

A fictional story about a family of unique individuals living on a unique island in the Southern Indian Ocean. The family members befriend Ty Shackleton, the great-grandson of an Antarctic explorer and his cracker-jack team of scientists.

POLAR SWITCH

By Charles Sexton

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POLAR SWITCH



Charles Sexton

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PRELUDE

“Remember our conversation about the origin of the Shackers?”

Neon recognizes that Ty and his team have been unbelievably supportive of Joey and her and does not want to become a pest. On the other hand, they seem to like it.

“We do like it,” replies Ty in simple fashion, waiting to allow the two Shackers to do as much thinking on their own as they can.

“Soo, can we develop theories about where we came from?”

“Thought you would never ask,” replies Ty. “Jared, you had one thought a few days ago. What was that again?”

Scratching his tanned head with a full component of gray hair and stroking his equally gray goatee, Jared begins, “Where do I start? Okay, I’m an anthropologist. I have spent most of my life studying humans, and to an extent, how they compare with other animals. I study and compare their origins, physical and cultural development, biological characteristics, social customs and other stuff. And I’m pretty good at it.”

“Except he gets seasick!” teases Damien.

“Yeah, well, in all of my years, I’ve never come across a puzzle as complex as Shackers. You have the brain of a human and the digestive system of nothing else I’ve seen. Amino acids dissimilar to those you consume are components of proteins which are critical to humans, but your digestive system is radically different from most animals. Someday, maybe we’ll have an opportunity to autopsy a Shacker and learn more, but...”

“Wait, what!” complains Joey. “What do you mean? What is this autopsy?”

“It’s a look inside of you after you die, to study you, learn more about you. I guarantee, it doesn’t hurt.”

“We never did that on the Shack”

“So,” Interrupts Ty, “on the Shack, when someone dies, do they all just sink into the plasma like August did?”

“That’s all I can remember since I was a kid,” replies Neon. “That’s all anyone ever described.”

Jared continues, “Anyway, there has always been a big discussion and lots of debate among humans about where humans came from. I won’t get into it now, but human DNA had to come from somewhere or be formed somehow. It could have been a slow process or could have happened quickly.”

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Neon's brain is in high gear. "On the Shack, we had a professor at the university who's eye focal length allowed him to see into space."

"I'll bet those contact haven't helped him any!" laughs Joey.

"Be nice. Anyway, we always asked him if he could see any other Shackers out there. He couldn't, but we wondered. Have humans seen other life forms in outer space?"

"No," answers Jared as the team, once again, admires Neon's questions. "But we have the same mystery to solve. And that gives me a segue to my thought of a few days ago. Scientists have found evidence of a meteor impact beneath the East Antarctica Ice Sheet. It's huge, about 300 miles in diameter and about a mile down. They think it could date back about 250 million years, the time of the Permian-Triassic extinction. The meteor itself, named the Ralph von Frese, probably killed off most of the life on Earth at that time. Eventually life grew back, and large dinosaurs developed and thrived. Then about 65 million years ago, the smaller Chicxulub meteor hit in the Yucatan Peninsula that led to the extinction of the dinosaurs."

"Sounds like space objects have done more to wipe out life on Earth than support it," exclaimed Joey.

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“Well, I think it’s possible that, given the closeness of the Ralph von Frese to the Shack, DNA could have been on board the meteor, survived the impact and eventually created Shackers.”

Silence is required to process that thought. In adjoining buildings intelligent students have earbuds stuck in their ears. They claim it helps them concentrate. Students are learning from devices of all kinds, research is occurring, and kids are becoming economic and social drivers of mankind’s future. But dead silence and deep thought are old but very efficient technologies.

“I don’t know how to confirm it,” confesses Jared. “The crater is more than a mile below the ice sheet. We would have to drill through that much ice, hit meteor fragments, and retrieve samples to analyze. DNA could be on a small fragment of an asteroid which was thirty miles wide before it hit and broke into pieces. And it’s all a mile below ice.”

“Overwhelming!” groans Neon.

“Possibly,” replies Ty. “But, the greatest discoveries have often started with a thought. We simply develop as many thoughts or theories as we can and explore each one we can until we prove or disprove each one. If obstacles prohibit checking out a thought, then we shelve it. We don’t forget it

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because technology changes may allow us to peruse it in the future.”

“I guess we shelve this thought for now?” mumbles Joey.

“Not just yet,” Jared reassures him. “I have some friends working on the ANSMET project in Antarctica. They search for meteor fragments that moving glaciers grind up and they know who has done research that requires drilling. There may be something there we can piggyback on. I don’t know if they have looked for DNA, but I’ll find out.”

“In the meantime, let’s develop a list of other thoughts or theories to at least preliminarily investigate,” suggests Ty. “Any ideas?”

“Yes,” claims Neon. “Remember our conversation about how plasma is produced is by high magnetic fields?”

“Yes, and I think we discussed high magnetic fields being near the Earth’s poles,” concurs Ty.

“And the theory I tossed out was that perhaps the Shack was formed somehow by being near a high magnetic field, the South Pole.”

“Yes, you did toss that theory out there.”

“If Shackers develop and thrive on plasma and we can find more plasma islands, then maybe we can find more Shackers.”

“And yes, you had that thought, too.”

“Soo, how can we investigate that theory?”

“Ahh, now that’s a good question,” teases Damien. “Do you remember Elise Lakey?” “That cartographer with the GTIS?”

“Right, actually, we’ve asked Elise to use the GTIS to perform some initial analysis for us. When we found the Shack, she identified its geothermic signature. And she’s performed some searches for similar signatures.”

“One of my goals,” declares Joey, “is to be ahead of you guys on something some day!”

“At your age, you already are,” Ty assures him. “With your grit and determination, you will amaze even yourself. Give it time.”

“Did she find anything?” begs Neon listening intensely.

“Three possible target areas,” Ty explains. One is about 400 kilometers south of Macquarie Island. That’s about half way between New Zealand and Antarctica. Total distance over 20,000 km from here by sea”

“What, wait, that is close to the Shack!” exclaims Joey.

“If you call 2,500 km close,” explains Damien, trying to be agreeable.

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“For sure, it is not close to the other possible targets,” continues Ty. “We are talking about 3,800 km from here”

“So, you’re talking about near the North Pole,” calculates Neon.

“Yes,” affirms Ty. “One is north of Canada’s Queen Elizabeth Islands and the other is near the Russian islands named Franz Josef Land in the Arctic Ocean.”

“I would love to go near the North Pole,” hints Liz who has traveled worldwide, but never to either pole.

“You will have to earn your right to do that, you know,” responds Ty.

With a puzzled look on her face, Liz mumbles, “And how do I do that?”

“Of course we all have to collaborate on writing about our scientific discoveries. You have to do your share.”

“Eee, you scoundrels,” declares Liz with glee. “That is the icing on the cake!”

PART 1

1

Over two years earlier the brilliant colors are back again for their long-awaited cycle in the island. Shacklers are mesmerized by the weaving of the phosphorescent colors, ebbing and flowing through the plasma base, especially at night. For about six weeks, a symphony of lights almost hypnotizes residents with their hues of blue, green, red and deep black appearing like a basket woven with colored light. Shacklers attach to branches and watch in awe, trying to describe to each other with a variety of conflicting interpretations what they see. This is a marvelous event on the Shack, occurring only about once a generation. Some say it is caused by ionized plasma flares which are emitted from supermassive black holes when they gobble up and rip apart large gas clouds in space at the center of the Milky Way. It doesn't matter.

One evening, what looks at a distance like a firefly seems to be lost in the abyss of colors below the island's surface. It is darting around in a mindless frenzy, changing course rapidly with no place to finish. Suddenly it comes to a dead stop.

"Ouch!"

"Ouch!"

It seems like the firefly had run in to something. The firefly and an old man slowly rose to the surface.

"Why don't you look where you're going?" The old man asked the firefly. "I'm sorry!" The firefly replied, "I just like to go fast!"

"You're a hazard!" the old man scolded.

"That's me!" The firefly exclaimed.

That's how they met. Hazard, who is not really a firefly, and August, who is too old to be below the plasma island's surface, are opposites in so many ways. But they are destined to influence each other in ways they could not yet know. Hazard explains that she is a mid-sighter who is lucky enough to be a fast swimmer. She knows of no one who is faster than she. She loves to speed about the island's vast plasma and be a show-off.

August listens to Hazard with great interest. He is good at listening and tells people that it is a good way to learn something new. "If you do all of the talking, you learn nothing new because you already know what you hear yourself saying!" he often suggests to them.

"How old are you?" boldly asks Hazard.

"Well, I'm not really sure."

"Wait, I'm not really sure how old I am, either!"

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"Why is that?" inquires August.

"I'm adopted, and I don't know when I was born."

"I'm sorry!"

"I have great parents, though. I don't remember or miss my birth parents, but when I swim about, I meet people like you and ask questions. Do you remember a branch fire in this neighborhood about twelve years ago?" she asks.

"I heard about it. I heard a nice family lived there, but I didn't know them."

"Do you remember your parents?"

"Yes, they lived quite a long time."

"Were they strict or nice?"

"They were both. They helped me learn to think. They helped me learn that I was responsible for my decisions and actions. And, they taught me how to have fun!"

"I wish I knew more about my birth parents. Knowing more about them would tell me more about me."

"Indeed, it would," replies August. "But you are still lucky to be in a family that loves you. They didn't know what kind of person you would turn out to be when they decided to adopt you. You're all fortunate! I lost my wife a few years ago and have been alone on my branch much of the time with my limited mid-range vision since then. I have learned to get along with my handicap with little difficulty."

The two continue to talk, exchanging stories about themselves, until Hazard realizes she is late and has to go home. "I hope I see you again sometime," she calls out as she once again transforms the sight of herself into a firefly in August's eyes.

2

Hazard's dad, Sky Alexander, has been asked to visit the neighboring Diaz family that has not felt well. Sky is a Shacker medical expert, who has been trained to help Shackers figure out what is making them sick or weak and to recommend cures.

The family of five has sent word to Sky that they need his advice. "We all have the same problems!" explains the mom. "We don't have any energy! And we have gotten smaller! That's weird, right? And scary!"

Shackers are not prone to a lot of illnesses but can be infected by a unique archaebacteria which had adapted to the cold water around the Shack. The infection is not deadly to Shackers, but it can send them to their home branch for an extended period. More commonly, they get sick from lack of movement and poor-quality nutrition.

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Sky questions each parent and the three Diaz kids; they all say the same thing. They started feeling weak and all began getting smaller at the same time.

“I've seen these symptoms before, but not in a whole family at the same time. Let's do some blood and urine tests, but in the meantime, make sure to stay attached for long periods of time to insure you absorb a lot of amino acids, okay?”

Shackers have blood and urine tests similar to humans, but their lab technology has not progressed much beyond the Shackleton days and results have revealed little useful information. All Sky can do at this point is to document his observations. He is at a loss to help, but the good news is that the family should recover in about a month. The bad news is that they won't have the energy to do much until that time--no work, no income, and no school.

3

That evening, at family attachment time, Neon, the oldest Alexander daughter, explains why she became frustrated at college today. “Like, I wasted forty-five minutes today waiting for Josie to show up and coordinate vision, so I could work on my genetics research paper! It's like everything has to work on someone else's schedule. I get so tired of it!”

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Shackers can see perfectly within their limited focal length; but, outside of that, their vision is blurred, or they can't see at all.

"Well, I don't think it's all that bad!" exclaims Hazard." I was having a ball today and met this wonderful old man. You can run into the nicest folks that way!"

"You mean you *ran* into someone, again?" taunts her brother, Joey. "Just because you're fast doesn't mean you can keep speeding into people, you blockhead! I, on the other hand, am smart enough to *know* I need lots of help! I have good friends who are there for me. You would be wise to develop the same!"

"What does that have to do with speeding? You need to say that to Neon so she can get her project done"

"Wait!" says her mother, Aurora, using an agitated tone. "You stopped to talk with a complete stranger? We've talked about this way too many times! I hate to lecture, but that cannot be done, not under any circumstances, young lady!"

"But you would like him, Mom. I could actually get a word in edgewise, which is more than I can do around here!"

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"That a girl, Hazard!" shouts her older brother, Harry. "You do whatever you want! You wanna go on an ion hunt with me and the guys? You would be a ball to watch, bumping into things and all that!"

"Enough!" intervenes Sky, who has had enough with this waste of time. "Tell me more about this 'wonderful old man' you met today, Hazard."

Sky has heard of someone whose father was living when the Shacklers were visited by Sir Ernest Shackleton, a British polar explorer who stumbled upon the island in 1921 aboard the *Quest*. Intending to further survey and explore the southern Indian Ocean region, Shackleton unfortunately died of a heart attack before his work could be officially started. "An old man who lives in town knows more about the Shackleton days than any other modern day Shacker."

"Didn't they name the island after Shackleton," adds Neon.

"Yes", Sky continues. "The story is that during their brief time together, Shackleton and our forefathers secretly developed a deep and trusting relationship. Before Shackleton's arrival, they lived on the island for centuries without knowing there was an outside world and didn't have a name for themselves or the island. They began to nickname the island the *Shack* and themselves *Shacklers*."

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"Yeah, and Shackleton taught the islanders English, math, science and brought as much technology as he could, says Neon. His closest crew fulfilled a promise to provide more equipment and for years quietly transported it to them. His influence upon them accelerated progress in our world tremendously," continues Neon, showing off what she has learned at the university.

"But we remained isolated and unknown to the world after his captain died," continues Sky. "Our forefathers didn't believe that all humans were like Shackleton and requested that the English team not reveal the island's existence upon their return home. So far as we know, that request has been honored."

Despite the promises, the Shacklers keep a constant ear toward the ocean. Many know they cannot remain undiscovered forever.

Responding to her Dad's question, Hazard explains, "So, I was exercising in the plasma when I kind of bumped into this man. I couldn't see him, and he certainly couldn't see me. Well, he was the nicest person! I was somewhat embarrassed and apologized profusely. He's a mid-sighter and looks quite old. His name is August. I don't know much more, except he listened to everything I said like I was the only person on the Shack."

"Exactly what did you tell him?" asks Aurora.

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"Not much. I told him that you are a City Governor here in Macklin, that Dad is involved in medical things, and that I'm adopted."

"Not much more to tell, is there, Sis! I don't think my ion hunting friends know all *that* much!" laughs Harry.

Aurora, thoroughly irritated right now, disconnects and goes for a swim of her own.

4

The Shack is a pretty unique place. The home for Shackers is a *Home Branch*, where family members *attach*. Each adult is about half the size of a human, with a cylindrical body and large, somewhat, protruding, tubular eyes. The body attaches to the family branch by a narrow stem for about their first six years of life. After that, they develop flat feet and small arms, and can *detach* from the stem. The short legs and flat feet are used to propel them on the surface or through the extremely dense plasma of the island. They return to the branch at night or whenever they need to reattach for nutrition, rest, work, and family functions. They eventually learn to attach to other host branches for similar support or work.

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The typical family consists of 4-7 members, all residing on and in a home branch which is in turn attached to a host. The host community has vessels which penetrate the plasma base of the island like a tree.

The parents of the family are usually the first two members on the branch and attach nearest the bottom. Children are added to the branch about once per year. A family can live together on the branch for 15-50 years if they wish. Of course, most leave to find an empty branch when married.

The typical community of branches may contain 25-50 families and a city may contain 50-100 communities. There are 14 cities on the island. Branches are often clustered with other branches to form communities and cities because generally they are more successful that way. Producing, storing, and distributing their food of amino acids is much more efficient when work groups form. Families can specialize, not only in producing and farming amino acids (AA's), but in all kinds of businesses. And the cities create governments which can hire individuals to provide education and services needed by all of its' citizens.

Only three cities, Rowett, (named after the Canadian who financed the Shackleton expedition),

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Wild (named after his right-hand man) and Emily (named in honor of Shackleton's wife) are economically strong. The other cities, including Macklin (named after Shackleton's expeditionary physician and the home town of the Alexander family) are in economic decline.

Shackers obviously have some unique characteristics. In addition to their body engineering and nutrition, each pair of eyes has a unique fixed focal length. Some see clearly only up close, some only far away and others in between. If a family has five members, the family may have five different focal lengths. The more focal lengths a family has, the better the family can see because they can share vision. Each family member must be attached to a branch to share its vision with the other family members. Shackers attached to other branches can share their vision with other Shackers on that branch. This is how they can function at work or school.

5

"You seem to know an awful lot about plasma, Al, observes Chun. You must have a natural ability to soak up information!"

"I do," replied Al, "but my whole family has an interest in this particular topic."

Al Hofer is attached to one of the university branches, talking with two classmates, Chun and Pushita. Both are popular, and Al is trying to impress them with his intellectual prowess. And it is impressive!

Al sees a girl moving across campus near the branch and promises Chun and Pushita he will be right back. "I haven't seen this friend in several years. May I invite her to join us?" What are they going to say? No way? Al quickly detaches and catches up with Neon.

"Hey there, Neon!"

"Hey," she replies.

Several years ago, in high school, the two had a spark for each other, but Al was popular and liked to play the field. He moved on, leaving Neon wondering why. Their relationship was not intense, but certainly could have been.

"It's been awhile. How are you?" asks Al.

"Oh, just trying to learn a little and do a little good."

"It's great to see you. Care to come meet some friends and catch up a little?"

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Neon joins the group on the branch and, after introductions, Al questions Neon about her studies at school. Neon explains that her major interest is genetics and that she is currently involved in a research project.

Pushita is impressed again. "Al was just giving us a scientific explanation of our island's composition. We all know it's made of plasma and that's about it."

Trying to sound like an academician, Al further explains, "There are four states of matter—solids, liquids, gases and plasma. Plasma is the most common form in the Universe. Most stars, including the sun, are in the plasma state. Exposing a gas to heat or a strong magnetic field may agitate its atoms, releasing charged particles called ions turning it into a plasma. Our island is a very unique form of plasma. It's very dense and much cooler."

Neon wonders, "Any idea how the Shack was formed or where it came from?"

"No one here has any idea. All the university knows is the information provided by Shackleton. There is a professor here with a really different focal length who has learned more. His vision is telescopic, so he is able to see into space, and he sees black holes, giant gas clouds and raining plasma on the sun."

"That's so cool!" concurs Neon.

"He's basically blind when it comes to seeing anything on the island. That must suck! He's really fun to listen to, though."

"Well, if we could figure out more about our origin, maybe we could genetically alter some of our weaknesses", comments Neon.

"That sounds like something more to talk about," says Al, eager to see her again.

"Maybe so," responds Neon, "but now I have some friends waiting to share their reading vision with me and I can't afford to miss the opportunity. I look forward to seeing you soon."

6

That evening, when all of the Alexander family is attached to the branch (except for Harry, with a focal length 3-6 m), everyone is complaining.

"We can't depend on Harry anymore!" exclaims Aurora who has a focal length of 0-1 m. "He's here only half of the evenings. A new family moved in next door and I don't have any idea what they look like. Normally I would have gone over there by now to welcome them to the neighborhood, but I couldn't just stumble over there on my first visit."

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"He's out with his friends again, chasing ions," accuses Joey.

"They seem to be plentiful and very active during the times of plasma colors. If I weren't a far-sighter, I would have helped and gone over there with you. I'm sorry!"

"Does anyone know anything about these friends of his?" asks Sky. "He spends more time with them these days than he does with us."

"I don't," responds Hazard. "He's missed a few days at school, but he seems to be doing pretty well."

"Well, the main problem," says Aurora, "is that we can't function very well on the branch without his vision. We can't complete all of our work without him. It's aggravating! "

"Talk about aggravating," exclaims Joey, "today at school, Haji, Shaka and I were working on our math homework together, when a gang of guys began calling us 'fags!' Look, you know I can't see up close and need help to read. All we were doing and ever do is to help each other. Yeah, we are friends and talk about more than school, but I'm not interested in them and I don't care! I wish I would have slapped them in the face!"

"The island is not an easy place to be, Joey," responds Sky, "I don't have any words of wisdom that helps with that kind of thing. You have the right to do

what you want as long as you don't harm others in some way. My experience is that, in the long run, bullies become meaningless and you will move on more to important things to think about. But how you work through these kinds of events is one of the many tasks that helps you create what you will become! On the island, there is no way to punish individuals for bad behavior."

"It sucks!" concludes Joey.

"By the way, I visited another family today with the same symptoms as the Diaz family," reports Sky. "It was the same story, and I have a third to go see tomorrow. I can't get a handle on what's going on, but this is unusual."

7

Aurora and two friends, Bella and Sierra, meet at Bella's branch.

"Wow, this is hard to wrap your head around," says Aurora." There's a lot of golden information here but organizing it in a way that tells the story is tough!"

They are discussing their recent visit to Rowlett and are trying to organize their data and observations. Aurora is not the typical Macklin City

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Governor. The Governors have been a locked-arm cluster of good old boys who all vote alike and maintain the status quo, usually to benefit themselves.

Traveling to other cities is not easy. A Shacker must have the stamina and AA capacity to get across the thick plasma to a neighboring city where he or she must find a branch for mobiles to attach and re-nourish. A few of Aurora's neighbors have traveled and have seen the differences in the economies of the cities. Knowing that Aurora is somewhat of an activist, her neighbors were able to get enough Shackers in her neighborhood to elect her to a City Governor position.

Aurora, with two of her supporters, Bella and Sierra, have traveled to Rowlett to see for themselves. They collected data on economic performance and tried to get an initial sense of why differences exist. They visited businesses, schools, public services and families. Clearly there are fundamental disparities between the two cities. For instance, in Rowlett, family members pitch in to help create goods and services when they are needed. They work hard. As in Macklin, family members go to school and at cooperatives find work to do. Everything happens basically the same way, except

the energy level and commitment of its citizens is much higher in Rowlett.

There are some members in Macklin who are as dedicated to community service and to making things with the same energy as in Rowlett, but in Macklin many are distracted with mindless play, laziness or devious activities such as thievery, fraud, and other ways to gain at the expense of other Shackers.

Aurora and her two friends thoughtfully collected as much information as possible on their trip.

"Wow! Did you observe how much conversation occurred at their Governor's meeting?" exclaims Sierra.

"Yeah, more discussion in one meeting there than we've had in all three months that I've been a Macklin City Governor! And they talked about so many different issues!" responds Aurora. "That has to be a big factor. Everything is out in the open. Transparency is something important that our government needs, and we need to make it happen."

Bella has taught at the college and understands what is required to develop research that is accurate and un-refutable. "We need to visit more cities," she advises. "I suspect we can strengthen our case dramatically."

8

"Mom, Harry's missing again!"

"Well, Joey, any ideas what to do about it? Has anybody seen him?"

"He was at school this morning," reports Hazard.

"I don't think he likes us!" replies Joey.

"Hey guys, I visited four more sick families today," reports Sky. "Something dubious is happening!" He is clearly worried.

"Anybody home?" comes a voice. No one can see who it is because of Harry's absence.

"Like, is Neon home?"

"Wait, is that you, Al?" inquires Neon.

"Yeah, I just came by to say hi! May I attach?"

"Sure, come on up. We will be happy to see you."

"And with your focal length," says Aurora, "you can fill in for Harry."

Al joins the family attachment and Neon provides the family with an update of what Al is doing at the college. She really is impressed with his knowledge of plasma and ions and is looking forward to having more discussions with him.

Eager to get back onto his concerns and comfortable with sharing them in front of Al, Sky

continues, "I'm not aware of this large number of lethargic families in our neighborhood, ever! I was talking with Josiah across town today, and he said he was seeing families with the same symptoms."

"None of the City Governors have mentioned any problems in their neighborhoods," adds Aurora. "I'll ask around at the next meeting."

"Have any lab tests been done?" inquires Al, eager to impress the family.

"They've been inconclusive," replies Sky. "They provide an indication that something is wrong nutritionally, perhaps with their AAs. But the lab's technology is limited. I'm certain about one thing though; if this continues, the whole city could be threatened with an epidemic!"

"Do you mind if I ask around the college, you know, to see if any of the professors might have any theories?" asks Al.

"I think we are going to need all the help we can get with this!" replies Sky, impressed with Al's level of interest.

"I understand your concern, Dad, but, in my opinion, if you can't figure this out, no one can," adds Joey.

9

The City Governors are slowly arriving and attaching to the Governors' Branch. Since Aurora is the newest member, her position is lowest on the branch. Her low position means that everyone arriving after her must pass her on the way to their position. She has arrived early so she can have an informal conversation with them as they pass by.

"Good afternoon, Leo. Good afternoon, Francois. Good afternoon, so and so. Say, have you heard anything about any unusual sickness in your neighborhood?" she inquired of each one. Their responses were unusually brief and sharp.

"Not that we can't deal with!"

"None of your business!"

"It'll go away!"

The City Governors have never been pleased with Aurora's presence on the Board, but they have never been adversarial. She is surprised at their responses and is thrown off guard momentarily.

The Chairman of the Macklin City Governors, Vladimar Kozlov, calls the meeting to order quickly. Vladimar has been Chairman for six years and has been a City Governor for twenty-two years. Most of

the Governors have served for more than ten years. Those that have served less than that are family members of past Governors. There is only one item on the formal agenda, so the meeting should be pretty short.

A Shacker named Lyle Perrot is requesting a contract with the city to operate its waste disposal systems. All of a sudden, the previous contractor decided to quit, leaving the city with no one in charge. Waste disposal is one city service that is operating with good results, and everyone knows the previous contractor was responsible for the commendable performance.

Lyle is someone who is frequently seen around the City Branch. He has known the City Governors for most of his thirty-five years, and his father was active in city politics.

Aurora wonders out loud, "Before we decide, should we see if anyone else is interested in this position who might be additionally considered, you know, to be fair?"

"No time for that!" admonishes Vladimar. "We need to move on this now before the service falls apart. All agreed?"

"Agreed!" responds everyone else.

"Lyle, can you start tomorrow?" asks the Chairman.

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"Absolutely, I'll have my man there tomorrow,"

"Now, Aurora, tell us about this trip you made to Rowlett with your two friends. That must have been a harrowing journey," Vladimar smugly states.

Aurora is off her game. This whole meeting now has her angry and confused. She does not know how to respond quickly in an intelligent way. In meetings, she is usually able to maintain her composure. Now she pulls herself together and does what has always worked for her in the past. She does not respond quickly. She pauses, takes a breath, and thinks.

"It wasn't so bad! The plasma there is just as beautiful at night as ours is. And the comradery was good. Have you ever tried it?"

Aurora does not want to reveal the reason for the trip and she talks around it. "Take the kids. You can reserve mobile attachment branches along the way."

"When do you plan to take your kids on your next trip? Or will you always travel just with your friends?" asks Vladimar.

"Haven't thought about it, but when you let me know your plans, I'll let you know mine!"

Aurora detaches and leaves the branch. She knows now why the City Governors were all impolite

before the meeting. It has nothing to do with sick Shackers. They suspect she is going to disrupt their political machine. That is not her objective, but, if the Governors are indeed the problem, she may have to attempt creating a little chaos.

Aurora proceeds to Bella's branch immediately. "Guess what just happened at the City Governor's meeting!"

She tells Bella all about it.

"We need to speed things up," observes Bella. "They may try to stop us! I'll get ahold of Sierra and bring her up to speed, if you would like."

"Thanks, you two come up with some optional travel dates that work for you and let me know."

Aurora heads for home, exhausted after a challenging day. With her nearsightedness, she can't see a Shacker moving behind her all the way to her branch and then disappearing into the plasma.

10

"Hey, Hazard! It's a day off, right?"

"Right."

"Let's go find that old man," suggests Joey.

"You mean August?"

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"Like, I think I would like him, he sounds interesting!"

"He is. Let's go, but we need to fill up on AAs because it may take a while to locate his branch. I think he lives in another neighborhood."

"We can start by asking around."

Joey has a tough time keeping up with Hazard because of her speeding, but the two are lucky. In the second neighborhood they visit, they encounter someone who knows exactly where the August Althaus branch is.

"August!" shouts out Hazard moments later. "Hello! Are you home? It's Hazard. Hello!"

"I may not see well, but I'm not hard of hearing!" comes a voice from behind them. "Did I tell you I produce my own AAs? I've been out collecting them. Excuse me if I'm a little out of breath!"

"Good morning. I wasn't sure we could find you easily. This is my little brother, Joey. He is a junior school student and a long-ranger."

"Good to meet you, Joey, although you look like a blur to me. Why don't you two come up and attach so we can see one another clearly?"

"Thanks, do you like to read?" asks Joey.

"I have a lot of time on my hands these days, and I spend much of it at the library branch. If I had a

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family like yours, I could read at home. On the other hand, I enjoy being at the library because I get to talk with a lot of different individuals."

"How old are you?" asks Joey.

"A few days older than when your sister asked me the same question!"

"Is that old?"

"Older than most Shackers!"

"Please excuse my brother," requests Hazard. "It's just that we are a curious family."

"That is a good thing," explains August. "When you are not listening, you need to be asking questions."

"OK, what do you talk about with other Shackers at the library?" asks Joey.

"Well, let me think. We talk about history, science, philosophy, math, other Shackers-- whatever."

"I'll bet you know a lot about those things," says Hazard. "Wait, how much do you know about history?"

"Well, I've been around a long time. I've met a lot of folks. I've heard a lot of stories, most true, but some I doubt. We Shackers did not keep written records until about 1920."

"Do you know anything about Sir Ernest Shackleton?" asks Hazard.

"My father knew him and worked with him when he was here. He helped my father and others

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understand the usefulness of keeping written records of events. Before that, there was no written history," replies August.

"So, all we know about the island and our ancestors before that time is what was told to children and then to their children over the years?" asks Hazard.

"Yes, and you know how easily we tend to misinterpret or modify stories for our own benefit."

"You can't read by yourself, so do you have friends at the library branch that help you read?" asks Joey.

"Lots."

"Is there anything wrong with having close friends that you read with all of the time?" Joey probes.

"No way, but why would you ask that question?" asks August.

"I get teased all the time by some guys because I spend a lot of time with a few friends who help me read. And we study together."

"I do it all the time. The teasing may be an age thing. It is not easy to grow up. And some guys never do!"

"Would there be any written records about my birth parents?" asks Hazard.

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"I don't know. Generally, there are no written records kept by anyone in the city about individuals or families. There is probably something at the city branch or library branch about the fire, but most likely, information about your parents will have to come from people who knew them. Have you tried to talk with any neighbors near your birth parents' branch?"

"I've tried hard, but they've moved away because of marriage, death or whatever. My home branch housed a number of families and I've been told that when I was three years old, a young neighbor Shacker set fire to it. My parents saw him running away and warned the other families on the branch. My mom and dad died as a result of rescuing me and their neighbors. I don't remember anything, and the rescued Shackers never saw exactly what happened to my parents. I had no brothers or sisters. No one knew why the boy set the fire, but everyone figured he was just mean!"

"Well, if you don't give up, someday an unexpected bit of information could just appear," August suggests." You will never know when or from where it will come. You may also decide it is not worth the effort to look for more than what you already know."

"It's not a big thing now but knowing more about them would be nice."

"I understand."

11

At the family attachment that evening, Neon can't stop talking about Al's visit to the family branch. "What? Guys, it's not Al I'm interested in, it's all the scientific knowledge available to us in these modern times! He has all kinds of friends. He isn't interested in me! Isn't it great, though, that we know about plasma, ions, space and things like that!"

"Yeah, but Al did not create all that information, he's just using it to impress us!" inserts Joey. "And he didn't come by to impress all of us. It's you he wants to impress."

"Come on! Just think, Joey. Suppose my team and I could use our research project at the university to genetically re-engineer our vision. Maybe it would affect us or maybe not, but future generations of Shackers would certainly benefit. What would our lives be like if we were all able to see well? We would not have to attach to a branch in order to see everything. We could all see up close and far away. We could all read by ourselves. Shackers like Hazard could speed through the plasma without bumping into things. Just imagine!"

"It makes good sense to me," says Sky. "Just exactly where are you guys with this project?"

"We have identified the gene that controls the shape of our eye lens. If we assume that all Shackers

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are born with defective lenses in our eyes and if we can figure out how to modify the genes, theoretically, we should be able to correct our defective lenses and see well."

"I'm impressed! I think you should be commended for getting as far as you have," says Aurora. "I didn't realize you were working at such an advanced level. You go, girl!

Speaking of Hazard speeding and Joey reading, where were you two today?"

Hazard responds, "Remember the old man, August, that I told you about?"

"The one you ran into and blabbed too much information to?"

"I'm sorry, Mom, but I don't think I blabbed too much! Anyway, remember, Dad, how you wanted to know more about him?"

"Yes."

"Well, Joey and I went to see him."

"You went to see him?"

"We went to see him."

"Wait," replies Aurora, "you two searched and found him?"

"We did!" brags Joey.

"How did you do that?" asks Sky.

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"Easy, we just visited neighborhoods and asked around about him. It really didn't take long. His branch is not that far away, and he's well known."

"What did you find out about him?" inquires Sky.

"We think he is the man you had heard about, Dad. His father worked with Sir Ernest."

"And he knows *everything!*" adds Hazard.

"I want to meet this man. How about it, Aurora, should we invite this man over some evening?"

"Well, if he is everything they are saying, he could help both of us. Let's find out. Can you two arrange it?"

12

Aurora, Bella, and Sierra head to the city of Wild and plan to proceed ambitiously to the city of Emily. The trip is quite an undertaking, but this time they are better prepared. Not only do they know more about travel logistics, but they have a better idea of what to concentrate on and what data is the most relevant for a good comparison with Macklin and Rowlett.

They decide to spend more time and learn more about how the two cities are governed. Specifically, they want to compare how common citizens provide ideas and input; how goals are established; how problems are identified, prioritized, and dealt with and

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how decisions are made. They also want to examine how schools and businesses are governed by collecting the same type of information and data on them.

Their reception by the residents of Wild is warm and welcoming. After finding a travel branch and attaching for nutrition and rest, the three start by interviewing Shackers moving about on their way to work. They talk to mothers escorting their children to school. They talk to university students. They visit large and small businesses, speaking with company employees and leadership. They proceed on the third day to the City Branch. They are greeted by the City Clerk; whose job is to maintain records of all city actions. Macklin does not have a City Clerk. The three spend the day collecting a treasure trove of information.

On to Emily they go the next day. They get a similar reception and a lot of meaningful information.

Before they leave Emily, Sierra remarks, "Hey, ladies, you know, I think we are better prepared to go home and organize our findings to prove that we need to make major changes in the way Macklin is governed."

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"The tough question, though, is exactly to whom and how do we present our findings?" replies Aurora. "The City Governors are resistant to change."

"I wonder why they are so closed-minded?" wonders Bella. "You would think they have a duty to welcome a way to make our lives better!"

There is something happening at home that we have not realized," responds Aurora. "We need to collect similar data on our own city government!"

13

The next morning, Lyle Perrot is in his daily planning meeting with his two senior business partners, Cade Smith and Julio Rodriguez, at his office branch.

"These women are going to be trouble!" Lyle leads off.

"Yeah, we will have to be more careful than usual with them, but they will go down just like all the others!" replies Cade.

The three are the leaders of a group of Macklin Shackers which uses the nickname, *The Bosses*. The Bosses is a machine set up by Lyle's family several generations ago that operates underground

businesses and uses some of the income from those businesses to control the City Governors.

Their wealth is obtained unfairly but not illegally because there are no criminal laws on the island, and some of their money is used to help elect City Governors. The City Governors in turn create rules and contracts that funnel cash and private information to The Bosses families.

"Let's think through this carefully," cautions Lyle. "These women are members of well-educated families."

"Yeah, with most problem makers we just get some dirt on em and they back off when they think we'll tell it to everyone in town," snickers Julio. "But we may have to look harder to find the dark secrets these Shacklers hide."

"We will find their dirt, and they will buckle, I guarantee it!" responds Lyle. "Now for this Aurora, she was at the last City Governor's meeting. She is like a fish out of water. She has no idea what's going on. The other City Governors will eat her lunch! However, to be on the safe side, we need to see what kind of information about her and her family we can dig up."

"OK, Chief, I will sniff around Sierra's family records and talk with some friends of hers," volunteers Julio. "Friends always like to gossip, and I

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can find out what will embarrass someone in her family."

Cade smiles, "Bella is the best looking. I will have fun snooping around her branch for trash."

"Wait! This is one of the most serious threats we have ever had, guys," warns Lyle. "We cannot be cavalier. You must be more tenacious than you have ever been. Cover your tracks. No one can know we are doing this."

"But Chief, we are experts at this," responds Julio. "It is what we do! What can go wrong?"

"Look, the City Governors are in our hip pocket. But, the fact that this Aurora woman got elected over our guy could be a harbinger of our future if we screw up! Got it?"

14

Aurora sleeps in the next morning, and everyone else goes to work or school. Tired after the grueling trip to Wild and Emily, she is awakened mid-morning by a muffled sound from the lower section of the branch but thinks nothing of it and goes back to sleep. Around noon she wakes up and becomes consumed with thoughts about what to do with the information she and her two friends have collected. She believes that explaining the differences between

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the three economically strong cities they visited, and the economically weak Macklin will be easy.

Several points come to mind as she begins to organize a future presentation to the Governors. It is clear that the energy level of Macklin's citizens, the transparent and steadfast commitment of their governing councils to long term economic priorities and education is much weaker than those of the other three cities. The nutritional supplies in Macklin are becoming expensive, individual and family income is going nowhere, misbehavior is increasing, employment is declining, and there is growing political disharmony. This new mysterious illness now comes along to make lives even more difficult.

Historically, in all cities on the island, family members simply go to school, adopt a trade or profession, provide their goods or services for which they get paid, and purchase goods and services. Most individuals in the cities develop simple school and work habits, and those habits are copied by the family generations. The citizens develop school cooperatives to help their children learn facts and how to think. When a community member becomes ill, neighbors and relatives take turns assisting the sick member or hire trained experts to do it for them.

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When a whole branch is at risk of an illness, a trained team is sometimes quickly activated.

Shackers in some cities have never given serious thought about public or economic policy in a formal and organized way. How best to help everyone achieve their full potential is a question that is discussed often in the economically strong cities. Shackers in these cities, Aurora now understands, recognize that there are various levels of intelligence, motivation, focus, and family support among their members. They believe that all of these factors can be barriers to high performance. Yes, a few citizens in the stronger cities believe that these barriers are of no significant consequence and Shackers have no collective responsibility to do anything about them. Shackers are who they are, and that is that. But most Shackers in the three strong cities and a few in Macklin believe that their long-term survival is at risk. These folks believe their island and their species is fragile because of their unique characteristics. The Shack population, they say, needs to do something dramatically different.

In the successful three cities, leaders have started conversations about ways to distribute some city resources to disadvantaged individuals. The most common handicap is blindness. Not only are

Shackers limited by eye focal length, but five percent are totally blind. It is a condition Shackers have been burdened with for as long as they can remember.

In Wild, there has there been a kind of economic theory, that they are calling *capitalism*, about how to generate income and wealth. The concept was mentioned in passing by Sir Ernest but has never been seriously considered until just recently. The idea, they believe, has potential value, and Aurora finds it fascinating.

Aurora recognizes that all of this information is complicated. Getting Shackers to listen to her describe the differences should not be too difficult but helping them understand different concepts is going to be challenging. And identifying barriers to change and agreeing on actions for change will require a huge effort and special skills.

15

That evening, everyone returns to the branch and Aurora is sharing her thoughts with Sky, Neon, Hazard, and Joey. They listen intently as they are all very curious individuals. Harry's voice is faintly heard speaking playfully to someone unfamiliar. He hasn't

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been home for several nights, and his voice is a welcome sound. Harry's vision range has also been missing for a while and it allows the whole family to see who he is talking to. She is attached to the branch about eighteen feet below Aurora. She is a youthful and somewhat shaggy looking girl.

Harry greets his family and introduces Ciar.

"Welcome, Ciar," says Sky. "Come up closer so we can hear you better. How long have you known Harry?"

"We just met," answers Harry. "Ciar is very interesting. She has been all over and knows a lot of people."

"So, Ciar, how did you two meet?"

Harry answers again, "Uh, she was just hanging out near the branch, and we saw each other."

Joey asks, "So, Ciar, can you talk?"

"Like, sure, smart ass!"

After a few seconds of silence, Harry is compelled to break it. "Hey, she just met us! She is going on an ion hunt with the boys and me."

"Wait!" blurts out Aurora. "Was Ciar attached to the branch when you arrived, Harry?"

"Well, maybe."

"Ciar, did you attach this morning?"

"No way, man! Not without you OK!"

"I heard a noise this morning. Was that you?"

No response.

"You were attached at a point where no one could see you. When did you attach, Ciar?"

Amino acids are expensive in Macklin and attaching to a branch and absorbing them without permission is extremely rude. At this point, the family knows what has occurred here.

But Harry is obviously drawn to this adventurous female, "Come on, Ciar. I have some friends that are a lot more fun!"

16

"It is a pleasure to meet you," says August after he is introduced to the family by Hazard and Joey. "You have at least two great kids here!"

"Well, we have heard so many good things about you from those two that we had to meet this 'man of wisdom' they have been trying to describe to us," replies Sky.

"Exactly how old are you?" asks Neon.

"I'm sorry, August!" interjects Aurora. "I have tried to help my kids learn some social skills, but it is not an easy thing for them to do."

"They are just curious and impetuous. I was the same way when I was young, and sometimes I

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behave like I am *still* young. But actually, I don't know my age."

Sky wants to move quickly to a conversation about Shackleton and searches for a way to gracefully do it. "The kids told us that your dad knew Sir Ernest Shackleton."

"Yes, my dad was one of the few that had the courage to engage him with an open mind. Once they established communication, Sir Ernest left so much information. Before him, we apparently had a limited language and our math and science knowledge was way behind the rest of the world. We didn't even know there was a rest of the world. The advancements we made as a result of his brief time here are amazing!"

"Speaking of the rest of the world, do you have any idea why we seem to be so afraid of it?" wonders Sky. "Why do we monitor radio frequencies out in the ocean and have listening posts where we take turns listening to ship communications. Why are we so wary of being discovered by hostile or untrustworthy humans when it is so clear that they helped us so much?"

"I'm not so sure the humans are the untrustworthy ones. I was quite young at the time, and my parents never mentioned anything that would allow me to offer you a good answer to that very good question.

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My parents told me that they did not believe that all humans were like Shackleton and requested that his team not reveal our existence upon their return home."

Joey is engrossed in this conversation, "But didn't one of Shackleton's team keep sending us information and technology after Shackleton died?"

"Yes, the one named Wild secretly sent books, tools and the best technology of that time to the island. When he got too old, everything stopped, and word of the Shack was never leaked. As far as the world is concerned, we don't exist."

"Wait, what did you mean when you said you weren't sure the humans were the untrustworthy ones?" presses Joey.

"Think about it. What did the humans do to break our trust?" asks August. "Yes, I know the common thinking about our lack of mobility, our vision issues and other unique features might make us vulnerable. I know we are physically weak and that most of us want to remain isolated. But, could our fear be a myth?"

Joey listens with intense interest.

"As a boy, I remember a big argument between my dad and some other Shacklers. The other guys wanted to keep the information Shackleton was giving

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us for themselves. That's all I remember, but I learned that not all *Shackers* are trustworthy!"

The entire branch is silent.

Finally, the hush becomes awkward, and Sky asks, "Do you know much about health issues?"

"Nothing special. I know we have vision issues, and we can be infected by some unique archaebacteria which had adapted to the cold water around the Shack. I know that we can get very weak if we don't absorb enough amino acids, but most of us know all of that."

"Well, recently, there has been an outbreak of families having generalized weakness and lethargy."

"Interesting, I have a neighbor family that you might need to talk to. They complain about the same symptoms. But I can't help you. I have never had much expertise regarding health issues. Well, it is getting late, and I go to sleep early, so I should go."

"Wait, could you come back tomorrow?" begs Hazard.

"We all would like that," adds Aurora.

"I like talking with you guys. You ask good questions. And I can help you see mid-range when your other son is out doing his thing! I'll return as soon as I can."

17

Following the next day's work and school, Sky is sharing his activities with the family. Harry is not home, and August sends word that he has been delayed at the library.

"So, Alexanders, this is Al. May I attach?"

"Hey, Al. Come on," responds Neon. "So, I haven't seen you at school. Where have you been?"

"Like, I've been there, but I have also been helping my family with its business. How is your genetics project coming along?"

"It's going to be extremely slow. We have to invent the technology as we go along. I have a suspicion that the rest of the world may be way ahead of us. I wish we could communicate with them about it!"

"Good luck with that!" exclaimed Joey.

"Say, Mr. Alexander, as promised, I've asked around about your health puzzle and I've developed a few theories," says Al, ignoring Joey.

"Great, the problem is growing, and we need help," responds Sky, who is surprised by Al's concern and effort. "It appears to be almost city-wide now. I have not seen single sick members in any family. It's been all of them or none! The lab testing points towards an AA problem."

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"That is exactly what I thought it would be!" replies Al. "Have I some possibilities for you or not?"

Theory number one is this. One of my professors says that the island's extreme southern location in the Southern Indian Ocean is such that the ozone layer is now 5 parts per million because of pollution. That amount is about half of the normal concentration for the atmosphere at this location. I think that the thin ozone layer may not be able to prevent the UV rays from destroying the COOH that is used to synthesize amino acids on the island."

"Cool!" Neon is impressed.

"Okay, theory number 2. This astronomy professor I was telling you about, the one that can see into outer space, says that a large gas cloud in space is being ripped apart and gobbled up by a hungry supermassive black hole at the center of the galaxy. I think that maybe ionized plasma flares are emitted from black holes during these events, and that this event is changing the ionization of the island's plasma base, altering the amino acids produced by it."

A few moments of silence occur on the branch.

"Well, Al, I don't exactly know what to say," replies Sky, who's head is a little dizzy. "That is a lot to think

about! Any ideas about exactly how to narrow down those theories to something we have more control over?"

"Right, it will take some time, but this problem is a big one, and perhaps I can get more help from the university if you could come emphasize the importance of studying these two theories. I can arrange for you to meet with some faculty members."

Joey, as always regarding AI, is skeptical, "Meanwhile, Dad, what do you do with the sick families?"

"Let some of this sink in. AI, you have obviously taken my problem seriously and spent significant time on it. I am super impressed, and I appreciate that very much. Come by in the next day or two, and let's talk about next steps, okay?"

"Brilliant, AI!" interjects Neon. "That is the best student investigation I have seen yet! It's the kind of thought processes I wish my research team could do. We will see you soon, right?"

"Look, I'm certain the answer can't be related to anything other than one of these two theories," AI states with great confidence. "I'm going to be on this until the very end. I promise!"

Joey is mistrustful but says no more.

18

Aurora arranges for Bella, Sierra, and herself to meet with August at her branch.

"We need your advice on an important but very sticky matter, if you're willing," starts Aurora.

"The stickier, the better. I like intrigue!"

The three don't know exactly where to start, but methodically bring August completely up to date on their travels, findings, and suspicions. Aurora also describes in detail the events of the last City Governors' meeting when the Governors were rude to her and when they approved a contract without any competitive process or discussion. They spend considerable time reviewing with August, the information collected from their trips to Rowlett, Wild, and Emily and their comparison to Macklin.

"You describe an analysis of the island's cities and their governments that no one has ever performed," reacts August. "I have never been impressed with the way Macklin government is managed, but I never thought to do what you three have done. I compliment you."

"Thank you," says Sierra, "We are able to demonstrate that good government can influence and stimulate education, private business, and quality of life."

"Either that or the other way of looking at it, that *bad* government can influence and *discourage* education, private business, and quality of life!"

"Why have the Macklin City Governors served so long? No offense," says Aurora, "but the Governors have served a long time. If they haven't, other members of their family took their place!"

"A good question! What incumbent did you defeat? Who or what was supporting that person? How did you defeat him?"

"Hmm. Well, he had been there for fourteen years and he succeeded his dad. I really don't know how he got votes all those years. I defeated him with the help of a lot of friends like Bella and Sierra who had heard that some of the other cities were more advanced and they wanted change."

"Find out who is supporting the current City Governors and you will discover the answer to your question."

"How do we do that?" asks Bella, somewhat bewildered.

"Not easy! One way is to go talk with voters in other neighborhoods. Ask them why they voted for their City Governor. You may have to be somewhat covert to get accurate information, maybe get friends to go undercover so no one will figure out what you are trying to do. You will probably discover some interesting information."

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"That'll take time," says Sierra. "Do you have any other ideas?"

"Big problems are not solved in a small amount of time."

Aurora is listening and is in deep thought. "But, August, time may be important if the City Governors could help in finding out the solution to the sickness that is growing in Macklin. In the other cities we visited, the City Governors would be all over that issue."

"Well, you could confront the City Governors head on."

"Like, how?"

"Present your findings to them."

"You mean, just tell them everything we found out?" asks Bella.

August suggests, "Aurora would have to do the talking. Present charts that compare the performance of the four cities and the major differences in the way they all operate. Do it without accusing anybody in particular. Ask for their help in developing a plan to bring Macklin up to speed in the performance comparisons."

"What do you think they will do?" asks Aurora.

"If your suspicions are correct, I think they will become very uncomfortable. They will react. I don't know how, but there will be a reaction of some unpredictable kind. And you will have to be prepared!

Take a day or two to sleep on it. Maybe we will think of another option. These are big decisions that should not be made hastily."

19

August has been invited to the family attachment that evening and Al drops by as well. There has been no sign of Harry since he left with Ciar.

"So, Sky," asks Al, "any progress with the sickness that is going around?"

"It's getting huge. The older family members get sick first, but eventually, the whole family gets it."

"And still no idea what is causing it?"

"None."

"Like, I have discussed my theories with several professors and they agree, I am right on! Don't worry, I've got this!"

Joey has been uncharacteristically quiet, but all of a sudden comes alive, "What! You've got this? No way!"

Shackers are basically all sort of a grey color, but Aurora turns reddish." I'm sorry, Al. He knows not to say offensive things like that!"

"What's going on, Joey?" asks Sky.

"I'm sorry, too, Al," replies Joey.

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"What's going on, Joey?" Sky asks again.

"Oh, I was called 'gay' again today!"

"Tell us about it."

"I was studying with my close friends like I always do, and the same three thugs came by like they always do and wouldn't quit. I get so tired of it!"

"It's no big deal to be gay!" quips Al.

"That may be, but it is a big deal to be accused in the tone they use." shouts Joey. "It's demeaning! No one should say things like that to anyone! They called me 'sub-Shacker'."

August is beginning to feel close to the family and understands Joey's emotions. "May I suggest something, Joey?"

"Please do, I'm ready for any idea that will help me destroy those idiots!"

"Those 'idiots' as you call them will always be around. We Shackers come in a lot of different personalities; that is the way it is. Actually, what would the island be like if we all looked and thought just the same? Just little robot Shacker clones of one of us? Which Shacker would we choose to be like? Give that some thought."

"I would choose Dad or Mom," responds Joey, quickly.

"So, you would like for Hazard, me, those 'idiots' and yourself to be just like your mom?"

"Wait, I guess. Maybe I would choose to remain like me!"

"Well, while you think on that, why don't you take a few weeks off of school and help your dad full time trying to find the cause and solution for the sickness he is working on?"

While the idea is being processed by Joey, Al speaks up, "No need to take time from school for something that will be a waste of time. I'm telling you guys, it might take some time, but, there is no need for you to do anything more about this problem. I will solve it for you."

"We all know you will, Al," says August. "But Joey has a lot of energy and Sky needs some help treating symptoms now."

"Not a bad idea!" says Sky, sensing a newly-lit light bulb in his head. "How about it, Joey? A few weeks away from school would not hurt, and I need the help."

"So, are we talking vacation time here? I really enjoy being around my friends at school. I don't want to do nothing!"

"It will be you and me, long hours and hard work, but if you are not up to it, I'll understand,"

"Okay, starting tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

20

Chairman Vladimir Kozlov calls the special unscheduled meeting of the Macklin City Governors to order. The meeting is called at Aurora's request because she wants to explain the findings of her visits to Rowlett, Wild, and Emily. The City Governors are eager to hear what she has to say because they distrust her as much as they would a human, and they need to know how big of a problem she will be.

Vladimir Kozlov whispers to one of the City Governors next to him, " I think she and her friends are naive and can be dismissed as incompetent, and quickly."

"Ha, Ha! They don't have the connections, you know. They are, as they say, clueless, no?"

"I hope that is the case. We shall see!"

August is sitting quietly in the back.

Aurora proceeds with her presentation objectively, avoiding any words or inferences that would ordinarily make the City Governors feel personally blamed or threatened. She describes the purpose of their study, the methodology of collecting data, what data was collected and the study's conclusions. The conclusions are clearly indicative of poor city government and even more so of poor City Governors' actions.

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The City Governors' hopes do not come true. Aurora and her two friends are quite competent, and the Governors now know it. For a moment or so, the City Governors do not know exactly what to say.

"So, Aurora," asks one of the Governors, "just exactly what do you recommend?"

"I was thinking we should all develop recommendations together."

The City Governors are smart as well; they are not interested in tackling Aurora in a public way, at least not without a game plan. Now that they know what they are dealing with, they will huddle and act later.

"I think that is a good idea!" responds the Chairman. "I will place this planning item on our next meeting's agenda."

Tension permeates the room as the meeting adjourns and members depart. The only one who speaks to Aurora on the way off the Government Branch is August, "What was Lyle Perrot doing there? That is not good!"

"I did not see him! I guess I was too engrossed in my presentation. He's the one who got the waste disposal contract like it was a done deal!"

"He has a real shady reputation. You don't want to cross him unless you're really prepared and maybe a little lucky!"

They just happen to overhear a brief conversation between Vladimir and Lyle at the bottom of the branch when Lyle asks, "Vladimir, what's wrong with the branch? I was attached, but couldn't see well outside of my normal vision."

"I'll have it checked out. The branch is pretty old."

21

"Dad, let's think through these theories of AI's. I'm not sure they make sense!" advised Joey.

"How is that?"

"Like, if the UV rays are destroying the carboxylic acid that is used to synthesize amino acids on the island, then why aren't we *all* getting sick? I mean, all AAs on the island would be affected the same way, right?"

"I guess that would make sense, Joey. But then, some of us could be weaker and simply be the first to be affected. The time for others may still come."

"Okay, think about the ionized plasma flares being emitted from black holes changing the ionization of the island's plasma base altering its ability to produce AAs. The Shack has the same plasma base across

the island. The same questions apply here too. Why aren't we *all* getting sick? Have you heard from other cities about the problem? Are all AAs on the island being affected the same way?"

"August would be happy to hear you ask such good questions! Maybe it's another reason he suggested that you help me."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Maybe we can do a couple of things. First, we can send messages to some of the contacts your mom made in other cities and ask them about any similar illnesses in their cities and to test their AAs. Then, while that's happening, we get samples of AAs from different locations around Macklin to determine if they are all the same."

"Suppose we discover that the AAs are different in Macklin?"

"Let take this one step at a time. We want to make sure each step is in the right direction!"

22

Al seeks out Neon at school, "Good morning, Neon."

"Hey, what's up?"

"Just wondering about your genome modification project."

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The two are sincerely interested in one another's scientific work. They both like science and admire each other's intelligence and cutting-edge thinking. And their interest in one another goes beyond the mind. Both are attractive, have good personalities and good *chemistry*.

"Well, we believe that human eye lenses are able to automatically adjust to see different distances. We are thinking that if we can identify the gene that controls eye lens variation, then, we might be able to modify it, so we can accommodate a greater variety of distances."

"Cool! Say, I was wondering, since the plasma lights are still bright at night, would you be interested in a night viewing together? You know, we could find a nice empty branch somewhere and just watch and talk. How about it?"

"Watch and talk, that sounds like fun! But are you sure school and the family business allow time for it?"

Seeing the smile that accompanies that comment, Al responds, "I'll sneak out to come to your branch, right?"

"Really! You have to sneak out?"

"Yeah! Well, not really. Sales are good!"

"Watch and talk?"

"Promise!"

23

"Has anyone seen Harry?" asks Aurora that evening at the branch.

"I saw him down at the Senior branch at school today, but couldn't get his attention," answers Hazard.

"I guess that's a good sign because friends have told me he has been seen going around the city with his friends and that girl who stole some of our AAs. I don't have a good feeling about that girl!" worries Aura. "Going to school is a good sign, though."

Neon is uncharacteristically giddy as she blurts out, "I have a date!"

"You need a chaperone?" asks Sky.

"Of course not! I am a student at the University, you know."

"Okay, how about a parade or a cake?"

"Oh, Dad, cut it out!"

August has been invited by Aurora to discuss the City Governors' meeting. "I'll never forget my first date," he comments. "It was..., well, I forgot when it was, but it was heart thumping! Good for you."

"Thanks, Al and I are going to watch the plasma lights and talk."

Aurora repeats, "Watch and talk?"

"Mom!"

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Sky and Joey glance at each other but say nothing about their discussion of AI's theories.

Aurora tells the family about the City Governors' meeting, "Their response was much what I expected, except I didn't expect them to be so calm and collected."

"They are clever," suggests August. "At this stage, they want to assess your strength and appear supportive."

"And take time to develop a good strategy to outsmart us, right?"

"Actually, I may know what their strategy is," says August. "But, I need to ask some old friends of mine some questions first. When I saw Lyle Perrot at the meeting and thought about it overnight, an epiphany occurred."

"What do you mean?" asked Joey.

"When I was younger, I lived in Emily and moved here later. I was pretty active in community affairs. There was a family whose last name was Perrot, and who, with some other thugs, operated an organization called 'The Bosses'. They had a lot of influence at the City Branch. My memory needs to be refreshed, but I recognized Lyle as one of the kids. They were not nice individuals!"

"What should we do?" asks Aurora.

"Give me a day to do some research. And you give some serious thought to this question: 'Is there anything in your past that will ruin your reputation if it becomes public?'"

24

In London, England, Sir Tyler Shackleton is quietly celebrating with a few of his partners. He has just received approval from a research joint venture between NOAA and the Met Office for a small climatology data collection trip which will require him to collect weather and ocean data for a large swarth of the southern Indian Ocean. For the trip he has secured a team consisting of a very trustworthy research meteorologist, a cultural anthropologist, a member of the Scripps Research Institute and another who is a cartographer. His plan is to set sail on a UN vessel with a UN crew. Only the small group of scientists know Ty's real goal.

Sir Tyler Shackleton is the great-grandson of Sir Ernest Shackleton. Ty heard from his grandfather about his great-grandfather's discovery of the island and visits with its inhabitants. He has always had a yearning to rediscover the island and complete his great grandfather's plan to study and help the islanders. He has promised his family not to reveal

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information about the stories and that promise has made rediscovery difficult to properly finance and staff. He knew that, if he could work out an expedition, he would have to do it with a small number of intelligent and trustworthy associates.

Expeditions to Antarctica in modern times are quite different than when Sir Ernest was exploring in the region. With GPS technology, anyone interested in knowing what is going on in the Indian Ocean can follow along. It would take some planning to mount an expedition and not be tracked by numerous scientific organizations.

25

Sky and Joey continue to visit the families of Shacklers who have experienced nutritional issues and ask the same questions they have been asking almost every family they have been visiting the last several days. Their questions are so routine now that they could predict the answers.

"Do you all attach at the same time? Do you all absorb your AAs from your home branch or somewhere else? Have any of you traveled recently? Do you grow any of your own AAs or do you purchase them?" All of the affected families say they

absorb purchased AAs at their home branch. But most do not remember their source or don't want to say.

Today is not routine, however. Unexpectedly, in the afternoon, one family tells Sky and Joey, "The Bosses have been asking questions about you and Aurora."

"What?"

"Yeah, I would be very careful. They wanted to know about your practice, how you helped us, and a lot of really personal questions about you, Aurora, and other members of your family. They are digging pretty deep." The mother adds, "We are grateful to you for your help. You were kind and courteous. You cared for us when we were bad off and we think you need to know. But, that is all we can risk saying. We're sorry!"

Sky and Joey are shocked. Adversarial events have simply never been anything the Alexanders have had exposure to. This is heavy stuff, worse than Joey's bullies. The two go home to think on this, trembling as they trudge across the dense plasma.

26

That evening when reviewing the events of the day, Sky and Joey describe the conversations with the last family they visited. Sky and Joey now understand why most of the families were reluctant to discuss the source of their AAs.

"Wait! I don't get it, Dad. How can The Bosses hurt *us*?" asks Hazard.

Sky shrugs his shoulders.

"I don't know how they can hurt us," adds Aurora. "But, I got a message from Bella today saying that she can no longer be involved in this city government analysis. She said she will have to lay low for quite a long time!"

August is present, "Well, I got lucky! I discovered that someone I know from my younger days in Macklin is a mid-level operator in The Bosses organization."

"Sounds like you had great friends!" teases Joey.

"The key word is *know*. Often, being able to communicate with the bad guys is helpful. They like to brag!"

"Did he brag a lot?" asks Sky.

"Let's say he is proud of his work. He told me that The Bosses organization is run by Lyle, as I

suspected. Lyle has two tough guys, Cade Smith and Julio Rodriguez that assist him with telling his ring what to do."

"So, why is he at all of the City Governors meetings?" asks Aurora.

"He basically controls them!" August responds.

"How does he do that?" asks Hazard.

"He pays for their election expenses and tells voters who to vote for."

"That doesn't seem right," adds Joey.

"No, it doesn't, but that is not the important thing now. Aurora, it seems like you have made a lot of nervous folks around the City Branch. The Bosses have quite an operation going for themselves and make a lot of money from it. What they do is obtain information about others' mistakes and use it to get money from them or to get business favors."

"But, I haven't tried to hurt the The Bosses or Lyle!"

"You questioned giving the waste disposal contract to him," August reminds Aurora.

"Yes, but that is not a reason to go after the whole family!"

"That's not all. The Bosses rely highly upon the City Governors for support. City employees often get information about individuals that The Bosses can use, and the City Governors give The Bosses access

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to that information. The City Governors also create rules and contracts that funnel money to The Bosses. In return, The Bosses help the City Governors stay in power. It's been this way for several generations of Lyle's family. All of this little economic ecosystem is now threatened by you."

"Wow!" responds Aurora. "I don't usually become afraid. I hope I am doing the right thing!"

"Oh, you are doing the right thing! You just might need to tweak your strategy and timing."

" And become stealthier."

"Exactly! And one more thing, make certain that there is nothing in your past that they can discover and use against any of you!"

"Everyone has something kind of dark in their lives," says Hazard.

"The key words here are 'can discover'."

"We understand," responds Sky. "We have some more thinking to do."

"I learned something else rather interesting!" adds August. "There seems to be some sort of problem developing with Lyle's vision."

27

Ty and his crew are nearing the target area.

"Are the seas always this rough in the southern Indian Ocean?" asks Jared Jameson. Jared is a research Professor of Anthropology at Cambridge University. He is used to being away from home for long periods of time, but his usual transportation is airplane, Land Rover and an occasional donkey or elephant. Being on a relatively small ship in rough seas for an extended period is not his cup of tea.

"This is the worst time of the year," responds C. L. Peabody. Peabody (usually called by his last name because of a habit which stuck with him as a member of the cadet corps at Texas A&M University), is the lead meteorologist who will be in charge of the data collection required by the research grant.

The two are having coffee in the Research Ops Room on board the USS Alfred Wegener, a United Nations contracted weather research vessel. They are soon joined by Ty, Damion Black and Elise Lakey.

Damion is clearly the smartest person on the ship. He is a Senior Research Fellow with Scripps Research Institute, Chemical Physiology Department. His expert knowledge base includes proteins and amino acids. He also dabbles in his spare time with

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the concept of focus fusion and the idea of converting artificial plasma to energy for commercial use.

Elise, an ex-NASA cartography historian and cartographer, was able to get clearance to use NASA's newest Global Thermographic Imaging System. Her knowledge of older maps of the area and ability to detect heat with satellites should be of great value to the team.

After he gets his second cup, Peabody observes, "We are only a few hours away from our research area. I guess it's time for me to go to work."

"We are in your hands, big guy. If you don't do your very best work ever, we all fail," Jared warns.

"So, let's go over this one more time, just to make sure we haven't overlooked anything," says Ty. "Peabody is going to manage the data collection for the grant while the rest of us work on locating and establishing communication with the Shacklers. And, Peabody, we need to exceed Met's grant requirements in order to obtain funding for future grants in the area. So, if there is anything that you need from any of us, *anything*, you tell us quickly and we will respond quickly, okay?"

"I'm on it. My only concern is maintaining the secrecy of the real mission, the work you guys are doing! Like, when you get to the point of getting on

and off the ship, how will you avoid being seen by one of the crew?

"Good question," replies Ty. "Let's think through this. First of all, Elise has designed the thermal graphic scan tracks to be identical to those ship tracks required for the grant's ocean and atmospheric data collection."

"So, we should be able to search for the Shack at the same time we collect weather and ocean data," adds Elise.

"And, I have reviewed some old maps of the area and compared them with newer maps. There are a few islands that appear on the old maps that are not on the new ones and they will be of great interest to us."

"The first problem," says Ty, "is when we find a target, either an unexpected heat source or when we are near one of those islands that are only on the old maps, we will need to get a better look. Elise's GTIS and old maps will help identify those possibilities, but we really don't know how much heat to look for. We don't know how much heat is produced by each Shacker, how many Shackers there are or how much heat is produced by the plasma. Each potential target may require a look."

"So, when the ship is trolling for data, it is moving at three knots, pretty slow. At that speed, our

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inflatables should be able to come and go using the stern platform easily at night, right!" speculates Peabody.

"Right. At least, in the beginning, checking out possible hits will have to be done at night. If we find a need to go during the day, we'll have to make up some excuse."

"How about radio communications?" asks Jared.

"Right, as we all know, we brought simple radio equipment with the same frequencies used during the original Shackleton expeditions. We will take turns sending out transmissions to the Shackers, hoping they will be listening. The ship's crew don't use those frequencies, so they should not overhear any of our communications."

"Wait," asks Jared, "is this room sound-proof? Even though the ship generates a lot of noise, we could be heard through these thin walls, right?"

"I don't know," wonders Ty. "We should do some simple testing, but about all we could do if it isn't, is to soften our voices. I doubt the crew will be spying on us, but let's not invite curiosity. All of our conversations need to be in this room and at a low volume. If the ship's crew is around, we don't discuss the Shack, okay?"

28

Neon arrives promptly at the Hoffer branch. The "date" has been slightly modified by Aurora, who has insisted that Neon at least meet Al's family before any date. When Neon told Al about her Mom's new requirement, he explained that actually, his family wanted to meet her too.

"Neon, this is my mom, Mary; my dad, Ulbrecht; my older brother, Hans and my younger brother, Udo."

"Good evening," smiled Neon. "You have a very nice branch, so many attachment points. And I'll bet you can see most of the city from the top! Al, you are so lucky!"

"Thanks, we do okay."

"So, Hans, growing up with Al as a younger brother, was he a pain?"

"Like, in the AA node! When he was one year old, he would poop all over the...."

"Hans!" admonishes Mary.

"Thanks Mom!" says Al appreciatively.

"So, Neon, tell us more about your family," instructs Ulbrecht. "What does your dad do?"

Ulbrecht already knows what Sky does but prefers to go somewhere else with this conversation.

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"He's into medicine, but surely Al's told you this, right?"

"Right. I hear he's investigating some kind of mysterious nutritional disease."

"Yes, and Al volunteered to solve it. Pretty neat huh! You have a smart son here!"

"Thanks. I don't know anything about any of this nutritional stuff, but I'm confident he will lead you down the right course of investigation," concludes Ulbrecht.

"And your mom," wonders Mary, "She is a City Governor?"

"Yes, she is new at it and is learning the ropes."

"I hear she made some kind of presentation?"

Neon is a little surprised that Mary knows about that and tries to remember if the presentation was ever discussed in Al's presence. "Well, she did." Neon decides not to say too much about the presentation or the City Governors until she can figure out what's going on.

"I hear she has made some visits to other cities, right?"

"Yes"

"And made some waves?" Mary pursues.

"I don't know anything about that. What do you mean by waves?" Neon responds nervously.

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"Any other working theories about the nutritional problems," intervenes Hans.

"It's in Al's hands. He's the man!"

Al and Neon begin to say their good-byes to the family as they want to catch the lights before it gets too late.

Neon comments as they start heading out, "You certainly have an attractive family, Mary. I meant to ask earlier, do you all work out or what? I don't think I've seen a healthier looking family in all of Macklin!"

"Uh, absolutely! That's one thing important to Ulbrecht. Health and all that stuff, you know."

"Yeah, and we absorb well, too!" blurts Udo.

"Udo!" admonishes Mary,

On their way out, Hans beckons Al to come near him and whispers something to him. Neon is not sure but thinks she heard Hans ask Al, "What did you do last month with the spoiled AAs?"

Neon is smart. She does not react or indicate that she heard anything. But, for the rest of the evening, she can think of nothing else. What she doesn't know is that Al is thinking of nothing else either.

29

Now in the official research zone, Peabody has his ocean and atmosphere research data collection staff working diligently. The staff is towing an array of sensors behind the ship, each of which is designed to operate at different depths and measure things such as temperature, salinity, strength and direction of ocean currents, and a variety of other chemical data. One of the objectives of the research is to further test some of the ongoing claims about ice melts near the South Pole.

Elise has logged on to the GTIS and begun searching for heat sources. She has assumed that the Shack is not on any contemporary maps, because its uniqueness would be well-published. She is looking for heat sources that are not on current maps. If and when she finds one, its location will be compared with old maps. She has one old map in particular that she will compare her findings with, as it is the only remaining map of the area that was drawn up in 1921, the year Sir Edmond discovered the Shack. All but this one copy, retained by the Shackleton family, were destroyed somewhere around 1930. The Shack, however is not named on this map. The GTIS identifies ships, whale pods, and

anything else that might produce heat, so she will stay busy.

Meanwhile, Jared and Damion set up the radio and begin broadcasting a message to the Shackers on the frequencies used by Sir Ernest. The message is, "This is Sir Ernest Shackleton's great-grandson. My name is Tyler Shackleton. I am attempting to carry on the work of Sir Ernest. Please have your leaders respond confidentially on this channel." No mention is made of the Shack in the event the message is overheard by other ships.

30

"I'm sure I heard it right. And, I think Al knows I heard it!" explains Neon tearfully to the family. "*Spoiled AAs,* that's what he said, *spoiled AA's!* Like, he's always talking about the family business. Can you believe it?"

"You think his family business is producing AAs and they have distributed some bad product?" asks Sky.

"Something like that. I mean, what else could it be? They obviously make a lot of money. That was the fanciest branch I can imagine! And they're all so

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healthy! They probably choose the best to absorb themselves! I just can't get over it, I just can't!"

"Wow! If so, Dad, then some of the spoiled AAs could have been delivered to customers and made whole branches of families sick!" adds Joey.

"And Al probably knew about it the whole time," adds Sky. "That's why he came up with those theories and tried to convince us one had to be the explanation. Just to throw us off track!"

"Wait, Dad, they made some sense! And he really *is* smart!" Neon insists. "I can't believe all of this. Why would he do this to me? I just don't get it!"

"He probably did not want to hurt you!" interjects August, who was invited by Aurora to discuss Lyle and the City Governors issues. "Shackers often have important interests that collide. They don't want it to happen that way, it just does."

"It stinks!"

"It does, but, if this is all true, he will have to choose between those two interests. And, beware, when faced with choices between the heart and money, money wins with a lot of people."

"Listen, Neon," notes Sky. "Joey and I have been talking about these theories. We believe that, if any of them were close to being correct, everyone on the

whole island would be affected, not just certain families in Macklin."

"The hustler's stories just don't hold water, Neon!" adds Joey. "I think he has feared from the beginning that we would eventually get wise to what he and his family have been doing and he's been playing all of us! They're all crooks!"

"Let's think about what we know," suggests August. "We know that about half of the AAs on the island are produced by private companies and the remaining by the cities. Among the roughly half that are privately produced, about five percent of families produce for their own branch. We shouldn't have to worry about them, right. There are six to eight other large private producers near Macklin. How can we quickly find out who owns them?"

"Easy," says Aurora. "They should be registered with the City Branch. I'll go there tomorrow and look. If the Hoffer family owns one, I should be able to find out immediately."

"And while you're there," adds August, "try to find out who is in charge of operating Macklin's public AA facility."

"Be careful, Aurora!" warns Sky. "The City Governors are clearly not our friends, so the staff at the City Branch cannot be trusted."

31

Vladimir Kozlov calls the meeting to order. "Gentlemen and lady, this meeting of the City Governors has been called on a confidential basis. No one must know of this meeting today. The reason for confidentiality will be explained momentarily, but first, I must have a pledge from each one of you that you will not discuss the content of this meeting with anyone else under any circumstances. Is there anyone here who cannot agree to take such a pledge?" There is no response.

The meeting has been hastily called and no one has advance knowledge of its agenda. Each City Governor is puzzled and a little frightened. They have never been summoned this quickly and under such hushed circumstances.

Vladimir calls on each City Governor one by one. "Leo, will you pledge not to discuss the content of this meeting with anyone else under any circumstances?"

"I so pledge, Sir."

"Francois, will you pledge not to discuss the content of this meeting with anyone else under any circumstances?"

"I so pledge, Sir."

And so on and so on.

"Aurora, will you pledge not to discuss the content of this meeting with anyone else under any circumstances?"

Aurora is bothered with this pledge. The phrase, *under any circumstances*, is extreme. She understands the need for confidential discussions, but she believes this requirement needs more justification, especially from someone she does not trust. She asks, "Sir, can't you give us a hint of the topic?"

"No!"

She hesitates, thinks and responds, "Sir, I cannot pledge without more information."

"We cannot proceed in your presence."

Aurora is truly stunned. At first, she doesn't know what to do. But true to form, Aurora remains a cool and collected individual. She is thinking logically without showing emotion. She decides that she will not participate in the meeting under the required circumstances and she will not obstruct the City Governors at this point. There will undoubtedly be an occasion to discover what the meeting is about and to become involved. She has rocked their boat enough with her comparison of Macklin to other cities and decides not to push them more.

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"Sir, I will leave." And she does. She considers trying to look at the registrations of AA production companies before she leaves but decides that would be too risky.

The meeting continues, and Vladimir explains, "One of our listeners has picked up a series of radio transmissions from someone claiming to be the great-grandson of Sir Shackleton. The message requests that we contact them, so he can continue the work of Sir Shackleton."

This is not the first transmission the Shackers' listeners have heard. They have recorded transmissions on these old frequencies often enough, but this is different. These messages are specifically calling them and using their most important historical reference. The meeting goes on for an extraordinary period of time.

Ever since Sir Shackleton left, the Shackers have feared that humans would discover the island and exploit it and its inhabitants. The Shackers are physically defenseless and don't have the extensive knowledge base of humans. Also, the historians tell stories of untrustworthy behavior in a few of the humans. Some argue that no human can be trusted, and others argue that the Shack will eventually be discovered anyway.

The discussion among the City Governors and their opinions about what to do are surprisingly mixed. The debate lasts for hours. Finally, Vladimir Kozlov declares the meeting over with no decision made. The effect of ending the meeting with no decision is actually a decision not to respond.

32

"She knows!" says Al to his family at their next evening family attachment time.

"Too bad, Al," Hans reminds Al. "You're the one who screwed up! You need to be the one to fix it! That's how it works in this family."

"Not only have you cost the business a lot of money," scolds Ulbrecht, "but allowing all of those AAs to spoil and be sold to customers exposes us to total financial ruin. If word gets out that our AAs caused that sickness and we tried to cover it up, it's all over!"

"What should I do?" asks Al.

Ulbrecht thinks and suggests, "Contact a man named Lyle Perrot. If anyone can fix it, he can. And, he owes me!"

"Al, you are my son. I love you!" declares Mary. "But, if you fail, you are so out of this family forever."

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On the Shack, the worst punishment that can be given an individual for any wrongdoing is to be cast out of your family. The family bond is the most highly regarded core of all of the Shack's societal norms and values.

"Mom, I'm so, so truly sorry! I'll do my best!"

"Not good enough! Al, you are very intelligent, but it's time for you to grow up! Now! Get it done!"

"Yes ma'am!"

Al goes immediately to Lyle's branch and is told that Lyle is sick. His first thought is "Oh, no, I hope he did not get a batch of our spoiled AAs!" Aloud, he says, "I hope the whole family isn't sick."

"No, he is losing his eyesight," is the explanation.

Very relieved, he explains that he needs some work done.

"He will be back to work in a few days. If you are in a hurry, you need to go see two other guys named Cade and Julio. I'll give you directions."

33

The Alexanders are attached when August shows up with some interesting information. But, before August can say much, someone else attaches. "Hey,

everybody," shouts Harry with a mischievous smile on his face. "Am I still welcome?"

"Of course, you are!" exclaims Aurora, happily. "You've been missed so much."

"So, how is your friend, uh, what's her name?" asks Sky.

"You mean Ciar? I have dropped my friendship with Ciar. Like, actually she found another friend more important than me."

"I am sorry about that, Harry, I really am, but she *is* a thief, you know!"

"Yeah, she is, but she was fun to hang out with."

"How's the ion chasing?" asks Joey.

"It keeps me in good shape! That stuff is really thick! Like swimming through it takes a *lot* of energy! And I have been going to school. Haven't missed a day!"

"Harry, this is August." Sky says as he nods at August. "He is an almost adopted member of our family that you have missed out on."

Hazard adds, "I'm not sure who has almost adopted whom in this equation."

They don't have time to bring Harry up to date on the events that have occurred since he left. Harry will have to learn as they go.

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"I know what the City Governors discussed at their meeting," claims August.

"What?" exclaims Aurora. "Everyone at that meeting pledged not to talk!"

"So much for confidentiality! I spoke with my contact with The Bosses."

"I should have guessed," replies Aurora. "Lyle is unbelievable!"

"Yes, he got the whole story, even though he is going blind."

"Wow! What would we do without you, August?" adds Hazard, amazed. "Running into you was the smartest thing I've ever done!"

"So now you take credit for *planning* to run into him?" Joey needles.

"Whatever, Joey. August, tell us more, please, and ignore him!"

"Yes, well it seems that the listeners have heard some transmissions from someone claiming to be Sir Ernest Shackleton's great-grandson, wanting to carry on his work. The discussion was about responding to the person or not."

This bit of information takes a few moments to sink in. The fact that they would someday be discovered is generally recognized, but at this time? This moment? Now?

"Do they know how authentic the person is?" asks Sky.

"All they know is that the caller specifically discusses information that only an insider would know. They are not random transmissions. They seem to be specifically directed at Shackers."

"Wow!" bursts out Joey. "How cool is this?"

"What did they decide?" asks Aurora.

"To do nothing."

"Again, why does that not surprise me?" declares Aurora.

"The way it was told to me indicates that, uncharacteristically, there was a lot of discussion. Vladimir simply did not give them time to completely talk it out," adds August. "He gave up and adjourned the meeting. Then they all left."

"They actually had a discussion? That's different!" says Aurora.

"Maybe you have already influenced some of them a little," replies August.

"That would be good, but we need to learn more about those radio transmissions," suggests Sky.

August agrees to see what he can do. He adds, "Let's think about Lyle for a moment. If it is true that he is losing his vision, The Bosses, as an organization, will not go away. They will have to decide who is in charge, but they will still come after

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you and try to take you down. They and the City Governors are still threatened by you."

"So, maybe, Lyle's removal will slow them down some, ya think?" asks Neon.

"Let's hope so."

"Harry, when you're out there chasing ions, you cover a lot of territory, right?" asks Joey.

"Yeah."

"You see many AA farms?"

"Yeah."

"Ever see a farm run by the Hoffer family?"

"Sure, they produce AAs in a field just a few kilometers south of town."

"Ever see AI there?" asks Neon.

"No, but I think he is in charge of their sales."

34

On the meteorological technology-laden USS Alfred Wegener, Elise has found something worth investigating." Got a possible target!" she shouts. In her excitement, Elise forgot the team's agreement to work quietly.

"Let's take a look," whispers Ty.

Pointing to the high pixel screen in front of her, "Here it is. Looks like about 150 kilometers across. Its temperature is 36 degrees higher than the ocean."

Charles Sexton

"Ok, is it on any of our modern maps?"

"No, but it is on the Shackleton family map with no name. Look, when I zoom in, you can see one, two, three.... possibly fourteen dense areas of even higher temperatures."

"Those could be cities."

"Yes, and when I switch to camera mode, the area is aglow with a variety of colors that seem to weave in and out."

"Hum, I don't recall any discussion about colors, but my information is generations old."

"Can we move closer?"

"I'll talk to Peabody and see if we can do a little trolling nearer it. Meanwhile, we can certainly increase the frequency of radio transmissions and direct the ship more towards that area."

The two are interrupted by an excited Jared. "You won't believe this! We got a response!"

"So soon?" says Ty, trying his best to remain calm and collected. "What was it?"

"Someone identified himself as Joey. He said he heard our transmission and he is a Shacker. He asked for some proof that you are Sir Ernest's great-grandson. He said he couldn't talk long because others may hear the communication. I told him you would talk with him again tomorrow. I told him to use

whatever frequency he wanted, and we would find him."

35

"You know, Julio," says Cade, "Lyle can't function anymore. I went to his branch yesterday and he could not see me. He's lost all of his vision for- good!"

"What did he say?"

"He said his mind still works better than ours combined and nothing has changed."

"To hell with him!"

"That's exactly what I told him. I told him he is no longer qualified to be the leader of The Bosses and that we will go on without him! I told him that we could have found something for him to do if he hadn't been rude, but there is a code of respect that we must maintain amongst members of the organization."

"Yeah, he shouldn't have disrespected us that way!"

"Anybody home?" comes a voice from near the branch.

"What do you want?" answers Cade.

"If this is Cade and Julio, I need some work done."

"Who are you?"

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"My name is Al. I was told that Lyle was sick and to come to you."

"Well, Al come on up and tell us about it."

"I don't mean to interrupt," apologizes Al.

"No problem! What do you need?"

"It's complicated." Al opens up and tells them that his family has an AA production and retail business. He tells them that he is a college student and also does most of the marketing for the business. The farm produced some spoiled AAs recently and he has sold them to some customers by mistake, which may have caused the sickness going around town."

"Wait!" shouts Cade. "Way too much information, man. "What is your last name, Al?"

"Hofer. My dad says he knows Lyle well."

"Oh, yes. We know Ulbrecht. He is a good business man. Just tell us what you need."

"Well, there is this family, the Alexanders, that is on to us. They could ruin our business if I can't shut them up."

"Who are these devils? How are they on to you?"

"The father, Sky is treating many of the sick Shacklers. His daughter figured it out and..."

"Wait, is the mother's name Aurora?"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"Let's just say we're already working on it and we can help each other!"

"What do I need to do?"

36

"Dad, guess what," says Joey with the biggest grin on his face that a Shacker can muster.

"What, Joey?"

"I talked to the outsiders, the humans trying to contact us."

"Yes, and who is trying to contact us?"

"You know, the great-grandson of Sir Ernest."

"Oh yes, we really need to find out more about those transmissions. We need a radio."

"Dad! I talked to them!"

"What do you mean, you talked to them?"

"I simply checked in to the city warehouse and brought home an old radio."

"You did what?"

"I took it out to a remote part of the plasma and listened for their transmissions. I responded to them!"

"Joey, are you telling me the truth? This is important stuff."

"Yes, Dad. I told them my name and that others might be listening. We agreed to talk again tomorrow on an unused channel and I need you to do the talking."

"Wow. First of all, I'm proud of you, Joey. Doing that took a lot of initiative and courage. Most kids your age would not have thought of it and certainly not

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have carried through with it. As I think about it, most adults would not either. I sure didn't think of it."

"Thanks, Dad. The thought of meeting humans is the most fascinating...well, I have to do it! That's it! I have to do it!"

"Hold on there, kiddo. We need to think this through."

"That's why I need your help."

"Okay, if we do this, the first thing we will want to do when we talk to him is to get as much information from him as we can to make a judgement about his credibility."

"And, I suppose, to convince him that we are credible too."

"Right. But, we need to have some idea about what we want to do after we talk and perhaps meet with him. There is no sense in just saying 'hello' and 'goodbye.' Do you have any thoughts?"

"One is to find out what he wants. He certainly did not travel such a

long way just to say 'hello' either."

"Any other thoughts?"

"Really haven't thought about it that much."

"Suppose we bring Mom and August into the conversation to hear their opinions?"

"Good idea."

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The four meet that evening at August's branch. Sky and Joey brief Aurora and August on the details of their conversation. All come to a quick agreement that Joey's planned transmission is a no-brainer. It should be done. Aurora suggests that in no way should they involve the City Governors, at least not yet.

August develops a few key questions to quickly determine the truthfulness of this outsiders claims. He suggests asking the outsider if he knows the name of Sir Ernest's doctor, wife, and the person who financed his expedition. Such information is not widely known, and an impersonator would have to be well informed to have the answers. He also suggests having a long conversation to learn as much as possible about the outsider's intentions, motivations, and scientific knowledge.

The next day's plan is agreed upon.

37

Joey and Sky choose a frequency they believe is never used by the island listeners or ships in the area.

"This is Joey and Sky Alexander calling Sir Ernest Shackleton's great-grandson."

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The message is repeated no more than four times when a response is heard.

"This is Ty Shackleton. I am Sir Ernest's great-grandson. So, who are you folks?"

"We live on the island. I am Joey, a high school student and my dad, Sky is here with me."

"Thank you for answering my call, Joey. Have you guys solved your vision issues, yet?"

Sky and Joey are impressed with this question. It's a good start.

Sky answers, "No, it's a tough one."

"I understand. I know that Sir Ernest tried glasses, but they would not stay on you guys. We have lenses now which may help a little. They fit on the surface of the eye. We humans have similar but less severe problems that are aided by these lenses."

Sky and Joey are astonished. They stare at each other momentarily.

"And, how is your supply of amino acids? Is everyone healthy?"

Sky has a good feeling about the early stage of this conversation and opens up just a little more. "We are having a few issues. But I would like to ask *you* a few questions."

"Okay."

"What were the names of Sir Ernest's wife, doctor, and expedition financier?"

"Emily, Dr. Macklin and Mr. Rowlett."

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Sky and Joey nod at each other. They believe that this outsider is who he claims to be. The question remains, however, can he be trusted?

"What do you want?" asks Sky.

"I have some of my great-grandfather's records and I have heard my family tell some of his stories and adventures. I know it has been very secretive. I don't exactly know legend from fact, but I have felt an urge since I was a small boy to do what he did. That is what I want."

Sky and Joey don't know exactly what to say.

Ty adds, "Now, can you tell me who you are?"

"We are two members of a family trying to achieve goals similar to yours," says Sky. "I am a medical practitioner; my wife is a City Governor and Joey here feels an urge to meet you. Joey has a brother and two sisters."

There is some static on the radio and the signal is lost. Sky tries to re-establish the link and after what seems an eternity, the connection is back.

"I am aware of the promise of secrecy my great-grandfather made to your ancestors a century ago. I have gone to great lengths and expense to get here with a small staff of trustworthy experts. I would like to meet with you. The presence of a leader like a City Governor is important."

"My wife will be eager to attend. When can you come to the island?"

The conversation, concise and to the point, has ended with a plan to meet at a designated place and time.

38

"So where have you been, Al?" asks Neon. "Haven't seen you in two days."

"Yeah, sorry. Like, I've had a lot of school work to do. It's just that time of the year, you know."

"I really enjoyed meeting your family and the lights were as brilliant as I've ever seen them."

Neon is trying not to come across as insincere because she is more smart than emotional. She remembers what August said about the advantages of communicating with the bad guys. Maybe she can get more useful information from Al if she can manipulate him just right.

"Al, you are a good friend. I don't know what happened to us in high school, but I like you. I just want you to know that!"

"Thanks."

"No, I mean it! You're a great guy. I want to know you better."

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Al is smart, too. He knows that Neon knows, and he is feeling very awkward right now. He would rather be somewhere else. He regrets this whole series of events. Maybe he should drop out of school for awhile, so he can avoid her until this thing is over. But then, it's going to end badly. There is no other way. He has made his choice. His family, his income, and he must come first.

"It's over, Neon. I can't see you anymore," he announces.

"I'm sorry?" she responds, trying to sound surprised.

"I wish it had been different, but it is what it is!"

"Okay, intelligent one, you're on!"

39

Ty and Jared take an inflatable and proceed to the planned location at a remote section of the island. They have not been able to find a reason to alter the course of the ship and get closer to the island. But they have been able to delay the meeting by a day and leave the ship undetected in the early evening in time to rendezvous and return before daylight. The maneuver is tricky because the timing is tight. If there is a delay, the meeting will have to be rescheduled.

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They are aided by the sea, which is unusually calm for this time of the year.

Aurora, Sky, Joey, and August travel to the same location. Despite August's slow pace, all agreed that his historical knowledge and wisdom will be of great value to the meeting. It is dark outside, with only a quarter moon and some plasma lights to illuminate the way. They are not attached to a branch and cannot share their vision, so they must talk constantly to help guide each other. They are moving along the plasma surface almost touching each other.

Ty and Jared arrive at the conclave site first. They put on special shoes which they have labeled "plamshoes." The shoes are nothing more than large, heavily-laced snow shoes adapted for walking on the thick, liquid plasma surface. They set up a small beacon and fog horn to assist the Shacklers in finding them. While they wait, they collect small samples of plasma and anything else growing in the area. Curiously, they observe tiny living organisms swimming about the plasma below but have neither time nor equipment to collect specimens now. They can't wait to look at the plasma under a microscope.

"I think I hear something," whispers Jared between the small bursts of the horn.

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Ty listens and says, "It's my heart beating!"

"What?"

"I've waited a long time for this. It's a huge moment for me!"

The customary, "Hello, are you there?" comes from the dark.

"By the light. This is Ty."

Jared turns off the horn.

The Shackers come into the light. The Shackers space themselves apart at different distances so each can see the humans. The two different species stare at each other for a long time.

Visualizing each other takes a bit of getting used to. These humans and these Shackers have never seen the likes of the each other.

Ty speaks first, "I am Ty Shackleton. This is Jared, one member of my team."

"I am Sky Alexander. Over there is my wife, Aurora. You have talked to Joey and this is our friend, August Althaus. Please give us a moment."

The four attach to a nearby branch to coordinate vision and absorb any available AAs.

"Do all humans look like you?" asks Joey.

"Most are uglier," answers Ty.

Joey chuckles.

"Do all Shackers look like you?" asks Ty.

"Most are uglier!" responds Joey with a grin.

"I like you already, Joey. Let me give all of you more information about me, my team, and how we got here. I never met my great-grandfather. He died before I was born. The family talked a lot about his explorations and discoveries. He and others wrote books about his Antarctic expeditions, but there was never a mention of this island in any of them. I heard about it by accident from my grandfather and over time quizzed him about it relentlessly. I learned all he knew. I was the only one in the family he would discuss it with. I vowed to myself that somehow, I would someday search for you and determine if I could help you as he did. I learned as much knowledge as I could, learned good thinking skills, put together a small team of scientific experts and here I am!"

The Shacklers believe everything they are hearing but sorting through all of this extraordinary new information can't be done instantaneously. They knew some day they would be rediscovered by humans, but by Sir Ernest's great-grandson? He seems to be a good guy and not a bad one like many Shacklers feared! And they look weird, so different from themselves and from what they have expected! What does one say?

Polar Switch

Ty understands that his presence is quite a shock to them. "You mentioned some amino acid issues, Sky. Can you tell me a little more?"

"Yes. We think one of the local producers sold some toxic AAs to some of the residents of our city, Macklin, and they became very weak. No one has died, yet."

"One of my team, Damien, can help with that. But, I must disclose my desire to work with the island's official leaders. How can you help me with that?"

August clears his throat and speaks up, "Ty, my father knew your great-grandfather. I, too, have heard stories. Based on those stories, your great-grandfather was a great man who helped us immeasurably. But our ancestors learned the hard way that some humans have selfish motives, as do some Shackers. Unfortunately, our city is currently controlled by Shackers with selfish motives and the best cities are not easy to get to from here."

"Aurora, you are a city official, right?" probes Sky.

August answers, "She is. Aurora is a new member who is trying to reform the Governing Council. But they are pushing back, strong! Aurora is an official. And, we are the good guys! Aurora has contacts in the other cities and can assist you with meeting them."

"August is correct," adds Aurora. "We need to keep the Macklin leaders out our conversations."

"So, if we continue to work with you, we will have to do it in total secret, right?"

"At least for now, Sir Tyler Shackleton," responds August respectfully.

"Deal, August Althaus and Alexander family!"

They will communicate again by radio tomorrow as now it is time for them to swiftly return.

40

Cade and Julio have found a new friend.

"So, why are you after Aurora?" Al asks.

"Like, she is out to disrupt our relationship with the City Governors and destroy our business!" Cade responds. "All of her trips to other cities and comparisons are no good. If she and her friends get all the public fired up and against the City Governors, buddy, we're shark chum!"

"I see."

"Yeah, we got some dirt on one of er friends and she is now enlightened, just like they all become!" says Julio, smiling. "Trouble is, this Aurora is good at hiding er skeletons. We don't have nothin on her."

"So, if we could kill her off, that would be good!" adds Cade. "You know, like we've heard humans do!"

Polar Switch

Julio mumbles, "Like we tried to do to dees guy three years ago. We can't make it work, man!"

"We could spread some false rumors, you know, make up some dirt, but that takes time," says Cade.

"I just burned my bridge with the daughter. It's too late to make use of that relationship, but she would have been playing me as much as I would be her. She knows about the AAs. I do know the other family members somewhat. I'll try to remember anything that may give us a clue about 'dirt'."

Julio is the mischievous of the two remaining The Bosses leaders. Lyle, the smartest, would have had several ideas on the table by now. For The Bosses, losing Lyle is unfortunate, but they figure they can adjust. For their income to continue, they will have to create a new leadership style, but they don't know exactly how to do that.

"Wait! So, Al, can't you make em sick, man, with those bad AAs?" asks Julio. "You know, put them out of action."

"An interesting thought! So far, the worst that's happened to Shackers is they get really weak and can't function for a month or so. We need something that is longer lasting or that makes them sicker."

"You go to college, right?" asks Cade.

"Oh yeah, had lots of that."

"Can't you come up of some kind of explosive or something like that? I heard the humans had somthin like that!"

"They did, but we don't have the ingredients on the island for that. Maybe some kind of chemical or biological alteration of the AAs that we put in their supply might work. Yes, that's it! A catalyst that modifies their AAs. I think I could do that!"

"What would it do to them?"

"I don't know for sure, never tried it. It would be worse than the spoiled AAs. I need to do some brief experiments. Shouldn't take too long. I'll need your help sneaking it into their supply pod. It will be pretty tricky. We need to figure out a way to coordinate vision."

"You got it, pal!" replies Julio, enthusiastically.

41

When the Alexanders get home, August stays the rest of the evening. They are all exhausted but sleeping is not easy. They attempt to describe their amazing adventure to Hazard and Neon and everyone is reflecting on it at the same time. Hazard and Neon have a difficult time hearing any continuous line of thought. Ty this and Jared that. Weird looking beings with long appendages, and devices called

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shoes. Finally, sleep overcomes them, except for Joey, who must detach and swim about to think through the wonders he can see ahead for himself. He is thinking the Shack will not remain secretly in the Southern Indian Ocean much longer. He wants to get away from the bullies at school and learn more about the world and what is in it. He is energized and full steam ahead.

It is precise work and a trio of rogues will have to be alert to avoid being caught. To make it happen, they must attach themselves to the branch, so vision can be coordinated. They have waited until everyone is asleep, but they fail to see Joey slip away quietly. Al communicates with them by using signals as they move slowly and quietly to the branch. They all look up and down the branch as they move in because if one family member is only drowsy and wakes up, they will be discovered and have to flee before being identified.

Joey is slowly moving nearby, deep in his dreams of being in the human world. He imagines meeting new humans with new knowledge and seeing new technology that the Shackers' world may never have.

After another period of watching the branch carefully, the three invaders decide it is safe and

attach. They can now share vision, which they do intensely. Al begins the tedious process of adding his catalyst at a point where it will enter the branch's AA storage pod.

Nearby, Joey is distracted by something, a noise, a feeling, something that arouses him from his deep thoughts. He decides it is time to return to the branch and sleep. Certainly, he does not want to wake the others in the process and he returns slowly and quietly. He notices what appears to be more Shackers on the branch than should be. His vision is blurred, but he counts. He is sure there are outsiders, but cannot recognize them. They look like they are awake. What the? Something wrong is happening, something is not right, but he is unsure what it is. Joey thinks, he can't move up close because he can't see up close, but he can't see this distance at night either. It appears like one of the intruders is attached near the AA storage pod. That's weird, he thinks. Who are they? Wait, there are definitely three. One looks a little familiar. Not good, he concludes and decides to move very cautiously.

Joey is uncharacteristically frozen while he watches the intruders detach and silently slip into the dark plasma. Then he moves towards the branch, attaches and ashamedly whispers, "Hey, everybody.

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Hello? Everybody. Everybody! Wake up!" he whispers then shouts.

Sleepy-eyed and very tired, Aurora answers, "Joey?"

"Mom, I saw some intruders attached."

"Not another girl, stealing AAs?"

"No, I think these were guys."

"You mean more than one?"

"Three."

Sky and the others slowly rise from their fog and try to understand what is going on.

"Three male Shackers were attached?"

"Yeah, like, I couldn't sleep, so I wandered about the branch. I couldn't see very well, but that's what it looked like."

"What were they doing?" asks Neon.

"I don't know. One was attached by the AA storage pod and the others just hung around."

"How long were they here?" asks Hazard, irritated. "And why didn't you wake us?"

"I was sleepy, okay! I was thinking about Ty and didn't notice them at first!"

"That's okay, Joey," says Aurora, trying to calm everyone down. She suggests that Sky and Joey go look around and see if anything unusual exists around the branch and that everyone get more sleep.

42

The family members wake one by one before noon the next day. August, who spent the night is the last one to rise.

Joey is still tired from the long night but sleeping is not on his agenda. "I have tried hard to figure out who those guys were last night. One of them looked familiar. I just couldn't see very well."

"So, you two did not see anything unusual when you looked around?" asks Aurora.

"No," answers Sky. "We'll look again in a bit, but these guys are a puzzle."

"Joey, you said one of them looked familiar?" probes Aurora.

"Yeah, but I just can't place him. It's irritating!"

"Could you tell if they were young, old, slow, fast, long-sighter, short-sighter, anything?"

"They moved slowly and deliberately. I'm pretty sure they did not see me."

"They probably were not The Bosses because there are only two of them with Lyle out of the picture," suggests August. "But, if these guys were up to no good, The Bosses are obvious suspects."

Sky and Joey take another look around the branch and surrounding area. There is evidence that

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one of them attached right at the AA storage pod, possibly to steal some AAs. There is no other sign of their presence. Sky suggests that they return to prepare for a journey to meet up with Ty tonight. Joey contacts Ty on the same frequency he used before and a meeting time is set. Both agree that the time could be a little earlier than before. However, they will still have to travel at night.

"I want to go too," pleads Hazard. "Please! We may outnumber them but certainly my presence won't be overwhelming, please! I won't say anything, I promise!"

"You not say anything! That would be a first," digs Joey.

"Sure, Hazard. You can go, you can be our scout," Aurora approves.

"I think I'll wait this one out," says August. "Last night was a long trip for an old Shacker like me. And you can travel faster and have more time with Ty. Besides, I have a few things to do in the meantime.

"Wait! Like, you're not going to leave me out of this!" insists Neon.

43

By the time they leave the Alexanders are well rested and travel quickly not only because August stays behind, but mainly because they know the route and obstacles. Hazard's speeding around also quickens the pace.

"Someday, that girl is going to cause some real damage," comments Sky.

"Yeah, but maybe she can find a job during college that takes advantage of her speed, delivery, or something like that," replies Aurora.

Joey is the first one there. All of the Alexanders are eager to engage the humans and learn more from them, but they feel awkward. Most Shackers have had blind dates, but this encounter is nothing like any Shacker has had in a century. They are still trying to understand how Ty and his friends function and think. It will take time to sort it all out.

"You're early!" declares Ty, somewhat impressed. "You folks almost whizzed past me!"

"Sorry about that! This is my sister, Hazard. She's fast."

"I can see that. Have you ever tried to swim in the water, Hazard?"

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"In water? No way! Never heard of that. Like, how would I stay up? The plasma's much thicker. It's easy to stay up."

"There is a way to learn. I could teach you, but the water around here is too cold for me. We can talk about it, though."

"Talking sounds better."

"Hello, Ty. How was your journey?" asks Sky.

"It took me a little longer because the ship is a little further away. The seas are still calm and that's good. Sneaking away from the ship undetected is my biggest challenge."

Ty meets Neon and then takes time to explain his research grant, his team and the efforts he has taken to maintain the secrecy of his real mission. He tells them about his childhood, growing up in a huge city named London. He describes how he heard the stories and read all of the books about Sir Ernest Shackleton. It was the quizzing of his grandfather and the confidential information this admired senior provided that created an impulse and yearning for young Ty to come. "It was like *you* were beckoning me here, like Shackers were calling for me. It's impossible to explain the allure and the sensation!"

"So now that you are here, what do we do?" asks Aurora.

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"I want to help. From everything my grandfather told me, I concluded that his dad was enthralled by your ancestors and wanted to assist them. For whatever reason, I feel drawn to you. So, my question to you is, 'How can I help you? How can I help Shacklers?'"

Aurora and Sky both speak at the same time, but after a minute they both realize that Ty was confused by the multiple conversations. Sky suggests that Aurora go first.

She explains to Ty how there are fourteen cities on the island, each with its own government. Some cities are economically strong, and some are weak. She has reason to believe that much of the weakness is due to poor government and summarizes her trips, data collection, and conclusions. She describes her interaction with the other City Governors and how unethical relationships appear to exist. She tells him about the election process, how she was elected, and about the shadowy deals between the City Governors and The Bosses.

"Clearly," she tells him, "not all cities are like Macklin, but some are."

"Are there laws that prohibit some of these behaviors?" asks Ty.

"Laws?"

Polar Switch

"Yes, you know, government written, and citizen approved rules that cite behavior that is not acceptable."

"I'm sorry?" she says, looking confused.

"Well, much of the world follows a concept called the 'Rule of Law.' Under this, governments and people create standards of behavior that they agree everyone should follow as they live their lives and conduct their business."

"That sounds like something we need," interjects Neon. "Like a plasma speed limit for Hazard!"

"It would not necessarily slow her down. The basic principle of most societies is that you can do whatever you want to do as long as you don't interfere with certain rights of others. If everyone agrees that Hazard doesn't risk harming anyone, they don't create a law that prohibits plasma speeding."

"What happens if someone fails to behave according to a law?" asks Joey.

"Yes, well a process is established to objectively determine guilt and, if guilty, the person is punished. The punishment varies in severity based on the seriousness of the harm or potential harm that the behavior causes. Often, the person can be trained to avoid causing the harm."

"How could this 'Rule of Law' apply to the City Governors?" asks Aurora.

"Well, the citizens of Macklin would create and approve a set of rules that prescribe the election process, as well as acceptable behaviors to be followed during it. Anyone found not following the rules would be punished the way the rule states. Similar rules can apply to the business conducted by the City Governors after their election."

"That sounds almost too good to be true!" responds Aurora, as she is now a little skeptical.

"In theory, it sounds great, but in reality, it doesn't work quite that smoothly." says Ty. "However, a system of laws works much better than what you appear to have here and better than most other alternatives. Whenever there are people around, it will not be perfect! That's the way the world is!"

"How do I get this law thing started?" asks Aurora.

"It takes a lot of time and patience. First, some citizens need to understand the potential for improving the current system before they can start a discussion about how to do so. Usually a group of core individuals has to risk upsetting the existing establishment and take a lot of heat. They have to communicate new goals and muster the support of most of the community members about how to achieve these goals. Usually, a lot of time and hard work is required."

Polar Switch

"Well, getting me more information and advice would help me and some other cities tremendously," concludes Aurora.

"Can I have my turn?" inquires Sky.

"Your turn, dear!" responds Aurora.

"Ty, maybe you can help with a sickness that seems to be infecting a large number of Macklin residents. I don't know to what extent it may have spread to other cities, but certainly whatever has happened here could happen elsewhere."

Sky explains to Ty how he first observed the problem, how it appeared to grow, and how Joey and he were able to conclude that the cause was probably some spoiled AAs that somehow got into the supply of the sickened families. He also explained Al's theories, as well as their findings about how Neon gained some information about Al and his family's apparent involvement in producing spoiled AAs.

"Okay, I talked with Damien. He needs a sample of those suspected AAs and samples of good AAs for comparison. The good news is that he believes if they are just spoiled. The bad ones may be about gone soon and things should get better with a little more time. On the other hand, if there is some additional issue, like a nerve toxin or something like that, greater problems could be on their way."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand!" responds Joey curiously.

"Well, from what you have told me, spoiled AAs have likely gotten into the food supply of many of the residents and they have gotten sick, right?"

"Yeah."

"What have you discovered that proves the two are linked?"

"The timing was about the same."

"Anything else?"

"No, but I don't trust AI!" replies Joey.

"We need more than that, right?" Sky says.

"Yes, I'll bring Damien when we can get off the ship during the day," suggests Ty. "I can almost guarantee that we will find the problem."

"I need help too, with a genome solution to our vision problem," adds Neon.

"Are there bullies in the rest of the world?" wonders Joey, not wanting to be left out.

"Guys, I can help with all of these questions, but I won't be able to make your lives perfect. And Neon, we have made a lot of gene modification progress and maybe we can help with your vision. I'm certain we can help make artificial vision improvements. And, yes, Joey, there are bullies in the rest of the world. Some societies have created laws to help deal with

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them, some have not. I don't know what Shackers will choose to do, but there are some successful strategies to deal with bullies. I will be happy to get you professional advice about them. I'm guessing there are a lot of important advances that I can arrange for you to access."

"The larger issue for you to think about before we can go much further with providing all of this assistance is the need for confidentiality," continues Ty. "Doing what you want is impossible in modern times without the rest of the world knowing about you."

"You know, I've been thinking about Damien coming here during the day," says Sky. "That is tough to do without being seen by other Shackers. So, before he comes, we will have to prepare Shackers for your presence. They will have to know about you. And also limited information about our contact with you, our plans with you, and certainly what to expect when they see you. That will be quite a shock!"

"I agree," says Aurora, "we need some time to *really* think about all of this, you know, meeting you, learning more about you and the possibilities that could lay ahead. We have been in a euphoric state since Joey first reported his contact with you. We have a lot to process."

"Here is a suggestion," says Ty. "The ship has a busted generator, and we need to go to Perth for a few days. You take some time to think about the consequences of revealing Shackers to the world, the world to Shackers, and how to go about all that. We can talk some more when I get back."

"I don't see the value in more discussion!" emphasizes Joey. "We are going to be discovered soon anyway. Why not do it our way?"

"Mom's right, Joey," adds Neon. "If we do this, it needs to be planned carefully. If we make a blunder, we could all become extinct fast!"

"Look," emphasizes Ty, "we can limit your involvement to the world's most trusted scientists and support experts, for at least for two years. I promise to do my best to make sure that limitation is continued for as long as I can. *But*, there are risks and no guarantees. That is all I can do! Think carefully. Make sure you're ready. And, make sure you're the right Shackers."

"Okay, we'll be listening for you," concludes Sky. "One more thing though. We had some unknown intruders at our branch last night. One of them attached right at the point where we store our AAs. At the last minute, before we left the branch, I extracted a small sample of our AAs and brought them with me."

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Could you get Damien to analyze them and radio the results to us if anything weird shows up?"

"Will do."

"And didn't you mention some kind of thermal imaging machine to help find us?" asks Neon.

"Yeah, it's a pretty amazing device."

"Does it keep records?"

"Until we delete them."

"Could you have Elise look at them for last night and see if she can track where those intruders came from?"

"That is a tall task. Tracking three small Shacklers in a city like Macklin may not be possible. But, if we have the location, we can sure try!"

"Great!"

After the exchange of information, the two groups head home with a plan to speak by radio sometime tomorrow and see each other again in less than a week.

44

The Alexanders sleep in the next morning, exhausted after a second long night in a row.

"Are you awake yet?" comes a shout from nearby.

"August!" replies Aurora. "Good to hear your voice. Please attach."

Charles Sexton

"Tell me all about it."

Joey eagerly begins rattling off words as though he was the only one at the meeting. Everyone else looks at each other and just lets him go, nonstop. After about 15 minutes, August asks, "When do you think you will hear from Ty?"

"Oh! I need to turn on the radio," remembers Joey.

"What do you want to tell Ty about allowing them to come onto the island?"

"My opinion's clear!" quips Joey.

"Wait, I'm with Joey," adds Neon, enthusiastically.

August asks, "What are the worst things and the best things that could happen?"

"The worst things?" Sky thinks out loud. "Well, for one, the island could be overcome by humans and we could all be hauled off to be displayed for humans to make money. Humans could infect us with disease. They could invade our island and control us and get rich off of us. Their presence here could possibly destroy the plasma. Without that, we have no island and can't produce AAs. There are all kinds of bad things."

"And the best?"

"I guess the best could be that all humans treat us with respect and dignity, let us live on the Shack

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without bad influence but share their knowledge and technology with us."

"Is Ty the human most likely to help us get closer to the best results or is it leaving our discovery to chance?"

"In reality, no human will probably lead us to the very best Sky described," concludes Aurora. "But, Ty's great-grandfather was the best and Ty seems honest when he describes his goals. I trust him."

"Me too," says Sky.

"Anyone disagree?" asks August.

All agree. A sense of relief and joy is apparent as the family celebrates an important decision. They begin talking about how to introduce Ty and his team to other Shacklers.

But then August has another question, "You said that Ty asked you to 'make sure you're the ones,' right?"

"He did," answers Joey.

"What do you think he meant by that?"

"Do you think he questions if we are smart enough or influential enough?" asks Neon.

"Maybe he thinks leaders from Rowlett, Wild or Emily should be the ones he should be working with?" Aurora wonders. "Leaders in those cities are more advanced than those in Macklin. There may be less

resistance to change there and those who are easier to work with."

"I think he wants us to be sure we have the resolve to deal with the difficult individuals in all cities," says Sky. "He knows that there will be naysayers all across the Shack. There will be those who will need a lot of explaining to convince them we need their cooperation and support. We don't want overwhelming opposition that makes the whole effort impossible. He wants us to understand the effort and commitment this will take and, if we are not up to it over our entire lifetimes, maybe he should find others that are."

"Folks, I'm getting a little tired and need to go home, but I think whoever Ty works with will not be able to pull all Shackers along by themselves. An organization will have to be created that does the foot-work for the leaders. Some trusted Shackers will have to be added to help. More will eventually need to be recruited and convinced through information and logical explanation. The organization will grow as we all learn more. Not all Shackers need to join our effort, just most of those who care about the future. Does that make sense?"

"Couldn't have said it any better myself!" applauds Joey.

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"You're right, August. I sure am glad we met you." says Aurora with a loving smile.

"Thanks, but are you up to such a commitment?" asks August.

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Yes!"

"Okay, then, I'm done here! See you later."

45

On board the USS Alfred Wegener, Damien reports that the preliminary examination of on the Alexanders' AAs is not normal. He has to perform some more tests to determine what exactly is different about them.

"Yesterday, I worked on the plasma samples you brought back from your first visit to the Shack and found some interesting things," reports Damien.

"Should I get a cup of tea first?" asks Ty.

"I suggest a whole pot of coffee!"

"What is it?"

"First of all, you know that the common state of plasma is a highly agitated gas. As we also know, the plasma which makes the Shack is a unique, thick

form of gas that we don't know about yet. Physicists have known for years how to get energy from plasma. The problem is there is not much of it on earth."

"Yes, but I heard it can be made artificially, right?"

"Yes. The problem is that making it requires more energy than it produces. Economics requires that artificially-made plasma produce more energy than is required to make it in order for production to be profitable!"

"So they can go to market, right? And get a return on their investment, right?"

"Right, and making money is what is driving the experimentation, so that's good."

"Okay, what about the plasma that makes up the island?" asks Ty. "What's the mystery about?"

"For one, it produces a hell of a lot of energy and there is a vast quantity of it!"

Ty thinks about that a moment and realizes the consequences," Boy, that gets out, people will be down here sucking up the whole island in months!"

"Yes, but if we can discover the island's origin or how it is replenished, maybe the process can be duplicated without harming the Shack. We would have a huge new alternative energy source!"

"Wow! We need to keep this between you and me for now."

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The full meaning of Damien's report requires some time to consider. The more Ty thinks about the island's plasma, the more excited, and at the same time, the more frightened he becomes. On one hand, the potential for discovering a new less expensive, eco-friendly source of energy for the world is irresistible. On the other hand, the opportunities to violate the rights of the Shacklers and destroy the island could be rampant if not controlled with an iron fist.

"Hey, Boss" says Elise. "Regarding those intruders, I was able to isolate four heat sources near the location of the Alexander's branch. One of them clearly returned to the branch. I need some more time to work on the other three. They disappear into a big blob of heat on my screen, so I need to find a way to isolate them in order to trace their paths either to the branch or away from it."

"Good job. Keep working on it, Elise. If anyone can do this, it will be you."

"Thanks, Boss!"

46

Sky returns to the branch with samples of AAs from the families of the most recent outbreak. Joey

has been monitoring the radio for the expected call from Ty, but there has been nothing yet.

Joey's also been thinking about the intruders. "Those guys, I think they were all guys, could come back, you know. Suppose they saw me and bolted. Suppose they didn't finish what they came to do. Should we set up some kind of 24-hour watch just to be sure they don't try some stunt again?"

"Not a bad thought, Joey," replies Aurora. "All we would have to do is that one of us remain awake. Come to think of it, if they attach again, we could spy on them. We could try to listen in on their conversation, see what they are looking at, and determine what they are trying to do."

"I'll set up a schedule," volunteers Neon. "I've been thinking, too. Assuming that Al's family is responsible for the spoiled AAs, I wonder if there is a way to find out the precise location of the bad AAs. If we knew their location, we could draw the city's attention to them or we could destroy them, right?"

"Good idea!" adds Joey.

"So, how do we find them?" asks Sky.

"Maybe Harry can help," suggests Neon.

"If we could find him," interjects Hazard.

"Something else we could give some thought to is how to expose Al's family," adds Neon. "Like, use The Bosses' technique on them,"

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"Do we really want to stoop that low?" inquires Aurora.

"A good question! But, I think they need to go out of business!"

"They should have to consume their own spoiled AAs!" says Joey.

"We have to prove it first," Sky reminds Joey.

Ty's radio call is received. "There has been a change of plans. The ship's Captain reported that the generator has been fixed with existing parts. The ship has turned around and we are headed back now."

"Great," says Sky. "We have done a lot of talking and have decided we want to see this through with you. We are eager to go to work, long term! And we have some thoughts on how to organize it."

"Sweet!" responds Ty. "We should be back in the area tomorrow. Hopefully, all we need is one more night meeting, then we can switch to days."

"We'll make it happen! Any word on the AAs or the intruders?"

"Yes, your AAs are definitely not like all the others. Damien is working on determining exactly how they were compromised. I'll try to have more on the AAs by the time we get back. Regarding the intruders, Elise was able to isolate four Shacklers around your branch. One was probably Joey. She is trying to track the others now."

"Okay, give us a call when you get back."

47

AI, Cade and Julio just received a message from their contact with the City Governors. It reads, LISTENERS HAVE OVERHEARD PARTS OF RADIO COMM WITH UNKNOWN SHACKER AND SHIP. PLEASE INVESTIGATE.

"If a Shacker is talking with someone on the ship, humans will be here soon," says Cade.

"Ayee!" shouts Julio. I smell money to be made!"

"We make a good team, hey, AI? See how The Bosses think?"

"Yeah, and I like it! But we need to be the ones the humans work with, not someone else who doesn't think like us!"

"Let's go talk to the head listener and find out more about this conversation."

48

Proof or no proof of the Hoffer's AAs causing the illnesses, Joey and Hazard leave the next morning to find Harry. They have skipped school because of the importance of the recent events and find him there

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easily. Harry has not been home since he revealed information about the Hoffer family AA farm. They bring him up to date about the intruders and the suspicion of degraded Hoffer AAs affecting the ill families. Harry has been so unreliable recently, they resist the temptation to tell him about Ty. Harry loves his family, though and offers to help any way he can.

"We really need to locate the remaining supply of spoiled AAs. Could you help?" asks Hazard.

"We know where the farm is. I need to get with the guys and figure out a scheme. This sounds like fun! Let me see what I can do."

"Great, what we would really like is their location and a sample of them."

Joey and Hazard return to the branch to tell the others about finding Harry, but something is not right.

"Mom's sacked out and Dad is really sluggish," says Neon with a clearly nervous quiver in her voice. "I've never seen them like this!"

"Can Dad talk?" asks Joey.

"Just a little."

Joey attempts to communicate with Sky to figure out how his symptoms compare with those of the other ill families in town.

"Th....They ar.. diff...."

"How different?"

Charles Sexton

"Fee.....feel hot."

"You feel hot?"

"Yes, and..."

"And what, Dad?"

"Can't see too well."

"Anything else?"

"AAs"

Sky falls asleep.

"Is there anything we can do?" asks Hazard.

"We need to keep them cool."

"Blankets wet with seawater might help," suggests Neon. "That's the coldest thing around. I'll get some."

"Good, that should help. Wait! We need to check on August. He was here the night of the intruders!"

"Let's you and I go to his branch right now," Hazard tells Joey.

"Let's go!"

Joey and Hazard have grown to love August because he has helped them dearly to grow confidence in themselves. He has been a source of wisdom for the family during a period of huge disruption and change. They go quickly to August's branch to find him detached and sinking into the plasma below.

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"No! No! No!" shouts Hazard as she can see his body in limbo below the surface of the plasma. She dives towards August with all of the strength she can muster. The body is too close for Joey to clearly see and all he can do is to awkwardly follow the blur in front of him as he attempts to follow Hazard.

"Help me push him up!" signs Hazard.

When they get August's hot body to the surface, one thing is clear. He is dead.

The Alexanders are a family whose members have learned to control their emotions better than most, but they are not perfect. Today, these two feel emotions they have read about but have never known, *rage* and *revenge*. They will find out who is responsible for this and make the murderers pay, somehow. This killing is not right!

August has no family, no one to remember his younger years. Although Shackers have wondered where they came from, the concept of religion has never developed. On the Shack, when someone dies, a ceremony is conducted by family members and the corpse is soon allowed to gently descend into the plasma where it apparently dissolves with time. Joey and Hazard are as close to family as August has. The two silently bow their heads, think their good-byes,

give the corpse a gentle nudge and let August go forever.

Then they race home to check on their parents.

49

Harry explains to his friends that the Hoffer family's AA farm is suspected of being the source of the illness that has spread across Macklin.

"My dad and my brother have collected evidence that demonstrates this certainty and my sister overheard one of Al's brothers talking about it."

"Let's go get em, dude!" bursts Harry's friend, Kofi.

"Yaw!"

"Not so fast, guys, it's the spoiled AAs we want to get first. We need to find out where they are and get a sample of them."

Harry and his friends often chase ions, which are electrically charged particles in the plasma, for sport. The stories Harry and his friends tell about chasing these atomically minuscule things are obviously exaggerated. However, what they do requires teamwork, close coordination, and communication, so, they know each other better than they do their

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own family members. Thus, they attach to a nearby branch and develop a plan.

Pretending to be chasing ions near the Hoffer farm, the boys quickly encounter Udo.

"Boy, am I glad to see you," huffs Harry. "Do you folks sell AAs?"

"Sure!" brags Udo. "That's what we do."

"We're out of energy, chasing ions, you know!"

"I hear that's lots of fun. Could I join you some-time?"

"Sure. We'd be glad to have you. You look like you have potential. Say, we need to absorb these AAs now. Could we attach to one of your branches to charge up?"

"How about right here. Feel free."

Udo is not thinking. He's going to be in trouble now! Once Harry and his friends are attached, they can see and hear almost everything being done and said on the farm branch network. In short order, they learn the location of the *bad* AAs and hear confirmation that the AAs have caused the illnesses. Harry also hears a horrifying phrase about, "the end of Neon's family."

50

Joey, and Hazard, crying, arrive at the home branch in an agitated state.

"They killed August!" Hazard tells Neon and Harry.

"What?"

"Wait!"

"They're gonna kill us all!"

"What?"

"Everybody calm down!" shouts Neon. "Joey, you go first."

Joey tells Harry and Neon about discovering August, about his hot body and his burial. He concludes that Aurora and Sky's temperatures need to be controlled to keep them from dying like August did.

Neon tells Harry about their parents' temperature and how she was keeping it low. Then she asks, "What did you mean when you said, 'They're gonna kill us all,' Harry?"

Harry tells them about the visit he and his friends made to the Hoffer farm, the location of the AAs, confirmation that the Hoffers caused the sickness, and-most urgently, the overheard threat to the family.

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"Wow, this is a big deal!" exclaims Harry. "What's going on?" he demands, confused. "I know about the spoiled AAs, but now August is dead, and Mom and Dad could die!"

"More than that," suggests Neon. "It appears that three intruders did something to our AAs that killed August and made Mom and Dad sick. Those three thugs may have been AI and two of The Bosses. And, on top of this mayhem, we have been in contact with a human."

"What?" shouts Harry with disbelief.

"Yes, it's the great-grandson of Sir Ernest and we've met him."

"No way! Incredible!"

"We need to try to contact him now!" urges Joey.

"Go ahead," says Neon.

Harry remains quiet, trying his best to understand everything going on.

Joey is able to reach Ty immediately and the four siblings brief Ty on the recent events. They all agree to meet at the usual place tonight. At the end of this radio conversation, Ty hears an additional unexpected "click" before he turns his radio off.

"Someone was listening to us!" Ty tells his team. "Damien, you go with us tonight. Bring your AA kit. Elise, I need for you to monitor heat sources around

the meeting point tonight and keep the radio open. Let me know if you detect any sources other than the four Alexanders. Jared let's rig the shoes for extra traveling, just in case."

51

"A gold mine!" cries out Cade, gleeful. "That's what it is, a virtual gold mine!"

"What a stroke of luck, ayee!" shouts Julio.

"You two guys are terrific!" laughs Al, who has quickly sized up the opportunity. "You know, if this outsider is someone with influence, we could make the contact tonight and have all kind of power and money."

"Sure as hell!" agrees Julio.

"But I wish we knew more about the extent of their communications," says Al. "We were moving around frequencies listening for conversations. All we heard was where and when they are going to meet. We also heard about sick parents, right?"

"I heard some names," says Cade. "What were they? Oh, uh, Ty, or something like that," he recalls.

"Yeah, Ty. That was the human. And there was another, what was it? How about Ho, Hoey, Joey?"

"Joey?" asks Al.

"Sounded like it!"

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"Joey with sick parents?"

"I think so."

"The Alexanders have a son named Joey and their parents should be sick by now," says Al.

"Shouldn't they all be sick by now?" asks Julio.

"Not if it affects older individuals first."

"I think I heard that four Shackers were meeting the human," says Cade.

"Umm, if it's the Alexanders, that could be Neon, Joey, Hazard and maybe the old man, August. August is kind of old to travel that far, but it could be him. There is another brother, Harry, but he's never home. Hmm, I wonder!"

"Is there anyone else in that family that might know about the Governors' radio contacts with humans?" asks Cade.

"That's it! The mother Aurora is a City Governor. She probably found out! That needs to be our working theory."

"Okay, then we assume it is either the three kids and an old man or four kids, right," suggests Cade.

"Hey, Al," teases Julio. "Isn't Neon your girl?"

"Could have been. History now!"

"So much for young love!" quips Julio, grinning.

"Yeah! Let's go to work on a plan. Our objective is to establish ourselves with the human as friendly,

trustworthy, and authoritative replacements for Aurora, Sky, and family, right?"

"Right."

"So we need to be the only ones there to meet with this Ty human," suggests AI. "The kids need to be detained or, preferably, taken out of the game quickly. We don't know when my catalyst will kick in to make the kids sick, so we need to stop them somehow. I know the family well. Without the parents, the kids can't see anything closer than seven feet. If Harry is not there-and that is the likely scenario, they won't be able to see anything closer than fifteen feet away. Maybe we can create some kind of distraction for them on their way to the meeting. You know, do something close so they can't see."

"A trap, that's good!" figures Julio. "But what can we do?"

"I don't know, but if these kids talk to the human after we do, they will destroy our good fortune," adds Cade. We need to make sure they remain nonfunctional forever. Could you give them more catalyst, AI?"

"Won't work. I don't know how long the effects last and it's too late for that anyway. No, we need an idea which is new for us Shacklers and something bold that we can do fast."

"How about their eyes?" wonders Julio.

"What do you mean?" questions AI.

"You know, hurt their eyes!"

Vision has always plagued Shackers and no one would ever think anything too odd if the kids all lost their vision. Shackers are not generally violent, but such an act would require violence of a nature unfamiliar to residents of the Shack. Al and The Bosses would have to take bold steps to damage or destroy the kids' vision.

"We could ram their eyes, I guess," considers Al. "Let's think. If one of us could get enough momentum, put his head down, and ram the eyes enough, that might do it!"

"Hmm, the eyes are fragile, they kind of stick out with no protection," adds Cade. "I'm sure we can disable them if we can hit them hard."

So, a plan is designed. All agree that they will have to encounter the kids before they arrive at the meeting point, hide in shallow folds of plasma until the kids are within two to four meters, depending on Harry's presence, charge them as fast and hard as they can and ram their eyes. They must stay within the minimum distance to be able to repeat the ramming until the job is complete. They know this will require a lot of energy, so they absorb AAs and depart.

52

Joey, Hazard, Harry, and Neon prepare to depart as well. They are intense, angry, and afraid. They have never felt this insecure or threatened, but now is the time for clear thinking and logic.

"Let's leave with plenty of energy," recommends Joey. All but one agree and attach.

"Not me!" exclaims Hazard. "I'm out of here. I'll see you guys later!"

"It would have been nice to have your vision and guidance, but you're all over the place and don't help much anyway," shrugs Joey, accepting her departure.

"We won't be too long," Harry promises. "Tell me while we wait, Joey, what do humans look like?"

"Really weird! Like, they are almost two meters tall and have these two long things that stick out below their neck with long digits on them."

Neon adds, "They make really good tools for grabbing and holding all kinds of things. And humans actually move upright on stilts that are attached at their hips. Funny thing is though, they sink into the plasma if they don't wear these big flat things they call shoes at the bottom of the stilts."

Joey continues, "And they have to wear covers on their body because they don't have much hair. They

get cold if they don't. And they have a lot of skin that burns in the sun."

"Despite all of those disadvantages, they are really smart. Like super smart!" says Neon, impressed with them. "And nice! You will like them."

"I think we should leave in about fifteen minutes," suggests Joey."

53

"This looks like a good place," says Cade. "Look, the plasma is thick as tar here and it'll give us good traction to gain momentum."

"I agree," says Al. "We're going to need all of the traction we can get. "Look at all of these folds in the plasma. They will give us places to hide. We're about 500 yards away from the meeting place, so the human shouldn't hear us if there is a lot of noise."

"Okay, how are we going to do this-take turns, all charge at the same time, or what?" asks Julio.

"Good question," acknowledges Al. "The kids won't be able to see well within four meters, and we have to stay closer than that distance to them, so they won't be able to fight back much."

"I can see up close," adds Cade, "up to two meters, Julio can see well between two and four

meters and AI, you can see between three and eight. So, we can all work on this at the same time."

"AI, you should stay out of this," Julio suggests, boldly out of character. "Think about it. You can't see much within three meters. You really need to see better up close to accurately ram the eyes. You might even miss them and hit one of us! And if they do see us, they know you and they don't know us. We don't need to have that complication."

"Right, but, uh, wait, uh, I need to do my share, you know what I mean,"

"I understand, but we don't do sloppy work, man. This is a big deal and it's a risk we can't take. Cade, you need to make the first ram, probably hit the little, fast one first, so she can't get away."

"That makes sense, then the boy Joey. I'll ram Neon and then the old codger. One eye, back up two meters and ram the second eye. If two meters doesn't give us enough traction, then four, no more, and quickly."

"I'll wait in the plasma folds and with my longer vision, I'll watch for anything that we haven't planned for," proposes AI. "You okay with that, Cade?"

"Yeah, good. We don't know how many hits it will take to stop them, but once we damage them enough, we all proceed to the meeting and tell the

human, Ty, that the kids got sick at the last minute and asked us to take their place."

"Remember," says Al, "Surprise is the key!"

54

Ty, Damien, and Jared are on their way to the island. Elise radios in that three heat sources are near the meeting location and one is approaching rapidly, bumping into a few things on the way.

"Sounds like they might get there before we do," concludes Ty. "This inflatable won't go any faster, but that's okay."

55

"Damn! What was that?" shouts Cade.

Al, Cade, and Julio are the surprised ones. Hazard flies right past them, headed straight for the meeting with Ty.

"Hazard! She's early!" moans Al. "I don't think she saw us, but we can't catch her."

"What do we do now?" fumes Julio. "We need another plan, man!"

"No," responds Al, "let's stick with our plan. Let's take care of the others that are coming first and deal with her later. We need to come up with another story for the human once we're finished here. It's just one less kid to worry about for now! Quick, hide."

56

"Something is wrong!" reports Elise. "Three more heat sources are moving in. At first, I thought that Hazard simply passed up her brothers and sister, but with three more heat sources, I don't know what is going on! It appears like Hazard is at the meeting spot now. The first three have not moved. The new heat sources are moving towards the meeting and will pass by the first three soon."

"So, the first three were early and not moving, right?" repeats Ty.

"Right," replies Elise.

"And these could be the ones that were listening to our radio conversation with the kids. This doesn't look good. Thanks, Elise. Keep us posted."

"Looks like the first three may be trying to ambush the kids and missed Hazard!" concludes Damien.

"Yeah, the last three are more or less on our expected schedule. They must be Joey, Neon, and

Harry. They're in trouble! Let's get this thing into high gear!"

57

"Holy, Harry is with them!" Al tries to whisper. Change in plan. Harry is strong!"

"No problem," says Cade, cool as a glacier. "I'll go first and ram each eye once. Julio, you hit each eye again quickly, got it?"

"Got it!"

"Then, I'll choose the one farthest from me and go after 'em! Hard! Then, it will be a free-for-all. Use your judgment, Julio. Al, once they are disoriented, you join in, okay?"

"Okay!"

"Are we all in agreement?"

"Yes!"

"Yes!"

No Shacker has any experience with physical violence to base their actions on. Their strategies and tactics are new thoughts and their emotions are savagely agitated. The actions they are about to take make them individually and secretly question themselves, each having doubts whether their plan is the smart and right action to take. However, each is

resisting the urge to break from the group's plan, fearing he would appear weak. The Bosses' families have always been fearless, as has Al. They must not, actually, cannot stop now.

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Ty and his crew cannot get to the designated spot early.

"Hazard, are you all right?" asks Ty.

"I'm okay. I sped away early because...I don't know! I'm bushed!"

"Did you see anyone on the way here?"

"No, I left early, like I said."

"Is there any reason why the others would have been waiting before they approached us?" he persists.

"What do you mean? You're scaring me!" she cries.

"Something out of the ordinary is going down, Hazard. We have three unexpected heat sources nearby."

Ty radios Elise for an update and is told that there are six heat targets very close to each other.

"Hey, guys, put on the shoes and let's go. No time to waste!"

They head for the six with Hazard trying to stay up with them, as she is very low on energy.

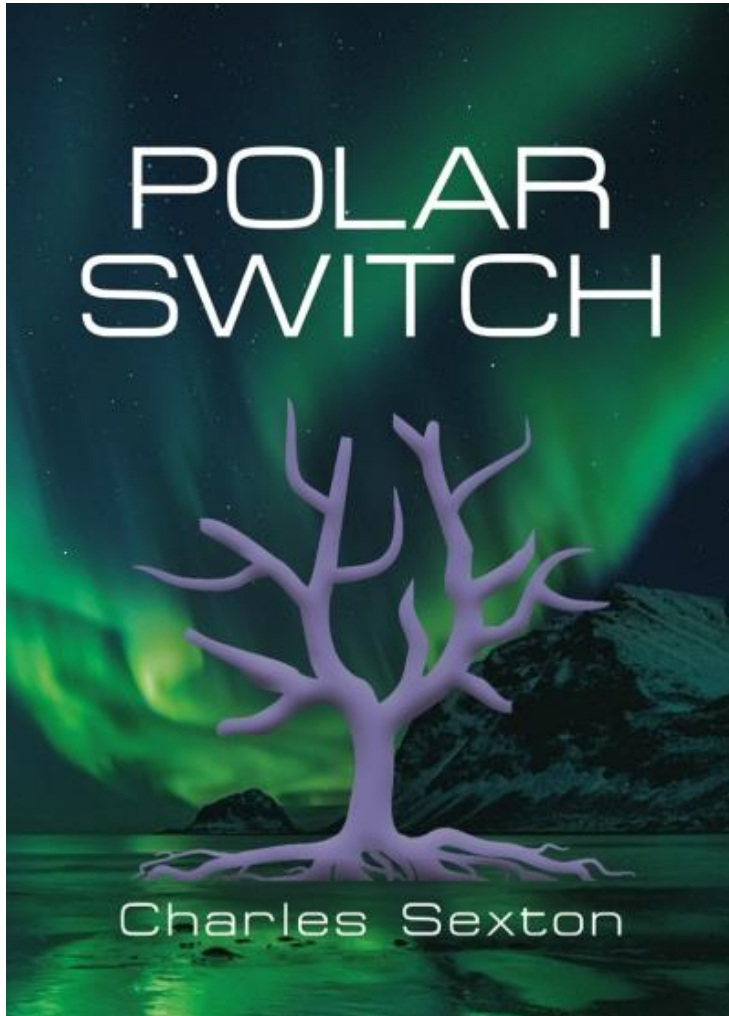
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Cade waits until Harry is close and musters all of the speed he can in the short distance he has. He aims for Harry's nearest eye and rams it with the bony substance on his own head. Harry is stunned; he has no idea what just happened, but he can't see out of his right eye and it hurts like hell. He screams at a level that no Shacker has ever heard. Cade's momentum carries him beyond Harry and within the focal length of Harry's left eye. Harry is able to see this stranger turn quickly and gain speed back towards him, but he is too confused to respond quickly. Cade rams Harry's other eye.

"Harry, what's wrong?" shouts Neon. Harry? Harry! Joey, can you see anything?"

"Blurs, all blurs! Someone is out there! Ohh! Help!" screams Joey as he is rammed.

"No!" shouts Neon as she detects a blur approaching her. "No, no!" Intense pain shoots through her right eye.



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