEO’s spying organization Section-7. This seems to be the area where they activated the first iteration of the White Christian Regency that took over the US government around 2048. The R&D, the tests, the contacts lenses, the permanent earbuds, all the damned brain implants they created like what our older brother had, it all got designed and made there, in the beginning."

Sitting on a spare chair somebody pushed towards him, the child explained further; "So now we have a clear, confirmed vision of what was happening to all our extended families. Any young adults, teenagers, or even children, of extremely high intellectual capacity were targeted for enslavement, experimentation to advance enslavement techniques, or destroyed because they couldn't be controlled externally in reliable fashion. It may have started long ago, as a small vendetta against our ancestors from Palestine, Italy, France or England throughout 2,000 years of history, but somebody along the line decided to think BIG. Somebody decided they wanted to exterminate all intellect not in service of them, annihilate all free-will, and destroy the lives of any who challenged their project, or simply brought the possibility of doubt to their diseased mind. Whether that's simply Franklin H. Wise acting in concert with S-7 and CIA, the Catholicu Vaticanese, the Baptismiat Suderia, or even one of the Wizerias, it still needs to be sorted out. Eventually, it will be. In the meanwhile, what we have is a clear idea of where the mess is centered, and who's in command. We can plan more extensively from that, after we verify many more data points across multiple dimensions to cover the realitive variances."

Stomping his booted heel down on the steel flooring, the 21 year old 'Martin' asked tiredly "Okay, so we have raw data, discovered where the big baddie's hiding, and confirmed that we were really being targeted for more than just killing off. Good. Now what?" the young man queried snarkily.

Sitting back in the borrowed swivel chair, rubbing his hands over his face wearily, the child answered "Now your team waits until we can secure those three corpses in a way that the bloody plants don't grow or live anymore. Then we get you to decon, and back to ordinary life. Until we're ready to do more, and you're called to service again. That's all I can tell you. That's all I have to give anybody. We'll need to work on the cadavers and new plant samples, then decide if we send a slew of probes through multiple temporal coordinates to do some spying on those situations we find suspicious, to modify our targeting list. Maybe when we have more data, we'll be better able to decide who to bring in, and from which circumstances to extract them."

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