

2080

By Mike Hoefflinger

As *1984* was written in 1948, so *2080* is written in 2008. Technology has moved forward 72 years, but President Bartoli's troubles are straight out of the past. 280AD to be precise. Can a mysterious bot keep history from repeating itself?

© 2007 Mike Hoefflinger and Packet Switched Press

<http://www.PacketSwitchedPress.com/>

This document is formatted for the Apple iPhone

Released under the Creative Commons license:

Attribution. The licensor permits others to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work. In return, licensees must give the original author credit.

Share Alike. The licensor permits others to distribute derivative works under a license identical to the one that governs the licensor's work.

Noncommercial. The licensor permits others to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work. In return, licensees may not use the work for commercial purposes -- unless they get the licensor's permission.



Index

Chapter 1.....	4
Chapter 2.....	11
Chapter 3.....	20
Chapter 4.....	33
Chapter 5.....	48
Chapter 6.....	61
Chapter 7.....	79

Chapter 1

5 Trillion cells in the human body

A copy of your entire DNA in nearly every cell

3 Billion base pairs in each copy of DNA

Only 1.5% of it encodes for proteins

The rest, "junk-DNA", has unknown function, but ...

"Some of our junk isn't junk at all."

Francis Collins, Director National Human Genome Research Institute

It was surprising that something first isolated in 1869, visualized in 1937, accurately modeled in 1953 and fully sequenced in 2003 was not yet completely understood in 2080.

Much more was now known about the storage nature of what had previously been considered junk-DNA. Vast regions of the DNA sequence that did not encode for proteins, but were discovered to carry the equivalent of software for the biological hardware that is the human body.

Long streams of wetware microcode that carried "memes", ideas and processes that explained everything from spiders' web spinning to complex human thoughts, behaviors and instincts. Things we do, but have not learned from others.

Discovered in 2049, the body used a method of “sucking spaghetti through a hole” to read, write and act on these memes (the press had referred to it by its dour scientific name: single-strand DNA nanopore sequencing).

In addition, it was learned that part of the process of evolution involved not only the blending of genes, but also the so-called hybridization of memes. However, even 30 Moore’s Law doublings of computing performance—including the introduction of computing based on light—had failed to unlock all the mysteries of the latter.

* * *

In a run-down apartment in what at the turn of the century had been one of the pricier residential buildings of the Haizhu district of Guangzhou, Zhao Xi Na was staring listlessly at the wall.

Before the middle and upper class had left for the beautiful, terra-formed coastal planes of the glorious New Pearl River Delta between Macao, Shenzhen and Hong Kong, the area had the nicest riverfront in the city. Now, it was just another place to vertically stack some of the 24 million people

in a metropolis bursting at the seams from the never-ending southeasterly migration of former farmers drawn in by the continued stratospheric economic rise of Greater China following the "grand alignment" of China, Taiwan, Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and Singapore in 2041.

Annexation was more like it. But, with physical borders and traditional warfare having become largely irrelevant in a world controlled by financial and information alliances and sabotage, it had been decades since anyone had whispered the word.

The world was no longer racked by losing its youth in ground warfare, or by the perfect technological neutralization of nuclear drones and counter-drones controlled from warehouses 5,000 miles away. Coming under the comforting protection of the world's largest financial and computing army without shedding a drop of blood or a square mile of land, felt not only acceptable, but desirable.

Or, at the very least, inevitable.

In its wake, the information-based conflict was throwing off the very technology and cottage industries in which many of the world's over-educated and under-advantaged twenty-something's now made their entirely unremarkable living.

A bot farmer like so many others, Xi Na was staring at thirty square feet of hyperactive statistics projected onto the wall. The digital exhaust of monitor bots watching millions of work bots customized and sent into the world to search, bid, do, negotiate and create on behalf of hundreds of Xi Na's economically advantaged clients in Greater China and Greater Arabia.

Although the shoebox-sized compute furnace was sub-par and the gigapixel cold-light projector lacked the latest free-space three-dimensional interface, the abundance of performance and near-gigabit wireless connectivity available after the 2058 state-controlled infrastructure reform left them with enough to satisfy the demands of most of their far-flung clientele.

"Can you believe the situation in Greater Europe?" Xi Na mumbled, casting a squinting glance at one of the windows showing video feeds of non-descript men sharing tense faces and aggressive rhetoric.

Across the hallway, staring at a similar nest of jittering pixels while rushing to consume a bag of pork rinds, roommate Xu Fu Ning did battle with gravity on a recliner. He belched,

rubbed both sides of his greasy hands over a protruding belly, and spat back a response.

"It is of no matter. Greater China will always prosper."

"Feel prosperous, do you?"

"We have everything a citizen of no consequence desires."

"Except free expression or economic pursuit with the likes of Greater Europe."

"Who needs to express themselves freely in times such as these? The motherland will care for you, as it has since your loving parents retrieved you from the Guangzhou City Children's Welfare Institute," said Fu Ning in careful jest. The orphanage was old ground for the two.

Expecting an incensed response, Fu Ning got only silence. Surprised, he began the process of extracting himself from the recliner to journey across the hall and prod his roommate into reprisal.

Instead, he turned over to get an eyeful of knees. Xi Na had taken the initiative to deliver the continuation in person.

"Greater Europe—one coalition away from having nearly as large a financial army as Greater China—is completely politically destabilized after the assassination of the

president's wife, and you gush of the motherland?" Furrowed brow and animated gestures thrown in free.

Fu Ning quickly swung two hands wide to his sides; stained palms open in a gesture of resignation. Pork rinds scattered to the ground.

"OK! I'll gush of other things," he said, an exploratory smile playing in the corner of his mouth.

"That's nice! A nation of one billion uninvolved, and I'm living with their king. Tragedy *must* be around the corner."

"Look, you know I'm a simple person." Cursory glance at his gut. "I have little energy as it is. Even less for things I cannot control. The question is," a finger stabbing the air in Xi Na's direction, "what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know. I need a break. I'm heading out. I'll forward my bot alarms to your screen. Can you put them in stasis if anything goes off?"

"I can," said Fu Ning, pulling the pork rinds off the ground and settling back into his idle state. "One day at a time, *Jie Jie*. One day at a time."

A little up-river from the old Haizhu bridge, dwarfed by its newer, taller single-tower suspension sister and the three unimaginative office towers across the river reaching 1500 feet into a polluted sky the bio-scrubbers and macro-fans couldn't keep clear, Xi Na sat on a railing watching the Pearl River go by.

At least the introduction of the third underground trolley system and surface personal pod transports had brought about a reduction in traffic. There had even been talk that the system would be expanded with multi-level airborne pods like those in Beijing, Shanghai, Seoul and Hong Kong, but the global economic uncertainty and the push for Greater China's continued supremacy had made short work out of that distraction.

Either way, you could finally hear yourself think out here now. Xi Na had been thinking a lot of late. The visions had become increasingly distracting—consuming even—over the past few months. Uncontrollable instincts, they were so tangible one felt compelled to move, oftentimes pace restlessly, in response.

They were of grand things. Politics. Economics. Conflict. Things that mattered more at the dusk of the century than they seemingly had at the dawn, but that through gigantic, faceless

armies of financial and information conflict had been driven far beyond the reach and comprehension of the commoner.

They were, Xi Na was now certain, flashes of history wrapping back on itself. Some of them visions of the motherland. Dynasties and vast territories. Others of empires far away.

None of them studied or learned, but still as vivid as though Xi Na had lived it.

All of them were about one man.

Chapter 2

"Am I not destroying my enemies when I make friends of them?"

Abraham Lincoln

Antoni Bartoli, president of Greater Europe, was in crisis.

The first region to take advantage of the trade, technology and manufacturing advantages of financial coalitions to advance their own standing while stalling that of others, Greater Europe included the former European Union, Greenland, Iceland, Turkey, Russia and its former republics and the North African contingent of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.

It was a powerful combination of financial expertise, wealth, advanced technology and low-cost manufacturing, and its complete isolationist trade protections and financial market chicanery had caught the United States and China by surprise. Under the blanket of exclusive currency, trade and non-aggression pacts, nearly two decades of unchecked growth had followed for the entire region.

Only then, with dramatic maneuvers of their own, had the Greater North Pacific (US, Canada, Mexico and Japan) and Greater China (allied with the small, but mighty Greater Arabia of Saudi, UAE, Oman and Qatar) coalitions responded with powerful alliances of their own, featuring similar levels of wealth, technological sophistication and manufacturing.

With the exception of risky black market transactions, which were quickly interdicted by all-knowing and all-seeing compute power from all sides, trade, travel and diplomacy between coalitions was non-existent. As was physical conflict.

Instead, massive technological incursions aimed at the financial and manufacturing arteries of the coalitions occurred with staggering speed and frequency. It was a sub-atomic arms race of electrons, airwaves and photons. In the new world order, the elimination of the means for production, wealth creation and the quality of life of entire nations carried more weight than nuclear attack. But, no less fear.

By 2042, the world had been redrawn into Three Coalitions, and a Rest of World group including the likes of India and Brazil and countless small countries, all either unwilling or unable to offer something of value to the coalitions.

Like some economic Pangaea, the four pieces drifted further apart as the years went on.

Until 2054. Science intervened.

Talk of the post-petroleum economy had been around since the beginning of the century, but lack of progress in the areas of fuel cells as well as cold and plasma fusion had kept the topic from becoming central.

Instead, it was the naval nuclear propulsion industry, sidelined in the 30's by the irrelevance of traditional militaries, which had quietly accelerated its commercial efforts and

stunningly produced commercial and consumer grade nuclear turbines five orders of magnitude smaller and lighter, and two orders of magnitude more efficient than their military equivalents. Coinciding with critical breakthroughs in technologies enabling autonomous consumer and commercial air and ground transport, the engines experienced an exponential growth not seen since the beginnings of the Internet. By the late 60's, they were powering 60% of what moved the world from point A to point B.

Disarray followed.

Oil-rich members of the three coalitions, more disrupted than they had been in a century, looked for new alignments. Unless guaranteed a much higher fraction of Greater Europe's investment, Russia talked of secession to the Greater North Pacific coalition where they hoped to trade manufacturing for better technology. Greater Arabia, in need of better low-cost manufacturing to maintain its coalition with Greater China, approached North Africa with significant financial concessions.

Western Europe itself, faced with losing two thirds of its coalition, a majority of its low-cost manufacturing and legions of financial and information warriors, began to splinter into two political factions. Those that believed Western Europe could prosper alone and should make no concessions to its

current partners, and those who believed the coalition must be preserved.

A tense period of internal Greater European politics followed, marked by five different presidents in ten years. No candidate was able to hold the confidence of a majority of the coalition.

The number of people whose way of life was fundamentally affected had grown to 950 million.

Having come into power on a platform of modest concessions to Russia and North Africa and increased local self-determination for individual countries in the coalition, Bartoli appeared poised to buck the leadership trend in the third year of his presidency.

Unfortunately, more autonomy for individual countries had led to local politicians flexing their muscle with ill advised and uncoordinated financial incursions on countries in other coalitions that were met with punishing reprisals by Greater China and Greater North Pacific, who had been monitoring—and fomenting—Greater European discord.

By the spring of 2080, the deterioration of Greater Europe's overall financial position had created a flashpoint for all

secessionists, whether Russian, North African or Western European, to re-ignite their grievances.

The greatest tragedy of Lucia Bartoli's assassination was not that it had been accomplished through rogue minicell chemotherapy for an intentionally misdiagnosed benign tumor, but that the number of potential origins of the conspiracy was so large.

The weekend following her mother's funeral, Natale Bartoli was standing with her father near a window at the end of a long hallway in their Florence estate. The warmth of the late afternoon sun lit their faces while the shadows on their backs faced their security detail.

Natale stood nearly as tall as her father. Short, dark hair. Her mother's nose in a beautiful, round face defined by big, almond-shaped eyes. Irises the color and depth of the darkest amber. 60 million years of pain in a 19-year-old gaze. These days she did not hold her chin as high. Her voice did not carry as far. Her hands were not as animated.

Next to her, now on the other side of 50, graying hair cropped short, Antoni Bartoli's eyes were still clear and his

head still cocked in confidence. Gravity and grief, however, were starting to claim his shoulders. One hand supported a hunched upper body on the windowsill. The other gently held Natale's elbow.

They stood close to each other. They always had.

"Do you have to go again so soon?"

"I'm only in Prague for a day and a half."

"What are you doing?"

"We're still negotiating the new Russian concessions."

"How can that possibly matter? What if they were the ones that killed—"

"We can't think like that—"

"We? What do you mean *we*? Soon, *I'll* be the only one left? Or, maybe I'll be next?"

He moved closer to put a finger on her lips while slowly moving his other hand from her elbow to her cheek, gently urging her face—eyes shut tight to keep in the tears—to meet his. He waited for her to open them slowly, and held her gaze silently for a long time before he spoke again.

"There is too much at stake for too many people."

"What about the things I care about? I spent the entire year worried about mom's cancer," turning her head away from him again. "It's like she died twice."

"I know. I know. I don't have the energy either, but I must stand and lead."

"You *must* not do anything. You could step down tomorrow. It's too late to put these pieces back together again. Too many things have happened. What can you possibly do?"

Bartoli turned to face the window, as Natale had. Both hands now on the windowsill, staring at the carpet, he mumbled to himself.

"...for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

"What?"

"Natale, do you ever feel compelled by an unseen force?"

"It's not that simple."

"Perhaps. But, my life has been about listening to what compels me. Greater European unity, cross-coalition dialogue and eventual co-operation, the final goal of stimulating the entire globe to greater collaboration. These things compel me

the way you and your mother compel me, the way my body is compelled to draw another breath.

"We did not choose this moment, but in it, we must make a choice. I could not face you—or the millions that elected me to make these choices—if I merely walked away."

Natale turned to face him. As he turned in kind, she embraced him holding his head in her hand and whispered into his ear. "You *know* I love you, father. You *know* I'm proud to be your daughter. I just don't know what to do anymore. There is so little left. It feels so—" eyes shut tight, tears flowing, she was glad he could not see her, "—we feel so alone."

"I know, *figlia mia*. One day at a time. One day at a time."

Their embrace was interrupted by the quiet approach of Bartoli's Communication Secretary, Maarten De Ryck, who excused himself from several feet away with a polite cough.

"Mr. President? There is something I believe you need to see."

A few minutes later Bartoli, De Ryck, several high-ranking intelligence analysts and information combat leaders assembled in the residence's situation room.

Bartoli had expected the high quality, ultra-broadband spatial teleconference that was the signature of the times. In its place, as though from another century, a screen featuring only text greeted him.

CNah: I am sorry for your loss.

CNah: Do you know much about the 3rd century AD? It is important.

Chapter 3

"Those who have hunted men long enough and liked it, never really care for anything else thereafter."

Ernest Hemingway

"The bots picked this up four minutes ago," De Ryck updated Bartoli. "We are tracing it from within the Greater

European networks. We do not have an assessment yet of whether this is of machine or human origin."

"Why are you even bringing this to my attention if there is no clear point of origin? There is not even a visual or audio!"

"Because of this." De Ryck asked one of his analysts to enter a reply.

GEGov1: Identify yourself.

CNah: Who I am is not important. It is what I know that matters.

GEGov1: Repeat your authenticating claim.

CNah: President Bartoli believes that to lead is not to dominate. He first felt this instinct during his childhood.

* * *

In a situation room in Beijing, Wu He Feng was standing next to one of her information analysts reviewing the latest interdiction reports. Her superior, a deputy minister in the Information Management Department, sat in the back of the room keeping an eye on his prized underling.

Wu was one of the pre-eminent information warriors in all of Greater China, perhaps worldwide. A prodigy bot author and hunter since her teens, the government had given her everything necessary to build the best technologies a wealthy coalition could afford. The efficiency and effectiveness of Wu's innovations—pitted against increasingly capable external coalitions and dissident internal factions—were legendary. Bordering on ruthless.

At no time since the establishment of information combat in the 40's and 50's had the ability to control communication and either isolate, or wreak havoc on, coalitions been more important. With Greater Europe against the ropes, finding a way to pull North Africa towards Greater China while preventing Russia from tipping world balance by defecting to the Greater North Pacific were life-altering priorities.

Wu's analyst was looking at the status of the most advanced bot Wu had ever written—her fifth generation. From millions of transactions, it had isolated one in particular.

"It's coming from our networks, but it's spoofing an intra-Greater European origin through a machine in the Netherlands. Origin is probably Beijing, but we need another minute or two. Destination looks to be in a secondary domain used by the GE government. Content is 64K-bit encrypted. We do not have a break yet. Currently at 62% likelihood that it is human origin."

"Use Chalovsky-Kessler decryption and tighten down the origin filters using the database from a couple of years ago just in case they're going back to old domains. I want to know what's being said, by whom, from where and where it's going in two minutes. Less if you know what's good for you. I trust you see the deputy minister sitting there?" Wu shot back.

* * *

"Mr. President, we now have a 99% assessment from the heuristics that origin is human. Location is likely the Netherlands."

"Marteen, don't you think this is unusual? A text message from someone—or *something*—spouting trite assertions about my childhood?"

"I understand your concern, Mr. President, but we wanted you to see it for yourself before we dismissed it."

Bartoli looked back at the display.

As he spoke, his words appeared as text.

GEGov1: You have my attention, but a quote does not mean you know me.

CNah: We have not met. You don't know me, but I know you. Your distant ancestor, Emperor Augustus, led the way you lead. Your grandfather has always been concerned about your ambitions. Your father never became the man he wanted to be. Your goal is not just Greater European unity, but collaboration across the globe, even beyond coalitions.

De Ryck looked quizzically at Bartoli.

GEGov1: What do you want?

CNah: I want to...

A pause.

CNah: ...help.

GEGov1: Help with what?

CNah: The unity you want to create.

GEGov1: How do you intend to do that?

CNah: What do you know about the 3rd century AD?

GEGov1: As much as any average student of the Roman Empire. Why?

CNah: The past is about to repeat itself. Unless we listen.

GEGov1: I can study the past on my own. What can you do for me?

CNah: It is not just about studying. It is about listening. It is not just about the Roman Empire. It is about China.

* * *

"We've got assessment. It's human origin," looking to Wu for a decision.

"Location?"

"Haidian district, near one of the old universities. One minute for our nearest officers."

"Send three men. Strangle the transmission until they get there. Then shut it down. Update filters with this fingerprint."

"It is done. The men are underway. Anything else?"

Wu considered. "Yes, keep the socket open long enough to inject a silent harvest bot underneath an older generation information assault masked with known Russian characteristics. Let's turn this to our advantage."

"Yes, Madame Information Director."

* * *

GEGov1: China? What do you mean?

CNah:

"Mr. President, we've lost the connection. Trying to recover."

"Open a squawk-back socket," ordered De Ryck.

"Opening now."

All eyes on the display. Suddenly, large sections of the diagnostics turned red and audible alarms started blaring."

"Incoming information assault."

"Launch countermeasures," De Ryck responded instantly.

"Countermeasures launched. Assault isolated."

As suddenly as they had started, the alarms went silent. The color scheme of the displays returned to calming neutrality.

"What the hell was that?" Bartoli asked, turning to De Ryck.

"You tell me, Mr. President. Someone clearly is trying to communicate with you."

"Sir, diagnostics are showing information assault as having Russian characteristics," one of the analysts standing by the display updated the room.

"That could explain it. Your negotiation partners had a little present for you before your talks," De Ryck suggested to Bartoli and then put a hand on his analyst's shoulder. "Take all our sockets off-line. Jam wireless. Re-run your traces."

Bartoli stared at the dialogue floating idly in front of them.

* * *

"Madame Information Director, we have a report from the location. Officers broke into the point of origin, but found only an autonomous terminal. Connection was wireless in, wireless out. Memory had been wiped and corrupted. Revised post-processing traces and assessment now classify communication as machine origin, not human."

"A disappointing result," Wu sniped coldly. "I am not sure you quite understand how vital every second of our attention is at these times. To have spent this time pursuing a bot instead of a dissident is unacceptable. Very unacceptable."

"Madame Information Director, begging your pardon, but I am very aware of the importance of our work to the motherland. It has been a very long shift, and some of the results of the latest bot generation require disambiguation."

"Are you suggesting it is our technology that is inadequate, instead of you?"

"No, Madame Information Director," the analyst realizing his mistake, bowing his head.

Wu, feigning disinterest, waited several moments, then continued without looking at the analyst.

"I find your lack of faith in our technology disturbing. It will be best for you to reacquaint yourself with its value by reporting to Information District 217. Do so now."

"But, Madame Information Director. I have given you two years of dedicated service. You yourself have rewarded me with merits."

"Clearly a lapse of judgment on my part. A warning for me to tighten the demands on my staff during these essential times. Now, take your leave."

The dejected analyst bowed to Wu and the deputy minister and left the room.

Wu walked to the back of the room.

"I apologize for this misdiagnosis and waste of resources, Mr. Deputy Minister," she said.

"Not to worry, Madame Information Director. If you did not fail on occasion, we would not know how good you truly are. Do you think perhaps you were a little harsh with your analyst," the minister replied affably.

"Hardly. A year of being deeply economically disadvantaged in the outer provinces will give him time to think

about the quality of his assessments. The motherland did not achieve its success—nor I mine—on the back of inferior ... *people*," Wu said with distaste.

* * *

"Sir, we've run high resolution post-processing traces on the earlier communication. Revised assessment is that communication was machine origin. Repeat, machine origin."

"A bot, then?" Bartoli asked.

"Yes, Mr. President. Adaptive conversational rendering. Presumption is that it was sent to mask the Russian information assault coming in over the same socket."

"How would it—they—know *these* things about us—me?" Bartoli asked, pointing to the exchange still on the display.

"It's public domain data extrapolated to conversation with sophisticated social engineering heuristics," De Ryck replied.

"You're saying it got lucky?" asked Bartoli skeptically.

"Essentially."

* * *

"Well, that was close. Here's to us not doing that again," Fu Ning uttered, right hand raised in a mock toast. He breathed for what seemed like the first time in minutes. Leftovers of their cross-border digital hide-n-seek hung on the wall innocently, belying the gravity of their transgression.

No response.

Xi Na was intently swabbing their electronic deck, shutting down, redirecting, spoofing and corrupting all compute and network resources of which they had availed themselves. 23 computers and 15 video bots on 12 networks—including a rare linkage of municipal 400GHz wireless and a recently decommissioned very-near earth orbit satellite mesh—in seven cities across four countries and two coalitions.

"Customarily this is the part where you agree with me, denounce your revolutionary tendencies and get me another bag of pork rinds and a bottle of Tsingtao to heal the wounds of a friendship taken advantage of," Fu Ning continued unabated having rallied a supporting cast of insistent arm waving.

Still nothing.

"I appreciate that you are compelled to take action. Really, I do. But, this isn't nearly as much fun as I had hoped it would be. We can't make ourselves a convenient target for outer province exile over these," looking to put it delicately, "*visions*."

"These are not just *visions*," said Xi Na quietly, but firmly, finally looking over at him. "I don't just see things. I *know* them. Things from long ago, and from recent days. Things from far away, and from the motherland. Things that in the hands of the right person can change—*truly* change—what is happening.

"If you had told me this would happen, I wouldn't have believed you. For the longest time I couldn't believe it—couldn't *understand* it—myself. I still don't understand it all, but what I know, I have to communicate. It is certain. I am quite serious—"

At that, Fu Ning shot his heft into an upright sitting position surprisingly quickly. "So am I! This is *not* funny. It is *not* safe, and it sure as hell is not like you. No matter what it is that you see—know—oh, whatever! No matter what, we—you—are moving on to a safer hobby. Write poetry if you need to express yourself. Paint. Start now." With a dismissive grunt, he got up and walked out of the room.

"Where are you going," asked Xi Na.

"I have to change my shirt. This one has blood on it from when my heart leapt out of my throat a few minutes ago," Fu Ning muttered over his shoulder as he walked down the hall.

"Oh, good ... seeing as how we're just getting started," Xi Na returned.

Fu Ning popped back into sight.

"What?"

Chapter 4

*"May god give you for every problem life sends,
a faithful friend to share."*

Irish Blessing

"Yes, sir. Very similar profile to the earlier communication according to the logs," boomed the voice of the plane's communications officer over the intercom. "Should we forward to the cabin for display, sir?"

"We diagnosed this as machine origin earlier. Why are we still looking at this? And how the hell is it able to communicate with the plane? Don't tell me it's coming in through our dedicated satellite," came De Ryck's annoyed reply from the spacious cabin of the presidential scramjet. He and President Bartoli were two minutes into their ten-minute Mach 4 flight to Prague.

"We understand your concern, sir. It is coming in through a previously unknown exploit over a decommissioned satellite mesh. We have all sockets closed and countermeasures on, and are not responding, but wanted you to review this latest communication."

"We really don't have time for this. We're landing in a few minutes," grumbled De Ryck.

"Just a quick review, sir?" the officer had made her way to the cabin. "Our new assessment indicates over 50% likelihood of human origin. Here it is," pointing to the in-cabin display where the new communication appeared.

CNah: I am sorry for the use of a bot in the earlier communication. It had to be done to create a fingerprint the filters of my country would dismiss on its reappearance. It was the only way that

we can now talk undisturbed. Can we start a video conference?

"Marteen, can we open up a one-way channel without risking an information attack like the one in Florence," interjected Bartoli, who was leaning forward in his chair now.

De Ryck looked for confirmation from the officer, who nodded her head silently.

"We could, Mr. President, but is this really our priority right now," De Ryck asked.

"Let's give them three minutes."

"Alright, Mr. President," and then to the officer, "send an acknowledgment and open up a receive socket for a spatial video conference. Maintain authentication algorithms on the video. Keep counter-measures up and double-isolate the plane's systems from the feed."

The officer stepped to the mid-air virtual display, touched a few controls, and the large three-dimensional face of a middle-aged Caucasian male appeared on screen accompanied by De Ryck's display counting down from 180 seconds.

"Madame Information Director, I wanted to make you aware of a trace coming in with a fingerprint matching the cross-border bot from earlier today, but a slight difference in transmission and content profile," said the analyst Wu had put in charge of bot oversight following the departure of the prior occupant of the role.

"Bring up the details," Wu urged, stepping closer.

"You can see here the former profile," the analyst indicated pointing to the information while bring in new information with his hand gestures. "This is the differential analysis. Only minor changes in the addition of video transmission. We have not cracked the slightly different encryption scheme, but the blueprint and network is nearly identical in every way to the earlier communication. Can we confirm this as identical and return it to the low priority watch list. I am sensitive to your concerns around not wasting our attention on the wrong things," he concluded eagerly.

Wu considered it briefly. "Yes. Yes, we can. Nice work," briefly touching him on the shoulder as he moved the information aside in favor of other reports.

Wu turned and walked back to her observation post. She gave the Deputy Minister in the back of room a brief look of satisfaction, reminding him of the quality of her decision-making.

* * *

The figure floating in front of them in a life-sized display started talking in a British accent.

"There is a powerful relationship between the events of 2080 and those of 280AD. It could be a metaphysical artifact of reversed digits, or a periodicity of 1800 years for significant events in history as 1520BC also saw critical events in the Egyptian Empire, the early Mayan Civilization and China's legendary Xia Dynasty.

De Ryck and Bartoli looked at each other in confusion. The figure continued.

"Whether you or I can understand or explain this is not important. But, this much is fact: 280AD marked the bad ends of *both* the so-called Troubled Century of the Roman Empire as well as the Three Kingdoms tripartite of China, the two most important civilizations of their time.

*Their fortunes have startling similarities to the circumstances of today, and put you in a fragile, but very important position ... *if* you are able to act on the information I believe I have.

A short silence.

*The period ending in 280AD was the beginning of the end of the Roman Empire, marked by an increasing breaking of ranks of the far provinces, much like conditions in Greater Europe.

*Because of this turmoil, the Empire saw no less than 25 Emperors between 235 and 280 AD, all but two of which were either murdered or killed in battle trying to maintain unity. Greater Europe has seen similar leadership turmoil over the past decade.

*Immediately following this time, the Roman Empire divided into two and never returned to its former glory.

*During the same time, the Chinese Empire was ruled by three kingdoms: Wei in the North, Shu in the West and Wu the South. There was a tenuous time, as the coalition of Wu and Shu tried to maintain balance with the larger Wei faction, a state of affairs akin to that of your Russian and North African partners threatening to upset the balance of your coalition.

*The ill-advised use of military powers granted to local governments in the Wu and Shu coalition led to damaging retaliation, reminiscent of recent events in Greater Europe.

*The retaliation weakened Shu, which resulted in their being conquered by Wei. The emerging Jin Dynasty subsequently defeated Wei and went on to defeat the now isolated Wu in 280 AD to lay claim to all of China. As many as 40 million people lost their lives.

These Empires were brought to their critical points—and eventual ends—by singular moments of weakness in the governing structure, a circumstance which I am sorry to say is similar to the recent assassination of your wife.

The figure paused again before continuing.

*What I have told you is recorded history. What you do *not* know—and nor did I, until I was able to be in command of it—is that I am able to discern insights from these periods and relate them to today's circumstances. More specifically, to *your* circumstances. They may be the keys to what is possible—*necessary*—for you as a leader.

Voices from those who lived in these times are speaking to us of the lessons they could no longer use to save themselves. Lessons of eliminating scarcity and mistrust. Of balancing central control and self-development.

The figure paused as the counter ran down to zero.

"We still cannot confirm with certainty that we have either human origin or authentic video, but we are over 70% confidence. Origin still identified as Netherlands, but there may be an obfuscated network involved," interjected the information officer hastily.

"Mr. President," De Ryck started in a low voice as he shifted closer to Bartoli, "now is not the time to concern ourselves with obscure communication of questionable origin and—you must admit—dubious veracity."

"Of course you're right, Marteen," said Bartoli slowly, moving to the edge of his seat and gazing past De Ryck in thought. "But, what do you make of the relationship between our circumstances and the histories of which he speaks?"

"Perhaps compelling enough to have our staff follow up and brief you upon our return tomorrow, but we cannot believe this is anything but a coincidence rather than original diplomatic thought."

"Not that we are overwhelmed with original diplomatic thought," criticized Bartoli.

"Our situation demands something beyond palmistry."

"What exactly *does* our situation demand?"

"It demands, by this time tomorrow, a successful renegotiation of financial concessions to Russia."

"Only to establish a new high watermark with which to be negotiated this time next year, assuming Greater China and Greater North Pacific insurgency does not divide us before then?"

"Mr. President, we are taking patient, long term steps according to the best possible blueprint our experts devised under grave circumstances. It is our last best chance."

"If it is our last best chance, perhaps we need to expand the circle of experts from whose advice we draw? How much longer until we land?"

"Mr. President, you cannot be—"

"How ... much ... longer ... until we land," Bartoli repeated sternly.

"3 minutes, sir, but during the last minute we lose communications due to sub-sonic re-entry."

"Give us the safest possible two-way communication for two minutes. Make sure that if this is a Russian trap, they cannot attack through this channel."

"Yes, Mr. President," De Ryck resigned himself. He stepped to the officer at the display to whisper a brief set of orders. Within seconds, both the figure and Bartoli floated in mid air.

"Greetings to you, sir. This is President Bartoli of Greater Europe. We have exactly two minutes. How do you expect me to consider what you describe anything but wild conjecture? We are not even able to determine who you really are."

"Thank you, Mr. President, for being in contact. I am not able to tell you who I am, and I cannot explain this phenomenon, but I am certain that I can understand the visions and insights of the distant past, as well as of your own past. There is no doubt that it all points to you. That is why I have sought you out."

"How can I understand you, if you are not able to fully understand yourself?"

"Sir, just because we doubt the 'how' does not make the 'what' any less important. I know that when you were young, you excelled in soccer, but your true love, which you were never able to pursue was tennis. This should help you trust that what I say I know is unique and true."

Bartoli was only partially successful in hiding his surprise.

"It is true," he said slowly. "So, what now, say you?"

"I know nothing of the way a coalition is governed. I hoped you would be able to translate my insights into action."

"And I hoped you would be able to provide me your insights. We have little time," Bartoli's voice picking up pace. Concern starting to mount the battlements.

"The voices of the Roman and Chinese Empire point to three common themes they knew were necessary for peace and prosperity over very long periods of time, but could not attain: Uniformly defeating scarcity, eliminating mistrust and enabling self-development for all under central control," elaborated the figure.

"You must realize these are not entirely profound ideas. What insights do you see about *how* to achieve them?"

"The first, scarcity, revolves around—"

"Sir, we have an urgent update on this communication. This is *not* authentic video. Repeat, this is not the real time footage of the speaker. Forcing de-cloaking now," as the officer scrambled to keep up with the analysis, the image of the figure started to deteriorate. "We are also now detecting

that the transmission is coming from outside Greater Europe domains. Repeat, definitely foreign origin."

"Shut down sockets. Launch countermeasures, including basic financial counter-insurgency packages," De Ryck shouted, as he leapt out of his chair.

"No, Marteen. Don't—" followed Bartoli's command, his hand reaching out to De Ryck.

As the three stared wild-eyed at the display, the image of the Caucasian male disappeared. In its place emerged a single still-frame of a young Asian female.

The communication cut out.

"Loss of signal, sir," confirmed the officer.

* * *

"Very good prosecution and termination," Wu confirmed to her analyst.

"Thank you, Madame Information Director. The introduction of two-way communication with the Greater European President's known domains, lack of frequency

hopping on the satellite mesh and poorly cloaked video gave us a chance to get the differential analysis quickly. We have another origin within greater China to which we have dispatched officers. Awaiting an update now. Really quite a routine interdiction."

"Success is built on consistently superb execution. I trust you attempted our latest package of infrastructure insurgency following the cut-off?"

"We did, Madame Information Director, but the socket had impressive counter measures in place. Not surprising, following the incursion we successfully deployed earlier."

"Understandable. Will you attempt to decrypt the actual content of the communication and file an update for me later today?"

"Yes, Madame Information Director."

"Very well. Let me know what we find at the location. Incidentally, where is it?"

"Guangzhou, Madame Information Director, although it will take us more time to determine the exact location."

* * *

"I hope you're happy," Fu Ning hissed, arms flung in the air, pacing wildly around the apartment. "You are now officially on the radar of two coalitions in the middle of one of the most politically unstable periods in the last few decades. Anything else you'd like to accomplish before dinner?"

Across the room, Xi Na was busying herself packing digital essentials. Of thin build and less than medium height, she hid her jet-black hair under a Mau cap. Although it was pulled low on her forehead, it could not hide her high, slightly arched eyebrows over a long, straight nose elegantly separating the two large pools of black eyes that seemed to collect all light, never for it to be returned. Dusk made it difficult to know whether the white of her complexion tended more to floral or to Navajo.

She was hurriedly pulling on a digital vest. "We knew the cloaking algorithm was decent, but would only hold so long against the authentication. It was just a little too long. Don't you see? I am communicating with him now!"

"Oh, I see. I see fine! I'm about to lose my apartment, and perhaps the best chair I've ever owned. All for the privilege of a two minute chat with one of the three most important people in the world, who will definitely listen to

everything you have to say, not to mention have the will and influence to implement it and save his coalition—no, the *world*—from certain ruin,” every exaggeration accompanied by mockingly gesticulating hands.

“I *am* sorry about the apartment,” Xi Na said earnestly, stopping her packing and intercepting his pacing with her hand on his arm. “I cannot—could not—do this without you. I know you don’t understand, and you probably don’t believe, but in the name of every great thing you have ever done for me, for being the only one ... all the time ... and ever ... I *must* finish this.” Looking up into his face now, all eighteen years of friendship aimed at one thing. “Can you finish it with me?”

Fu Ning loosened his arm from her grip and walked to the window. “I ... really ... can’t.” Turning to walk past her. “I’m sorry.”

A few minutes later he re-appeared, wearing an ultra-light waist-to-foot exoskeleton to load-bear the pack on his back.

Dwarfing her small frame, he approached her with apologetic eyes.

“I can’t risk being deported. I have so little. I don’t want to be without you, but I can’t do this. I hope you find what you’re looking for. One day at a time, *Jie Jie*—Big Sister. One day at a time.”

"I know. I love you". She reached up to kiss his cheek and gave him a long, solemn hug. "*Fei cháng xiè xiè*".

"*Bu xiè*. I love you, too," he said almost inaudibly before disappearing as the door closed behind him.

A few minutes later, Xi Na, a similar pack on her back, took one last look around the apartment and left. Whatever technology she had not packed had been destroyed.

Chapter 5

*"Trust the instinct to the end,
though you can render no reason."*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

It was nearly midnight in Florence. Most lights in the Bartoli residence were off. Even in the kitchen, where Bartoli and Natale had congregated, only one light illuminated their late night conversation.

"Yes, they've identified her as a Greater China national. Approximately 22 years old. Lives somewhere in the Guangzhou area. We don't know much more, but it doesn't appear that she has anything noteworthy in her history. Has no connections to government. As ordinary a person as you could wish to find," said Bartoli leaning against the kitchen counter and gazing into the swirling ice cubes of his glass of scotch.

"Amazing," responded Natale, steeping her tea bag and slowly taking a first sip with both hands around her cup. Considering the story Bartoli had just unfolded for her upon his return from Prague. "Aren't you shocked that she found a way to contact you through all the filters?"

"They say she's a bot farmer. There are millions of them. Somebody is going to be smart enough to find a temporary hole in our system. What I can't shake is her message."

"She *hears voices!* This strikes you as rational? Marteen must be beside himself."

"Natale, you make her sound like she's insane. It's not so much that she hears voices, as that she feels she has very particular insights from a period in history that seems to be echoing ours very closely."

"You should hear yourself."

"I know."

"Must be dangerous."

"It is. Marteen is very concerned that we isolate this incident. I cannot be seen as communicating across coalitions, much less to Greater China, or even a—"

"I meant it must be dangerous for *her*."

Bartoli considered this.

"Yes. Yes, it must. We believe the Greater China information apparatus pinpointed her after our last communication. That means she's on the run, and we've got a dozen people of our own working on who she is. Everyone believes this is a cover for another incursion of some kind. The fact that we can't figure out what the angle is makes Marteen in his team even more nervous."

"Makes you wonder where she is right now."

"Do you mean to say that you think she's real? That her intentions are real?"

"We live the majority of our lives over spatial displays, surrounded by technologies that can render things more perfectly than we can perceive them. We fight wars that you can't even see. How can you be sure *anything* is real?"

"What if it doesn't matter whether it is real? If there is a greater truth—some ember of a solution—in her message, does it matter whether she, or her story, are real? It's been 37 years since the world realigned itself and we've never been in a more precarious position. Is now not the time to consider *everything*?"

"You are going to stake your fate ... the thing mother lost her life over ... on the words of someone of whom you have but a single picture? Don't you see? This is what I was saying the other day. You are grasping at straws. No real solutions. Certainly none that you alone can implement." She put down her mug and stepped closer to him, pleading with her eyes. "This is beyond a solution. You and I have paid the worst price already. Why can't we at least prevent ourselves from being hurt any further?"

"You're right. This is crazy," Bartoli said as he put down his glass and put his hands on Natale's hips.

"That it certainly is."

"There is only one thing to do."

"What would that be?"

"I have to meet her!"

Over the course of the day, Xi Na had been making her way down the Pearl River, benefiting from the generosity of a few captains still piloting older diesel-powered boats down the river, rather than the nuclear hydrofoils that seemed to be everywhere now. Although the going was slow, it put some distance between her and Guangzhou on transportation less likely to be infested with fixed or mobile cameras. She ran the new camera jamming and spoofing code which she had also used at the apartment the previous day and kept her face away from obvious potential camera locations, but she could not be certain how well it was working.

After nearly 24 hours, she had made it about 30 miles downriver to within a few miles of the Nansha ferry terminal where she had gotten off and walked a few blocks into a crowded marketplace neighborhood. She had just sat down in the shadows of an outdoor seating area of a run-down restaurant, her pack at her feet, when her input/output earpiece alerted her of an incoming communication. The fiber optic projection appeared, as though floating, on the right lens of her glasses courtesy the wireless connection to the small, underpowered compute furnace in her pack.

She was shocked to see it was President Bartoli.

Bartoli and De Ryck were alone in the Florence situation room, as the latter had insisted that if Bartoli was going to make contact again it would be with De Ryck's objection, and could not occur in front of any other staffers given the sensitivity of the situation both for internal as well as cross-coalition political purposes. De Ryck had been able to utilize one of the many networks Xi Na had been using to tunnel into her mobile equipment. Unfortunately, the modest capabilities of her equipment prevented them from protecting the communication well enough to allow for any more than a few minutes of dialogue.

"Can you talk," came Bartoli's clipped opening.

"Mr. President? Is that you," Xi Na asked suspiciously in a very low tone, her face not giving away that she was actually in a conversation. Greater China information management agencies could easily be spoofing his image in an attempt to gain a better idea of her location.

"It is," he replied.

"How can I be sure?"

Bartoli paused briefly at the inversion of circumstances.

"I'm not certain, but perhaps we could use your ... abilities to discover something only you and I would know." He considered it briefly. "About ten years ago I voted against an immigration bill in the Greater European Senate. What was my real opinion on that issue?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. President, but I have no vision of that. Could we try something from further in the past?"

"OK. In my college days I wanted to start an organization, but never did. What was that organization?"

"I do know this. A club to study American Cinema."

"Yes it was. Great. We don't have much time to talk, but I felt compelled to communicate with you. First, can I have your name?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but for both of our sakes, I cannot give you my name."

"I understand. I'm sorry I won't be able to use your name. I do have a few more questions I have to ask before I have something very important we need to discuss."

"Yes, go ahead," she said, beginning to look around cautiously as the conversation went on.

"You spoke yesterday not only of the insights you see, but of ways that they can be made real. Ways that the ... ancients ... communicated to you. Tell me a little more about that," he spoke quickly.

"Yes, they speak of three things: Eliminating scarcity and mistrust and balancing central control and self-development. To deal with scarcity, they needed something in their economy that was nearly ubiquitously available, but in those days—an economy of hard goods, crops, animals and land—there were constraints that could never be overcome, equalized or even reliably protected. Today, however—and this is where their insight and yours combine—technology and communication affordable even to the lowest peasant is creating opportunity to contribute, and a near-infinity of resource—there is no such thing as running out of virtual resources—only limited by the effort of the individual."

"I understand, but even that cannot be the complete picture?"

"It is not. They knew that the other two elements also needed to be in place, before the entire system became sustainable, reliable and resilient. Their insight on defeating mistrust is to—"

"I'm sorry to interrupt," interjected Bartoli urgently. "My people are telling me that you are likely being monitored at this point. We have very little time before this link may be decrypted, so I must talk to you about something else."

* * *

"Madame Information Director, a word if you have a moment," called the analyst from across the room to Wu, who was talking in hushed tones with the Deputy Director.

She walked over to the analyst standing next to his display.

"Yes, what is it? I trust we've improved our progress on the cross-border communication interdiction from yesterday," she said without hiding a measure of frustration.

"Yes, Madame Information Director, we have. As you'll recall from my report this morning, we were not able to break the encryption of the transmission to determine the actual content, nor were we able to apprehend the originators as our initial location proved false. By the time we had a better fix, they had been able to jam and spoof our fixed and mobile cameras in the immediate area of their apartment, preventing us from tracking their egress. Although we now know who they

are, we are requiring much more compute time to pick up the cold trail through image recognition on over one million fixed and mobile cameras. As I indicated, the earliest low confidence traces suggest they may have left in different directions, making our task—"

"I suggest," Wu shot at him with impatience, "you cease this redundant update and make your next sentence one with new—and decidedly more competent—information. Am I making myself quite clear?"

"Yes, Madame Information Director. We have a new fix. Both location, and network activity, but do not yet have maximum confidence. This is the footage," as he pointed to several high definition spatial video feeds correlated to map locations and surrounded by network analysis charts.

Wu observed the fast-forwarded recorded footage, as well as the live feed of a woman with her back turned to one camera, and a three quarter profile under a large cap visible to another. There was audio from the location, but the woman was clearly using a Near Field Noise Cancelling and Generating earpiece that recorded her voice while simultaneously canceling it with an inverse wave and pink noise. She had turned just enough from the camera to make automated lip reading highly inaccurate. Although they had been able to get

into the network feed of her communicator, the traffic was encrypted similarly to that of the past day.

"Much better. This one here shows promise, but I feel that I have to do this analysis myself to avoid the ... *ineffectiveness* ... of the past few days. Lock this feed for my eyes only and move it to my office. I will take care of it," Wu demanded and turned to head for her office, separated by a window from the situation room.

In her office, she quickly went to work on two large spatial displays, one now showing the video and network feeds they had reviewed in the situation room and the other a large blueprint of the software running their entire network analysis center.

With a few voice, keyboard and hand commands, she inserted the latest versions of her personal decryption as well as image analysis code into the system as the highest priority process for their fastest compute furnace standing by idle for her personal use in circumstances such as these. The superior decrypter running on the network traffic, together with the speech estimation from the video analysis finally cracked the transmission.

Wu reclined in satisfaction as the audio of Xi Na's conversation began to reveal itself.

* * *

"We must meet. Without interference, able to discuss this in full and giving me a chance to meet you in person," said Bartoli.

"But how are we going to accomplish this? My ability to move is starting to become constrained. They will easily interdict me trying to get near an aircraft," said Xi Na concerned.

"It will be difficult, but the latest circumstances among the coalitions may allow us to accomplish it. Here is how. Greater Arabia has strong channels with Greater China, giving us just enough opportunity to get you into the area while avoiding the filters, and with Greater Arabia's recent clandestine overtures to North Africa, I have enough cover—and a few favors remaining from thirty years ago—that I will get myself into the region for a few hours. I am downloading to you the information and location of a novel transportation method you will use. You will have to ... *tailor* ... it to your needs, but with

your skills that will be no problem. You need merely to get yourself to the location, and then transport yourself to our meeting place. After that, I will be able to take care of you."

Xi Na looked at the information coming across.

"But, this is on the coast near Macau?"

"Yes it is. Another 30 miles downriver from your current location. Assuming you can get yourself there, you will understand upon your arrival. Your eventual destination will be the inlet a few miles southwest of Shah Ai Shaib beach in Dubai just outside the border with Abu Dhabi. That's far enough away from their latest teraforming to avoid detection. I will meet you there in exactly 24 hours. Good luck. You have no time to lose!"

"What if I cannot make it?"

"Getting to Dubai will be easier than what you've already accomplished. I trust you!"

"Thank you. May good fortune speed you on your journey. I look forward to meeting you ... Mr. President."

"And I you, my friend."

"Very well. Dubai it is, then," Wu uttered to herself, leaning back in her chair. She looked out through her office window at the technology and manpower at her disposal.

Chapter 6

*"Expect the best.
Plan for the worst.
Prepare to be surprised."*

Denis Waitley

"I'm so glad you agreed to come," said Bartoli to Natale seated across from him. They were nearly an hour into their 78-minute flight to—and around—the Arabian Peninsula. It had been a very quiet trip.

Out the window to their right, a mere 30 feet away, a strategic reconnaissance jet flew in formation. The frightening

stunt at 92,000 feet altitude and nearly 3,000 miles per hour was necessary to mask the not-really-here passenger plane behind the known-signature, known-flight-path surveillance craft as they flew over the Mediterranean and Egyptian airspace.

Natale replied while looking out the window.

"I've had moments of better judgment."

"Good thing you're looking out for both of us," Bartoli said with a slight smile, touching her knee.

"Somebody has to be the adult."

"You wouldn't be here if somewhere in that big heart of yours you didn't want this to succeed."

"I don't know *what* we are doing anymore. How is anyone supposed to make any sense of this," she said, her long, delicate fingers pushing a long strand of jet-black hair away from her eyes. "I just don't want to be away from you anymore."

The voice of the second officer came over the intercom from the flight deck. "Mr. President, begging your pardon. We are now less than fifteen minutes from the final stage of the

mission. We are currently over Djibouti about to make a northeasterly turn as we skirt Yemen and Oman airspace to their south before we get to our separation point. As we discussed, at that point you, Madame Bartoli, your new pilot and security officer will be seated in the PAZE—Power Assisted Zero Emission—stealth glider. We will slow to just under Mach one and launch the glider with a northwesterly turn as you head over Oman and United Arab Emirates airspace. It will be about a 400-mile glide lasting just over half an hour. You will ingress the meeting point from the southeast.

"Unbelievable," muttered Natale as her fingers slowly wrapped around the ends of her armrests.

* * *

Courtesy a particularly sentimental boat Captain who took great pride in their clandestine activities, Xi Na had been able to make surprisingly good time heading down the Pearl River as it widened into its delta. They arrived at Heung Chau's small harbor cluttered with barges, hydrofoils and old junks only ten hours after her conversation with Bartoli.

The riddle of what exactly Bartoli had in store for her was soon answered, as Xi Na found the small operation halfway down the dock. She had heard of super-cavitating mini submarines, but had never seen one. Scarcely over 20 feet long, they held two passengers, a large cargo area and the solid fuel booster. The subs were ordinarily used for higher-speed transport of small payloads along China's three thousand miles of coastline at speeds exceeding 500 miles per hour thanks to the cocoon of air forced out through its nose, which eliminated virtually all underwater drag. To facilitate lengthy roundtrips without refueling, they had an impressive range of just over 6,000 miles.

Xi Na realized why Bartoli had chosen this transport. Although she would have to reconfigure the vessel to exit Greater China territorial waters, she was much less likely to be tracked effectively enough to be interdicted before she was far enough away for it to become politically difficult for Greater China to pursue her into the waters of independents like India.

Representing herself as an independent merchant needing a transport for a pick-up several hundred miles up the coast, she rented one of the subs and clambered into the cockpit. Although entirely unfamiliar with the controls, she was able to quickly come to grips with the mostly automated systems managing depth, speed and direction automatically using

undersea charts and global positioning. She would have to download charts for navigating the Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman and Persian Gulf later. The sub was not equipped with them and she did not want to tip off any observers to her intentions.

Knowing little of seafaring and looking at her route, Xi Na was concerned about her passage into the Indian Ocean through the Strait of Malacca between Malaysia and Sumatra. A busy, dangerous waterway, as shallow as 60 feet in some areas, seemed a hostile environment for a vessel—and intention—such as hers. However, with no choice but to press on, she settled at the controls, pointed the sub southeast out of the Pearl River Delta and into the South China Sea for the beginning of her twelve hour trip to Dubai.

* * *

In the designated spot just inside the breakwater at the far end of one of the rare Emirates beaches not deemed worthy of development, Xi Na sat in silence in the cockpit of her sub. Miraculously, her maiden voyage had gone without hitch. It was just past midnight local time. The time for the agreed-to rendezvous had come.

At first, she took the sound for a gust in the ocean breeze, but when it was practically upon her, she could see that it was a motor-less aircraft, its lights entirely doused, gliding in at a flat angle from the southwest. As she looked at the speed with which the glider approached, and the beach she judged to be no longer than 1,000 feet, she grew concerned, but the glider executed a perfect flare to scrub speed and slid to a halt comfortably at the far end of the beach having made no more noise than a parachute.

Incredulous that she may actually meet Bartoli after all that had happened, she contained her enthusiasm a few final moments while she waited for the sequence of lights they had agreed to, and for Bartoli to emerge.

He did so only a minute later, together with two officers and, to Xi Na's surprise, a young woman. Moving across the dark landscape lit only in impression by moonlight under cloud cover, the four made it over to her position, led by the officers, who were clearly scanning for weapons. Upon their satisfaction, they gave her the signal to emerge.

"Hello. I am Antoni Bartoli," he greeted her with an extended hand to help her off the sub and onto the beach. "May I finally have your name?"

Taking off her cap and straightening out her shoulder length hair, she took his hand, looked him in the eyes and said, "I am Zhao Xi Na, but my given western name is Sienna. I cannot tell you how glad I am to see you."

"And I you," answered Bartoli before turning to the woman behind him, beckoning her to come forward. "And, may I introduce you to my daughter, Natale."

Sienna greeted the woman, roughly her own age and nearly as tall as Bartoli, with a reverent expression. "Hello. I am so sorry for your," also addressing Bartoli now, "for both of your loss."

"Thank you for your thoughts. It is in Lucia's memory that I am here trying to finish what I ventured to start. We—I—hope that you can help us. Although I must profess, it is still difficult for me to grasp what is—"

The two officers, equipped with multi-sensor heads-up displays, a pulse cannon and anti-personnel ballistic weapons, had been silently monitoring the beach and the ill-maintained road leading to the breakwater from the crest above. Suddenly, they backed into the group of four and commanded them to get between the breakwater and the sub as they closed the formation.

"We have a high-speed vehicle coming into the location directly toward the breakwater," the coordinating security officer yelled as both trained their weapon on the crest, where a low-slung wheeled vehicle—practically noiseless due to its nuclear turbine—shot seemingly out of nowhere and directly towards them. Through the windshield, they could see the solitary occupant.

"Permission to eliminate, Mr. President?"

Bartoli hesitated briefly, then gave the order.

As the officers were about to execute the order, an EMaMP—Electromagnetic and Mechanical Pulse—weapon on the vehicle detonated, rendering the officers' systems and weapons useless. Although the weapon had been occasionally rumored in the intelligence communities, none had ever been confirmed. Bartoli and his officers were stunned.

The vehicle came to a swift halt and its occupant, a woman of Asian origin, emerged on top of the breakwater, looking down at the group pinned between the wall and the sub.

It was Wu He Feng.

"Your weapons will become functional again in about five minutes," she said, addressing the officers, "but, I am unarmed and come in the deepest of peace. You may search me."

She jumped down to the beach and approached Bartoli. The officers closed in front of him and began to search her.

Shortly, they nodded to Bartoli and stepped aside.

"Mr. President, I am Wu He Feng, Information Director for District 1 of the Greater China coalition. I am here, however, as a private citizen of the world, and hopefully as your partner in unification."

Bartoli, Sienna and Natale looked at her bewildered.

"I am Antoni Bartoli, President of Greater Europe. This is my daughter Natale, and this is Sienna—Zhou Xi Na as you probably know her, given your job." He looked quizzically at Wu. "And here I thought meeting Sienna would be the most astonishing thing to happen to me this evening."

Wu briefly acknowledged Natale and Sienna.

"I understand, sir. This *is* about Sienna, but there are a few things I must explain to you," looking at the whole group now, "then it will be Sienna's turn."

She continued.

"I am part of a small group around the world that is silently dedicated to preserving world peace and promoting unity among nations. We live, like ghosts, in the highest levels of government and try to use best principles, and influence the most important people.

"We have known for the better part of this century that much of human DNA can encode events and instincts of those who have come before us, and that the body under certain circumstances has efficient means of accessing these so-called memes as they are passed between generations."

Bartoli, having adapted to the unusual in the preceding days, waited patiently for Wu to continue.

"I am a direct descendant of the Wu dynasty of the Three Kingdoms period of China's Empire, and have had access to the insights of my ancestors, but it has not been enough to combat the world circumstances that have emerged since 2043. We knew that the other critical pool of knowledge for these circumstances resided with descendants of the Roman Empire, especially those of the Troubled Century. We tried to build new insights by blending computer models of both the Wu genes as well as those from descendants of the Roman Empire, but we do not know enough about interpreting the DNA data to accomplish this.

"So, we resorted to the oldest of computers, the human body itself. We hybridized these two memes biologically by giving birth twenty-two years ago to a baby girl born of Wu and Bartoli genes."

Bartoli, Natale and Sienna could not believe what they were hearing.

"You did what?" uttered Bartoli.

"We were able to synthesize sperm from a skin sample one of our diplomats was able to collect from a handshake with you in the days before the elimination of cross-coalition diplomacy. I myself carried the child conceived of this artificial insemination. Tragically, it was safe neither for me, nor for her, to raise her as my own, and after naming her with the Chinese words for 'happiness' and 'lock' and the western name of your hometown, she was given up for adoption.

"We did not know whether the hybridization would cause the deeper insights critical for these times to emerge, or whether Sienna would know instinctively how to read them, but as you have found out, we have been very, very fortunate.

"You, Mr. President, are Sienna's father. I am her mother. And she is the key to your—*our*—re-unification of humanity."

As a flood of both newfound clarity and questions washed over the four, they hardly knew what to do. Sienna looked at Bartoli and Wu. Bartoli and Wu at Sienna. Natale at Bartoli.

Bartoli was first to speak.

"Can this be?" he said looking to both Wu and Sienna.

"It can, Mr. President," answered Wu gently.

Bartoli briefly looked at the ground, then decisively at Wu. "Call me Antoni." He stepped to Wu, and they hugged briefly, but warmly.

Then Bartoli stepped to Sienna who, in her turmoil of emotion could merely look at him tired and hopeful. They embraced with abandon as one fit a hole in the soul of the other.

"Now, Sienna, let me introduce you to your mother," and he pointed her in mock ceremony to Wu.

"I cannot believe it," said Sienna as she walked slowly to Wu, who could no longer contain herself as she spread her arms wide in welcome.

"Oh, to see you again. To see what you have become." They embraced for a long time, crying quiet tears.

Bartoli and Natale stood near them in silence, arms around each other, wearing incredulous, but happy smiles as they watched the two.

As Sienna slowly separated from Wu, Natale stepped towards her. "I've always wanted a sister," she said softly with an encouraging smile and open arms.

Sienna, laughed through her tear-stained face and embraced Natale.

"Thank you, but you are so tall and beautiful," Sienna said.

"If I only had your eyes," Natale replied. "And where did you get that cap?"

"Girls, there will be time for that later," Wu said affectionately. "Sienna, it's time for you to share your insights with the President—I mean, your dad."

"Yes, yes, I know," Sienna replied, trying to compose herself.

She began.

"I have already explained how the Chinese and Roman insights can be blended with today's technology to attack scarcity.

*Their second tenant was the defeat of mistrust. In the third century, however, they had no way to reduce the distances of their empires for purposes of swifter communication, and even locally there was unequal access to information, as there was to property. They knew that the issues with distance and access of information stood in the way of a sense of transparency for people, which they knew was the road to combating mistrust.

*The key is not to mandate transparency, but to have so many citizens observing and communicating that transparency occurs organically. It is not just representative democracy, or even democracy, it is a marketplace of truth comprised of billions of participants seeing and hearing as one.

*Their third and final tenant was balancing the need for central control with the desire for self-development at the edges. Far provinces or warlords of the Roman and Chinese Empire either disobeyed or misused their powers, which weakened the whole, eventually coming full circle as destruction to the far provinces. The smartest of the leaders of these empires knew they had to allow—even benefit from—some autonomy and de-centralized development in their provinces while guiding and policing the entire empire under a common blanket. Sometimes they were able to achieve this,

but because of their imbalance of resources and poor communication, most times they could not.

"Today this is even more important, not only because the world is too complex for hundreds of entirely separate governments, but because even within a country there must be an orderly rule of law to prevent internal damage. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, much of their economic nightmare comes from despots, dictators, roving bandits and corrupt systems hollowing out their own, not through economic exclusion or apathy by other countries. If the industrious at the edge of town, the edge of a country, or the edge of a coalition are not only enabled, but also protected by central law and order, self-development and growth will follow."

She paused, searching Bartoli's and Wu's faces for a response.

The two had been listening with rapt attention, absorbing her message, relating it their own doctrine and the best they had been given by their advisors.

"Sienna, it's incredible how this blends diverse and ancient thinking from two empires with the state of today. It resonates, but do you discern a single policy, a unifying pursuit, a mission to which the world could commit that would accomplish all of these?"

Next to him, Wu slowly nodded her head. The palpable sense of being within reach of new ground was slowly drawing the four physically closer to each other.

"I may," said Sienna, "but this is so much bigger than I can grasp."

"That's alright. Do the best you can. We will take everything you said and develop new doctrines and political approaches," said Wu looking at Bartoli for confirmation, who gave it readily.

"Thanks ... mom," Sienna said with a quick smile before she continued.

"Taking the ancients' insights about scarcity, mistrust and self development, dad's goals of unification and what is possible today through technology, yields an expansion of what is thought of as unalienable rights," she said in air quotes. "In addition to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, it must be something like computing, connectivity and the pursuit of commerce. Instead of giving land in exchange for farming it the way they did in the nineteenth century, we have to settle new digital frontiers by giving compute terminals and connectivity to all that want them in exchange for their contributions to a largely digital economy.

"The end product—the mission, as you said, dad—is the development, maintenance and growth of a single borderless worldwide digital marketplace for information, education and goods. All nations that meet minimum standards of 'digital homesteading' for their citizens are allowed access, providing backpressure for the implementation of equal opportunity across nations, and even coalitions. The marketplace, in turn, is governed by its participants. A self-organizing system of billions.

"It can eliminate scarcity, defeat mistrust and provide self-development in an ordered system policed both by governments, and the governed," Sienna concluded.

The group fell silent as they considered Sienna's words. As before, Bartoli was the first to speak.

"I see how the sheer size of it, and its distributed nature, could have a revolutionary impact not only to intra-coalition stability, but how it could create a draw for us to return to inter-coalition commerce and diplomacy. That said, there are elements of this, that have been tried—and have failed—before, and we must find ways to drive their success."

"Antoni, I agree. Don't you think that providing access and means for billions to participate in either a parallel, or new, economy, will create the necessary momentum—pressure

even—to yield something new within your own government and with the government of the other coalitions. Perhaps even a re-entry of the independents into the mainstream of world economics,” asked Wu.

“It is possible. It is definitely possible,” he said as he considered the staggering steps he would have to take. “I have to return to Florence and start working on this. Natale will come back with me. He Feng and Sienna, it won’t be safe for the two to return to China in the meantime.”

“Absolutely right,” Wu agreed. “However, because of the coalition between Greater Arabia and Greater China, I have much freedom of movement here. Sienna and I can weather at a safe house in Dubai for weeks. I will keep the Deputy Minister at bay with a field operations story.”

“Perfect, but first, let’s be thankful for this occasion and part with our hearts full.” With outspread arms, he drew the three closer to him. “This is not what we expected. It is *much* greater than we expected. We can delight in finding not just friends, partners, confidants tonight, but something much larger: family. There is much to do, and when the time comes, we will be together again to build something new among us.”

He hugged Wu and Sienna tightly. They, in turn bid farewell to Natale with the two younger women walking to the water and chatting animatedly for a few minutes before Bartoli moved interrupted them.

"Natale, time to go. We have a lot to do."

As Bartoli and Natale walked to the glider for their return ascent, they took one last look back and waved enthusiastic goodbyes to Wu and Sienna.

Wu took Sienna's hand and they made their way to the vehicle for the drive up the coast. "We've got a lot of catching up to do," she said happily, kissing her daughter on the cheek.

Chapter 7

"One of the greatest discoveries a man makes, one of his great surprises, is to find he can do what he was afraid he could not."

Henry Ford

Bartoli had opened the clandestine session with Nelson Mandela's words: "There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."

Three weeks had passed since his unusual family re-union. Three weeks of extraordinary political backroom maneuvering among a cluster of statesmen as remarkably small as its constituency large.

It had begun with Bartoli's trip to Prague for another meeting with the Russian governor to introduce the digital homesteading and global marketplace concept. Miraculously, the benefits of the manufacturing opportunity of the mountains of digital equipment necessary, a broader demand for micro-manufacturing from millions of new, smaller merchants and access to the largest imaginable market for a surplus of information workers had resonated enough to sew the seeds of the exceptional gathering.

Armed with this development, Bartoli had ventured to Casablanca to meet with North Africa's governor who could not ignore that staying away from the marketplace would make opaque to him much of the world's emergent information and economy. Although giving up the benefits of the closed

systems the coalitions had established disturbed him to his core, the ability to benefit from billions of eyes, ears—and wallets—through potential participation was the greater draw.

In a stroke of good fortune, Bartoli had won from Russia and North Africa not only an agreement to participate, but also their help in influencing Greater North Pacific and Greater China—Russia and North Africa's recent conversational partners—to do the same.

The assembly was complete when Bartoli was able to attract Independents India, Brazil and South Africa. After decades of having been shut out of the world's primary economies, it was an opportunity of grand proportions for them while bringing additional advocates to Bartoli's faction and hundreds of millions of additional consumers and producers to the marketplace.

So, they found themselves here. A conference the likes of which the world had not seen in half a decade.

Twelve men, four women, one idea.

An inexhaustible supply of uncertainty and doubt.

And an outside world that knew nothing of these events, yet every dawn appeared closer to unraveling at the seams of its coalitions.

* * *

Although they were ensconced in a safe house near Safa Park south of downtown Dubai, Sienna and her mother were slowly being drawn into the worsening climate. He Feng was in Dubai under the pretense of official business, but their traces of information traffic showed that her cover was getting increasingly fragile and Greater China had not stopped pursuing Sienna. To make matters worse, the discovery by Greater Arabian security forces of the sub the two had scuttled at the beach had dangerously raised the temperature of their trail.

With Bartoli unable to extend his protection to them and their location growing stale, He Feng decided to relocate them.

At nightfall, they were putting their small cases into the trunk of their ground pod when they heard the hissing sounds. The two airborne pods seemed to have fallen out of the sky as they came down the street from opposite directions.

"Sienna, get in. That's GA security," He Feng yelled across the roof as she scrambled into the pilot's position.

"What?"

"My god, just get in!"

She turned the pod on a dime, and headed for the nearest cross-street, scraping composites with one of the descending pods as she shot around the corner, both pods in pursuit, one flying in a blind spot to her right, the other on the ground behind her left coming up fast.

"This isn't going to work. They have too much speed," He Feng yelled as she cut into a residential section with smaller streets and two story buildings on both sides of the street. The agility of wheels on pavement gave her a small benefit over the airborne pod navigating above her through the tight canal. The advantage would not last long, however. Her ground-based nemesis was matching her corner for corner.

"Can we get an airborne pod at the Hospital?" Sienna asked as she held on for another corner, looking frantically at her mother.

"Maybe, but they're autonomous. We'll be a sitting duck," He Feng replied, eyes on the road as she threw her pod into a screaming right turn, Jumeirah Beach Park now on her left, and

Emirates Hospital and its rows of pods just ahead. Their airborne pursuer now ahead and above them.

"I'll have to take over the system," Sienna said, as she started to patch into the Hospital's vehicle network to find one of the airborne pods' control systems to display in her glasses.

"You'll have less than 30 seconds," He Feng said. "...if we're lucky." She swerved to pull into the Hospital driveway at the last possible moment and took the shortest possible path to the waiting pods, narrowly missing several pedestrians as she shot across a curb. She hit one of the pods as she came to a screeching halt in front of the vehicle Sienna had begun to hack. The GA Security Forces pod was only a hundred feet behind her, and the airborne pod was beginning to descend right on top of them as He Feng and Sienna scrambled out of their pod.

"Mom, get your EMP gun out of the trunk," Sienna yelled.

"We don't have enough time," He Feng replied as she ran around the crashed pod and to the hovering pod whose turbine had just kicked in as Sienna was able to control it.

With Sienna barely in the pod, He Feng grabbed the stick and pushed to accelerate the vehicle. It moved forward at an orderly speed as it merged in perfectly civilized fashion into traffic, clearly still under the control of the autonomous public

transport system. The occupants of the other two pods, just making their way out of the vehicles to arrest the two, jumped back in and made short work out of the distance the fugitives had covered.

"Sienna, I need to get stick control. You need to override the speed governor on this thing, or we're done," He Feng said intently, as she tried in vain to maneuver the pod more rapidly through traffic.

"I ... understand ... mom," Sienna hissed through her teeth, concentrating on the display in her glasses.

The pod was shaken by a huge impact from behind as the ground pursuer caught up and struck them. As though stunned into reason by the collision, their pod shot forward with a burst of new speed and upward and over the ground traffic as it finally responded to He Feng's hand at the controls.

"There you go," Sienna said with a satisfied look in He Feng's direction.

"Great job, sweetheart," replied He Feng not taking her eyes off the rising and dipping landscape in front of. She made a hard right to head over another residential area and towards the old Burj Dubai tower in the distance.

Another hard left later and they were awash in the glow of the high rises turning lower Sheikh Zayed Road into a canyon of metal, glass and neon. He Feng was deftly maneuvering their pod on the wrong side of the air corridor, fighting a never-ending stream of pods as they tried to head upstream to keep their pursuers at bay.

"Mom, I think we've got a problem," Sienna said.

"What?"

"I see some incoming network traffic trying to corrupt our pod's controls."

"Turn off the network connection!"

"I can't. We won't get enough information from the other pods to let you maneuver out of their way."

"OK. What do you suggest?"

"I can hold them off for a little while. Not long."

"How long?"

"Couple of minutes, mom. But, then what?"

"Well, I guess, we'll need a new vehicle, won't we," He Feng replied as she swung a mid-air U-turn and dove to the deck barely sliding under one of the pursuing pods.

"Where are you going?" asked Sienna.

"We need to get back down to the waterfront high rises to get a thrust-vectoring passenger craft."

"That's got to be nearly ten miles? I don't know if I can hold them off that long."

"Try!"

Sienna worked feverishly to hold off the assault, but with the pod's systems being attacked on multiple fronts, she was no match for the onslaught. The prospect of falling out of the garishly lit sky at any moment forced her to cut their network connection a mile from their destination.

"This is it. You'll have no more proximity assist, mom."

"OK," replied He Feng, flexing the fingers of her right hand around the stick and narrowing her gaze as she aimed forward. "I'm heading for the upper floors."

She pulled on the stick, but at an altitude of 500 feet, the pod's trajectory flattened out.

"Sienna, what's going on?"

A quick survey of her display gave Sienna the bad news.

"These pods are altitude governed. I won't be able to fix it by the time we get there."

"Lovely," He Feng said without enthusiasm. "We'll have to bail out at the 40th floor and figure it out from—"

With a muted crunch, the pod lurched terrifyingly to the left after a mid-air strike from another pod on a lateral course. The momentum threatened to carry them off their course as the pod hangar slipped away to the right.

He Feng muscled the stick into a roll that ended in clipping the outside wall of the hangar, throwing them into a series of spins. The pod skidded to a halt on its side, the nose hanging a few tantalizing feet over the edge at the other end of the hangar.

"Mom, you OK," yelled Sienna as she checked on He Feng while at the same time undoing her harness.

"Yes, yes, fine. Get out of this thing and hustle inside. We have to beat them to the elevator."

Both of them scrambled out the passenger door of the destroyed pod and ran through the crowd of gawking onlookers. Several building security officers joined the pursuit of the pod occupants, who had landed only seconds earlier.

"This way," screamed Sienna running for an elevator and starting to scan systems using her glasses. "Where are we going?"

"180th floor."

Surprisingly, their elevator cabin control system was not attacked on the way up, and they stepped out well over 2,000 feet above ground a few moments later and headed quickly to their left. Three thrust-vectoring two-passenger craft and their attendants stood on a platform facing out over the water and the dark horizon.

He Feng surveyed the scene quickly. Unfortunately, there was no time for subtlety. After slowing to a walk and frantically pointing behind her to momentarily confuse the attendants, she pulled the small tazer off her ankle and struck down the two on the left.

"Jump in and get the systems wound up," she yelled to Sienna as she spun, stayed low and fired a last well-aimed shot in the direction of the attendant on the right who was scrambling for his console.

After having to abandon the first craft because she could not open its canopy, Sienna jumped into the passenger position of the craft in the middle and had brought the display panel to life by the time her mom climbed into the pilot's seat. The

satisfying whine of a turbine coming to life followed only seconds later.

Relieved, Sienna turned to her mom. And froze.

Behind He Feng, a Greater Arabian security officer had a tazer pointed at her temple. To his left, an officer with an anti-personnel ballistics gun stepped into view.

"That's quite enough. Get out of the vehicle," he commanded.

He Feng briefly looked around, then nodded slightly to Sienna to obey the order. The two slowly made their way out of the craft and were put into hand and feet restraints.

"Wu He Feng and Zhao Xi Na, you are charged with information crime and resisting arrest. Walk this way to the—"

He stopped and looked to the side as he put his hand to his headset. The audio was barely audible to He Feng and Sienna standing next to him.

"Cease operation. Repeat, cease operation. We have confirmation of a world accord. Suspect Wu and suspect Zhao are to be released and returned to Europe immediately."

"Even the Greater China Information Minister did not know the details of the clandestine meeting we convened to close the accord. In their minds you were still suspects, and they certainly did not know of your relationship to each other, or to me. I'm sorry you had to go through that harrowing chase, but fortunately it all ended just in time," Antoni Bartoli explained to his small audience.

Bartoli, Wu, Natale and Sienna were sitting in the shade of a cluster of cypress trees on the patio of a villa outside of Siena. Surrounded by the undulating patchwork of Tuscan countryside, they were resting on the heels of a hectic series of weeks following their near-arrest, a landmark worldwide accord and their re-union.

"So, how is all this going to work now," asked Natale.

"Well, now that Sienna is on the governing board of the global marketplace, she will be traveling a lot—including to Greater China, where she'll be working with Fu Ning, one of China's delegates to the marketplace—but, has chosen to live in Florence," Bartoli said with broad satisfaction.

"As will I. I'll be here for at least a year as a cross-coalition information consultant. That way I can be close to Sienna," He Feng said. "And closer to you and your dad, too," she added with a smile aimed particularly at Bartoli, who returned it charmingly as he leaned in for his glass of Chianti.

"Natale, tell us your new idea," Sienna interjected with an encouraging hand gesture and a knowing smile playing in the corner of her lip.

"I'm going to make and sell on the new global marketplace some of the great dishes mother used to make. Bruschetta sauce, porcini mushroom cream sauce, pesto sauce, truffle cream and other pasta sauces. We'll use only artisans from this region to source the ingredients as well as small operations to make the end product. Crazy, isn't it?" concluded Natale with a mixture of enthusiasm and apprehension.

"Well, well, well. Looks like we'll be adding our own very modest empire to the new marketplace. Your mother would have loved it," Bartoli said with pride as he touched Natale's hand on his way to the kitchen.

Sienna followed him into the villa.

"Dad," Sienna said, as she caught up with Bartoli in the kitchen.

"What is it?"

"Thank you," said Sienna. "For fighting for the world. For believing in me. For getting us together."

"Of course, Sienna! How could I not. You practically did it all for us. It was," he said, looking at her gently, "our destiny. You. Me. Your mother. Quite a team, aren't we?"

"Yes, we are. You should have seen mom in Dubai!"

"I did! There's lots of video of the chase in our files. Let's hope we never have to put you in jeopardy like that again."

They wordlessly sipped their wine for a few moments.

"What do think will happen now," asked Siena.

"Who can be sure? But, for now we are together," he said, putting a re-assuring arm around Sienna's shoulder. "One day at a time, figlia mia, one day at a time."