

2042

Artemis Rising
M.A. Mitchell

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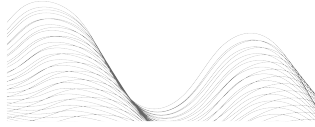
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For Teresa, always

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Prologue

July 2026

Sandra sensed Linda Ngo's gentle movements as she entered the room. Her parents handled the introductions, and they were left on the living room couch to talk.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Sandra. Gina has spoken highly of you."

"Really? That's kind of her. Gina is a great lady, but I'm surprised she would speak highly of me to a Berkeley professor. I was a pretty average student."

"Well, it's your brain we're interested in, not your academics."

"Excuse me?"

Sandra didn't know why Linda had come to her house. If the request hadn't come from Gina Johns, Sandra would have ignored it. However, Gina was the superintendent at the California School for the Blind and a trusted friend.

"If my information is correct, you have a specific form of Optic Nerve Hypoplasia that could be relevant to our study. Can I ask you to confirm that you have no light perception whatsoever?"

"That's correct."

"Thank you. That's good."

"Umm, yeah, lucky me." This lady was already irritating Sandra, but in many ways, Sandra knew she was indeed lucky.

ONH was primarily an issue with the optic nerve, but there were often secondary brain disorders. For example, in some cases, the hypothalamus developed abnormally. That caused a lot of issues. The hypothalamus controlled the pituitary gland, which in turn controlled all of your emotions through the release of hormones. If you were happy or sad, excited or bored, frightened or content, it was your hypothalamus telling your pituitary gland to make you feel that way. Fortunately for Sandra, she had nothing more, or less, than the usual hormonal issues of an eighteen-year-old.

Linda paused and started to explain. "I'm sorry if I misspoke. What I meant is your form of ONH is a good target for our study. We're using an extremely precise form of repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation to target the occipital lobe. Our research so far shows that we can send images directly to the brain independently of the optic nerve."

Sandra didn't know what all of that meant, but she understood enough to make her heart drop into her stomach. It was made very clear early in life that she would never be able to see. That was a fact she had accepted long ago. The psychologists called her "well-adjusted." Yet, for the first time in her life, this woman gave her the idea that she might be able to see, well, something. She probably should have been happy, but her first reaction was fear. Fear that Linda was a crackpot. Fear that her hopes would be raised and then destroyed. Fear that her life, her good life, might be destroyed by change.

Linda sensed the moment and continued cautiously. "We have been able to project low-resolution images to volunteers within the lab. What we don't know is if it will work on someone such as yourself, where that part of the brain has been dormant since birth."

Ah, here it comes, thought Sandra. The expectation setting combined with the request to be a guinea pig. She felt her fear turn into something closer to anger. *Who is this woman to come here and disrupt my life like*

this? She clenched her fists into tight balls, but stayed silent as Linda continued.

“You might be wondering why we want to work with you in particular. Frankly, you fit the criteria. Specifically, someone without a functioning optic nerve yet also without any other related complications. Secondly we want someone as young as possible so the occipital lobe will have been dormant for as short a period as possible. Yet, for legal and ethical reasons, at this stage in the research, we are required to have an adult who can give consent. An eighteen-year-old with your condition thirty minutes away from our lab makes you a prime candidate for our program.”

Sandra kept her breathing deep and steady. Her hands remained in tight fists, and her lips shut.

“Speaking to Gina, there was one other reason I moved you up to the top of our list. She said you always kept a positive attitude despite adversity. Nothing seems to keep you down.”

Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me, Sandra thought. That had to be the worst bit of pandering she’d heard in a while. It was so blatant that it made her smile despite herself. Yet that little crack of humor was all it took to allow hope to rise up again. She heard herself asking Linda about the next steps.

“We would like you to come in for some initial scans and fitting sessions. If everything looks good, we’ll ask you to sign a non-disclosure agreement and contract with us. We will then create a custom headset for you at considerable expense, so we will require a twelve-month commitment to the project. We think we’ll need you for an average of three days a week for four hours a day, but that’s just an estimate. You are free to do whatever you’d like outside of the lab, but you must remain in the area, must not speak about the project, and must be available whenever we need you. In return, you will receive a base salary of \$54,000 for the year.”

Ah, okay, so this is just a job, Sandra thought. Well, that's okay then. She had just graduated from high school and, frankly, didn't have much else going on. She could play along with these academics and maybe take some classes at Ohlone Community College on the side. The money sounds good, and all they want to do is mess with a part of my brain I'm not using anyway. Oh, yeah, they are messing with my brain.

"Are you planning on irradiating my brain or something?" Sandra asked. "Will I need to take drugs or anything?"

"No, nothing like that," Linda replied. "The magnetic pulses simply trigger the brain's neurons, replicating the way they would be triggered naturally. Once you remove the headset, there's no lasting effect." Linda paused for a moment. "The main thing I want you to be aware of is that this is very much in a developmental stage. We might accidentally target the wrong neurons and send you incomplete or distorted images. Given that you have never processed visual images before, we're unsure how you'll react to some of the stimuli."

Sandra had agreed to do it before Linda had left the house. A week later, she went to UC Berkeley's Vision Research Center for the initial scans. She enrolled part-time at Ohlone. Another week went by, and she was under contract with the lab. She had her hair cut short. A month more, and they had her come in for the first real session.

She was led to a comfortable chair and asked to sit still. They placed a heavy, tight-fitting hood on her head. She could feel the weight of the attached electromagnets and wires. Sandra couldn't tell exactly how many people were in the room, but she knew Linda was there and at least a few others.

"Sandra, today will be a calibration session. We're going to send pulses to your occipital lobe. You should perceive dots or small flashes of light. We will begin in three, two, one."

Sandra let out a small yelp as she "saw" little dots of different colors flash on and off. They moved around as she perceived a field of vision for the first time in her life. Just little dots, but they were in different

places, and they were . . . there. A few minutes into the session, and the nausea started. Then came a cold sweat. The field went black again.

"Sandra, we're going to give you a little break while we look at the data."

Sandra puked into her lap and onto the floor.

"We'll clean that up. How are you feeling?"

"Fine, I guess" was all she could get out as her mind was racing at what she just experienced.

"A little motion sickness is to be expected. Your body is trying to incorporate a new way of perceiving your surroundings. Those little dots probably didn't give you much of a point of reference."

Sandra didn't think it was motion sickness. Or maybe it was. But it was mostly shock. This was sight? She had no basis to compare. She literally, suddenly, had a new sense that she didn't have a moment ago.

"We can quit for the day if you'd like," Linda said, and then there was a male voice trying to quietly object to that suggestion. Sandra didn't want to quit either. She wanted to see the dots again.

A week went by, and she was back in the chair with the headset on again.

"Sandra, today we're going to try to send you an actual image. Let us know what you see."

A switch was flicked, and she heard a low hum. "Four lines . . . It's a square! No, it's four squares; two of them are one color, and the other two are a different color!"

"That's right, Sandra! The darker color is blue, and the lighter color is yellow."

And so it went for the first few months. Sandra had to learn her colors and confirm her tactile perceptions of shapes by sight. The images were simple to begin with, but slowly started to become more complex. There wasn't any more puking or cold sweats, just intense headaches by the end of each four-hour session. Yet she found herself longing to go

back in between sessions. She was learning colors! She dropped out of Ohlone.

There was small talk between sessions, and Sandra got to know the other researchers. It turned out Linda was just half of the leadership team for the project. The male voice she heard arguing from time to time was Peter Graham. He was apparently responsible for the software that created the images in her head.

By month five, she was able to perceive multiple objects of various shapes against a background. She also got a sense of what people meant by “resolution,” and she knew she wanted more of it.

Things started to move by month six.

“Sandra, time for something new. We’re going to go from static images to images in motion.” Sandra felt something being placed in her lap. “That’s a bucket, in case you need it.” Sandra laughed, and the room followed.

She didn’t need the bucket, but the smiles didn’t stop as she saw the rectangles and circles move. Peter said she was seeing “Pong,” which he said was one of the first video games ever created. Seeing objects in motion felt natural to Sandra, and the end-of-session headaches started to go away.

Month seven was her next life-changing experience.

“We’re going to try something different today, Sandra. Just let me know what you see when we start.”

A flick of a switch, and another low hum. “I see . . . is that a person? They’re sitting. They’re waving an arm? It looks like there might be two other people behind the one in front. Wait, is that you waving an arm?”

“Very good, Sandra! It is indeed me. We’re sending you a live feed for the first time! The image clarity still needs work, but this is the room you’ve been coming to for the last several months.”

Maybe the image did need some work, but Sandra wept from her closed eyes as she saw her surroundings for the first time.

The non-disclosure agreement prevented Sandra from talking in detail about what was happening. However, her friends and family knew she was working in a lab, and they knew her emotions were on a roller coaster related to this work. By the time she entered the tenth month at the lab, Sandra had become unusually short and irritable at home. When her parents suggested quitting work if it made her so upset, she screamed “No!” and locked herself in her room. It was so out of character that her mom contacted Linda privately. After describing her daughter’s behavior, she said that she was concerned that there may be side effects from the lab work. Linda assured her that direct side effects were highly unlikely but that they would look into it.

Sandra received a new, lighter-weight hood as she entered the eleventh month of lab work.

“We’re going to do a little calibrating to start, Sandra.” More dots, more blocks, more Pong, but no puking, and everything seemed a little crisper.

“Now we’re going to switch over to the live feed.” Suddenly, the room was revealed, and she could see like she had never seen before. She gasped in amazement as she made out some of the features on Linda’s face in front of her. And there was Peter sitting there with a little smile—yes, she could see he was smiling!

“You should be seeing the equivalent of about twenty-six-thousand pixels of resolution. It’s about the same as the very first digital videos on the internet,” Peter said.

Sandra had no idea what he was talking about, but she was amazed by the detail that was suddenly available to her. The tears of joy started to flow. She saw Peter reach out and put an arm around Linda. *Oh, that’s how it is*, Sandra thought, *nerd love!* She started giggling through the tears and then, just as quickly, started sobbing uncontrollably. Linda thought something must have gone wrong and turned off the feed, which only made Sandra cry harder.

“Sandra, are you okay? What’s wrong? Have the headaches returned?”

Sandra shook her head and continued sobbing.

“What is it then? Do you want to quit for the day?”

“No! I don’t want to quit.”

“That’s fine. Just gather yourself, and we can do some more scans to make sure everything is okay before continuing.”

“You don’t understand! I don’t want to quit! This is my last month before the contract ends. You’ve shown me what I’ve been missing all my life, and then you’re going to take it away again. It’s not fair! I knew this would end badly; I just didn’t know it would be this brutal!”

Through her weeping, she heard Peter and Linda pull away and murmur something to each other. Then Linda addressed her again.

“We were planning on waiting until things were a little further along to tell you, but we don’t think this has to end in a month.”

There it was. Hope rising again. Sandra wanted to shove it back down, but she controlled her sobbing and listened to Linda.

“We think this process, using repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation or rTMS, to stimulate the brain has obvious commercial potential. The university has agreed to allow us to spin out our work as a private endeavor as long as we agree to pay royalties for any commercial sales.

“The potential applications go beyond restoring sight, as amazing as that is. But we will start with that as our first commercial product.

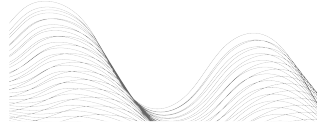
“And I know it might sound funny, but Peter has gotten used to your brain. Each one is unique, and he’s gotten a sense of how yours is mapped. Having access to it going forward will help us get to market sooner. We won’t be able to pay you more than minimum wage at first, but we can offer you a small amount of equity. It won’t sound like a lot, just a percent of a percent, but it should grow into something if the company does what we think it might. In return, we’ll need you to be in the lab full-time. When we’re not actively testing, we’d like you to

help out where you can. Maybe you can answer the phones for us or something?”

Sandra started crying again, but this time, they were tears of joy.

Sandra started nodding vigorously and managed to get out an “okay” in between the tears and sniffing.

And what did Linda think she would say, Sandra wondered. It was the choice between going back to being blind . . . or not.



Katherine

May 2042

Katherine looked out at the peaceful waters of the San Francisco Bay far below. It was late on a sunny May morning in the City. The fog was weeks away, and the rain of winter was long gone.

Grabbing her coil from its charging cradle, she turned away from the window and collapsed on the couch. She looked up again, staring at the Bay Bridge, humming with traffic. Did her colleagues feel the same way? It wasn't something you could talk about. Peter? No, bless him. He seemed to genuinely enjoy casting. Frank? Yeah, Frank probably felt the same way she did.

The thought of work steadied her resolve. That's what this was. Work. That meant attending a cast once a month, advertising and all.

Resigned, she placed the coil on her head. A menu popped up over her vision. She navigated to the SmallNet and selected the cast she had bookmarked. "*DHF – Osprey.*"

The caster was crewing on *Osprey*, and this was the Double Handed Farallones race, which had begun a couple of hours ago. The sailing race was around Southeast Farallon Island, part of a chain of islands about twenty-four miles west of the Golden Gate Bridge. The Farallones were little known, even in the Bay Area, but Katherine remembered reading about them when she was much younger. They were nicknamed the Devil's Teeth due to their shape and the great white sharks that frequented the area.

Which was fine. Or not. Katherine didn't care. She was just fulfilling her monthly casting commitment and wanted a sailing story to tell Harbrinder.

She selected "join," and her vision dipped to black. A few seconds later, she was physically still on her couch, but also on the *Osprey*, experiencing everything through the caster. She was now a slightly younger man. They were standing with a sailboat's wheel in their hands. Their legs were stiff. A cold wind was blowing. As their eyes scanned the ocean, the waters were in stark contrast to the serenity of the Bay just a few moments before. Despite the chill, she felt sweat on their skin. Their nerves shook as the *Osprey* fell off one wave and slammed almost immediately into the next.

"I told you not to go through the Potato Patch," the caster yelled to a middle-aged man trimming the mainsail.

"My boat, my call," the other man yelled back. "Just keep the speed up and feather it right before she falls off the wave. We'll be through this before long."

Katherine wondered if she had joined a sinking ship. With each wave, the tiny sailboat felt as though it would crack in two. The caster's anxiety flowing through her body seemed to verify her concerns as the pounding continued.

"Here, let's switch places for a bit," the middle-aged man said as he moved cautiously towards the caster. Both sailors held the wheel until the *Osprey* was momentarily in the trough of a wave, then the caster moved to the bench and grabbed the mainsheet.

Katherine felt the rope in their gloved hand. They worked the mainsheet, pulling the sail slightly in and out as the *Osprey* slid up and down the waves. They scanned the horizon at the crest of each wave and could see several other sailboats to the south and, yes, behind them. A sense of satisfaction relieved some of the pain that had crept into their lower back.

They looked back at the middle-aged man at the wheel. The captain, Katherine supposed. Their eyes drifted to the sailing jacket he was wearing and focused on the HH logo on his chest. Katherine felt an artificial, but definitive, quasi-sexual feeling from seeing that label. *Ah, there it is. Fine.*

A few minutes later, the interval between waves began to increase. The *Osprey* was still taking a beating, but the pounding had turned into a roller-coaster ride instead of bumper cars.

“See,” the captain said with some pride, “We’re ahead of the fleet. I bet we make it around the Farallones by 1:00.”

Katherine felt the caster’s gratification contrast with her own feelings. She was happy not to witness a disaster, but she was done. Her lock-in period was over. She wasn’t staying on the *Osprey* any longer than she had to. She clicked out and was back on the couch in her apartment. The cold, the pain, the exhaustion, all disappeared instantly from her body as it lingered in her mind.

Walking over to the kitchen, she opened the fridge, poured herself a glass of white wine, and stood at the counter, looking out once again on the tranquil waters of the Bay.

Coming to terms with the impulse bubbling up from her subconscious, she reached over and grabbed her tablet-sized glass. *Might as well get it over with.* She navigated to the Helly Hansen website and purchased her new sailing jacket.

The next morning the alarm clock went off at 5:45 a.m. As usual, Katherine was already awake. Swinging her legs out of bed, she began her day comfortable in the discipline of routine.

It was Monday. A work day. She had her schedule memorized, and she knew there was little chance of drama. When she was honest with herself, these average days were the ones she liked best.

She placed her slender frame into her running clothes and put her long black hair in a tight ponytail. A quick glance at her glass confirmed there was nothing urgent, so she took the elevator down to Fremont Street.

Katherine was welcomed by the start of a sunny May morning in the City. This was her favorite time of year in San Francisco. The fog was weeks away, and the rain of winter was long gone.

Slowly jogging down Mission Street, she navigated sidewalks filled with the mixed energy of people coming from late-night casts while others headed to work. The crowd was an assortment of rich and poor, young and old. Missing was the emphasis on the tech bros and the homeless from Katherine's youth. The City had finally recaptured some of its past as the cultural center of the Bay Area.

She turned toward the waterfront and felt herself gaining pace. A not-unpleasant stiffness in her legs began to loosen as her breathing became a conscious act. The scent of water, the crisp air, her heart rate increasing. She tuned in to her own body even as she became more connected to her surroundings. No earbuds, no running chip, no glass to display analytics, just the pure motion of her body through the buzz of the City.

She hit a rhythm and knew she would maintain this pace for the rest of her 3.5-mile run. She quickly passed the gathering commuters at the Ferry Terminal and began ticking off the odd-numbered piers on the north side of the Bay Bridge. Pier 1, Pier 3, Pier 5, Pier 7 . . . by the time she passed Pier 9, her mind had started to drift through the day's agenda.

Her first meeting of the day was the executive welcome at the new hire orientation. In theory, every member of the senior staff was on rotation for this assignment. In reality, her peers were good at coming

up with “unavoidable conflicts,” and she gave this pitch more often than any other executive. As the head of Corporate Communications, she was the obvious substitute, but Katherine truly didn’t mind giving the presentation. She knew she would walk in, turn on the full “Katherine Tanaka” charm, and convert the room full of new hires into members of her growing fan club.

The thought of cultivating a fan club struck Katherine as funny. She didn’t consider herself a schemer or someone who manipulated people to get ahead. She prided herself on her business ethics and behavior. She simply wasn’t oblivious to her situation or how the game was played. The simple truth was that at a company the size of Artemis, with many employees doing little more than reviewing the work of AI, human beings filled the gap with politics.

Katherine looked up from her thoughts as she strode past Pier 39, empty of tourists on a Monday morning. She glanced out at Alcatraz and made the turn back toward her apartment.

Mornings like this made her happy to be back in the Bay Area. Katherine grew up in the Silicon Valley suburb of Fremont but surprised her parents by going to Penn over Stanford or Cal. After graduating with a BA in Communications in 2027, she took a PR job at a large financial services company in Philadelphia. However, it didn’t take long before she grew tired of the East Coast and was looking for a role in California.

As it turned out, a small, but rapidly growing bio-tech company named Artemis was looking to hire a communications manager. Now San Francisco was home and work was Artemis headquarters on Alameda Island.

Back when she joined in 2030, Artemis had just the one building on the old Alameda Naval Air Station. Now it had not only taken over most of the station, but had transformed the entire island into “The Island.” In the twelve years she’d been with the company, she’d seen the addition of a new car tunnel from West Oakland, a new terminal

at the Oakland Airport, and the old Seaplane Lagoon transformed into the Bay Area's largest ferry terminal. Housing on Alameda Island itself has become some of the most expensive in the Bay Area.

Despite being a ferry ride away, Katherine originally chose to live in San Francisco because housing had become relatively inexpensive. The downtown area was still reeling from the tech exodus of the 2020s and former office buildings had gradually become apartments. Young people, artists, and the non-techie crowd were finally able to return to the City. With them came the nightlife and experiences a young woman like Katherine sought when she spared a moment from work. After all, at first she didn't know how long this job would last, so she figured she might as well live somewhere fun. Once the potential for the company had become obvious, she could have moved to the Island, but she had no desire to do so. People there lived in constant relation to Artemis. Alameda had become a company town, just like it was a Navy town until the government left in 1997. As dedicated as Katherine was to work, she also prized the separation provided by living across the Bay.

She finished her run and cooled off by walking the last block. Back up the elevator and a quick shower. The day called for a younger, but tasteful business casual outfit that a new hire might assume someone in her position would wear.

As usual, her life started to transition from personal to work over her morning breakfast. This was when she habitually reviewed the news that broke since she slept. The feed was curated by Suzi, the Comms department AI. Anything in the media that was Artemis-related and either currently trending, with the potential to grow, or flagged by another department's AI was brought to her attention. The AI certainly helped narrow the volume, but Katherine knew it was her disciplined approach to data consumption that had brought her this far. She had to be prepared if Frank, or any member of senior staff, asked her opinion on a story. Katherine had never been caught flat-footed, and she was determined to keep it that way.

Today's feed was fairly typical. The three items flagged as most likely to be discussed were:

1) Another "Could it happen here?" story related to the Second Korean War from a mid-level site. Nothing new there, and not getting much traction. Suzi recommended no action, but it might be discussed internally.

2) An opinion piece in the *New York Times* on Neo-Imperialism and Artemis's development facility in Uganda. No new content generation needed, but Suzi recommended a relatively small ad buy through a third party promoting a recent book on Africa's economic renaissance powering global GDP growth. Katherine tapped to approve.

3) A SmallNet industry group had published a report showing live stream OpenCast use had grown from two to three percent of casting over the last year. Suzi said the consensus from Artemis's own AIs put it closer to four percent. This was indeed news to Katherine as it had been hovering around two percent for years. Suzi flagged it for general awareness.

The rest of the feed was a collection of local and world news followed by a series of interview requests for senior staff that she approved or denied, largely following Suzi's recommendations.

With that, Katherine felt prepared to walk down to the ferry and head over to the Island. Most senior execs would take an AutoCab or even drive themselves. Katherine liked the ferry though. Sure, it was faster than sitting in traffic, but it was more than that. The ferry was filled almost exclusively with young Artemis employees, and she made sure they saw her as one of them. She was always willing to talk, but she was constantly amused at how few people would approach her. It was some combination of courtesy and fear that made people wary of contact.

Once on board, she headed upstairs and found a seat near the window. The ferry lurched gently into reverse and turned to the Bay. They accelerated onto hydrofoils and away from the City. Katherine had her handheld glass out and ready, but she avoided looking at it.

After all these years, the view was still worth a few moments of her time. She looked up as they passed under the original western span of the Bay Bridge, still connecting the City to Yerba Buena Island. The Golden Gate and even the newer eastern span on the Oakland side were more famous, but this part of this bridge was Katherine's. The old steel suspension bridge was a constant companion out her apartment window and the gateway to her life at Artemis. Moving clear of the towers and out into the open bay, she reviewed the easier messages of the morning while flagging the tougher ones for follow-up on campus. Ten minutes later, she saw the USS Hornet out of the corner of her eye as they entered the Seaplane Lagoon.

The Hornet was an aircraft carrier from World War 2 that was opened as a museum in 1998, a year after the Navy pulled out of Alameda. Now it had become the unofficial mascot and guardian of Artemis Corporation. As a global company, Artemis had to be careful about using overtly American patriotic symbols, but there was no ignoring having an aircraft carrier on your front door. So Artemis directed some of its local community funds toward the preservation of the Hornet. Katherine even gave a little speech at the Hornet's hundredth birthday celebration a couple of years ago. She wondered what the ghosts on board thought of a Tanaka giving a pep talk on the flight deck, but she doubted many people made the connection. A hundred years is a long time, and besides, she was as American as any of them, even if, or maybe even especially since, her grandparents spent part of their childhood in the Manzanar relocation camp during World War 2.

Secure at the dock, Katherine stepped off the ferry and walked to the AutoTram marked for Building 12. There were over thirty buildings that made up the Artemis campus, including a dedicated five-star hotel for customers and VIPs. All the buildings had their own character, but none of them were over six stories tall. Maybe it was their academic background, but Artemis's founders wanted a distributed and walkable campus rather than a mega tower. The old Naval Air Station became

the ideal place to create an eccentric headquarters central to the rest of the Bay Area.

Building 12 stood out from everything else on campus. It was the largest building and clearly the nerve center of a very powerful corporation, purpose-built to house senior staff and impress visitors. Its main auditorium took up much of the ground floor. Sliding partitions opened up to create an indoor/outdoor space that could accommodate thousands during a company-wide meeting or special event. Most days, including today, it was subdivided into smaller spaces. One of those spaces housed the orientation Katherine was walking to.

"Hi, Katherine!" came the familiar voice as she walked into the lobby. It was Sandra, technically the receptionist but also a bit of a living legend at Artemis.

"Hey, Sandra, are they ready for me in there?"

"Just about. They all got back from badging a few minutes ago, and I think they're grabbing coffee inside."

"All righty then. I guess I better head in and inspire the next generation."

"Just do me a favor and leave me out of the story this time."

"Not a chance."