

New California Date 92:65

14 November 2093

On a breezy early evening near to shore on the Western Sea, when K-Nought's last rays from below the horizon banded thin clouds orange, red, and purple, and the night's first lights of the coastal suburbs of San Lazaro glittered on the mesas to the east, when waves quietly splashed the yacht's hull and the colony's elite partied at the bow and below deck, while both lumpy, bone-white moons looked down, the governor of New California committed suicide for the third time.

The party had started with an airmobile ride, like most others Desmond Park had attended in his forty Earth-years on the planet. In the garage of his mansion at the edge of Fremont Mesa, he strapped into his sportster and gave it coordinates encrypted by Governor Watkins' security system to foil party-crashers. The sportster launched and banked over the pedestrian avenues of San Lazaro's lowland districts, then headed northwest. The airmobile cast a jittering shadow on hills blue-green with chaparral. From his line of flight, Desmond guessed his destination, and his sportster confirmed it when it descended a few minutes later.

From above, the town of Clearwater Beach showed Spanish tile roofs around the tricolumnar basalt bulk of a Buddhist Kabbalah meditation center. A T-shaped marina jutted into the sea at the northern end of the black strand that gave the town its name. Desmond's airmobile pivoted its jets and joined a dozen others on a parking lot twenty yards from a pale blue pavilion erected in the sand near the marina.

The sea breeze ruffled Desmond's black hair and untucked linen shirt, and the obsidian sand slumped under his topsiders between the parking lot and the pavilion. Security was subtle, but thicker than

usual. Miniature robots on oversized tires rolled across the sand and swung cameras and microphones toward him. The robot bartenders under the pavilion intently watched the people around them.

In the cool shade mingled the usual crowd, many of them, like Desmond, first colonists. The tang of Acapulco gold, and a muscular fellow's brag about the work just done to him at the rejuvenation clinic, clogged the air. Desmond nodded a few greetings, then opened a mindlink channel to the robots to order a drink.

When he stepped back from the bar, his vodka tonic tart with fresh lime, Gov. Cameron Watkins opened wide arms. "Nihao, esé! Thanks for coming!" He chest-bumped Desmond and thumped his right palm on the back of Desmond's shoulder.

Desmond returned the bro-hug. "Nihao. Thanks for the invitation, Cam." The governor insisted those from the first ship use the nickname. Desmond opened his mouth to utter some small talk, what's new or how are you today, but he hesitated, suddenly conscious that twice in the past local year the governor had been stealthily rushed to the clinic on Fremont Mesa for acute rejuvenation with partial neural reconstruction. Small talk might sound forced, avoiding the elephant under the pavilion, but so too might his hesitation.

Cam's eyes narrowed for a moment, and Desmond hurriedly said, "Today's immigration ceremony went well."

Cam brightened. "Everyone could tell this was special. Only our second immigrant wave from the UN occupation zone—"

"Fourth." Desmond's mindlink had given him the correction. Cam's would have too, if the governor had listened to it. Cam's brows furrowed. "But our first in five years," Desmond added. "Definitely special."

Cam's face relaxed. "The word's getting out. New Cal is the best place for Americans to build new lives. We're a beacon of opportunity." He put on a confident, genial smile and lifted his drink to take in the beach, the ocean, and the partygoers. "Look how good we have it."

Desmond looked. Everyone under the pavilion had immigrated more than thirty Earth-years ago, except for two lithe nativeborn women, each on an older man's arm. Most recent immigrants and their native-born children lived off citizen's stipends and ad-sup-

ported media in lowland San Lazaro, with many of the rest in isolated communes scattered across the continent's rugged interior. "A beacon, you're right."

"And they're Asian," Cam said, meaning the hundred-twenty new arrivals, Vietnamese-Americans from Texas. "I know that's unimportant to you—"

"It is," Desmond said. Especially since the new arrivals weren't Korean like him, but he kept annoyance off his face and changed the subject. "The speeches by the college students were a great addition to the usual ceremony. I'll let Justin know he shouldn't have missed it."

"Just because he's the hefé at New Cal Mol Fab doesn't make you second banana. I appreciate you representing NCMF. Your operations department set up our new citizens, ma?"

"My best field team emplaced a standard mol fab facility for their settlement size. I flew down to San José del Bandera Oso two days ago for a final inspection."

Cam looked wistful. "San José. Someday it will be a bigger city than its namesake."

Its namesake was the patron saint of Vietnam, not the city at the southern end of San Francisco Bay, but this time Desmond kept the correction to himself. "Absolutely, Cam."

"It's almost time to set sail. Take your drink on board." Cam angled his head at the pier leading to the marina's ranked boats. "The *Golden Gate*. All the way to the tee-junction, then last boat on the right."

Desmond gave Cam a final glance with as much scrutiny as could go unnoticed. Not enough to read his thoughts. "See you there." Desmond cradled his glass by the rim and mulled their conversation as the boards flexed underfoot. Boats bobbed on the waves and rubbed against their bumpers. After two suicide attempts, had neurotropics and cognitive therapy healed Cam?

At the end of the pier, Desmond hesitated. A dry, cottony taste filled his mouth. Here the security was thick and blatant. The rui shi were robots like giant bulldogs, the male on the right and the female on the left. Snarls stood frozen on both their faces. A livery collar draped over each rui shi's shoulders and chest. The collars' bright

yellow contrasted with their matte-black nanotube pelts.

A line of red hanzi characters stood on each collar. Desmond's mindlink overlaid on his vision an English translation, *auspicious lions guarding all of heaven*. Under the male's right paw, a globe swirled with clouds over the continent of New California. A cub lay on its back under the female's left paw, writhing and playfully snapping at its mother's claws, but when it became aware of Desmond it twisted onto its feet and leaned forward, unafraid, to face him. Cooling bristles stood up on their napes and the backs of their heads.

Desmond inhaled to mask his fear and dislike. The translation of the livery collar mocked him and every gweilao with a lie. The rui shi did not guard all of heaven, *tián quán*; instead, they guarded the interests of Tián Quán Discovery Co. Ltd., master of more than half the settled galaxy. He passed between them as impassively as he could. The heat from their cooling bristles drew sweat from his brow and made him squint.

Desmond climbed up the ramp to an open gate in the yacht's deck railing near the stern. The *Golden Gate* was sixty yards long and twenty abeam, far larger than his speedboat docked on the riverfront in the city. Oak decking sealed against salt and spray ringed the midcastle. Behind the midcastle's glass walls, now transparent, stood billiard and ping-pong tables, a robotic kitchenette, and sternward, a fitness room filled with yoga mats, stability balls, stretch ropes, and a rack of cast iron kettlebells. The bottom of the rack held a few hundred-pounders no normal person would ever swing or press. Below deck, Desmond saw in his mind's eye, through his mindlink, three sitting areas, a banquet hall, a bar sprouting twenty beer taps, and a walk-in smoking lounge.

Stairs led from the stern deck down to the banquet space. Two pony walls flanked the stairwell, each hiding an ell-shaped banquette poised for conversation and views out to sea. Desmond leaned over the far railing, his back to the ramp and any new arrivals.

High above, the wind herded clouds across the indigo sky. K-Nought's fat orange disc hung a third of the way past the zenith and the smaller, closer moon, San Francisco, showed a narrow crescent halfway through its retrograde crawl to the eastern horizon. On the western horizon, lapping against the buoy line, the turquoise ocean

glimmered with unicellular photosynthesizers, New Cal's pinnacle of indigenous evolution. On the Earthlife side, a flock of petrels floated on the sea breeze. Twenty yards in from the buoy line a long low black shape glistened at the surface: one of EnvE's seahyenas, giant robots that broke down Terran biomolecules and, in concert with the buoy line, protected the native life from contamination.

Speaking of EnvE, Secretary of Environmental Engineering Ashwin George's smooth baritone voice came from the ramp. "Ellen, is Buddhist Kabbalah compatible with one's pursuit of his TruSelf?"

"Any religion can be," came the reply, "except for fundamentalist Christianity." Ellen was Ellen Sakamoto, Prime Teacher of the TruSelf Foundation of New California.

"Of course," another woman said softly. Priya, an English professor at UNewCal and Ashwin's life partner.

Ellen went on. "However, even though almost any religion can be compatible, if it encourages excessive mysticism, it's a distraction from our pursuits of our TruSelves."

Desmond leaned further over the rail. Most of the passengers for the party cruise were nearly an E-century old: we'll find our TruSelves any day now.

"So are the Buddhist Kabbalists excessively mystical?" Ashwin asked. After a moment, he said brightly, "Desmond, you can help us for a second, ma?"

Desmond gritted his teeth but released the tension before turning. He knew exactly how this would go. "Nihao."

Ashwin's fleshy face wore a perpetual gloat. He was the second most powerful man on the planet, far more powerful than the lieutenant governor. "Would you mindlink for us whether Buddhist Kabbalah is excessively mystical?"

Desmond couldn't even tell him to look it up himself: the question lacked any settled answer. Desmond's search sense would only give him the biases and cherry-pickings of Buddhist Kabbalists, their business rivals, and their past and current lovers. "No. It's too subjective a question. But I'll wager it isn't."

Ashwin frowned. It gladdened Desmond to befuddle his expectations. His conversation with Cam Watkins came back to mind. "Buddhist Kabbalah is like most things," Desmond added. "The passion

of youth congeals into the habit of middle age.”

Ashwin’s frown deepened. Ellen stared down at the ocean, her face naked with delight at Ashwin’s discomfit before her usual polite mask returned. “Thank you, Desmond. If you’ll excuse us?” She started for the stairs down to the banquet deck. Ashwin and Priya followed Ellen. Desmond returned to the railing and lifted his glass.

A gust buffeted his ears but in the ensuing lull he heard Priya quietly say, “Awas,” *be careful*. Desmond borrowed public camera and microphone feeds from the top of the stairs. In his mind’s eye, Priya raised her eyebrows to admonish Ashwin.

Ashwin’s tone of voice revealed amusement at an overreaction. “What?”

“Give me sleek-headed men,” she whispered, “and such as sleep a-nights.” She held the admonishing gaze for a moment, then descended the stairs.

Ashwin followed her. “Honey...” he said, plea and annoyance in his tone.

It took Desmond’s mindlink a moment to finish her quote. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act I, scene II. *Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look; he thinks too much: such men are dangerous.*

He stared at the resting seahyena’s dorsal carapace while chatty, perfumed guests boarded behind him. After a time, the gate in the aft railing clanged shut and the yacht’s paddles, like immense black duck-feet, kicked away from the dock. He tilted back the rest of his vodka tonic, then tossed the empty glass to a custodial robot, a dwarf centaur with recycling bags slung over its flanks. K-nought suddenly seemed too bright, the ocean too unfathomable. Desmond went below.

An appetizer table bore platters with sunchoke samosas and peeled kiwi wrapped in wine-cured prosciutto. The robot bartenders scanned their databases for the attendees’ preferences and Desmond found a second vodka tonic waiting for him on the bar. He sipped and smiled weakly. Same faces, same actions. As he led a cluster of people forward, Cam talked about the two-month-old news from Earth, brought by the same Tián Quán ship as the new immigrants. Ellen bragged about her latest furniture purchase, hand-made by a sawdust-covered artisan in Schwarzenegger City. Carl Yaeger, chan-

cellar of UNewCal, turned his narrow blue eyes toward the youngest woman at the party.

Selene Alvarez attended Golden State U, eight hundred miles up the coast, and had won a speaking slot in the immigration ceremony in a planetwide college communications contest. Her demeanor had been earnest, her speech a regurgitation of conventional wisdom, praising Cam and the founders' generation for enriching native-borns' lives with diversity. Did she really believe that sentiment, or deep down did she try to convince herself? *You're projecting your own pessimism onto her*, Desmond thought. *Whether she's idealistic or naïve, let her be young.*

Selene wore a sheer peasant blouse and purple eyeliner. The lights recessed in the ceiling glossed her thick black hair. Desmond blinked in surprise at a datum uncovered by his mindlink: she wasn't the youngest woman here. A twenty-year-old UNewCal student named Tethys attended the party. Ah, it would violate university policy for Yaeger to have sex with a current student.

Desmond suddenly felt glad both his daughters had attended UNewCal.

"So are the rumors true?" Selene asked Yaeger.

"Rumors?" Yaeger replied. Desmond leaned his left ear toward them, ignoring small talk accreting around him.

She lowered her voice. "About the governor."

"Oh, they aren't rumors. He really is a horrible tennis player."

She saw through that. Smart starchild. "I heard from someone who's dating an intern at the rejuvenation clinic on Fremont Mesa the governor was rushed there a couple of months ago in really bad shape." Her voice became even more quiet. "They said it was self-inflicted."

Desmond masked his next motion with a sip of his vodka tonic. He glanced out the picture windows and saw a reflection of Yaeger. His eyes looked even narrower, like pinholes of Earth sky in his tanned face. "You're too smart a girl to believe silly rumors."

"I knew it had to be a rumor." She sounded relieved. "It didn't make sense to me. Our genes built us to strive for success and status, so how could someone who has a lot of both attempt suicide?"

Her question was like a lever wedged under a boulder. Thoughts

recurring to Desmond over E-decades followed well-worn paths in his mind. *Because our genes are blind fools rolling down gradients toward local optima. Because nucleic acid sequences can't predict the system dynamics resulting from the actions of thirty thousand of their peers.*

Because our genes built us for their benefit, not ours.

An urge pooled in Desmond's gut. Abandon the people around him, barge in, earning Yaeger's enmity for a few decades, and tell the girl the truth. His heart thudded. Yaeger and Ashwin's crowd already kept him at a distance, respecting him for being on the first ship, tolerating him as the man who kept them in material excess, but nothing more. He had too few bridges to burn. He shut his eyes and pulled in a breath until the urge left him light-headed.

"I need some air," he said as a polite explanation to the people around him. In case he would gulp his first drink soon, he detoured past the bar to pick up another on his way to the foredeck.

The wind over the speeding yacht whipped back Desmond's hair. At the bow, Cam spoke to a cluster of people about the need for donations to the New Cal Settlement Fund. The latest arrivals showed there hundreds of thousands of potential immigrants lived, not just in California or rest of the Pacific Republic of America, but in the UN occupation zone as well. His listeners' feet shuffled and their mouths froze in half-smiles.

Desmond turned to the midcastle. The other college student, Tethys Broniatowski, stood within. At the ceremony, he had pegged her as just another earnest starchild in a skirt-suit and pinned-back hair. Now, though, her sandy brown hair loose around her shoulders, her tall, buxom curves reminded him of Jennifer, the girlfriend he'd let get away after graduating from UC Davis. Why hadn't he seen the resemblance before? Unless he saw it now groundlessly, fleeing from the sense of wrongness hanging over the cruise into a private nostalgia he projected onto this zaftig starchild.

She played eight-ball and clearly didn't enjoy herself. She hunched her shoulders and clutched her cue in front of her with both hands. Her opponent, a deputy director at EnvE named Maltby, stalked around the table, his gaze alternately gauging the sharp angles of a bank shot and the soft swells masked by her royal blue,

polka-dotted sundress. No accident evolution had tuned the same hormone to drive both sex and violence.

The midcastle door opened for Desmond and he strode in, distracting Maltby into banking the cue ball into a corner pocket. As the other man glowered, Desmond raised the still-full of his two vodka tonics to Tethys. "Sweetie, here's your drink."

She hesitated a moment, then unwrapped her left hand from the cue stick. "It took a long time."

"The bartending database doesn't know your preferences." Desmond pretended to notice the other man for the first time. "Ni hao."

The bureaucrat folded his thick arms in front of his chest and gave Desmond a surly look. "Have some manners next time."

"I assumed it was a friendly game. You look like the kind of man whose TruSelf keeps things in perspective." Actually, Maltby didn't, but the surly look blunted. "Were you playing for money? Oh, not yet..."

Tethys stood taller now and brushed bangs from her eyes. She gave Desmond a chiding look. "I'm trying to sandbag a mark here."

Maltby racked his stick, saw Cam asking for donations on the foredeck, and headed aft. After the door closed behind him, Tethys said, "Thanks."

"Everyone should be able to enjoy the party."

"And thanks for the drink." She sipped and winced at the quinine in the tonic water. "It's the thought that counts."

Desmond laughed, but as he did, he saw the path he'd committed himself to for the next few hours. He took in her rouged cheeks and saw again bits of Jennifer in her. He had no better paths to tread, no better destination to reach, than a tryst after sunset belowdeck or back in the city.

They chatted as K-Nought sank toward the western horizon. Tethys majored in journalism and planned to work for New Cal Broadcasting Corporation after graduation. She underestimated the number of resumes flowing into NCBC's sapient resources expert system, but he let her keep her hopes.

Tethys would be a classmate of his youngest daughter, but asking if she knew her would derail their journey down the seduction

track. It relieved him that if she did know his daughter, Tethys wanted to be danced down the same path enough to leave it unspoken.

As they chatted, he remembered her presentation at the ceremony. She had expressed at least one profound thought. "I liked your comment that immigrants remind the native-born of your good fortune."

"Really."

"I wouldn't lie."

She glanced out to sea. The seahyena to starboard, halfway to the buoy line, effortlessly kept pace with the yacht. "From the moment I started designing my presentation, I was afraid the, ah, Earthborn would realize just how much us starchildren take everything you've done for granted."

"You can call us rucos. I won't take offense." She looked unsure how to respond. He lightly pressed his fingertips to her forearm. "Be glad you're nativeborn. You wouldn't want a ruco's baggage."

She frowned. "What's important about your luggage on the trip out?"

"It's an idiom. However you might take TruSelf—" He lifted an eyebrow and lilted his voice enough to imply he could understand if she held TruSelf in very low esteem. "—you've heard the term *cruft* for all the psychological damage that scars over." Memories of President Fletcher's nuclear strike on China, the ensuing United States civil war, and the Sino-UN joint occupation lurked beneath Desmond's consciousness, like the seahyena abreast of the yacht. "Be glad you don't have ours."

"I know a lot happened the E-decades before the governor founded New California, but I don't know what those events mean to the people who lived through them...."

Desmond waved his hand. "We don't need to talk about it. Tell me more about you."

"We know all about *cruft*." She wanted to talk up to him, he read from her words and tone. "Many of us nativeborn have our own psychological damage."

"It's not your generation that interests me. Tell me more about you."

She did, but soon found an opening to turn the conversation to the glamour and power of running NCMF's operations. He played it up; she wanted to hear it as part of their dance. Yet he was glad when their mindlinks forwarded to their consciousnesses the yacht's invitation to dinner.

They left the midcastle and descended to the party deck to find the appetizers gone and buffet tables in their place. Even though no new immigrants had been invited, the menu honored their exotic heritage. Not with *phở* or *bún* or ham sandwiches on baguettes—any kitchen on New Cal could assemble four courses of Vietnamese cuisine—but with Texas recipes culled from the planetary internet. Shredded chicken enchiladas smothered in tomatillo sauce and sour cream at one station, brisket mesquite smoked for eighteen hours at another. Cam worked the room and urged people to drink frozen margaritas and bock beers. A dark pink smoke ring showed on Desmond's brisket slices, and his beer bottle dewed in the sea air. Tethys enjoyed the enchiladas and a margarita so sweet its tequila was untasteable. The dim light and her smile reminded him of a spring evening in Jennifer's room in her rental house near campus, listening to decades-old songs played from the original CDs by a dedicated music player she'd bought at a garage sale, the windows open to the smell of cow manure from the University farm.

By the time the robots picked up their empty plates, the windows showed K-Nought had nearly set. Time for the next step down the path. "Let's take in the sunset," he said.

"I'd like that."

With gentle touches to her shoulder, he guided her aft. Yet when they rounded the last corner before the stairs, Desmond's mood deflated. Ashwin emerged from the head and malice flowed into his face when he saw Desmond.

"Desmond! I heard Annalise broke up with you. Such a shame. You seemed to hold a torch for her for a long time."

Tethys stiffened her fleshy limbs. Desmond's heart pounded in his ears, but he pushed the ball of his left foot against the floor until his rage softened. "It's been so long since then, I don't even remember when that happened. Look it up for me through mindlink, would you? Pardon us, Ash."

Tethys stiffly climbed the aft stairs. The door to her boudoir might now be irrevocably closed. Piyan indio. Yet as they reached the aft deck, her head jerked up, her eyes widening and her mouth gasping, and Desmond forgot about Ashwin George.

The male rui shi sat serenely on the aft deck, like a lion surveying its territory. It had docked its globe in a socket in its chest. The setting sun on the globe's left curve and the newly-risen moon Los Angeles on its right framed Tethys' stunned reflection in its center. Some time in the hours since he'd last seen the rui shi, the hanzi characters on its livery collar had changed. No longer *auspicious lion*, the hanzi now read *indomitable blue stubborn water pig*.

Desmond breathed in. His chest and abdomen swelled and squished out part of his fear. He stepped forward and slightly bowed his head. "*Jiǔyǎng*." A polite, formal greeting, with an implication of equality between them.

"*Wǎn ān*," it replied in a deep bass voice. In a flat American accent it added, "Good evening." It rose to its four feet and padded forward along the port side of the ship.

No one occupied the sitting area to starboard, facing the sunset. "Here's a good view," he said.

Tethys hesitated. He guided her with his hand on her shoulder blade. She shuffled her feet but kept staring after the rui shi. Only after he led her to the sitting area, and her knees folded to land her on the banquette with her head below the pony wall did she turn to him. "Those things can *speak*?"

"That's the first I've ever heard one."

"Is it a special model? It must have extra hardware."

"Not hardware, I don't think, or software either," Desmond said. She looked confused. "It's like the way we can use our mindlink to look through cameras and hear through microphones. I'm sure something can act through them."

"Something?" Her eyes widened in shock. "Tián Quán's AIs?" She lifted her gaze to San Francisco, its half-moon high overheard like a shrunken white pea. Her breath sounded ragged. "Is that thing here to protect the governor?" She paled, then whispered, "To kill him?"

"I don't think either one."

Tethys studied his eyes. “I’ve heard the rumors. Mysterious events involving the governor and all the Fremont Mesa generation closing ranks around it. What’s happening? Tián Quán? Domestic politics?”

Desmond took a deep breath to calm her, not himself. An oblique way to say it came to mind. She seemed smart enough to take his meaning. “Against boredom, even the gods themselves struggle in vain.”

“Gods?” She frowned.

He hid his disappointment behind a casual tone of voice. “Nietzsche. He lived a couple hundred years ago. He’s the guy who said ‘God is dead.’”

Understanding flowed into her face. “Oh, it’s a metaphor.” Tethys blinked, her eyes suddenly moist. “Oh.” She leaned toward him, put her arm around him, rested her cheek on his shoulder. He remembered holding his children when toddlers. He worked his arm behind her back and palmed her waist above the hip.

K-Nought smeared reds and purples across the horizon and the first stars came out overhead. Conan’s eye glinted at Thulsa Doom’s severed head, and the bowlegged Tramp clicked his heels. “Are the constellations different on Earth?” she asked.

Twelve thousand light years away. “Even the stars are different.”

For a few seconds, the only sound came from the twenty-foot-long paddles behind the stern, gravely working to hold the yacht’s position against the strong southerly current. From the flash of her wrists to her coy up-angled smile, he read she’d gotten over Ashwin’s attempted cockblock and expected him to take the next step down the mating path.

Yet what would he gain? Half an hour of pleasure in the warm folds of her flesh. What would she gain? A feeling of being desired by a ruco on Cam’s guest list. They would run programs coded in DNA and compiled by protein every animal generation for the past five hundred million years.

Yet his body and brain fit that rut. He remembered a ruse he had tried on several other starchild girls with good effect. The memory of Jennifer’s room and her old CDs came to him, reminding him of the ruse’s source in an ‘80s college rock song and dogging his next

words with guilt. “I remember late one night, when I was a child, lying in the rear seat of my parents’ car. The wheeled kind, it traveled on roads. I was falling asleep, and the car motor’s sound would cut out of my hearing for a moment at a time, as if all the clocks in the world had stopped. My last waking thought was I’d never seen anything so great as all the stars.”

She shifted to look up at him, her eyes wide in the fading twilight. “That’s beautiful.” She closed her eyes and angled her mouth toward his when a sound distracted them. Someone inside the dark fitness room clanged equipment together. Both he and Tethys looked over the top of the banquette, but the fitness room remained dark. *Turn on the light*, he thought, but he chose not to send the message. Maybe blind kettlebell swings were a new training fad. Then the fitness room fell silent, and Desmond decided a couple inside wanted stealthy sex.

From the starboard side of the midcastle came a quiet woosh: the door opened. Desmond almost said *Someone’s here already* to give the couple a chance to turn away, but instead he held his silence.

A single figure came past the corner of the midcastle and strode straight toward the stern. Cam, a purposeful set to his shoulders and a hundred-twenty pound kettlebell against his body, racked to his chest with both hands on the handle. Perfect form, Desmond remembered later, wrists straight and forearms pressed to his ribcage. Cam remained oblivious to both the fading sunset and Desmond and Tethys. His upper body and the backs of his shoulders showed resolute purpose. His strides lengthened as he went to the railing.

Tethys gasped. Desmond untangled from her arm and lurched to his feet. “Cam!”

Cam’s shoulders hunched a moment, but he lifted them as he turned his head. He hadn’t come on deck to do kettlebell swings. “What do you want, Desmond?”

Desmond held out his hands. “You don’t have to do this, Cam.”

“I know I don’t have to.”

“Don’t choose this. There’s so much to live for.” Wodema. The clichéd words sounded ludicrous. “Colonists from the UN occupation zone, San José will be bigger than its namesake—”

Cam peered at him. “I know you too well, Desmond. You don’t

believe there's so much to live for. You don't believe in anything. There's nothing else for me. I can't go back to Earth. I can't resign my office. I need to do this."

Gooseflesh stippled Desmond's cheeks. The colony needed room to grow, and to gain that room, Cam needed to be out of the picture. But suicide? Cam's forearms shivered under the weight still racked against his chest. A thin rope lashed the kettlebell's handle to his left hand, and Desmond realized he'd planned this attempt for months. "You know what you're choosing?" Desmond asked.

Relief filled Cam's face. "Thank you for seeing that."

"Then go," Desmond said, "with New California's blessing."

Cam turned to face the railing, and lifted the kettlebell straight up. His head eclipsed the black iron cannonball from Desmond's view. He strode to the railing. The kettlebell cleared it. Cam bent over the railing from the middle of his back, held his grip on the kettlebell, but dropped his arms and kicked both his legs backward. The combined momentum of his rotating body and the falling kettlebell whipped him headfirst over the railing. A loud splash, a dull thunk through the hull of the ship from the massive paddles; then silence.

Tethys' breaths came shallowly, raggedly. "You let him...."

"He chose it. You saw that."

Her face showed no sign of hearing him. "Governor!" she shouted. She opened a public mindlink channel, top priority, and shouted again. She ran to the stern and Desmond ambled after. *Girl, let him go, for all our sakes.* He peered at the murky water, his gaze caught by moonlight glinting the surface. Over the public channel, the party's hubbub faded as Tethys shouted again, –Governor! Someone, help him!–

Later, the silence seemed to last for hours, though the yacht took action a couple of heartbeats after her final call. Below the waterline, robots looking like pygmy dolphins with grafted arms propelled themselves out rescue hatches, and bright white lamps lit up the subsurface, so bright the black paddles appeared gray. On the starboard paddle, a shadow showed a fresh dent close to its hinged connection to the hull. Through his mindlink, the yacht's subsurface spectrophotometers told him excess heme iron enriched the water around the dent.

The silvery school of rescue robots darted into the darkness beyond the lamps' reach. From a few dozen yards to starboard came a gurgle of water. A silvery ripple on the surface showed where the seahyena dived.

People reacted next. Virtual avatars popped into Desmond's vision, projected there by his mindlink. Ashwin's avatar manifested at the railing next to Desmond. Anxious surprise had replaced his usual arrogance. –What happened?–

–He weighted himself down and jumped, right here. He hit the paddle hard enough to draw blood.– Footsteps pounded up the stairs from the banquet level. Ashwin's avatar shifted as Desmond turned his head to the new arrival. Flesh-and-blood Ashwin ran to the railing while the avatar mapped itself to its owner's body and disappeared.

Ashwin stared into the water while he caught his breath. Now he looked thoughtful. “Cam wanted to leave the rejuve clinic nothing to work with. Unless he thought Tián Quán would build a new body for his archived brain scan.”

Tián Quán would never, and Cam had been clear-eyed about what the company permitted its protectorates. “He knew what he was doing.”

Ashwin sneered at the water. “Pimping blonde topless dancers to the People's Liberation Army, and paying a few billion yuán for the settlement rights, didn't earn him that much gratitude.”

More avatars and people filled the deck and looked over the railing. “Cam fell off the boat?” Ellen Sakamoto asked.

Her attempt to cover up Cam's intent from the starchildren present annoyed Desmond. “He jumped with a hundred-twenty pound kettlebell tied to his hands.”

“How do you know? You saw this?” She angled her head. “You saw him in danger and did nothing to stop him?”

“No. I let him do what he most wanted.”

“It's true,” Tethys said. “He didn't try to stop him.”

Ellen noticed her for the first time. “You sounded the alarm?”

“Yes.”

“When? Before or after he went over?”

Tethys hesitated. “After.”

“After? After the yacht could have preemptively launched its rescue robots? After several men could have hurried up here to block him?”

Tethys quailed, and though Desmond had lost the urge to seduce her the moment he’d divined Cam’s intention, he took her side. “She was stunned by what she saw. We’ve covered up Cam’s recent suicide attempts so well she didn’t know it was real.”

“There’s no time for this!” Carl Yaeger shouted. He stood next to the railing and bounced his fist against it. “Cam is down there! Ashwin, I’m sure you’ve already told the seahyena to go to rescue mode—”

“There is no rescue mode,” Ashwin replied.

“—but it has to bring him up soon! What? No rescue mode?” Yaeger’s lower lip sagged and his head slowly oscillated from side to side. “It will leave him alone if he’s moving under his own power, but turn it off while there’s still a chance for the rescue robots to save him!”

Ashwin turned from the railing and squared his shoulders to the crowd. “The seahyenas preserve the sanctity of two biospheres. That’s more important than any one man. Even Cam.”

The crowd looked confused, frightened. The girl Selene looked ready to burst with tears. Only one face showed an emotion dissonant with the crowd’s. Priya Varghese gave her life partner a knowing, cautioning look.

“But we have to save him!” shouted someone in the mass of people.

Desmond glanced at Ashwin and their gazes met. Desmond still loathed the other, and he read incompletely-disguised ambition in Ashwin’s features. But Desmond knew the other agreed letting Cam stay dead was in the colony’s best interest. Tomorrow would be time enough to renew their rivalry.

Desmond nodded to Ashwin and raised his voice. “We do? This is the third time he’s done something like this!” The Earthborns shot him warning looks. Timid rucos, afraid of losing face to the starchildren. “The first time, when he hanged himself in a closet in the governor’s mansion, we could all pretend it was accidental autoerotic asphyxiation. And the second time, obviously someone adulterated

his ecstasy with pentobarbital, and we packed that someone off to criminal psychiatric reprogramming at Los Robles to serve justice.”

Desmond flourished his hand toward the water. “But now? We can’t delude ourselves any longer. Cameron Watkins wanted to kill himself! He could have tried drowning in a swimming pool or in the river, but he realized someone would jump in to save him. The river is deep, maybe a heavy weight would have worked, but he would’ve attracted notice carrying one to the riverside. Not one of us thought twice about the kettlebells on board.” He chopped his hand toward the midcastle. “He waited until we were all full with dinner and moving on to the evening’s other entertainments, then he slipped away from each and every one of you.” Desmond stared at Ellen Sakamoto until she ducked her gaze. “And he knew out here a seahyena would keep us from recovering his brain and breathing more life back into it.” *Four minutes since Cam jumped* came from Desmond’s mindlink. If the seahyena had not yet crushed Cam’s skull, anoxia would soon pulp its contents. “Review the yacht’s camera feeds. Watch how intently Cam went over the edge. We know what he wanted. He’s found it. Let him keep it.”

Desmond surveyed the crowd. His words had dislodged the desire to save Cam from many of their faces. Not all; a few betrayed private doubts about the apparent consensus Desmond and Ashwin had forged by forceful words and resolute demeanors, but from their expressions, those few people clearly felt alone. They would not protest. He had carried the day.

“We agree,” Ashwin said. “We’ll let Cam go.” A few of the crowd nodded, but most seemed numb. Their world had turned upside down.

Confidence buoyed Desmond’s chest. Cam would stay dead and the people left behind in New California’s tiny bubble of earthlife could free themselves from the dead hand of the past. Then he glanced up.

The rui shi family, once again auspicious lions guarding all of heaven, sat on the midcastle’s roof, serenely watching the crowd through their snarling faces. To port, the cub sat between its mother’s front legs. To starboard, the male’s paw rested on the globe. In the globe, gray swirls smeared the reflections of the coastal

settlements and the moon Los Angeles. Whatever the rui shi and the AIs working through them thought about the petty lives played out this night, they kept to themselves.

A chime in his mind's ear told Desmond that Ashwin wanted to privately speak. –I'll remember how you've helped me,– Ashwin said.

Desmond swallowed. Tomorrow started now. –When the time comes, I'll remind you.– After Ashwin hung up, Desmond turned his face to the empty sea. *He's so arrogant he thinks I did it for him.*

The crowd milled around the aft deck for a time. A few leaned over the railing and stared into the ocean, as if their biological eyes could pierce the murk and lift Cam to acute rejuvenation. Many shuffled across the deck and averted empty faces from their peers.

Someone cried. The urge from the party deck a few hours earlier returned to Desmond, this time tinged with shame at having kept years of insight to himself. He followed the sound. In the corner of the port sitting area, a woman sat with her knees pulled to her chest and her black hair over her face. Selene. Sobs convulsed her torso. The people nearest her stood in an awkward semicircle a few yards away.

Desmond went to her and Yaeger stepped in his way. “What do you think you're doing?”

“Comforting her.”

“Comforting? Like you comforted her by recounting Cam's other suicide attempts?”

Desmond privately said, –Once Cam went over the side, she wasn't going to spread her legs for you tonight.– He pushed past Yaeger with his forearm and thought at a lounge chair to roll close to Selene.

He sat, lowering his head to the same height as hers. “You're hurting.” Behind him, Yaeger snorted.

After a moment, her sobs subsided. “Yes.” Her buried face muffled her mucus-thickened voice.

“Tell me about it.”

“You know. The governor.”

“I know Cameron Watkins committed suicide earlier tonight. Tell me how that hurts you.”

Selene lifted her head. Her bloodshot, puffy eyes and contorted mouth showed fresh anguish. "I don't know," she said. Her face clenched, squeezing out more tears. "But it does." She buried her face and gave muffled cries.

"You don't understand why he did it." She breathed raggedly and rocked back and forth. Desmond read her motion as a nod. "You were right, he had everything his genes could want for him. Wealth? In old California, the Chinese occupation forces made him rich enough to buy the rights to this planet. Power. Fame. Status. He had all those, plus everything those coins could buy. Imported luxuries, rich food, excellent physical health. Sex, too. Seven children by five women. His genes could want nothing more."

He lightly touched her shoulder. "But *he* could. You see, his genes, like yours, like mine, don't know what they're doing. They build yearning brains, but the yearning remains after all our desires are sated. They build curious brains, but the curiosity eventually wonders if our lives have any purpose. They build brains seeking meaning, but often either failing to find it or, on finding it, discovering it hollow. Our genes are not geniuses. Our genes are not angels. Our genes are evil crippled godlings who built half-formed creatures good enough, and loyal enough, and programmed well enough to serve them. They don't care about us. But they don't know we can set ourselves free of them."

Selene looked up. Her tears had faded and longing tinged by hope shone in her face. "Tell me more," she said. She glanced around. "We all want to hear more."

Desmond stole a look to left, to right. Many of the people around him, from Earth- to native-born, from female to male, listened to him. Nods, affirming words, supportive body language. Ellen looked unconvinced, but even so, encouragement lifted him until he glanced up.

The rui shi cub's front paws hung over the edge of the midcastle's roof and it watched him with what seemed an inquisitive look on its squashed snarled face. A water pig now, just like its father earlier. What did this thing want?

"No, we've heard enough," Yaeger said. "Cam is dead for one simple reason."

“Just one?” Desmond asked.

“His TruSelf teachers failed to find the right combination of psychotropics and self-talk in time.”

Ellen frowned, but kept silent. Yaeger turned to another Earth-born standing nearby. “Ashwin, what do you think?”

Ashwin’s habitual smirk soon formed. “I think Desmond spends too much time alone with the scribblings of dead men. Free ourselves from our genes? How the hell are you going to do that, Des?” His tone grew more mocking. “Start a religion?”

New California Date 92:95

17 December 2093

His mindlink pinged: Selene approached his house. Before heading to the guest landing pad, Desmond checked on the neuropharm implantation couch. He'd bought a standard model, identical to dozens in TruSelf facilities across the planet, and learned to program it. The couch's expert system reported its status was all green.

Good, since it had implanted neurochemical microfabs in his brain three days earlier.

Desmond rose from the sunken seating area around the translucent ceramic fireplace in his great room. In the foyer, his sandals rustled over the cultured marble floor. The double doors swung toward him, opening the way to the front lawn and the guest landing pad.

The airmobile came over his neighbor's mansion and extended its wheels as it descended. Its running lights blinked brighter than the stars the city's light pollution washed out. He'd sent one of his own vehicles, the landau, to pick her up at her friend's myconcrete apartment, to spare her the sweatiness of a bicycle ride up the switchback and spare him raised neighbor's eyebrows at a public-hire airjitney landing in his front yard.

He followed the flagstone path from his front doors, past a bubbling fountain of animatronic nymphs, to the landing pad. Down on its wheels, the landau popped its nearside door. Selene climbed out and shook her hair, smiling. "Desmond, nihao!"

"Nihao, meimei."

"The implantation couch worked for you, ma?"

Save for following the motion of her hair, his gaze had never left her face. No "boob check," as an ex-girlfriend had called it: the

inevitable appraising glance built into the male brain by the selfish gene and triggered every few seconds. “Perfectly.”

“Great! I’m so excited, the past few days I’ve been telling everyone. Like Max.” She waved her hand at the landau’s open door. “He heard so much he wanted to come along.”

Max climbed out. Shorter than average, with wiry hair and narrow eyes, he glanced over the fountain and the front façade of the house, then lifted his chin and stuck out his chest. “Nihao, Mr. Park,” he muttered, and jutted out his hand to keep a bro-hug at bay.

“Nihao.” Desmond’s mindlink compiled a dossier from social networking sites. Max Jacoby, son of an EnvE retiree, recent graduate of Golden State U., employed by TruSelf as an assistant implantation tech. The dossier failed to explain his caginess. “You know Selene from undergrad, ma?”

“That’s right.”

“We overlapped my first five NC-years,” Selene said. “We had a lot of deep conversations late at night. When I moved to San Laz to be closer to you, he let me crash at his apartment.”

“Very kind to let her stay with you.” To Selene, Desmond asked, “Just deep conversations?” He glanced at Max. Frustration flickered across the younger man’s face.

“He’s been like a brother to me,” Selene said. Max kept silent.

“Thank you for coming to celebrate your sister’s liberation from the selfish gene,” Desmond said, though it was clearly not Max’s intent. “Let’s go inside.”

He led them past blue jacaranda shrubs as the landau revved up and hopped over the house to the garage. He slowed the pace in the great room, giving Max time to be cowed by Desmond’s opulent house. This was Selene’s first visit, too, after all their prior meetings in coffeehouses, but she ignored his house’s luxury.

Before they started down the hall to the implantation couch, Max said, “How do you think you can liberate people from their genetic tendencies?”

“I told you he has an implantation couch,” Selene said.

“TruSelf’s had implantation couches for fifty Earth-years. We’ve never claimed to free people from the selfish gene.”

“TruSelf never tried,” Desmond said. He led them deeper into

the house.

Sol-spectrum ceiling panels lit up the room when they entered. The couch was set up in the former tea room. The tatami mats lay rolled up in the attic and the brazier had long since been picked up by NCMF recycling. The room stood nine feet on a side. The implantation couch, a sleek plastic cocoon in various gray shades, filled the back third of it. Blue status LEDs glowed and a display showed all subsystems ready. Water bubbled in its internal tubing as cooling fans hummed.

Selene ran her fingers along the smooth case. "It looks so powerful."

"Mr. Park," Max said, "this isn't a toy. TruSelf requires years of training and testing before qualifying an employee as an implantation couch operator, let alone a programmer."

Desmond raised an eyebrow. "It took me a couple of weeks with the programmer's guide. I operated it by mindlink while inside without any problems. The expert systems do most of the work—"

"Selene, do you hear him?"

"Yes. He's so intelligent he can do anything."

Desmond smiled at her, but dropped the expression as he looked at Max. The younger man hadn't followed her to protect her from a badly-programmed implant. He had come to stop her from taking the next step toward freeing herself from the selfish gene.

"He's out of control!" Max said. "He plugged neuropharm microfabs into his brain without oversight! You're putting your mind at risk if you do this!"

"In the conversations I've had with him the past month, Desmond has done more to help me grow than all the other mentors I've ever had put together. I'll follow him anywhere. Aren't you my friend? Don't you want me to grow?"

Anxiety showed on Max's face, turning into anger he aimed at Desmond. "You think you know what you're doing? Prove it."

Confidently-spoken jargon would be enough. TruSelf's rigid hierarchy wouldn't yet have taught him the underlying neurophysiology. "We'll implant several microfabs in the brain. To eliminate the sex drive, we'll synth a testosterone antagonist in the limbic system—"

“Instead of blocking testosterone production in the gonads?”

Maybe he did know the physiology. Irritation spiked in Desmond, and he remembered Maltby and Ashwin on the party yacht. He leaned into Max’s personal space. “Testosterone serves useful purposes, such as fueling competitiveness.” Max backed away. “Second, we’ll eliminate kin favoritism by lowering the synaptic weightings on projections from the kinship recognition centers to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex.”

“You think that’s enough? No cognitive therapy or post-hypnotic suggestions?”

“Those are unreliable and unnecessary,” Desmond said. He’d done enough simulations to support his findings.

Max folded his arms in front of his chest. “Just because you can throw around some buzzwords doesn’t mean you know what you’re doing. Dozens of people review any new programming before TruSelf implements it—”

“I personally delivered Ellen Sakamoto the first implantation couch fabbed on this planet. She had one programmer, now your chief r&d officer, who did double duty as the couch operator. TruSelf doesn’t need all its layers of junior programmers and assistant technicians to do its job. Neither do we.”

“Goushi.”

“Max!” Selene admonished.

Desmond raised his hand to her, but spoke to Max. “Goushi? Really?”

“Why does TruSelf have so many levels of redundancy, if not to catch errors? Tell me that.”

Before Desmond could reply, Selene said, “That’s easy.” Her smile confirmed the words.

“Easy?” Max said.

Her smile widened, crinkling the corners of her eyes. “The expanding pyramid. It’s one of the things Desmond has shown me the selfish gene makes each generation do, now that we get routine rejuvenation every two years.”

“Expanding pyramid? What sort of nonsense has he put in your head?”

“Rejuvenation means no one ages out of their jobs. People some-

times retire if they're restless or have saved a lot of money, but that's uncommon. Your father was an exception. You agree, ma? Not nonsense?"

Max shrugged. "Go on."

"Perhaps it's less obvious the selfish gene makes us timid. We cling to our habits and our social groups, and most of us prefer clinging to what we have than taking calculated risks to improve our lot. Our subsistence-farming ancestors couldn't switch jobs or become entrepreneurs, so we don't either. So once hired, people rarely quit."

Max looked to be considering her words.

"The selfish gene does more. Desmond is brilliant for seeing these and pointing them out. People in hierarchies want more underlings, not more peers, and they want to use those underlings to out-compete their peers for budgets, salaries, promotions, and prestige."

Delight sparked inside Desmond. She'd taken his words and made them her own. Not his words originally—he'd paraphrased a management aphorism by C. Northcote Parkinson—but even if Max's mindlink dredged up the original and Max accused him of plagiarism, he would just give Parkinson a hat tip and breeze on. Selene would stay convinced, and after she entered the couch, Max could go back to being a pawn of a pawn of Ellen Sakamoto.

"In other words," Max said, "I'm a joke. And you call yourself *my* friend?"

Selene looked pained. "No. Your job is a joke. The selfish gene has hidden the truth from you, until now."

Max cast a troubled look at the hardwood floor near the implantation couch. He didn't want to be a cog in the TruSelf machine, Desmond read from his body language. He'd told himself the same lie all starchildren did, *I'm the one who'll rise up the pyramid*. In twenty E-years, he would resign himself to mediocrity and feel fortunate to work for an established enterprise and have a few subordinates under him.

Desmond's mindlink filled in more: Max's college transcript, extracurricular neuropharm research, and traces in other people's social network profiles. He had far more merit than most of his TruSelf coworkers. A nudge might turn him from an adversary to an ally. "TruSelf's wasting your talents, ma?"

“They’ll see I’m qualified for a promotion.”

“You’ve been there long enough to know,” Desmond replied. “Selene, are you ready?”

“Absolutely.”

“No!” Max said. He stepped closer to her and cradled her hands in his. “Don’t do this. Please.”

Her brow crinkled. “There’s no danger.”

“I’m sure Mr. Park knows what he’s doing. That’s the thing. It’ll work too well. Cut off the ties to your parents and your half-siblings? Dry up your sexuality? Are you ready for that?”

“Sexuality is a distraction,” Selene said. “It almost snared me in a bad situation the night Desmond showed me the higher truth. And when my relatives have no special place in my heart, the better I can devote myself to the friends I’ve chosen.” She pulled her hands from his and chastely air-kissed his cheeks. “Thank you, Max, for all your concern.” To Desmond, she added, “I’m ready.”

Desmond flourished his hand at the implantation couch. The lid clamshelled up. “Enter and become free.”

Steps distended from the base of the couch. Selene climbed them and sat on the couch’s rim. She pressed together her pale knees, exposed below the hem of her summer dress, then swung her legs into the couch’s interior. She stretched out on the contoured cushions at the bottom. Robotic arms darted out from the side walls and snaked sensors down her neckline and up her skirt. She grimaced when an iv needle pierced the skin inside her left elbow, but her face soon grew calm. “Close the lid.”

Desmond thought at the couch. The lid lowered, motor whirring. Even louder came Max’s fast, ragged breaths.

The telltales all showed clear. In the display, Selene’s face showed the effect of the mild sedative in the iv. The microfabs passed their final diagnostics, and the pumps and syringes holding each microfab and its targeting agents were ready.

A chair rolled up to the display. Desmond put his hand on the backrest, then paused. “Even though your bosses don’t let you, you know how to operate it, ma?”

Fear and interest battled in Max’s voice. “I’ve studied for the promotion exam.”

“She’d welcome you to operate the couch.”

Another ragged breath. “What?”

“You’re right, I shouldn’t speak for Selene.” Desmond opened a mindlink channel to them both. –Would you like Max to run the controls?–

–Max, you’d do that for me?–

He swallowed hard. –If it’s what you want, yes, I will.–

Desmond backed away from the chair. It swiveled its seat for the younger man. Max gripped the armrests and sank onto the cushion. “Let me check what you’ve set up.” Max studied the display for a couple of minutes, as menus flashed by and sheaves of text scrolled upscreen. “Looks like you’ve got it.” To the couch, he said, “Start.”

The first syringe injected its cocktail into Selene’s iv. Over the next few minutes, Desmond occasionally asked Max for progress updates. Max’s answers grew more detailed, and his voice more engaging, as they went.

After the second cocktail entered her vein and a robot wheeled in with a bottle of mineral water and two glasses, Max started asking about Desmond’s design choices. His questions showed he knew enough about couch programming to do some himself. “How would you have done it?” Desmond asked. He listened intently to the younger man’s answer, asking questions and offering suggestions in a mild voice of genuine curiosity.

After the third cocktail, Max asked, “So you really think our genes don’t care about us?”

Desmond had an elevator pitch ready. “If they did care about us, why are so few people happy?”

Max stayed silent, while the sedative and the targeting molecules from the final cocktail cleared Selene’s bloodstream. The robot arms disconnected the sensors and withdrew the iv, then spread coagulant over the puncture site. The lid lifted and both Desmond and Max reached into the couch for Selene’s arms. They lifted her to a seat on the rim while her legs stayed in the couch.

“It may take a few hours before you fully feel yourself again,” Desmond said.

“I already feel–no, not myself–better than myself.”

“The microfabs are just getting started,” Max said. “They won’t

secrete a sufficient dose to give behavioral changes for a couple hours.”

Selene smiled. “If what I’m feeling is a placebo, then when the microfabs are active, I’ll feel even more free. I can stand. Help me out.”

Desmond steadied her. She swung her legs over the couch’s rim, less chastely than she’d entered. Her dress cast a shadow between her knees, on the lower parts of her inner thighs. Max’s gaze lingered stupidly there for a moment, before intelligence returned to his eyes and he turned his chagrined face away from her and Desmond.

“Let’s talk about your experience in the couch,” Desmond said to Selene.

“Gladly, Desmond. If I can make it even easier for the next person who wants to be free, I will.”

“The great room, then. We can sit with warm tea near the fire. We’re done here for tonight.”

“No we aren’t,” Max said. His voice wavered and he steadied himself with his hand on the couch. He looked down at his hand for a moment, until certainty filled his face and lifted his head, chest, and shoulders. “I will join you.”

New California Date 92:97

19 December 2093

Ashwin's airmobile descended toward Tián Quán planetary headquarters. The black box proper loomed behind a stone wall fifteen feet high. Straddling the wall at each of the four cardinal directions stood four buildings, each sixty feet high, all dwarfed by the black box in the center. A different material cladded each building—whorled wooden panels, stained green, to the east; opaque glass blocks tinged the color of fresh blood, to the south; sputtered tin-lead-antimony to the west; and yellow basalt quarried from the interior of the continent to the north. Yet on each building, the side facing the black box, as well as adjacent curved swathes on the roof and each adjoining side, showed the same unnatural matte black as the central tower. Ashwin pictured the complex as some *chingru* inversion of a model solar system, where a black cubical sun scorched the inner faces of its satellites.

But for all Tián Quán's power, nothing lasted forever. A drip of water would eventually erode a mountain—didn't one of their holy books say that?

He landed outside the stone wall at the base of the eastern building. At least Li helped his illusion: Ashwin usually met with Tián Quán's environmental engineering staff in the outbuilding of green whorled wood. Today, though, planetary director Li himself had accepted his request to meet. Although Ashwin had held silent about his primary purpose, for Li to accept the offer showed Tián Quán's local hefé knew the score.

Ashwin debarked. Paired double-height doors swung inward for him. Inside, his mindlink guided him through a maze of twisting corridors and escalators. Despite decades of official visits, the path always eluded his memory. Probably some aerosolized drug to

disrupt his sense of direction. If Desmond were here, instead of dithering that benighted girl he'd stolen from Yaeger, he'd ask him which drug and its antidote.

On the highest floor, he came to a large conference room. One long wall, a single pane of one-way glass, faced north to Government Mesa. The governor's mansion, a ludicrous design full of flat curves, sharp angles, and aluminum cladding, stood next to EnvE headquarters' green brachiated dome.

From habit, Ashwin looked to the conference room's long table and stopped short. The table stood bare, its constellation of chairs undisturbed.

"Mr. George," Li said in Mandarin from an interior corner of the room. Three armchairs and a loveseat formed a sitting area. Li rose from his chair and held out his hand, palm down, as Ashwin approached. Daylight shadowed Li's jowls.

Ashwin put on a smile. He took Li's hand with both of his, turning Li's wrist to a less dominant position as he shook. He took a risk by resisting Li's dominance display, but Ashwin wasn't going to kowtow to Tián Quán to overthrow Lt. Gov. Levinson. He would acquire the governorship as a partner, however junior, or not at all. Li raised an eyebrow as Ashwin broke the handshake, but said nothing.

Ashwin spoke in Mandarin shunted to his vocal cords by mindlink and muscle control implants. "I'm pleased to meet you again, Mr. Li, and under more direct circumstances than previously." Reminding him of cocktail parties at the governor's mansion couldn't hurt. The lieutenant governor had missed most of them in recent years.

"Let us sit," Li said.

"Of course," Ashwin said, but he hesitated at the side of the sitting area.

Someone, obviously an avatar, had appeared behind Li's chair. There stood a smooth-faced, soft-jawed male in a round black cap and a long gray robe. On the robe's front, a black silk band marked off a square bearing hanzi characters and the image of a peacock in a meadow. In the image's background, a boar crossed a shallow stream. Where Desmond wasted time mindlinking to trivial knowl-

edge and antiquated books, Ashwin used it to gather intelligence on his enemies: the avatar represented one of Tián Quán's AIs, projected onto his senses. The company demanded access to his mindlink as an entry condition for its facilities.

Li didn't introduce it, so Ashwin overcame his initial surprise and ignored it as they sat. A robot carted in a tray of hot tea and savory Chinese pastries. Ashwin sipped and queued up a request to Priya's mindlink to make him a masala chai when she came home from the university.

After a few minutes of chit-chat, Ashwin looked at an empty chair next to Li. "Will anyone else join us?"

Li's brow furrowed. "You mean Capt. Zhang? Why would an official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs be needed?"

Ashwin blinked twice, rapidly. "Your pardon, please. I thought, as he is a recent arrival, you might have wanted to introduce me to him." He grasped the ministry was sticking its nose further into Tián Quán's affairs, posting diplomats or military attachés, like Zhang, to the company's protectorates. Small wonder Li was touchy about the attaché.

"When you request a meeting with me, I'll decide who else attends." Li peered at him. "Now tell me why you wished to meet."

Ashwin set down his mostly-full tea cup. "As I said earlier, EnvE faces unplanned ecosystem spread from the wild zones planted decades ago by my predecessor as Secretary of Environmental Engineering."

Li spoke around a mouthful of pork dumpling. "Information from our satellites would help you monitor it. True, yet... EnvE faced or did not face this problem before Gov. Watkins' suicide?"

"We faced it."

"Why, then, is it an issue now?"

Ashwin had expected this question. "When we recognized the problem a few local years ago, Gov. Watkins committed a great deal of the planetary government's resources to fight it. Levinson reneged on that commitment when he became governor."

"I see. Go on."

"His decision has aroused much anger among EnvE's employees and its friends in influential positions."

A stray cloud dimmed the light through the glass wall. “If that were true, would I not already be aware of it?” Li asked, his face in deeper shade.

“I do not know what senses you have.” Ashwin glanced at the AI’s impassive avatar. “Yet what I say is true.”

Li kept his gaze on Ashwin. “Do a thing under cover of another.”

One of those damned *chingru* idioms, but the meaning was plain. In spite of that, Ashwin said, “I don’t follow.”

“You want to depose Levinson.”

Appear willing, but not eager. “It has crossed my mind that I would lead the colony more effectively than Levinson.”

The AI’s avatar shifted its nonexistent weight. Its stare made Ashwin want to squirm in his chair. He could only lead the colony under Tián Quán’s suzerainty. *The hefé of New Califas* he thought in a mocking Pachuco accent. *Head indio in charge.* He stifled those thoughts and returned his attention to Li.

“You ask too much.”

“How so?”

“Tián Quán seeks peace, order, and good governance on all the worlds over which it is granted transportation and security rights by the Treaty of St. Louis.”

Ashwin nodded. “I seek all three of those for New California.”

Li raised his voice slightly. “We cannot condone extralegal regime change.”

Ashwin raised his palms. “Extralegal? I assure you, I seek nothing of the sort. I speak for many people and factions who have lost confidence in Levinson’s leadership: EnvE employees, caucuses in the Planetary Assembly, leading intellectuals at UNewCal, and Ellen Sakamoto of TruSelf.” He had lobbied all of them over the past month. “Faced with so wide a lack of confidence in his leadership, he would bow to the inevitable and resign, after naming me lieutenant governor and the Assembly confirming me.”

“So many people are concerned about invasive species in the wilds of the continent?” Li sounded bored and amused.

“My concern is a bellwether for other concerns. Levinson has been inattentive to many state affairs and has spent most of his month in office far from the capital, at his ski chalet near

Watkinsville.”

“This is true,” Li said.

“Some say he is overwhelmed by the burdens of office and seeks a way to shed them.” Ashwin turned up the volume on his smear. “I’ve heard he is even showing some of the signs Watkins showed in his final Earth-year.”

Li frowned. “My inward spies have not reported that.”

Ashwin shifted his sails, lest he say something Li could clearly identify as a falsehood. “At minimum, he has not showed leadership. Your outward spies must have revealed who showed leadership on the party yacht the night Watkins killed himself.”

“They did. You and Desmond Park.”

That goddam nerd. Ashwin kept the thought off his face. “After his brief moment, Park returned to obscurity as an introverted engineer. Only I have the ability and the motivation to govern New California.”

For a time, Li stared past Ashwin, out the window toward Government Mesa. “You make good points. However, Tián Quán cannot hand out colonial governorships to all who ask.”

Ashwin studied Li’s impassive face, glancing briefly at the ethereal aloofness of the AI’s avatar before dismissing its opinion as irrelevant. “You knew my intention when accepting my request to meet. Did you choose or not choose to meet me?”

Surprise flashed on Li’s face, but then he chuckled. He stood and gestured for Ashwin to rise. “You have confirmed thoughts I’ve had since Watkins turned suicidal. Depose Levinson under your colony’s laws. I look forward to working with you.” He extended his hand to shake Ashwin’s, and this time held it straight.

New California Date 92:110

3 January 2094

The coffeehouse door swung open, jangling its chimes. In trudged Selene and Max. The bright day outside lit up University Avenue and silhouetted the two. Though shadows covered their faces, Desmond read dejection in their slumped shoulders and tired gaits. They avoided the gazes of seated strangers on their way to Desmond's table.

He waved his hand through the space above his table. His day's work for NCMF—graphs, reports, videos, messages, all projected as expandable icons onto his field of vision—vanished, leaving the lacquered tabletop, an empty espresso cup, and biscotti crumbs.

"Nihao." He bro-hugged Max and air-kissed Selene's cheeks. "Why the long faces?"

"You didn't see what she published?" Selene asked.

"I saw Tethys' article in today's *Daily New Californian*. But why does it deject you?"

A smile glimmered on Selene's face at the echo of his words to her on the yacht.

Max, though, remained agitated, rubbing his palms down the front of his blue polo shirt and distressed jeans. "Everyone on campus read it, too. *Ruco's wannabe cult recruits UNewCal students*. That piyan fresa."

"She said a lot of hateful things," Selene said, and patted Max's arm. All three of them sat. Desmond guessed what most riled Max: tooltipped, hyperlinked video panning still photos of sultans and harems, with Tethys' voiceover. *Undoubtedly it's a pure coincidence, in spite of Park's lofty rhetoric, his first cult member is a comely girl a quarter his age. One wonders, though, at the presence of a young man in Park's inner circle. Perhaps Park wants*

to surround himself with eunuchs.

"Most days," Max said, "most people on campus ignore us if they don't want to hear our message. Today people sought us out to laugh. Some hunior called me a 'blueballer—'"

"You happened to wear blue clothes today," Selene said.

"You know what he meant."

"I do. But don't take it personally. They're all puppets."

Desmond angled his head at her. "Tell us more about that."

"The selfish gene built us for living in small groups of subsistence farmers." A flattop robot trundled up with a tea latte and a cappuccino. "In those social environments, the optimal evolutionary response is for most people to mindlessly follow the herd under the whip of conventional wisdom."

"That's very true," Desmond said.

"Thank you, but I only see it because of you."

Max glumly rotated his cappuccino by the handle, cup scratching on the saucer. "But what does that fresa gain by spouting conventional wisdom?"

"The selfish gene primed Tethys to seek a powerful mate who can provide for her offspring's material needs," Selene said. "On the cruise, she thought Desmond might be him, but now that he has a higher purpose, she feels scorned and wants to get back at him."

"Her article won't make him want to father her children."

Selene sipped her tea latte. "Her article warns other men they'll receive the same insults if they take themselves off the mating market and gives women insults to deliver...."

While they talked, Desmond stared past them out the front windows. On University Avenue, pedestrians and bicyclists drifted by under the lines of coast oaks on the sidewalks near the curbs. An NCMF delivery van rolled down the middle of the street. Across the avenue stood brick, steel, and glass storefronts for a massage therapist, an oxygen bar, and a cannabinist. One wide storefront bore no sign: a virtual projection, required by city ordinance to mask the vacant lot there in reality. Some software noticed his gaze and found his face in a high-net-worth database. A tooltip appeared over the virtual storefront. *Real estate investment opportunity, 0.6 ac prime location—*

A tall young man on the far sidewalk caught his attention. Stooped shoulders, long features, Desmond guessed him to be a student. He halted opposite the coffeehouse and checked the sign over its front door. "She did us a favor," Desmond said.

"Tethys?" Max asked. "A favor? How?"

The young man outside started across the street toward them. He paused for three speeding bicyclists and shot a brief annoyed look after them.

"The only thing worse than being talked about," Desmond said, quoting Wilde, "is not being talked about."

The coffeehouse door chimed. The new arrival looked around until he saw the three of them, then started through the mid-afternoon crowd toward their table. To Selene and Max, Desmond said, "In a moment, you'll see what I mean."

"You're Desmond Park?" the new arrival asked.

"Nihao." Desmond rose and held out his hand.

"I'm Castor Shafer." He grasped his right forearm with his left hand before shaking Desmond's. Desmond blinked, surprised. He hadn't seen a respectful Korean greeting since his childhood in Oakland. "And you're Selene? Max? I've seen you on campus but never worked up the courage to talk to you."

Desmond told an unoccupied nearby table to send over one of its chairs. Once all four of them sat, Desmond asked, "What can we do for you?"

"Like I said, I've seen Selene and Max on campus, and I know the message they're giving people. I kept my distance, but when I saw today's *Daily New Cal*...." He shook his head with a disgusted look. "*Krokodil* humor."

Selene's nose wrinkled. "I didn't see any crocodiles in Tethys's article."

Desmond's mindlink, tuned for such searches, turned up the reference to Soviet history. "He means edgy, transgressive satire slavishly serving conventional wisdom."

"If someone hates you that much, you're doing something right." Ice water arrived for Castor. "I don't just mean her. For the story to publish, at least the student editors and the faculty advisor for the *Daily New Cal* must hate you too. Maybe even the university admin-

istrators.”

“Certainly Chancellor Yaeger,” Desmond said. “But if the powers-that-be hate us, you should follow their example, ma?”

Castor looked to each side, then leaned in and lowered his voice. “When the governor offed himself, I spent a few days feeling relieved and optimistic. New Califas could change for the better. But it hasn’t. Ashwin George is governor now, and he’ll stay governor for another local century, or longer. No change will come from the top down.”

Desmond laid his hands on the table, palms up and open. “Will you help us bring about change?”

“From the bottom up? Yes.”

Desmond glanced at the lot for sale across the street as he put on an intent expression. “Not from the bottom up. From our DNA up.”

New California Date 93:1

5 February 2094

The dim light coming through the draped front windows gave the lobby of their new headquarters a secluded feeling and muted the shades of blue dressing his three closest followers. Desmond turned to Selene, Max, and Castor. The time was 13:40, a few minutes before local noon. “I want to thank you for all the work you’ve done to prepare for unveiling the front façade.”

They stood between the front glass wall and the large meeting hall, in the lee between two curved staircases leading to the freedom couches on the second floor. Selene smiled and bowed her head. She had built up the mystery of the concealed façade through social networking software while Max had readied the freedom couches and Castor had proselytized on campus and in the planetary internet. “Thank you giving us a purpose to work for... Seer.”

They’d brainstormed titles for Desmond. Max rejected *teacher* before Desmond vetoed it. Everyone liked *seer*, especially Castor, who pointed out the rough homophony to *sear*. *We’ll scorch the power structure*, he had said.

Desmond led them to the two-story-high glass wall on the street side. The ocean breeze undulated the drop curtain outside. The double doors opened for them. Desmond stepped up to a low dais and robotic arms pulled back the flaps in the curtain for him and his followers.

Selene’s work, combined with brunchtime on Planetary New Year, had brought a crowd onto University Avenue. People crowded the outdoor tables at the coffeehouse and a bistro across the avenue. The tables bore bloody marys, mimosas, and tiny dishes of cabbage and black-eyed peas. More people milled on the sidewalks and in the street, standing under the coast oaks or leaning their bicycles on one

leg. The crowd pressed closer and their curiosity-born murmurs echoed off the low-rises on both sides of the street, buildings dwarfed by their new headquarters' eight-story bulk. The new headquarters cost a pretty penny to construct in an L-month, but thanks to his position and ownership share at NCMF, Desmond afforded it without a blink.

He stopped near the front of the stage. While his followers lined up across the dais behind him, Selene to stage left and the men to stage right, he looked over the crowd. He put on a charming smile, then picked random people and held eye contact with them for a few seconds each, long enough to make the rest of the audience think he knew some of their peers. The crowd burbled till Desmond gestured for silence.

"Friends, welcome, and Happy New Year." Parabolic microphones tracked his mouth and loudspeakers under the dais amplified his words as much as the city's noise ordinance allowed. "I know it's customary on each New Year's Day to resolve to live better. I also know resolve can weaken and leave us in regret. Today I offer you good news. Today, we can hold to our resolve. Today, we can unchain ourselves from our selfish genes."

Desmond raised his right hand. The curtain split apart into a hundred vertical shreds. The shreds detached themselves from the roof's parapet and drifted down to the avenue, curling as they fell, their ravels vaporizing before reaching the pavement. The crowd's gazes ran up the façade behind Desmond and flitted from point to point over its giant mosaic.

Seven million colored glass cubes formed an image of two people. The male could have been a scion from almost any race of old California: tanned Caucasian, Polynesian, light-skinned Bantu-American, Chicano, or a multiracial embodying old California's blind gropes for liberation from the selfish gene. He had short brown-black hair and lean, sculpted muscles. The female's blond hair brushed the sides of her neck and evoked innocence. Her skin was fair, clear, sleek.

Castor had disapproved the figures' artistic nudity. *Men will come in because they want to have sex with her.* Desmond watched the crowd and many a man's gaze circled the angles of her face, the

heft of her breasts, the obscured curve of her lower abdomen. *Their selfish gene will be its own undoing*, Desmond had replied, and between his tone of voice and his position as leader, Castor had acquiesced.

The two figures, male to the left and female to the right, held hands and looked beatifically upward. From their waists down, shards of double-stranded DNA shattered and fell away from their bodies. Backlighting built into the wall and the noon sun in the glass tiles worked in concert to make the figures dazzling. Just above the front doors, a lintel bore the words TRANSCENDNA SOCIETY in a classical, serified font.

“In our heads,” Desmond said to the crowd, “we all know we are creatures of the selfish gene.” He followed with the names of Dawkins and Pinker, standard fare repeated by high school teachers across the planet. “But in our hearts, we all know the selfish gene led us into a dead end.”

He recapped Cam’s suicide. In the crowd, some of the faces looked contemplative. He continued his discourse, painting the late governor as an unwitting martyr to human biology. Desmond looked from face to face and saw a few agreeing nods. The rising wave of social proof crashed, though, around a coast oak on the far side of the avenue, between the coffeehouse and the bistro. Tethys leaned against the trunk with crossed arms and a cool look on her face. He took a breath between sentences and faintly smiled at her. She glanced away and muttered sidelong to a man in a green polo shirt—an off-duty EnvE employee, according to his public profile. He nodded, but a redheaded woman next to him, the EnvE man’s girlfriend, looked unconvinced by Tethys’ words.

Desmond went on. “What has the selfish gene given us? Sexual urges? Have you ever regretted what you’ve done to get sex or what you’ve done by giving it?”

“You would know!” the off-duty EnvE man yelled, as Tethys nodded and his girlfriend looked embarrassed.

“No need to raise your hands, just listen to the honest voice of your heart. What else? An urge to give your parents affection? What affection have they given you? Robotic nannies and ossified power structures that stunt and cripple your creative energies? The real you

hates the whipcrack of those urges, and hates the cruft laid down by the selfish gene that makes you jump at them.” If people heard *real you* but understood *TruSelf*, and decided Ellen Sakamoto approved his words and actions, well, what a happy accident.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Desmond said. “How can the TranscenDNA Society remove those urges?” Desmond raised his hands toward the figures in the mosaic. “The answer lies within. Lay yourself in one of our freedom couches and the Society’s members and expert systems will free your brain from the unproductive habits encoded by your selfish genes.”

“Just like at Los Robles!” the EnvE man heckled. Members of the crowd frowned and others suddenly looked pensive.

“So you’re accusing everyone here of being criminals?” Desmond called. He took a closer look: blond, cowlicked hair, and narrow sunglasses accenting his scornful look. His pale, redhaired girlfriend pressed her narrow lips together and muttered something.

The EnvE man waved off her words. “Not criminals, but fools. You know nothing about implantation couches.”

“I fabbed every implantation couch on this planet,” Desmond said confidently. The crowd’s mood shifted toward his side.

“Brain chemistry is harder than bashing atoms!” To the crowd, the EnvE man yelled, “Would you trust your brain to him?”

Max stepped forward. “He knows more about implantation couch programming and operations than everyone at TruSelf!”

–Max,– Desmond said with a stern edge. He should know not to mention TruSelf.

“How would you know?” the heckler shouted.

“I used to work there,” Max shouted back, “until I realized the TranscenDNA Society does more for human freedom than TruSelf ever will!”

–Max, that’s enough.–

–Desmond? Seer?–

–Later.– Desmond kept a confident expression and watched the crowd. The heckler’s girlfriend berated him and he glowered back. Without his fresh barbs, the crowd’s skeptical energies dissipated. Many faces showed agreement and support. Max’s denunciation of TruSelf had struck a nerve. Unsurprising–TruSelf was as morally

bankrupt as the rest of the founders' institutions. But the Society could use bridges to those institutions far more than it could broken piers with blown spans.

Enough. Stay on target.

"If you're ready to free yourself from your sexual urges or the burdens of your families, you're welcome through these doors any-time, day or night. If you prefer privacy, come through the alley to the rear entrance, or hire an airjitney with tinted windows. If only one or the other of the freedoms we now offer appeal to you, take that one by itself now and the next when you're ready. Or come in any time to tell us what you're feeling. We'll listen."

His gaze roved the crowd, and with the help of his mindlink he noticed the most needy faces. "If you're ready now, why wait? Come, we'll set you free." A bicyclist shuffled his feet, then came forward; Castor helped him onstage. A shill, a follower recruited on campus a few weeks before, but needed to prime the pump. A few more people, honest new members, followed. Desmond met each of their gazes and beckoned them. "There's no need to wait any longer." Another two people started forward.

One last study of the crowd. The EnvE man and his girlfriend still argued. *Fortune favors the bold*. "You think he's in the wrong," Desmond said to her. His mindlink hunted her face in a social database.

"What you do is your business," she said.

"So why does he oppose us, Gwendolyn?"

The EnvE man jabbed a finger at Desmond. "Stay out of it."

"I asked her, not you." The woman looked uneasy. "You can tell me privately," Desmond added.

She overcame her uneasiness. "He's currying favor with his bosses."

Turn the conversation into an attack on EnvE? No, too early in the process of building a mass movement. *First get them on your side, then attack the power structure*. Desmond kept the conversation personal. "Do you know why?" He set his mindlink to mapping social connections around her boyfriend.

"He wants a raise and a promotion. I swear," she said to her boyfriend, "all you care about is money."

The EnvE man fumed and shook his head. Desmond spoke. “You know why he wants those things, ma?”

“The reason why anyone does. The selfish gene, just like you said.”

A picture of the EnvE man’s social connections filled in Desmond’s mind’s eye. “He’s got a more particular reason than that. He wants that blonde in the next cubicle to go out with him.”

Purely a hunch, but the EnvE man paled for a moment, eyes wide. He covered his tell with bluster. “You’re talking nonsense, ruco!”

“Nonsense?” Gwendolyn said. “Don’t lie to me. I saw your face. Lissandra? You want to dump me for Lissandra? Do you think of her when you get me in those positions where you can’t see my face?”

“Goushi. Gwend, you are such a whera sometimes. Rucodan’s making shit up—”

“I saw your face, piyan! I saw your eyes!” Gwendolyn stalked toward the stage. Her nostrils flared and her cheeks reddened, and impending tears glimmered in her eyes. Selene helped her up and embraced her sidelong.

“Brothers, sisters, welcome,” Desmond said to the newcomers to the stage. Good results for his first public call. He led them inside as the remaining crowd broke up.

In the lobby, the terrazzo pattern showed another mosaic of the characters from the front façade. Here, the male and the female stood with their backs to each other, each looking up the stairway on their side of the building. Castor’s idea, to separate the freedom couches by sex. Selene led Gwendolyn and three other women up the right-hand stairs and Castor led the men up the left, Max trailing. Castor gathered the male converts on the second floor landing and described the freedom couch process as Desmond caught up with Max on the stairs.

—Max, a word.—

—Yes, Seer?—

—I never brought up TruSelf. Why did you?—

Max frowned. —I wanted to help you shut down the heckler. Everything I said was true. I would never lie about our work.—

—It was true, and I appreciate your zeal. But we’re not here to

attack TruSelf. We're here to set people free.—

—But Seer, TruSelf keeps people in chains. Employees like I was, clients it gives talk therapy and microfabs to. We have to oppose it.—

—I detest it too,— Desmond said, —but I prefer we use it. We most need a good reputation among the general public, and if we stand next to TruSelf, some of its perceived legitimacy will rub off on us.—

Max's brows crinkled. —But it has none.—

—Perceptions, not realities, are what the masses see. It's an easier sell to pitch the Society as a renewal, not a revolution. Also, an alliance with TruSelf would give us a counterweight to pressure from Government Mesa. I'm sure our new meimei was right about senior people in the bureaucracy wanting to stop us.— Ashwin had undoubtedly noticed the building permit in Desmond's name. —We already have one enemy. We don't need to make another.—

Max's face showed a few remaining misgivings; action would sap them. Desmond clapped his hand on Max's shoulder and spoke aloud. "I trust our expert systems to operate the freedom couches, but I'll trust them more when you're overseeing them."

Purpose galvanized Max's features. He hurried to the waiting men and joined Castor in explaining the process. Desmond hoped he could keep Max's energy moving with that same sense of purpose for a long time to come.

Satisfaction tightened Desmond's cheeks. The EnvE man's heckling showed Ashwin would give his followers all the purpose they needed.



Ashwin stood on the blue-green lawn, his back to the governor's mansion. K-Nought's midday warmed his nape, but his blood was already up. He stared through the smartglass wall at the edge of Government Mesa to the khaki smear rising over University Avenue a mile and a half away.

Someone on the roof of Desmond's temple could read lips through a telephoto lens. —Opaque the smartglass inbound,— Ashwin told the mansion. After it did, he turned and said, "Look what he's done."

Yellow and red balloons, their interior heating elements spent, shrank and wrinkled atop their poles. The breeze from the ocean swayed over the heads of the brunch guests he'd asked to stay after the party.

Justin Bauer, New Cal Mol Fab's CEO, lifted his head. "That's right, Desmond unveiled his side project today."

"You knew what he was doing?" Carl Yaeger's voice bore a sharp edge.

Bauer shook his head. "I only hear rumors. Desmond's an introvert and is mostly at ops south of the river, not at headquarters."

"Come here," Ashwin said. "All of you, augment your vision, and look." Bauer and the others started toward him, stepping around dwarf centaur robots cleaning dirty plates from the garden tables. While they did, his mindlink showed still photos of the new building's façade and pulled public audio and video feeds from Desmond's recent soapboxing.

Transcend DNA? He'd thought Desmond recognized his power that night on the yacht and would not dare challenge it. No one else had, even before it became clear to all Tián Quán backed him. Ashwin had earned the governorship; no psychobabble cult would jeopardize his hold on it.

"He really did found a religion," Carl Yaeger said.

That son of a bitch Desmond wanted to prove him wrong? He loved Priya, but she had miscast the roles in *Julius Caesar*: Ashwin had the lean and hungry look, and now he turned it on the others. "He's fired a shot across all our bows. Carl, he's right under your nose. He's already got some of your students, and he picked his location to lure in more with free pizza and bullshit philosophy." The chancellor yanked his gaze to the university's campus atop Rousseau Mesa, its cultured limestone walls and Spanish tile roofs a quarter-mile by airmobile from Desmond's temple.

"Ellen, he promises people self-improvement. That's TruSelf's turf."

Ellen Sakamoto scrunched her mouth. "Hundreds of groups on the planet promise to make you a better person, from the Inner Game of Surfing to Buddhist Kabbalah. TruSelf is still the most popular."

The breeze moaned a little louder. "Have you checked what he

said today? ‘Free the real you?’”

She looked unconcerned. “He used vocabulary from our frame of discourse. It shows TruSelf’s position.”

“He wants people to think you endorse him,” Ashwin said. “But listen to his follower and you’ll hear the truth.” He sent a bookmark to Max Jacoby’s words to the heckler.

She narrowed her eyes and peered at the grass for a time. Too long. Ashwin said, “You heard how he called you a bunch of frauds.”

Ellen showed a palm in a stop gesture. “I’m looking at it in context.”

If she still doubted his leadership, time to force her doubts aside. “So we’re agreed,” Ashwin said firmly, “about what a threat he is.”

“What are you suggesting we do?” Bauer asked.

Ashwin hooked his thumb at Desmond’s new temple. “He paid for his construction project out of his salary from you, didn’t he? Fire him.”

Bauer gaped. “Fire him.”

“You’re the chief executive officer, aren’t you? Execute.”

“He’s also an owner. Two million shares.”

“Buy him out.”

“Even if I did,” Bauer said, “I have to answer to the other owners of NCMF. Desmond does good work.”

“Does? Or did? You’ll find he’s shirked his duties at NCMF to build up his cult. I’m quite sure. If you look for it, you’ll find it, which will give you ammunition to lowball the buyout offer.”

“I’ll look into it when I’m back in the office,” Bauer said. His demeanor reeked of insubordination. *Did you disrespect Cam the way you’re disrespecting me? I need NCMF to feed sixty thousand colonists, but you need me and my allies at EnvE more than you think.*

Bauer remained nonchalant. “Governor, thank you again for a marvelous New Year’s Day brunch.” They bro-hugged stiffly, hands clapping hard on backs before they disentangled. “Happy New NC-Year, everyone.”

Bauer sauntered over the lawn to the mansion’s near wing. A glass door, the sole visual break in a wall of pearlescent concrete and

rolled steel, opened for him. It galled Ashwin, but he would give Bauer a chance to play ball before he brought down the hammer. His position was still new; he had to pick his battles. Desmond first.

“Carl, what are you going to do?”

“I’m already thinking about it. Non-students require a permit from the administration to engage in public speech on campus—”

“They do?”

Yaeger blinked. “We haven’t enforced the requirement very much in recent years, but I’ll change that. Second, the university has a lot of sway over the businesses at the foot of the mesa. But those are minor compared to my main plan. I’ll engage Desmond in a public debate.”

Ashwin frowned. “See how your other ideas work first.”

“I’ve taken part in intellectual dialogues for decades, while the deepest discussion Desmond’s ever had is telling expert systems what color to fab a shirt. I can debate circles around him.”

“I’m sure you can...” Ashwin said to buy time to phrase his objections.

Ellen filled the gap. “You’ll give oxygen to the fire if you do this. If you keep it quiet, Desmond’s movement will wither away, like most do.”

“She’s exactly right,” Ashwin said. “If you debate him, it would make him seem to be your equal. He isn’t. He’s a child throwing a tantrum. If you give him attention, you’ll only encourage him.” He’d learned this from his parents; why hadn’t Yaeger learned it from his? Lax whereo parenting, probably.

Yaeger shook his head. “If we let him linger under our noses, he’ll grow confident. Ashwin, I’m the most respected academic on the planet. Desmond’s an engineer. I have the advantage. Once I crush him in a debate, the TranscenDNA Society will be a joke on everyone’s lips.”

“He’s an engineer with a mindlink mainline to historical facts.”

“My debating skills are in my brain,” Yaeger said. His tone of voice showed he considered the question resolved.

Ashwin opened a private channel to the chancellor. –Is this personal?–

–Personal? Why would it be?–

—He was rude to you. That night.—

Yaeger's brows lowered for a moment but a distraction came to Ashwin, a private message from Ellen. —What are you freezing me out of?— She asked.

Whatever I damn well please, but TruSelf was the nearest thing New California had to a state religion. *Pick your battles*. Ashwin angled his head and replied to her alone. —I'm trying to teach out Carl's TruSelf. I don't want to embarrass him by letting others see his cruff flake off.—

—A fair point. Sorry.— Ellen closed the channel.

—Sure,— Yaeger said, —he was rude to me with Cam less than an hour dead, but that has nothing to do with it.— Aloud, he said, “I can best him in debate and, as you may recall, I have former students across the planet, in NCBC and the private content providers, and high school teachers and college professors, who can help get our message across. He's already getting publicity through social networking software and that eyesore on University Avenue. As I see it, we have to engage in counterpublicity.”

Former students across the planet? Was that a threat? Could Yaeger withdraw enough support to deny Ashwin a future reelection?

Ashwin peered at the chancellor, but he had to deal with Desmond before confronting Yaeger. “Try it, then. Ellen, where do you stand?”

She stared at Desmond's distant temple. “It's the Foundation's current view that, because DNA made us, transcending it would take us away from our TruSelves.”

“I'm glad to hear the Prime Teacher's wisdom,” Ashwin said. “Both of you, thanks again for coming to brunch, and staying to discuss business on a holiday.” They took their goodbyes with bro-hugs and air kisses. As soon as Yaeger and Ellen entered the building, Ashwin stared through the smartglass wall, past the scrub myrtles downslope, to Desmond's temple.

He could force Bauer to act if NCMF's CEO dithered in firing Desmond. Hopefully Yaeger would win the debate. Ashwin briefly envied Cam; the founder had taken for granted the unanimous support of all the colony's leaders.

New Cal needed Ashwin to have that unanimous support. The opposite of strong leadership was not democracy. It was anarchy.