

 Mia Molvray © 2014
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Thieves of Sorrow

Chapter 1

There is something about the cry of a very young child. In the middle of the most boring task in the world -- it was forcing Corinna to skip dinner, which made it worse -- she sat up. She stopped herself from racing out to help. There were no children in the research section of the Station. Were there?

Another wail sounded, almost a shriek.

She was in her cubicle, behind a lab full of humming equipment, around a corner, at the very end of the hall, but the sound cut through everything like the only thing that mattered.

Her feet moved into leap-up position. She shoved them back under the chair. That was definitely a child. But other adults had to be there. Maybe a proud parent was showing Junior around, and the kid had tripped over his ankle weights.

But what would anybody be doing showing a toddler around? It wasn't like a five year-old would be fascinated by a genome scan of Martian bacteria. And if a kid did get fascinated, it would probably be by something that could electrocute her. In the six months Corinna had been on Mars, nobody had ever brought a child to this part of the dome.

A third wail split the air. Corinna jumped up and ran out. Her tiny office was off one of the labs she supervised for Dr. Morbier. She dodged around lab benches and reached the door just as the cry abruptly cut off. It was coming from somewhere about halfway down the hall. Why had it been cut off? Had someone muzzled the child? Or offered him or her a candy bar? Was this an emergency? Or an overreaction? Corinna kept right on going, glancing into every open door, right and left.

Corinna Mansur's official title was Postdoctoral Consulting Scientist and her official work was billed as research for the terraforming of Mars, but her job included everything that someone more important didn't want to do. Now, since it was dinner time and there was no one to pester her, she'd been planning tasks for the lab techs during the coming week.

There was another wail, weaker, less urgent.

It seemed to come from Dr. Wallis's office. Could the great doctor be seeing a patient? Not likely. He was too famous to deal with humans except as brain cells in tissue culture flasks. Of course, this far from help, even Dr. Wallis might have to pitch in if there was an emergency.

She felt the usual creeping annoyance when she thought about Dr. George Wallis and brain cells. She was the one who should have been the great doctor's right hand postdoc. Her dissertation had been on brain chemistry. Instead, she'd had all that trouble with Nat, and now she was a glorified flunky messing about with cold tolerance in rabbits. Rabbits! Something safe enough to study in a high school lab on Earth. The whole point of the Station was doing projects too dangerous for Earth, and too interesting not to do at all. The kind of projects everyone else was doing. Everyone except her.

Stop it, she lectured herself. She was lucky to have found an academic job. So what if she was a glorified rabbit farmer. It paid the bills, and some day a real job would show up.

The cries seemed to have stopped. Maybe there wasn't a problem. Maybe she should just continue on down the hall and take dinner at a normal hour instead of going back and scheduling techs.

Hah. Very funny. She'd be up till the wee hours if she did that. She cast a glance through the half open door into Wallis's lab before turning back.

And froze. She could see past the lab into an inner examining room. A small blond boy, now listless and droopy-eyed, with his head in a brace, was being held by a nurse while Dr. Wallis inserted a flexible needle behind his ear and straight into his head.

The great doctor was wearing a head monitor, probably showing the needle's path, and did not see Corinna. The nurse was focused on holding the child and tracking the needle's progress on the wall monitor.

Everyone was at dinner and there had been no one to hear, except Corinna standing stupidly in the hall.

They were taking a brain sample. Why the hell were they taking a brain sample? If she startled any of them now, the boy might suffer irreversible brain damage. The needle was in so deep, only the syringe portion was visible. Briefly, Dr. Wallis pulled on the syringe, and the magnified image on the wall showed a thin short line of whitish material move into the needle. Carefully and slowly, he pulled the needle out. The nurse prepared the antidote injection, applied disinfectant and a patch of clearskin, and then loosened the brace. The surgeon removed his gloves. The whole process had taken less than a minute.

Corinna finally noticed a very worried-looking man behind the adult-sized patient chair holding the child. He, too, looked at nothing but the boy. He must be – he must be the boy's father. Did that mean everything was all right? She felt as if she'd screamed at the sight of a horrible bug, only to have it turn into a harmless dried leaf. Surely, if the father was there, there must be some good reason why they were carrying out a risky biopsy on a growing brain.

She wondered what the good reason could be. She'd taken dozens of brain samples herself during her graduate work on neurotransmitters, but only from adults. Even teenagers' brains were changing too fast to justify the risk

except in cases of disease. Any child sick enough to need a brain biopsy wouldn't be on Mars. Unless he got ... whatever it was ... after arriving.

Besides, Wallis's work was all growth flasks and petri dishes. The closest he got to actual human beings was waiting in line at the cafeteria. And research on children would require a file drawer-full of permits. Although he was certainly a grand enough old man to get them. If it was research, she'd be eminently qualified for a job on the project and it was much more likely to advance her career than—.

"Oh, hi Corinna," said the nurse. She was looking politely surprised while she nodded in a friendly way. "What brings you here?"

Corinna opened her mouth and then closed it again when her disordered thoughts didn't boil down into anything she could actually say. It was obviously silly to admit she'd panicked about a child being murdered. With the father right there, she couldn't start making small talk about the research project — if it was a research project — and if his son really was sick, she certainly couldn't grill him about that.

"Corinna?"

"Um, yeah, sorry to barge in. I heard the crying. I thought a kid must be lost, but I guess everything's okay." This was not the time to find out what was going on.

"Yes, just a bit of fussing. But we'll soon get over that, won't we?" The nurse cooed at the child. He looked woozily but suspiciously at the woman and reached for the worried man, who scooped him up.

"Well, I'll be getting back. Sorry to barge in," Corinna repeated, although everyone was ignoring her by now.

She slowly made her way back to her claustrophobic cubicle. About halfway there, she became aware of the usual faint smell of rabbits. It never ceased to amaze her how brief an absence was enough to make her notice it again. The rabbits might be tucked away in their own government-approved and sealed animal room, but the odor insisted on coming out, as unwelcome facts often do.

She was still walking slowly when she reached the lab leading to her office. Generally she walked fast enough to make her lab coat billow like a sail, but her mind was in a whirl about switching to a real job in Wallis's lab. If neurochemistry research was really happening right down the hall, and if she could get Wallis to hire her, and if it was as high-profile as Wallis's other work, she might get her career back on track.

She was so occupied with the world of her thoughts that the world of solid objects bumped into her, and she noticed Jonathan at the other end of the offending lab bench, behind the big graphics workstation.

She stopped. Had he been there the whole time? Had he heard the child too? And then had he just sat there? He'd probably watched her with those fish-like blue eyes of his.

For the second time that evening, she opened her mouth and then had

nothing to say. There was no point asking him anything. He'd come back with something like, "You seemed to be handling it, and I came here to get some work done." She marched on into her closet disguised as an office.

Jonathan had started work two months ago, a newly minted postdoc who should have been junior to her, but somehow, he wasn't. When he talked, which was not often, it was about papers he had published, was in the process of publishing, or was going to publish. She'd never seen him smile. Jonathan had been hired to replace a much older and even more standoffish postdoc with whom he shared at least one characteristic. His predecessor had also conferred constantly with Morbier. Maybe it was Jonathan's brilliance that earned him this treatment, but she doubted it. To her it looked more like an old boy net, one that meant he didn't get loaded up with umpteen extra gofer jobs.

Well, at least he stayed out of her way. It could be worse. And the old boy net wasn't everything either. His well-connected predecessor hadn't been saved by it when he found himself out on the surface in a bad suit with an empty reserve tank. For a while the entire staff, herself included, went safety-mad. Everyone lectured everyone that it took only one second of carelessness to die on Mars. But it was impossible to maintain maximum alert forever, especially because inside the dome there was no real sense of being on Mars. Most of the time you could just as well be in Antarctica or a basement in New York. Research institutes were like that.

Taking a breath deep enough for an ocean diver, Corinna forced her attention back to scheduling lab chores.

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Corinna glanced at the time on her screen and rubbed her eyes. Eleven o'clock. Last night she had managed to get away by nine, a record that was obviously going to stand for a while. She rubbed her whole face. She was bone-tired and starving. It was decision time. Should she crawl back to her room or should she drag herself over to the cafeteria and eat something? To think she had friends at home in New York who envied her ability to stay thin.

Eating won out. She was too wired to go straight to sleep anyway. She stood up and threaded her way past the rows of lab benches covered in stained and tattered bench paper. One more thing to tell the techs: tape down new paper.

White, gray or beige lab machines, boxy centrifuges and DNA readers, probe synthesizers and gel rigs, all clicked and hummed while their indicator lights winked green or blue or yellow. Corinna's practiced eye read the patterns without even thinking as she passed toward the hallway. And then her prac-

ticed eye served up a memo to her conscious mind. Note: the pH probe is not soaking in its buffer solution. It is lying on the table. It will be ruined if it is left to dry out overnight.

Jonathan, grumbled her conscious mind coming back from its waking-sleep state. It wasn't the first time he'd left stuff for someone else to clean up. She fought down the urge to leave the thing lying there. She'd seen him using it, and it would be his fault when a new one had to be ordered all the way from Earth. However, it didn't feel right, even near midnight after a long day. The pH probe had faithfully measured pH and didn't deserve neglect just because Jonathan was a jerk. Besides, she was going to need it tomorrow.

She detoured to his work area, and found the beaker full of buffer stashed in his section of the fridge. Next to it was a rack of sample tubes that she normally wouldn't have noticed amid the thousands of tiny tubes in the lab. A familiar label drew her attention. EDRP-15.

Endorphinase? EDRP was the standard label for various endorphin preps and associated neurotransmitters, something she'd spent six years studying for her doctorate. She looked at the label again. No, she might be exhausted, but she was not hallucinating. It said EDRP-15. It wasn't possible, even for Jonathan, to be working on her specialty and never so much as mention it to her. Besides, Morbier didn't work on neurotransmitters. The only one on Mars likely to be doing that was Wallis, and surely Wallis wouldn't have tapped Jonathan to work on a brain chemistry project without so much as asking her to apply. Jonathan didn't have half her experience, nor, she was willing to bet, one tenth the smarts.

The initials had to be a coincidence. She'd ask him sometime what they actually stood for. Once the buffer was put away, she looked only at the floor on her way out. She didn't want to see one single solitary other thing that needed work.

She plodded down the length of Artemis corridor, one of the six radiating out from the hub of the station. Morbier's labs were way at the tip, so she had the whole white and grey and sterile length to go. She thought she might fall asleep standing, waiting for the bulkhead door at the end of Artemis to open. The doors sealing the spokes closed at 2100 hours, opened at 0600, and as often as not her schedule made her wait for them whether it was early or late. She trudged up the stairs to the second level of the dome's central bulge and around the periphery of the hub, past the plush administrative offices. Here some of the few windows in the Station overlooked the Boyle and Curie spokes and the Martian landscape, but there was little to see in the unlit night. Two lines of slow pinpoint strobes marked rover tracks near the Station and curved out of sight. Stars like dust were visible through the pocked and scratched plastic scoured by Martian winds, stars that stopped abruptly, proving that she was on a planet instead of a space ship. One orphan star, nestled improbably under that black horizon, was the beacon of a hydroforming station. She walked on past conference rooms and the back sides of the shops. Fi-

nally, she reached the cafeteria overlooking Darwin spoke and the lights of the clipper and rover port at its tip.

Peering with a jaundiced eye at the fossilized sandwiches and boiled-looking lettuce, she decided all she really needed was a brownie. Two, perhaps. They were small. She sat down at one of the big round eight-person tables already occupied by another night owl or two and began munching moodily. The plastic surface of the table masqueraded as rose granite, which, at this hour of the night, struck her as inexpressibly sad. Tables should be made of wood, and the closest wooden table was tens of millions of miles away.

“Is one of those for me?” said a man’s voice jokingly a couple of chairs over from her.

Corinna skidded back to reality. She frowned. She had pleasing, regular features of the sort that would have looked remarkable with make-up, which she never wore. She also had large brown eyes, large brown hair in ringlets that never did what she wanted, and a good figure. The result was that she had been fending off optimistic males since about the age of fourteen.

She reserved her annoyance when she saw a decidedly good-looking, tall, black-haired fellow smiling at her. She could have recited the privacy rules. Instead she only raised her eyebrows to say, “*And what do you want?*”

“You’re Doctora Mansur, aren’t you?” he asked with a nod of greeting added to his pleasant smile.

The strange terminology stopped her. She’d never been called “Doctora” before. Under normal circumstances, she would have said something like, “No, I’m exhausted. Please just leave me alone,” but her tired mind was repeating *Doctora? What?* to itself. Finally she noticed that he was still looking at her with that friendly air of good fellowship. Somehow, that and her slowness made it hard to tell him she was totally uninterested in everything. She nodded briefly.

“Oziel García,” he said, and reached over with his hand extended.

She found herself shaking it, as if they had just been formally introduced. Who was this guy? Why did he know her, but she couldn’t place him? She’d been on the Station over six months, which was long enough to recognize just about all six hundred inhabitants, especially one who looked like he’d walked off a movie set. He had a broad forehead, short glossy black hair, and skin like polished copper. He must not have been on Mars long enough to become sallow. His eyes were so dark, there was almost no difference between his irises and pupils. Central casting could give him a big part because he had a very expressive face. The direct way he looked at people made it seem that he could read the thoughts of everyone in the room. However, the midnight shadow on his cheeks would have to be edited out in post-production. It was practically a young beard and made him look like —

And then she finally had him placed. It made him look like anything except what he was: one of the new workers in day care who’d arrived about two months ago. Life sure didn’t take any cues from central casting. She remem-

bered noticing his looks and thinking it odd that he'd been hired for day care, considering how many qualified women there had to be for an unusually well-paid job in that field.

"Don't they teach you scientists about balanced meals?" He cast a crooked smile at the brownies on her plate.

When she shrugged, he followed up with,

"And regular meal times? Kind of wasted, yes? Dessert at midnight?"

She shrugged again.

"Yup," she said. "Dessert at midnight. You got a problem with that?"

"No, not at all. I'm just wondering," he pretended to seriousness, "why?"

"Why?" she echoed him again. "Why yourself. I'm eating. You just seem to be sitting here for your health."

Actually, he was sitting there with a book, one of the library's printouts. Strange that he didn't just – but then she noticed he didn't have a wristpad to which he could download books. He had a very blue watch that looked like one of those things they hand out as promotions at fun fairs. It probably couldn't do one single thing except tell time. The only other person she'd ever met without a wristpad had been an anti-technology buff in the Mars for the Martians movement.

He'd hesitated a moment before speaking again, and she knew perfectly well she was being brusque, but what made these unnecessary males pick on her? Was she wearing a sign that said, "Talk to me"? No. And what did she want with some day care worker? Now, if only she could find a postdoc with a sense of humor who was this easy on the eyes. Nat, for instance, had been deficient in both departments, although he'd been brilliant, of course. Corinna had always envisioned her partner as being brilliant. Together the two of them would make a team that went from strength to strength. Only they didn't. However, that was neither here nor there. The man was saying something.

"– on Mars. I would stroll down the boulevard in Caracas at midnight, with the gentle breeze blowing in off the mountains."

Very nice, Corinna thought, but she wasn't really listening. Bob Kruskal had just walked into the canteen. He was obviously working late too, except in his case it would be some vitally important research that he would insist on talking about, completely disregarding the fact that it was the middle of the night and she was not interested. He had never been anywhere but the fast track and he worked as a research postdoc for Ching, Director of Science for Mars. He was in his late twenties, same as she was, and she couldn't stand him. It was probably nothing but jealousy, but she was glad he was already starting to go bald. It served him right.

She hoped Kruskal would concentrate on his food and she would not have to talk to the toad. Besides, the brownie was making her ill. She should just go to bed.

But she did not get up to leave instantly and then it was too late. Kruskal

spotted her and, true to form, could not pass up an audience.

“Boy, late hours, huh?” He sat down next to her at the big table. “Me too. There’s all that work Hanzhe has me doing on parietal neocortical pathways. I had to finish up some northerns, probing for acetylcholinesterase. Hanzhe thinks there may well be a major funding in it, if the memory enhancement application pans out. The RNA-ases are a huge problem, of course, but I came up with a much better method for limiting aerosolization during capillary tube transfers.”

He carried on. And on. He ignored Oziel. Corinna had just decided to stand up in the middle of one of his sentences and leave, when she awoke to the fact that he was no longer ignoring Oziel.

“I guess you finally decided to go out on a date, huh?” He looked at Oziel as if he was barely visible through the wrong end of a telescope. “Good to see you’re starting somewhere.” The last was said with the smug grin some people use to flag a joke.

Kruskal achieved offensiveness on so many levels that Corinna woke all the way up. She looked at him for a second, enough to get her question worked out.

“Are brownies in the canteen your idea of a date, Bob? I doubt I’d ever have to start that cheap. But,” and now she eyed him again, “if this is a date, should you be joining us?”

“Excuse me,” huffed Kruskal, picked up his tray, and moved to a distant table.

“That cut him down,” came Oziel’s quiet voice.

Yes, thought Corinna. And now I’ll be damned if I leave because that blot will assume it’s because I don’t want to be seen with a day care worker. The fact that she felt guilty about thinking something similar herself only made her more determined to stay.

“You were saying something about Caracas. You’re not from the States?” Except for his odd way of addressing people, a musical intonation, and beautiful-sounding vowels, his accent was American.

“I lived in Florida for a few years, Doctora, but, no, I am from Venezuela.”

“Hey, call me Corinna.”

He gave her a small, formal nod that was definitely un-American, and a warm smile that was universal. He really was extremely good-looking.

“So,” she said, “you still haven’t explained why you’re basking under the lights here.”

“Well,” he said, and some of his good fellowship faded, “I am here because I couldn’t sleep.”

“Ah,” she said, starting on the second brownie. Her appetite seemed to have recovered after the spike of adrenalin. “Rattling fan?” People on Earth discussed the weather. Here it was the ventilator fans, and the care, oiling, and sometimes enraged removal thereof.

“No.”

After a while, her sleep-slow mind noticed he hadn't said anything further.

"No? That's it? Just no?" She glanced at him and then forgot to look away.

He was staring at his hands. His right was a fist which he was gripping with his left, making it seem he was trying hard not to punch someone. He sat so still, it felt like he might stop trying any second.

People did run amok on space ships and stations. Maybe he really had been sitting here for his health before she stirred him up. She grew uncomfortably aware that he wasn't just tall. He was broad too, at least at the shoulders, and probably weighed near a hundred kilos on Earth. If he exploded here, he could break everything and everybody in the cafeteria within minutes. She must be semi-comatose if she hadn't noticed how formidable he was.

He shot a glance at her with no expression. It felt like a wall, a great high one with no doors.

"You really want to know?" He was staring straight ahead, as if he might have added, "Don't blame me. You asked."

"Well, uh, not if you'd rather not talk about it." She took another bite of her brownie, thinking that it wasn't called a comfort food for nothing.

Something about her quick retreat into the polite phrase seemed to make him angrier, at least judging by his humorless grin. He was looking at his hands. It was gone when he looked back at her.

"It's about what I want?"

He said it so evenly, he made it sound like a question instead of sarcasm, but there was almost a rumble in the canteen, he was thinking so loud. *You want nice, comfortable small talk.* She really hadn't meant that. She meant only that someone who looked ready to throw the table across the room could have all the privacy he wanted.

"Actually, I meant just what I said."

"Ah," he said too quietly, looking at his hands again. She could see the tendons stand out on his gripping hand. "Talking is easy." He stressed "talking" slightly. "*Pues ...*, the last time I heard from home, I found out my youngest sister's baby died. My mother's trying to help my worthless youngest brother's girlfriend take care of their little daughter, because his gang must not have paid somebody off fast enough, so he's doing time for dealing spike." He took a noticeable breath and added, "My sister-in-law was also in prison, but when she came home, my other brother said she'd changed somehow."

He stopped and looked over at Corinna. She had forgotten her brownie and was staring at him.

"And I am here in this empty place ... and they are there. So I cannot sleep sometimes."

Corinna finished chewing and swallowed.

"What —," she began.

Then she got a grip on herself. She had no business asking questions.

"I — I'm very sorry to hear that. That's — that's a terrible run of bad luck. I hope things get better." She had no idea what to say, but to say nothing was

unthinkable.

He smiled a very small smile that didn't reach his eyes, yet the tension around him subsided from a roar to a hum and he relaxed his hands. It was his doing, she suddenly realized, that she hadn't noticed how frightening he could be. When he wasn't using all his energy to fight his own demons, he somehow erased fear in those around him. It must be a useful talent when working with kids.

"Actually, compared to many of our neighbors," he continued, "we do okay. All my brothers and sisters are alive. Most of us support ourselves legally enough. And I can send them money now." In answer to Corinna's still-shocked expression, he explained, "We live in a barrio of Caracas, with a few hundred thousand others. We do okay."

Corinna looked down at her plate, its white plastic surface, the brown crumbs scattered on it, the incredible strangeness of the fact that she and it were here, now, and not somewhere else in a hugely vast universe. Talking might be easy, but listening had tumbled her into a different world where nothing belonged. She could see a cramped plastic hut with pans on the floor to catch the rain leaking through the roof, while an indomitable woman made sure all her children survived and learned enough to live in a terrifying world.

It also explained that odd reference to "empty." The Station could be lonely, without a doubt, but it was about as empty as an ant heap. But a mass of kids in one room would make any subsequent space seem deserted.

Which, now that she thought about it, made no sense.

"It's none of my business," she began apologetically, "but how many of you are there? Aren't the penalties for having more than two kids kind of expensive? Especially if..." She almost blurted out, *especially if you're poor*.

"Especially if we're poor?" he finished her thought for her with another smile that didn't reach his eyes. "My mother had three children and for us the extra taxes start with the fourth. We're part Guahibo."

Oh, yes, she'd heard about that. The genetic diversity preservation rules for small groups with rare genes.

"The younger two are my cousins, but we're *hermanos*, we grew up together. My mother took them in when her younger sister died and they were babies. Quintón wasn't even sitting yet."

The mix of pain and affection on his face reminded Corinna that this was the youngest brother, the baby whose diapers he had probably changed, and who'd grown up to deal spike. That must feel horrible.

Yet his tension continued to fade. She wondered how much effort it cost him. After a while, with nothing but his original friendliness, he said,

"You still haven't said why you're eating an unbalanced dinner at this time of night."

Corinna's own world seemed like nothing but a silly fog. Compared to dead babies and brothers jailed for drugs, the complexities of doing three jobs at

once and dealing with Morbier looked like a juggling act doomed to failure in a slapstick comedy. In her exhausted fugue state, she started to laugh.

“Me? I’m a postdoc.” She saw that now Oziel was looking at her as if wondering whether to call the medics. She tried to stop chuckling. “A Postdoctoral Consulting Scientist,” she said with great mock gravity. “A Postdoctoral Consulting Scientist right here at the old Burbidge Bioengineering Research Station. Supposedly, I was hired to do research for Dr. Morbier. I bioengineer rabbits so that they will tolerate Martian cold. Then they can be kept in much cheaper domes and provide meat and fur.”

“This costs less than vat protein?” he asked surprised.

“Of course not, but you have to have something to feed the expensive tourists on Arsia. Not that they say that. When someone has to hand out the official line, it’s that terraforming will start a couple of years from now. Once they land that comet full of water and volatiles, there’ll supposedly be a big need for local resources. And for some reason, rabbits were right up there. Possibly it’s because administrators are hare-brained, but I think it’s because this place is called Foggy Bottom.”

Oziel sat there for noticeable seconds, puzzling.

“Ey? I thought the name was because of the fogs here in Mariner’s Canyon.”

“No, no, no, no, no.” She wagged a finger, still pretending to be terribly serious. “No, no, no. It’s because nobody has the foggiest notion what’s going on.”

“Ah,” he said, puzzlement gone. “Sí. It is a good name for too many places. So you stay up till the small hours to find out what’s going on?”

Corinna went back to laughing out loud.

“Yeah, right.” She made another effort to simmer down. “I’m also supposed to ‘keep an eye on’ the good doctor’s lab. That means managing it. He’s got three other postdocs and five graduate students here. They all have questions and need help. Guess who deals with that. I take care of the computers and make the lab’s backups so nobody loses data. There are three techs. I supervise them all, figure out what they need to do, tell them to do it, check to make sure they’ve done it, and re-do it myself when they haven’t done it right.”

“Sounds like a full time job by itself,” was Oziel’s comment.

“Oh, but we’re not done yet,” she said. “I’m also supposed to publish multiple papers that Morbier can have his name on, and get bags of grant money. It usually takes more than one application to get a grant, and each application is more work than a major scientific article. And,” she wound up, “that doesn’t even touch on the really important work I do. Like make sure the new arrivals know to call the boss ‘Mor-be-yieh’ and not, heaven forbid, ‘More-beer.’ Do you have any idea how totally that lab would cease running if somebody addressed him as Dr. Morebeer?”

“The world will fall,” he said, mirroring her wide-eyed seriousness.

“Well, unless I’m going to put my head in the tray and go to sleep right here, I really have to get back to my room.” She stood up. “It was nice meet-

ing you.”

“Ah,” he said, looking hesitant for the first time. “I actually wanted to ask you about ... an issue.”

Now what? thought Corinna. It was always something with guys.

“Do you work with X-ray-type machines at all?”

Not the question she had expected.

“‘X-ray-type’? What do you mean?” She sat back down.

“You know, machines that take those perfect pictures of the insides of people.”

“Sure. I work with MRI all the time because of my rabbits.”

He looked down at his hands, studied his fingers for a while, and didn’t say anything.

“Well,” he finally began, “I’m not sure where to start. I’m probably not supposed to be doing this. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t talk to other people about it.”

“Assuming it’s nothing criminal, of course,” Corinna stipulated. She was awake enough for that.

He nodded.

“One of the children got a strange puncture at the clinic. Right here.” He indicated the back of his neck.

Corinna’s eyebrows went up. That was the commonest point of entry for taking a brain sample, carefully snaking the cannula past the brain stem.

It was not the same point as on the child she’d seen. That meant it had to be a different child. A second child. If a sample had been taken from a second child healthy enough to be in day care, it had to be for research. If this wasn’t a new and fascinating research project, it was the first sign of a bizarre epidemic of brain disease brewing on Mars. In which case, the whole Station would already be under quarantine.

“Where, *exactly*?” she asked, to make sure it wasn’t some other medical procedure. “Here?” She pointed to one spot near the top of her neck, shoving a bunch of tangled ringlets aside to do it.

“Yes! That’s it. You know something about this?”

“Not about this specifically. I did my graduate work on neurotransmitters, on endorphinase actually, an enzyme that keeps one of the neurotransmitters in balance. The foramen magnum is one of the ways to get hypothalamic samples.”

“Ah,” said Oziel, looking at her dubiously. “Could you say that again,” he asked, “but this time slowly?”

Corinna let out a little snort of laughter at herself. She shouldn’t even be trying to carry on a conversation when she was this tired.

“Endorphins are chemicals in the brain that make you feel good. Too many of them, and you’ll lose touch with reality; too few and you can get depressed. Endorphinase is an enzyme that destroys endorphins in the brain, so it prevents them from building up too much.”

“Oh,” he said, giving her the feeling that she still wasn’t being very clear. “So you’re saying they were taking a *brain* sample?”

“Probably,” she said absently, as she watched Kruskal stand up at the other side of the cafeteria and leave. Why hadn’t anyone talked to her about this research? A second child proved it had to be research. She was the only person she knew of at the Station besides Wallis himself who had worked on neurochemistry, and yet he’d gone and hired somebody else for this project without even mentioning it to her. Kruskal wasn’t the only toad around.

“But why do they need to take brain samples?” Oziel exclaimed, his eyes looking even blacker in anger.

Why indeed, she wondered.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Normally, in children, it’s only done for a medical condition. Severe epilepsy, for instance. That could develop suddenly.” She had the feeling she was trying to convince herself it wasn’t a research project and she wasn’t being ignored. “Or they might be looking for the biochemical basis of a behavioral problem.”

Oziel listened and frowned a couple of times, but he didn’t interrupt. Now he shook his head once in an emphatic *no*.

“Problem! That little kid is a problem like a friendly puppy. He’s a ray of sunshine. And poking around in the brain damages it, yes?”

“Well, if you poked around in the wrong way, it would. But otherwise, it actually does less damage than, say, a glass of beer or some strong coffee.”

“*¡Qué vaina!* He’s just a little kid. I don’t go around feeding him beer!”

Corinna looked at him closely. He seemed like a nice, caring fellow, when he wasn’t facing demons. If he didn’t baby sit kids and had enough education so she could talk to him, and if she’d met him before guys began to seem like a waste of space, she might have.... Once upon a time, she would even have been interested, just to see what happened. But not these days, and certainly not on a station with a few hundred people. She could see herself at every meal in the cafeteria, having to wade through the debris of old lovers.

“The boy was pretty clear that there was an injection and so forth?” she asked.

“No, actually. He just said he was scared and couldn’t see and it felt funny. I think they gave him some sort of sedative as well as a local anesthetic.”

“What about his parents? What do they say?”

“I’ve never seen his father. His mother is some kind of too-busy lab worker.” He glanced quickly at Corinna and looked down. “Sorry. I didn’t mean —. Do you have children?”

She shook her head.

“You could ask the doctor, I suppose.”

“No,” said Oziel with a dark look. “The doctor was too busy to speak to me, and the nurse slid it off. Said it was a medical matter and they couldn’t discuss it. That’s why I thought I’d ask one of the scientists when I could. I’m worried they’re trying to cover something up.”

“When did you notice this puncture?”

“This one happened today, and there was one a lot like it a few weeks back.”

“Well, bring him to my lab tomorrow,” she found herself saying. She was going to find out what was going on and worm her way into this nifty new project, whether they wanted her or not.

Chapter 2

In the sober light of morning, Corinna wondered about the wisdom of letting perfect strangers into a lab whose boss did not see the humor in being called Morebeer. Her jitters were matched by increasing certainty that letting him know what she was up to and simply asking his permission would be a bad career move. She'd had no chance yet to find out whether Wallis even had a research project going, and no way at all of knowing whether he'd hire her if he did. Morbier, once he knew she was looking around, would have no sense of humor about that either. In the cause of caution, she tried to call Oziel and tell him to come around 12:30, during what would, she hoped, be lunch time, especially for Dr. Morbier.

Her first call to the day care center went unanswered. A child answered the second one, which she found as odd as no answer at all, but the little girl took a message with the self-possession of someone far older. The message didn't deliver any results, though, and Corinna tried a third time with rising annoyance. They must be seriously understaffed at day care. Oziel confirmed that impression when she finally reached him, because most of his attention seemed to be elsewhere.

He was punctual, however, and arrived with a subdued-looking three year-old just after the lab had cooperatively emptied out. How long it would stay that way was anybody's guess, so Corinna hurried them both toward the MRI equipment that she'd put close to her office. She'd borrowed it from Clem Kilburn's lab earlier that morning, as she had dozens of times before, and she'd even used it on a couple of rabbits, just to make everything look as normal as possible. Imaging one biological organism, such as a child, was the same as another one, such as a rabbit, but she wanted to avoid explaining that to Morbier, if at all possible.

Oziel lifted the boy onto a high lab chair next to the MRI machinery, and she started to wrap the cuff around his head. They were both very quiet and serious, as if one of them was about to be diagnosed with a dread disease. She knew she should try harder to be reassuring, but she felt too preoccupied herself.

"Iskender Mahmoud, Doctora Mansur," Oziel introduced them with that odd formality of his.

Corinna was taken aback. One of her techs was named Mahmoud. Did

Djamilah have a son? She couldn't recall. She needed to spend less time pipetting and more time getting to know people. Or maybe there were other Mahmouds on the station.

"That's the same as Alexander," the little boy announced, "but I like Iskender better."

"Iskender is a beautiful name." She smiled at the boy. "Is your mom's name Djamilah?"

"No," the toddler shook his curly head. "She's mama."

"Yes," said Oziel. "It is."

"Well, for Pete's sake. She's a tech in this lab. Your mama works with me, Iskender, so you should feel right at home here."

He looked around as if expecting to see his mama somewhere.

For a second, Corinna doubted whether she was wise making the connection so clear to the boy. What if he told his mother he'd been here and she mentioned it to Morbier? Then she decided there was nothing to worry about. Djamilah had fled from a Middle Eastern sheikdom to avoid being killed for having driven a car or something. She was friendly, hard-working, if not terribly talented, and she barely said hello to Morbier, she was so intimidated by him.

With the MRI cuff fitted around Iskender's forehead, over his ears, and around the back of his head, she started the scans.

"You may hear a buzzing or whining sound," she explained. "It'll take about five minutes of scanning because what we're trying to see is difficult."

"Mr. García explained to me," he said with a serious nod. "It's called magnetic resonance."

"I remembered they have an MRI machine at Ciudad Bolivar. But I told him he'd be inside it," said Oziel, with a dubious look at the black cuff and its embedded magnets. "That one is huge."

"Those are pretty old," said Corinna. "In this kind, you don't need a big machine because the magnets don't spin. Instead the signal is passed around the ring, and the sensors are much more sensitive so the magnets can be much smaller and weaker."

A faint electrical hum filled the air and transverse sections of Iskender's head started to appear on the associated monitor. The little kid, having been asked to sit still, was as quiet as a statue, but Corinna did not do so well. With nothing to occupy her except waiting, she fidgeted and kept glancing at the lab door, waiting for one of the early lunchers or, worse yet, Morbier himself, to come padding in.

The MRI machine emitted a long beep, indicating completion. She immediately started removing the cuff from Iskender's head. She was in the process of laying it on the counter when footsteps sounded in the hall and entered the lab. She glanced over her shoulder, and saw Jonathan. Why couldn't it have been someone nice, like Mei-mei, for instance? At least he always ignored everything except himself, and much as that had irritated her in the

past, now she was glad of it.

However, she'd counted her blessings too soon. Today, of all days, he seemed to have decided to broaden his horizons and take an interest in her work.

"You're doing some MRIs again?" he asked, headed toward her end of the lab.

If he came close enough to see the image of Iskender's head on the monitor, he might start asking even more questions. She thought fast.

"People have been waiting all morning for you to get those aliquots done. I'd suggest you get on it." The set-up for that task was all on the far side of the lab, and as the unofficial lab coordinator, she had a perfect right to remind him of it.

Jonathan stopped in midstride and his eyes acquired the blank but accusing stare of a large fish.

"Some of my gene expression data for the paper in *Neurochem* is coming off the DNA reader in a few minutes. It's not my job to run the lab—"

Something about the way he said "my" rubbed Corinna the wrong way. It was amazing how quickly "keeping an eye on" the lab devolved into being the "hey-you" in the lab.

"It's not my job either. It's nobody's job and it needs to be done. That's why we all take turns."

"I have time-sensitive procedures going."

"Jonathan, we all have time-sensitive procedures. The data can sit on the reader all week, if it needs to. It's not like it spoils. Now, please get to the aliquots, because you're holding everyone up."

Jonathan's shoulders hunched in annoyance, and he marched to the far end of the lab.

Corinna breathed a sigh of relief and began to hope she really might sneak this enterprise past everyone. She piped the preliminary images to her own workstation and cleared them off the lab station. She shepherded Oziel and Iskender into her tiny office, and found a new set of things to worry about. It was a tiny room, and Oziel was a big guy. He nearly filled the small space to capacity all by himself, but he did his best not to crowd her, and kept Iskender on his lap. He was either considerate, or she wasn't his type. Either way worked for her.

"You wanted to get him away from the monitor?" he asked quietly, tipping his head toward the end of the lab where Jonathan sat.

"Jeez. Was it that obvious?" Her receding irritation inched back.

"Only to me, I think, because I know what we're doing. I just wanted to suggest that next time, you could try telling him there's an emergency with his own experiments in some other room. That'll work better as a distraction."

Corinna stared briefly at the image being processed and took a breath. How, exactly, did a day care worker figure he knew more about lab work than she

did? The fact that it was a good idea somehow made it even more annoying.

"Mm," she mumbled in grudging acknowledgment and went back to work. Bossing toddlers all day probably meant he had lots of practice distracting people.

After setting all the dozens of different parameters for the analysis, she hit "go" and sat back to wait for the software to generate a colorized three-dimensional image from the scans. It was amazing how fast technology progressed. When she'd started grad school, the processing took half an hour and couldn't resolve anything smaller than a millimeter. Now it would take five to ten minutes and she could zoom down almost to individual cells.

However, five to ten minutes with a large man in a small closet was still a long time. She tried to find something to talk about.

"When I called this morning, one of the kids answered. Did a good job, too," she hastened to add. "I guess you start them young."

"No," he said. This time, however, he continued before she said anything.

"We had an emergency this morning."

"Oh," she said, not knowing how to continue the conversation since he didn't explain.

Iskender suddenly spoke.

"Dorie died this morning."

Corinna looked from the boy to Oziel and back without understanding. Who or what was Dorie?

"One of the children," said Oziel with the subdued, serious air he'd had since he'd arrived. "Doran Jackson. We had, as I said, an emergency."

She sat there, thunderstruck, open-mouthed in shock.

Nobody said anything.

This wasn't some kind of mistake. They meant it.

"My God," she finally managed. "That's – that's awful. What happened?" In the same instant, she doubted whether she should have asked in front of Iskender, and glanced at the little boy before she could stop herself.

"It's all right," said Oziel, sounding tired. "I explained what happened as soon as I could. It was bad enough without the kids imagining things even worse." He waited a moment before continuing.

"Doran's mother dropped him off as usual this morning. It was just me there, because Zoë, who's usually on my shift, was out sick. He just slumped over. I called the medics. His breathing stopped, and a moment later his heart stopped. He felt really cold. I did CPR right up to when the medics arrived a couple of minutes later, but all they could say was that it looked bad."

"Jee-sus," she muttered. "How awful." There didn't seem to be anything else to say. No wonder they'd both been so quiet and serious. The wonder, now that she knew, was that they'd been coherent at all. And, of course, this being Mars, it wasn't like the day care center could be closed for the week while everyone tried to get over it. "Did the medics say what the problem was?"

Oziel shook his head.

“I asked one of them, and he just shrugged. I thought that boy was fine when he came in this morning.” For a moment, his eyes looked through the walls at a universe too far away. “At least in the barrio, the children get sick before they die.”

Corinna wished she could comfort him, somehow. She’d never seen anyone die, much less a child. She noticed that as he talked, he’d kept one hand protectively around Iskender’s back, and that the little boy was definitely too quiet and serious for a three year-old, but nothing worse than that. Oziel really did calm fear. Maybe, she thought as she glanced at him again, he’d had a lot of practice.

She wondered who the dead child had been, and whether she’d seen him around the Station. She opened a window on her monitor, called up data on the Station’s inhabitants, and searched for Doran Jackson. And then she felt like her heart had stopped in her chest. It was the same blond boy she’d seen at Wallis’s office last night.

Wait, wait, wait, her scientist’s mind shouted at her. Wallis didn’t necessarily kill him. Maybe the blond boy had been sick. Maybe Wallis had been treating him.

“You knew him?” asked Oziel, sounding very far away.

She turned toward him and shook her head, unable to speak at first.

“I saw him in Wallis’s office,” she said, and Oziel responded,

“Ah.”

He’d jumped to the same, possibly wrong, conclusion. It was impossible not to.

The symptoms he’d mentioned happened in certain kinds of central nervous system failure, and only then, as far as she knew. Had the great Wallis managed to inject water instead of taking a sample, like some flunking first-year student? No, then the child would have died in his office. Maybe he’d caused a slow hemorrhage without realizing it, although that was also too stupid for words. Was there really a strange brain disease out there? Was it catching?

“Has – will they be doing an autopsy?”

“I sure hope so.”

That sounded odd. She glanced at Oziel, bewildered.

“I was the only one there, remember? I just spent two hours answering questions to see whether I’d overlooked something obvious and called for help too late.”

His impassive expression didn’t change, and Corinna stared at him dumbly. It was true. People didn’t thank you for trying to save a life. They concentrated on finding someone to blame.

“But at least they didn’t say anything about starting an investigation on me. Yet.”

To think that when he’d arrived at the lab, all she’d noticed was that he looked a bit serious. She would have been a basket case, herself.

“Well, the autopsy will probably clear up the cause, at least.” She looked at

him hesitantly. "I know it's easier said than done, but try not to worry. I'm not a physician, but I'm pretty sure those symptoms don't fit anything ordinary, and you can hardly be expected to diagnose extraordinary conditions."

He looked at her for a long moment, so directly that it felt almost like a touch, but his expression was no longer impassive. It was something else. Sad? Relieved? Grateful? All of the above?

"That's me," said Iskender, announcing a fact.

Corinna looked over and saw that while the grownups had been on another world, an enhanced image had taken shape on the screen, so three-dimensional it seemed to float inside the monitor. She remembered she was supposed to be hurrying, and that she'd forgotten all about Morbier.

She needed to take her cue from Oziel and carry on, so that Iskender didn't think things were even worse than they were.

"That's right." She did her best to smile at the little kid. He smiled back as endearingly as only a toddler can, and she could see why Oziel had said he was a ray of sunshine. She pointed to a yellow region on the screen. "This bit is right here," she reached over to touch the boy's head just above his ear, "and helps you remember things. This bit which is red on the screen," she touched the back of his head, "helps you understand what you're seeing. And this bit is the one we're going to look at."

Unlike anything she could do with the real Iskender, Corinna chose a specific slice of his head, one that she expected to show the whole path of the puncture, assuming there was one. Oziel looked in fascinated horror at the multicolored image of skin, bone, blood vessels, and brain. Meanwhile, the real Iskender was vigorously whole and behaving like a true scientist, reaching to explore in new directions. Oziel managed to stop him just before his chubby little fist closed around the nice red wire carrying 220 volts to the jury-rigged gel perched on a shelf above her desk.

Luckily for her impatience, she had guessed the correct slice to display. She hadn't spent a couple of years doing this as a graduate student for nothing.

"See for yourself," she pointed at the faint path still visible where the needle had passed through the tissues, straight into one of the lower regions of the brain.

Oziel stared.

"So they *are* taking brain samples." After a pause he added, "Why?"

"I wish I knew," Corinna frowned at the screen. The needle went right to the part of the limbic system she knew well: one of the main endorphin-producing areas. Wallis had to know that she was the only person on Mars with any background at all in the morphinoid neurotransmitters. Her papers would have come up in any search for recent work on the subject. Was she considered such a no-account tech that people didn't even think of her as a potential source of information?

"What can I do?" Oziel asked.

She didn't answer. She was too busy wondering about Jonathan's EDRP vial.

If he was in on this while nobody had even mentioned it to her, it meant she wasn't being ignored. They were actively excluding her.

If Doran's death was connected with this, she wanted to be excluded. Totally excluded.

On the other hand, she had to remember that she had no evidence at all that it was connected. She was jumping to conclusions in leaps and bounds.

Oziel, she gradually became aware, was sitting there, patiently waiting for an answer. What had he asked? Something about doing something.

"I'm not sure you need to do anything," she said slowly. "This is probably just a research project." One that Wallis had been too important to speak to her about, since he was too important to speak to anyone except God. However, the postdoc or grad student working on it would have boasted about being involved in life-changing research. Especially if it was Jonathan.

"But they're taking brain samples," persisted Oziel. "That can't be good."

"Well, like I said, it's not harmful when it's done right. And this," she frowned again at the display, "was done very right."

Doran Jackson, however, was another matter. He might have been done very wrong. At this point, she wanted no part of Wallis's project until she knew whether the autopsy cleared him of blame.

"It would be a good idea," she continued, "to tell Djamilah not to let her son go for any more tests. I'll tell her too. And if any other kids come back with these sorts of punctures, let me know. Also, if they give you a copy of the autopsy report, let me see it."

Oziel nodded once, very definitely.

"*Hecho*," he said.

Her couple of years of college Spanish in the dim past told her that meant *done*. She wondered why he suddenly spoke in Spanish. Maybe it felt more like a promise in his own language.

He rose and took Iskender's hand.

"Thank you, Corinna," he said. "For everything."

He turned to leave and Iskender waved goodbye to Corinna with a smile on his face.

Corinna watched them go without moving, even though there were a hundred things that had to be done in the lab. She needed a minute to get a grip on herself after everything that had happened. And something about the image of Oziel, vanishing through the doorway with the curly-headed little kid made her wish her life was less simple and had more people in it. She stared unseeing through her door at the far lab wall, listening to the whisper of the thin Martian wind. She was one of the few who kept a radio tuned to outside noise. Even she wasn't sure why. In case something approached? For a connection to a wider universe beyond the ivory-colored walls? To remind herself that she really wasn't in a basement in New York? It was a sound she could forget, but it was always there, enveloping all the hums and clicks and whines of lab machines.

Morbier came in as she sat sunk in thought. Naturally. She didn't understand how it happened, especially since she worked sixteen-hour days with barely time to eat, but if she ever did do nothing for thirty seconds, Morbier was bound to come in. Then he would look at her in his chilly way, as if to say, "Yes. Much as I expected."

Chapter 3

Morbier said nothing, making Corinna increasingly nervous. She knew the MRI cuff was lying in plain view in the lab, but why shouldn't it be? The same cuff could be wrapped around rabbits. There was nothing to show this one had been around a child.

Morbier's thin grey hair was always plastered to his head in exactly the same neat lines. His lab coat was always clean and pressed, all disorder stamped out with each new day. He pottered about the lab in his sharp-eyed manner, taking stock of the amounts of expensive chemicals left in their tiny vials. That way he could judge both how much work was being done in the lab and, if there were not enough results to justify the usage, how much material was being wasted. He was dreadfully sharp in every way. Corinna wished she could remember what it was she needed to be busy with, but there was something about her boss's assumption of failure that froze her. She fingered printouts nervously, knowing that his small grey eyes had already summed her up and come perilously close to a negative number.

"Ah, Corinna," he said as he passed her door. "Was that child visiting this lab, and the man with him that I saw in the hallway?"

Corinna's heart jumped into the back of her throat and stayed there. He was back early, but this sounded like he was early on purpose. Was he keeping tabs on her? How much had he seen? Flat denial stayed stuck in her throat, keeping her heart company, and by the time she found her voice she realized denial was useless. Jonathan had seen them. Maybe Jonathan had called Morbier to let him know, to see if he could get her in trouble. Would Jonathan do that just to get back at her? The answer to that was hopelessly obvious, as was the only answer to Morbier's question.

"Yes, that child was here." She tried wildly to think up an answer to his next question.

"The lab is not insured for visits by members of the public, as I trust you are aware."

She hadn't given that aspect of it any thought. But the phrase "members of the public" gave her an idea.

"The little boy is Djamilah's son," she said. There. She had not actually lied and, by implication, his relationship explained his presence.

Morbier neither accepted nor rejected the explanation, but somehow the

very lack of change in him suggested suspicion.

“You’ll be going to the party tonight, of course.” He moved on.

The stupid office party? Not if she could help it. She stood up to follow him into the lab, since he had not stopped for her response.

“I want my lab to be well-represented during Dicastillo’s stay.”

Dicastillo! He was the major stockholder and Chairman of the Board of Clipper Transport and Services. He’d provided the seed money for the whole exercise in cloistered bioengineering that was Foggy Bottom. He’d organized five different governments to participate. And he was positioning himself to be the only player once Martian terraforming started in earnest.

“Dicastillo is at *Burbidge*?”

“Yes,” said Morbier in his precise way, “that is what I just said.”

“But – I only know about an office party. I haven’t been invited to anything important enough for Dicastillo to be there.”

“Yes, you have,” he contradicted her evenly, his back to her as he continued examining supplies in the lab while he talked. “I made sure of it this afternoon. Read your email.” Doesn’t even check her email, his stiff back seemed to say.

What the—? Since when did Morbier knock himself out making sure she met important people? Blowing Martian dust could cause some respectable lightning. Maybe he’d been struck by a bolt out of the pink.

She stopped between the lab benches so she could tap at her wristpad for her latest messages, and there it was. “Leira Dicastillo y Jerez requests the pleasure of your company Wednesday at seven, June 12th.” And there, in keeping with the most refined manners, was the guest list and a little space to mark whether you were coming or not.

She needed to find out exactly what Morbier saw as her purpose at this shindig.

“Is there anyone in particular I should be sure to meet? Or a point you’d like me to make?”

“I’m sure if you use your initiative, you will make good use of your time.”

He just wanted her to go and network and make his lab look good. If there was any activity more repulsive than networking, she didn’t know what it was.

“Uh, certainly,” she said, resolving privately to devote no more than fifteen minutes to the ordeal of putting in an appearance.

He’d worked his way around to the MRI cuff she hadn’t had a chance to put away. This was going to get worse.

He picked it up.

“Was this a routine scan? I did not think you had scans scheduled for another two weeks.”

Thank God she’d thought to run a couple of rabbits as well as Iskender.

“The newest glycoprotein alters blood viscosity more than the others, so I was checking blood flow in the kidneys.”

“And how is my GP-17 synthetase coming?” Morbier asked.

Corinna bit back a smart remark. His synthetase! This was the seventeenth “antifreeze” enzyme this lab had worked on. Her predecessor had worked on one through eleven without finding a functional enzyme. She had made steady progress with twelve through seventeen. Eighteen was probably going to be the one, but it was Morbier’s enzyme, even though it was her ideas and her sixteen-hour days. She was writing the paper on the subject, and she was in the middle of the list of authors, after Morbier and a string of cronies to whom he owed favors.

She had her latest three-dimensional model of the enzyme on the workstation in her office and began pointing out the salient improvements since last week when he’d been around to check.

“It synthesizes a glycoprotein that works well when we inject the molecule itself straight into rabbits. But its catalytic rates are pretty slow.” As a matter of fact, her enzyme made “antifreeze” so slowly, a rabbit would turn into a frozen lump before the antifreeze could do any good.

“It might be that the active site is too shallow,” Morbier jabbed a bony finger at the image, “so it loses the molecules it should be holding. If you could deepen these arms, maybe with another sulfur bond here, the conformation would change enough to hold it.”

Corinna stared at the image with sudden insight. He was right. She took the light pen out at once and made delicate marks at several spots on her model where she would try changes. Morbier nodded, as if his professionalism forced him to admit she had not only understood, but had even gone him one better.

Corinna grudgingly admired Morbier’s intellectual edge. It was the main reason she was able to keep working for the man. If only he could have had fewer edges and more center.

As Morbier was on his way out the door, he mentioned,

“Wallis said you’d dropped by his office.” He waited a beat for Corinna to explain, then continued, “Anything in particular?”

Hell, yes, she wanted to shout. The kid died! But then she was brought up short by the revelation that this had to mean Morbier and Wallis were in cahoots. Why else would Wallis be keeping Morbier posted about every little thing? And why would Morbier care, unless the child’s death had plunged them all into full cover-up mode?

Well, she wasn’t going to aid and abet them by providing advance warnings. She wasn’t telling Morbier anything.

Pretending it had taken her a minute to understand what he meant in order to cover her slow response, she said,

“I heard a kid crying and thought he was lost.”

Morbier stood there. Was he never going to return to his office?

“What was the child upset about?” he asked.

Good grief, she thought. He’s angling to find out what I saw.

“You know how kids can behave in doctor’s offices. By the time I got there,

he'd calmed down, and I think his dad was there, so I just left again." It grew more difficult with every passing moment to discuss the poor child as if nothing had happened, but she certainly wasn't going to let him know she'd heard about Doran's death.

Morbier finally crossed the hall to his own office, while Corinna sat sunk in thought. This time, though, she wasn't after the large questions about life and death and the meaning of it all. This time it was a raft of narrow, but equally unanswerable questions. What was the secret research? How much did Morbier know about it? Was Burbidge about to become a seething mass of investigators? Or had Doran been ill and the whole thing just one of those unfortunate coincidences? Two samples had been taken from Djamilah's son, after all, and he seemed to be fine.

- + -

With the miserable office party suddenly added to her agenda, Corinna skipped any thought of dinner. If she arrived at the party before all the food was gone, it wouldn't matter anyway. She put off every single non-critical task except laying down new bench paper. If Señor Diego Dicastillo decided to come through on a site visit, it wouldn't do for the place to look like an alien slaughterhouse, covered in strange-colored stains.

The other non-critical task she simply could not put off was calling home. Her mother would disown her if she missed another reserved direct-connect time slot. There wouldn't be any of these problems with plain old email, but there was no way to convince her parents to take the sensible approach.

She ran downstairs to the nethermost level and the comm room, but stopped as soon as she stepped through the open doorway. Oziel was the only person there, sitting at one of the carrels, head sunk on his hands, and headphones on even though he also had the speaker going. Venezuela was only one time zone away from New York, so it made sense he'd be calling now. There was no visual, which meant he'd be getting money back on his allotment for using a low-bandwidth, voice-only connection. If there was a way to save a nickel, he took it.

In the seconds while she stood there, thinking empty thoughts about nickels and trying to pick a carrel, her two years of college Spanish coalesced the words into meaning, and then it was too late. He must not have realized the speaker was still on because the headphones cut out voice frequencies so effectively.

The man's voice coming over the speaker sounded upset. "No, Zielo. I don't mean it like that. Of course I would be glad if she was really happy. I was wild with joy when I thought Selena was getting out early, but when I went to meet her, it was all wrong. I mean, for instance, I bought her some chocolate

and all she said was, 'Thanks, dear,' and ate it. Last time, she had tears in her eyes—"

Getting out early? This must be Oziel's brother, the one who's wife had been in prison. "Last time" sounded like she'd been through this before. Was she another drug dealer, like the youngest brother?

"—you know how expensive that stuff is — and she broke it in half to give me some, and she asked about Juanito."

Oziel's head sank deeper into his hands.

"This time she didn't even ask about Juanito. She'll sit with him in her lap — he's dying Zielo, I tell you, he's dying — and she just has this stupid smile on her face, and she isn't even holding him. And when I look into her eyes, they're empty, except that somehow, I have this horrible feeling, that if she could say what she wanted, she'd be screaming."

Corinna could see Oziel's hands tighten around the sides of his head as he heard this. She should tell him about the speaker, but his brother's words were so obviously meant for his ears only, she couldn't face letting him know she'd heard them.

"And ... the way she is with Juanito is the worst, but ... well, she doesn't seem to want me any more. I mean she doesn't say no, she doesn't say yes. It's just, 'That's nice, dear,' either way. It's killing me, Zielo. What can I do?"

She could see Oziel straightening, one hand moving to rub his forehead while he obviously racked his brain, or, more likely, his soul, to find an answer that could help. As if anything could help, when your partner no longer loved you. Although that business about how she treated her son sounded very strange. Before Oziel could turn and see her, Corinna stepped quietly back through the door and fled.

Her parents were just going to have to wait. She'd dress up and try again just before heading to the party. To think that one scant day ago, she would have said Oziel was just some good-looking guy who worked in day care. And according to him, compared to his neighbors, he didn't have it too bad. You really never knew what burdens people carried.

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Corinna pushed the access button at the door to Dicastillo's penthouse suite and tugged unhappily at her blouse with the embroidered collar. Clothes, to her, were just something she put on, but now they focused her nervous mind like a broken zipper in a crucial spot. The tailored blue skirt was for job interviews, not evening wear. Her footwear was billed in the official inventory as "leisurewear slippers." It had been a choice between that and space suit boots. The whole effect was hopeless. Maybe her hosts would give her points for trying.

A butler in a tail coat, an actual tail coat, answered the door. My God, she thought, I hope he's not going to announce me to a staring roomful of people. He took no notice of her clothes. Corinna's breath was taken away by the wealth of the apartment. It had rooms, whole, large, normal-sized rooms, the like of which she hadn't seen since Earth, and they were full of the deafening chatter of people. The place didn't just have windows, it had window-walls in the two rooms that faced outward. The plastic was neither scuffed nor scoured, which meant somebody had to resurface the outside of each entire window about twice a year. There was a real view with thousands of stars, and no scuff marks to destroy it. As usual by the time she got out of the lab, the land was invisibly black, but one distant strobe marked Beta Station, where the scientists studying Martian bacteria worked.

As she entered one of the windowed rooms, Corinna saw a large archway that turned both rooms into one space. Then she gaped at the glassy surface of one of the interior walls. The whole thing was an image projector, currently displaying a glorious nighttime view of Mt. Arsia silhouetted against stars, with the brilliantly lit spaceport at its summit, and the streaking firefly lights of spacecraft. A projector that size would cost more than entire houses on Earth. And this was just an occasional weekend retreat for these people.

The apartment was full of plants, as was every space on the whole Station in the interests of improving air quality. In rooms this size, the effect was of a well-behaved forest. An elfin young woman appeared from behind a bushy fig tree. It cost Corinna conscious effort not to stare at her. She had a delicate, bone-china face, ice-blue eyes, and black hair with a silver band encircling her forehead to keep the glossy swirl of her hairstyle in place. The silver circle held two small peacock feathers above her left ear, and they accentuated her every movement. She wore a diaphanous white dress of many layers, so that only the edges were translucent.

"I'm so pleased you could come," said this vision musically. "You'll have to excuse me. I've only just arrived and I don't know people's names yet. I'm Leira Dicastillo y Jerez."

"Corinna. Corinna Mansur. So pleased to meet you."

Leira nodded gracefully, and her peacock plumes swept forward to help her.

"Let me introduce you to my father. He arrived in his clipper an hour ago, so he's even more disoriented than I am."

Corinna wanted to ask why her illustrious family felt this sudden need for Foggy Bottom, but couldn't think of a polite turn of phrase.

They approached a group of three. A stocky, hard-featured man Corinna had never seen at the Station before was holding forth.

"Yes, that's precisely the problem. Poor people are disadvantaged, which is why they go for self-destructive behavior, and since they won't help themselves it's very hard for anyone else to do anything either. The first step is to break that behavioral cycle."

Why, Corinna wondered, with so many people expressing a desire to help

the poor, did so few of the poor actually find help?

She suddenly realized that the small Chinese man wearing glasses was Hanzhe Ching, the UN Director for Science on Mars himself and her ultimate boss. She had seen him on newscasts and once in person giving a speech. He looked different from only a few feet away: shorter, flabbier, less important somehow. She found him difficult to smile at because his antique, flat glasses reflected the light and hid his eyes.

The woman completing the trio had a polished, impervious surface from which, Corinna thought, both insults and compliments would slide off with equal ease. If she ever cried, the tears would bead up and drop without a trace. She was Bukovsky, if Corinna remembered right, Ching's new second-in-command. Corinna noted with envy that she was wearing a business suit without any pathetic attempts at party clothes.

Leira began the introductions and Corinna said she was pleased to meet each of them, but all she felt was the awkwardness of a peasant in a palace. The three important people looked at her, but they did not continue with their conversation.

Desperate to fill the silence, Corinna babbled.

"Keeping up with your businesses must be difficult. I mean, the time lag. Between Mars and Earth. Must make it difficult."

"No, not at all," said the billionaire, polite and bored, as one who had answered the same obvious gambit a hundred times before. "I am lucky to have a very capable son who is in business with me and he takes care of any emergencies."

"Oh, how nice," said Corinna. For some reason she felt the daughter, standing right there, might construe this as a slight. "And your daughter must be a great help to you while you travel."

"Certainly, she does all she can," said the great man, now polite and dismissive.

The daughter, clearly, was not in the same capability league as the son, making Corinna feel like a social idiot for having brought the subject up.

"Dr. Mansur," Ching was saying, "yes, I remember now. You did your graduate work on endorphins, didn't you?"

"Yes," she said, astonished that the great man would remember such a detail. "Endorphinases, actually."

"Still keeping up with the field?" Ching asked.

All she needed, Corinna thought, was for word to get back to Morbier that she spent time on anything but antifreeze.

"Oh, heavens no," she said with a bit too much heartiness. "I've got too much to do working on the glycoproteins to have any time for hobbies." Everyone joined in the empty little exhalations that were the social equivalent of laughter on these occasions.

Leira smoothly suggested that she would show her the refreshments, to Corinna's immense relief, and then the scientists could get together again lat-

er and talk shop.

Corinna hoped not.

They threaded their way through the potted forest to where the knots of people were thickest. Leira steered her around the back of the table to a gap in the crowd between the table and the immense window. Corinna's eyes widened at the sight of the table. Nobody had told her there would be cheese, actual cheese, real, true, Earth cheese in about twenty varieties. The aroma, now that she was close enough, almost made her dizzy. There was a whole smoked salmon, half gone, half neatly sliced. And there, making her eyes feel like they might fall out of her head, was a bucket of caviar. The Dicastillos must have brought all this over on their private ship. They were going to have to knock her out to get her away from here.

Leira introduced her to an Alfred Marks, shifting from foot to foot by himself at the table, and left her to fend for herself. Corinna remembered him as one of the fellows in Horticulture, working on hydroponics or something. She marveled briefly at how Leira, for whom everyone here was barely more than a data blip in a computer, could nonetheless unerringly foist Corinna off on someone of her own rank. These things had to be taught at finishing schools.

Corinna helped herself to a cracker and brie and tried to make polite conversation with Alfred, but their mutual low status had powerful repellent properties. Alfred soon circulated off to network with people worth knowing. Corinna wasted no time in digging shamelessly into the caviar and retreating into a small grotto of potted palms right up against the window to eat her plateful of indecently heaped crackers. After months of vat-grown burgers, reconstituted carbohydrates, and hydroponic vegetables, she felt a hunger for this food right down to her toes. She wasn't the only one, and the wine was obviously having the same effect on many people. The volume of chatter in the rooms was already on the convivial side.

She'd thought the child's death that morning would be the main topic of discussion, but it wasn't. In all the chatter, she heard only a couple of people refer to it. The scuttlebutt made it sound like the death was just one of those unfortunate things, aggravated by the difficulty of living on Mars.

Well, maybe it was.

She decided there was no reason not to make herself comfortable by sitting on the floor in her almost-hiding place and using a palm pot as a backrest. There were a number of people sitting on the floor near the couches, so it was okay.

She could pick out bits and pieces of half the conversations in the room, as people like Kruskal, for instance, brayed loudly for emphasis as he flattered his boss. It sounded like they were talking about food production, of all things. What did His Bobness know about food production? He worked for the military on using polio viruses to carry molecules into cells. They were ostensibly hoping to cure radiation poisoning or something. However, be that as it might, she had to admit that Kruskal certainly didn't waste time with frivoli-

ties like eating when there was networking to be done. She polished off her first plate in peace, and then, once she had a second, more moderate plate of goodies, went to join the two of them with much concealed regret. Morbier was bound to arrive soon, and it would be politically correct if she were hobnobbing with Ching, Director for Science on Mars, when he did.

Ching was talking about food riots somewhere on Earth as she approached, and Kruskal had opened his shrewd little eyes wide in calculated admiration.

“Down forty percent! Excellent!” he cried as if he could taste the word. “At this rate, riots will be a thing of the past.”

“There are increased burial costs, of course,” Ching was saying with scientific objectivity, pointing out the negatives equally with the positives.

Why “of course,” wondered Corinna. Decreased riots implied decreased deaths, not an increase. She was going to ask what they were referring to, but they fell silent when they noticed her. It made her feel as welcome as the time she’d climbed a tree when she was six and appeared unexpectedly among her brother and his buddies in his treehouse. Unfortunately, this time she couldn’t break the ice by threatening to tell Mom where the kitchen satellite receiver had disappeared to. Instead, she asked whether Dicastillo’s presence meant there was a chance for increased funding for Burbidge, while in her mind she puzzled about why they couldn’t discuss world news in her presence.

The conversation orbited effortlessly around funding – that was always a safe bet in any group of scientists – while she kept returning to the peculiar food riots. If they hadn’t acted like it was a secret, she would never have given it a thought, but now ... now she was going to look it up on her wristpad the first chance she got.

She noticed Morbier with a politely meager plate of food talking to Dicastillo himself. As usual, her boss didn’t miss much, and he gave her one of his precise little nods across the room. She nodded back. Good. He’d seen her talking to Ching. Now she could get away from Kruskal, who seemed to be intent on monopolizing the Director, and circulate elsewhere.

Bukovsky, she saw, was standing not far away with a small group around her, so Corinna presumed on her introduction to the woman to join the group. She asked her about plans to expand the scientific facilities at Burbidge, and while the administrator began holding forth on new habitats and carbon scrubbers, Corinna saw Morbier walk up to Ching and she heard Kruskal braying again.

“Haha, Dr. Morbier. I guess I really am getting on in the world if the Director looks for me first at parties. Haha.”

She saw Morbier look at Kruskal without the slightest expression, and had the sudden insight that he disliked Kruskal as much as she did.

Then he began talking about someone splicing into his computer.

That was odd. He hadn’t said anything to her about it, and since she did the backups for the lab, he should have alerted her.

“Don’t you think?” she heard Bukovsky say.

“Definitely,” said Corinna, not missing a beat. In the hope of maintaining the illusion that she’d been listening, she added, “But the other thing that would be really nice is, if in addition to fixed plant, we had more vehicles for field studies.”

Bukovsky nodded in complete agreement and discussed vehicles. Corinna breathed a carefully suppressed sigh of relief that she’d managed to cover up a major floater. As soon as she could, she excused herself to go harvest a third helping of caviar and salmon and crispbreads and cheese.

A childish peal of laughter rang out somewhere else in the penthouse, and then through the big arched doorway she glimpsed a tiny, sharp-faced toddler racing by. Corinna was dumbfounded when Oziel appeared next, gaining on the boy in long, easy strides. Yet it made perfect sense. If Leira had a child, who better to baby-sit than a member of the professional daycare staff?

Oziel caught up with the youngster, scooped him up in one sweeping motion, and planted him on top of his shoulders. Under these circumstances the child thought it was great fun to be caught. Oziel turned his head and grinned up at the kid, as if he didn’t have any more cares than the boy.

She couldn’t take her eyes off Oziel. In the same way as colors seen on a different background can change hue, he became more than someone with a cheap watch and a lot of troubles who worked in day care. His warmth and kindness radiated from him like heat. He was such a contrast to everyone she’d seen since entering the penthouse, she just stared at him as if he was a window onto a different and a better world.

She’d drifted toward the doorway, and he noticed her as he headed back down the hall. For a moment he seemed unsure whether she’d want to say hello to him here, among her peers. He smiled in a tentative greeting. She smiled back, even more tentative, but he suddenly, briefly, just glowed.

Oh, she thought, and felt everything stop for a second. He moved toward the nursery, Leira came running, and Corinna started to turn away. *What brought on that incandescent smile? What should I do to see it again?*

“Pedro Xavier Diego Dicastillo, you naughty little boy! Are you being difficult?” His mother was trying to sound playful, trying not to be obviously worried about a scene in front of her guests.

Oziel turned back, and the little boy from his position over two meters high shrieked jubilantly about something that sounded like “French fries!”

“Petey,” scolded his scandalized mother in an undertone as guests’ heads turned in increasing numbers to see what was going on out in the hall, “be quiet! Now,” she switched to wheedling, “you stay in your room like a good boy and nice Oziel will come and take care of you again tomorrow.”

Corinna thought if Leira was really trying to teach her son not to shriek, wheedling sent the wrong message. Nor did she see the need for it. The boy, riding on Oziel’s shoulders, was going to go wherever Oziel went. She turned toward the crowd. A moment later she heard Leira’s silvery laugh among the

guests again and saw the splendid eyes of her peacock feathers floating above the throng.

“Hey,” said a quiet alto voice in Corinna’s ear as she stood by herself, trying to decide what to do next. She turned to see her friend and fellow postdoc, Tambika Mlongweni, who worked in Kilburn’s lab.

“You can’t stop to think,” Tambika murmured. “It’s like skiing. Think, and you’ll fall down.”

“Yeah. Tell me about it.” Corinna exchanged a wink and, as Tambika moved on, tried to make up her mind whom to accost. Kruskal was in a deep discussion with the Station’s main financial bureaucrat, and Corinna wondered why she hadn’t thought of that. The fellow probably had the inside scoop on dozens of sources of funding. The group coalesced around Dicastillo was too intimidating, and besides, they seemed to be discussing the counterproductive habits of the poor again.

Tambika was right. If you stopped to think, it was all over. The color contrast worked both ways, and something about Oziel made the crowd even duller than before. Corinna went back for fourths, trying to look innocent, and checked information on food riots while she ate. Fatalities and food riots gave her nothing. Other combinations of keywords proved equally uninformative. Unlike the past, there weren’t that many places these days that even had food riots, and the only one with noticeably fewer than last year was impoverished Surinam. However, there weren’t any fatalities associated with the ones they did have. She gave up. It was just going to be one of those irritating facts waiting for an explanation she couldn’t find. She finished her last slice of salmon and left for the lab. She’d stayed almost an hour. What more could anyone want?

She turned toward Artemis – and stopped dead. Jonathan was coming out of Wallis’s door, headed towards Morbier’s labs, so he had his back to her and did not see her. He was carrying a small white rack with purplish specimen vials. What was he doing, carrying specimens from one lab to the other? She might as well face the fact that he was included in this new research nobody had even told her about. There was going to be hell to pay, if she could get the accounting department there to send a bill.

She hung back, waited till he was safely inside the lab, and then made audible footsteps as she approached.

“Oh, hi, Jonathan. Didn’t you hear the edict from the Head Man? You’re supposed to be at that party.”

He stood up the moment he heard her coming, and was trying, with pathetically transparent nonchalance, to carry the sample rack toward the freezer while he screened it from view.

He’d buried his head in the freezer, but took it out to turn his blank, blue eyes on her.

“What about you, then?”

“Been there, done that,” she came back at him. “You better shake a leg and

get on up there. Besides, it's worth it. They've got caviar. And wine."

"Caviar," muttered Jonathan into the freezer. "Might as well eat cod liver oil."

He was now making a pathetic attempt to hide the rack while pretending to look for something in the freezer.

The way he was behaving, those sample tubes would be worth a look once he was out of here.

He finally took his head out of the freezer again and saw that she was still looking at him, waiting to see what he would say.

"I can't waste time on a stupid office party," he said. "I'm working on an important project for Morbier. On methylation and regulatory genes," he added, as if to make sure she didn't assume it might be something else.

The squirt was really starting to irritate her.

"Jonathan, I'd be surprised if it came as news to you that everyone in this lab, from Tom on up, is working on the boss's projects. So what does that make all of us? Chopped liver?"

She walked over to the synthesizer, and began measuring out reagents for a DNA primer that needed to be ready tomorrow.

Jonathan didn't answer, but punched at his wristpad with almost as much emphasis as she squeezed the button on the pipetter to release measured amounts of liquids.

She was loading the completed mixtures into the synthesizer when Morbier came in.

Now what? she thought. It was not the great man's habit to stay up till the wee hours in the lab.

"The Director of Computing Operations just arrived, *and* Dicastillo's personal secretary, and I understand from Dr. Ching that several more important people are still due." For some reason, he was looking at Corinna while he said this.

"I just needed to set up a synthesis. Then I was headed back," she lied. However, it was one of those lies which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Now she had to do it. She waited as long as she could to see if Jonathan felt compelled to leave too, but apparently not.

She marched back up the stairs in quick, irate steps.

So. Morbier wanted her out of the lab. Not Jonathan. Just her. Given the long hours she worked, she practically lived in the lab, which, obviously, was why Morbier himself had made sure she was invited to this party. Well, that did it. She was going to take apart those three purple tubes right down to their component atoms.

At least the food wasn't gone yet when she was ushered back into the opulent suite by the imperturbable butler. They must be putting fresh supplies out as people snaffled up what was there. Corinna found that the brief hiatus in the lab had gone a long way toward melting away her previous four helpings, so she loaded up on a fifth with the feeling that she deserved some sort

of compensation for everything.

She stood near the big arched door to the hall, mostly because of a psychological need to feel that she could escape quickly if she had to, and she could hear Petey still shrieking in a room not far away. Playing quietly was obviously not in that kid's repertoire. Or maybe he was feeling elevated because the place was full of people.

Leira Dicastillo, like the highly polished hostess she was, circulated around to Corinna to make conversation, and Corinna took the opportunity to thank her for the marvelous feast.

"Your courier must have been packed right up to the control consoles."

"Actually, it's much less than it seems. You'll notice it's all rather compact food. Everything fitted in three crates."

Corinna saw her throw a brief, worried glance in the direction of the shrieking, and then turn back to her guest with nothing but pleased politeness on her perfect face.

"Your father was talking earlier about helping the poor break out of their disadvantaged ways," said Corinna as she nodded with a grin at the table by the window, "and this has certainly gone a long way toward lifting the tone of the Station."

Leira let out a peal of musical laughter.

"I hope you didn't get Father started on self-help and the poor. The only subject on which he's even harder to stop is taxes."

Corinna saw Dicastillo Sr. march purposefully toward the shrieking sounds, and noticed Leira see him too, looking even more worried than before.

He yanked a door open on the other side of the hall, the volume of childish noise suddenly increased. Corinna could see Petey banging something on a flowerpot, stop, race over to his grandfather, and bang the thing gleefully on his leg. Corinna marveled at the boy's fearlessness. Given the thunderous look on Dicastillo's face, she would have boarded a space ship and found another planet to live on.

The captain of industry had just begun to hop up and down on one foot, and was going to start expressing himself fully any second, when Corinna saw Oziel scoop the kid up and Leira hastily excused herself.

Corinna could see Petey now banging the favored object – a model car, that's what it was – on Oziel's head. Luckily, it was the tires that hit him before he interposed his large hand between it and further damage.

Leira swept in, everything stopped for a moment, and then started all at once.

Petey was yelling, "I got the winner! I got the winner! I got the winner!" to the beat of the bouncing car.

Dicastillo Sr. was demanding to know, "When will this child be taught to behave?"

"Fa-ather," Leira expostulated, sounding like an adolescent. "He's a healthy, active little boy. You just don't like children."

The Dicastillos, like many of the upper classes worldwide these days, apparently spoke English at home. Corinna noticed the other guests near the door also grinning at their plates and enjoying themselves.

“I like kids well enough,” growled Dicastillo, still rubbing his shin. “It’s wild animals I disapprove of.”

Meanwhile, not exactly in the background, Petey informed everyone that he had gone down the slide, down the slide, down the slide.

“Fa-ather,” said Leira again. “He’s only four. Four year-olds need to explore the world, not be put in a straitjacket.” She sounded like she was quoting from a child-rearing book.

“You should have a doctor look at him. This is the twenty-first century, in God’s name. They can fix chemical imbalances that lead to tantrums. Dr. Wallis could give him one treatment, and you could have a bright, smiling child who knows how to behave.”

Leira was clearly offended by the implications.

“Father, I don’t think —”

“Vroom, vroom, yeowww, BLAM!” Petey drove his car over Oziel’s head and crashed it off his nose.

“Oh, Petey, do be quiet!”

Petey, now that someone besides Oziel had finally noticed his existence, returned the favor by cheerfully throwing his car.

The essence of the more expensive model cars is that they are metal, and acutely painful, especially when they land on a cheekbone as delicate as Leira Dicastillo’s.

“Petey!” shrieked his mother.

Oziel, who had one hand free since he no longer needed to defend himself from the car, moved over to the door and closed it.

Regretting that the show had ended, Corinna wondered whether she should shamelessly attempt a sixth helping and wait around, in case the fun started again, or whether she should go back to the lab. Morbier was still there, over by the window, deep in a discussion with the head of Computing Operations. She figured she better wait till she could leave without him noticing, and sneaked a sixth helping, hoping nobody else was counting.

When she headed back toward Artemis Hall, she wondered what she’d find Jonathan up to this time. If only she could look through a hidden camera —. Then she realized she could. The security camera panned the lab for the benefit of emergency services and central security. She could feign worry to the guard on duty about a fictitious stranger in the lab. Most of the security guards knew her by now, so it would not involve a lot of tedious explanations. She ducked toward the hub instead of her hallway. The guard let her into the control post immediately and even zoomed the image on her lab when she asked him to.

Jonathan was there, all right, and he was fiddling around at the back of the server. The zoom showed he was holding something. It looked sort of like a

pipetter. What would he be doing with a pipetter at the server? Maybe he was trying to fix a loose connection and just happened to be holding a pipetter, but somehow she doubted it. Whatever it was, he was done now and was looking at his notes. She wasn't going to find out anything using this clever method.

"Okay, thanks a million. That's just Jonathan, so there's no problem." She smiled her best smile and headed back to her own hallway.

Her smile vanished the minute she was by herself. This time, she didn't try to let her arrival be heard, but Jonathan didn't seem startled. He must be done with whatever he was doing. A moment later she was sure of it because he up and left. She looked around to see if she could figure out what he'd been working on. It was all just the usual lab things all in their usual places. For once, he'd put everything away. All the pipettors were hanging in their circular racks. She looked around the area where he'd been working and felt a perverse sense of smug disapproval to see that he'd left one pipetter out after all. Except it wasn't a pipetter. Now that she saw the thing up close, she realized it was a logic probe. The two were a vaguely similar shape, especially from a distance or on a fuzzy security monitor. But the only purpose for a logic probe was to test hard-wired computer circuits. What the hell had he been doing, fussing around at the server with a logic probe?

Was he perhaps the mystery splicer Morbier had mentioned at the party? Or was he trying to deal with the splicing?

Some ten minutes had passed since he'd left, so it was more than just a trip to the bathroom. Now, while the lab was empty, was as good a time as any to look at the three mysterious samples. Later on it would be more crowded when people came back to finish procedures they'd been working on and to make sure they had everything ready for tomorrow.

She went to the freezer, found the sample rack with very little difficulty, and began the process of identifying the stuff inside the tubes. Having put on rubber gloves, as for any lab procedure, she scooped a little bit of material out of each vial. They were labeled the way purified DNA usually was. She melted the top layer enough so that no sign of her scooping could be seen and put the vials back in their rack. The big, tabletop DNA reader worked on her samples, and once the machine assessed the size of the fragments, the countdown timer told her she had twenty minutes to wait.

She potted about, listening for returning footsteps and cleaning up and putting away the equipment she'd used. It was hard not to gloat that the grand old men were going to be frightened out of a couple of years of lateral growth once she had the goods on them. That's what they got for excluding the most qualified person around. And if Doran's death really was their fault somehow and they were trying to cover it up, then her results might be useful to the investigators.

The DNA reader finally beeped. She lost no time in piping the files to her office computer and naming them something innocuous, like fish-GP-19, 20

and 21. It only took the blast search seconds to come up with a near-perfect match for the first one. Endorphinase.

She stared at the result and realized she hadn't really believed it herself until this moment. Everything else had been conjecture. This was proof up to scientific levels of certainty.

They were working on endorphins. She was the most knowledgeable person on this subject on all of Mars. They were excluding her. The only possible reason had to be that they were trying to cover something up. And that had to mean Doran's death was their fault.

She downloaded the files to her personal laptop and removed them from the DNA reader, the server, and her office desktop. She wondered if she'd get any sleep that night.

Chapter 4

Feeling wildly overworked and underappreciated was one thing. Now Corinna felt like she was working for the Mob. For this she had slaved through sixteen-hour days. Well, no more. She was going to start having a life and she was going to start now. The following day she took dinner at dinner time.

Unfortunately, the cafeteria reminded her why she generally worked through meals. The place was a seething mass of blue, green, white, red, and brown Station suits; different colors, but all the same jump suits with the same United Nations Planetary Bureau logo. The line snaked out the door, and already almost every table was full. Had all things been equal, she would have gone back to the lab, but all things were far from equal. She stood in line. A quarter of an hour later, with her veggies and vat-grown protein, she surveyed the boisterous room in the idealistic hope of a quiet seat. There was a small table by the wall with an empty chair, but then she noticed Oziel there. She stopped. Would he misinterpret it if she joined him? Another person on an intercept course for the same chair decided her. She didn't care what he thought. She wanted to eat her dinner.

She sat down, but he did not look up. Then Corinna noticed depression in every line of his body. What could be so bad that it visibly affected him, of all people?

"Oziel," she said just loud enough for him to hear under the din. "What's wrong?"

He looked up then, his face drained of joy, grey and hollow.

"Read that," he said, pushing a handwritten fax toward her. He didn't say "hello" or seem to care who knew his troubles. That, by itself, was unlike him. "It came by *mail* today. From my brother."

Mail, physical mail, was expensive. The encrypted scanner at the sender's end cost money, interplanetary bits and bytes always cost money, and the decrypting printer keyed to the receiver's iris scan cost even more money. All this money bought absolute security and privacy. His brother must have had to save up for it, if the family was poor. Costs increased by the page and she noticed it was exactly one page long.

She took the paper, and buckled down to dredging up enough of her Spanish to make sense of it. Her protein blocks cooled in their congealing sauce on her plate.

*Zielo,
I don't know where to start.
Selena died last night.*

Corinna froze in unbelieving shock. Died? This was the sister-in-law he'd been talking about only yesterday. She'd been alive then. She was dead now. Death seemed to follow him around.

They must have done something to her in prison, but when I begged her to tell me what happened, she said, "Nothing." Juanito's —

"What's this word?"
Oziel looked over.
"Diarrhea."

— isn't getting better, so I finally took both of them to your old friend, Dr. Miguel Sanderas. He said no, he could find nothing wrong with Selena. But Juanito, he said, is not getting enough food to his brain because the diarrhea is draining him of everything. So now he needs drugs that cost more than I make in a year.

I walked home with them in despair. She sat in the door of our rancho.—

"A 'rancho'? He has a ranch?"
"That's what they call the shacks in the barrio. Ranchos."
"Oh."

I put Juanito on her lap. My heart was breaking. She still did not even wrap her arms around him. She stared with nothing in her eyes.

After much time, I have no idea how long as I sat there, she spoke. Her voice sounded different, sounded like she meant it, as if she was fighting her way up to air. She said, "I love you, Marco."

I was going to put my arms around her, but our son cramped up in one of those fits he's been getting. I took him from her because he might have fallen, the way she held him. I shouted for a doctor, our neighbors ran for him. Then I saw that Selena was gone. Other neighbors ran to find her.

But she was gone forever. They found her after midnight. Hit by a bus on Calle Bolivar. The driver said she jumped in front of it. No way to stop in time.

Sanderas saved our boy for now. He is still sick.

I do not know if there was something I could have done for Selena, or not done, that might have made a difference. I don't know what I'd do without Juanito.

Graciela was laid off again, so she is helping me, taking care of things. She says to say hola.

Marco.

Corinna slowly raised her eyes from the single, terrible page. She could imagine no words that would be of any real use. Oziel hadn't moved, not even to shift his gaze to another spot on the floor.

"How awful," she said. "How absolutely awful." After a while, she asked, just to have something to say, "Who's Graciela?"

"Our youngest sister."

"It's good he has family to help him." It was impossible to say anything that didn't sound stupid. "Did Selena have a big family too?"

"Only one living sister."

Good God, thought Corinna. When you heard about the short average life span in the third world, and didn't think much about it, there was some vague assumption of a compressed life much like your own. People just got old at forty five and died peacefully at fifty seven. But of course that was nonsense. What it meant was that people's children died. Their younger sisters died. Their brothers and wives and nephews died.

Slowly she reached out to touch his hand.

"I am so sorry to hear this," she said softly. "I am so sorry."

He felt warm and dry, as if fire burned within him. She felt the little hairs on the back of his hand, and the smooth, rounded bones under his skin.

He bent his head down, fighting tears Corinna guessed.

"I don't understand," he finally whispered, barely audible even now that the dinner crowd had thinned a bit. "I just don't understand. Selena had all the fight in our family. She was a school organizer. That's what she did. She made sure people could learn to read." He made a wry face in the middle of his grief.

"A 'school organizer'?" Corinna couldn't see how that fit in with dealing drugs. Or had she been in jail for something else? "She was in a fight?"

"You could say that," he muttered. "She fought to let people read. The authorities want only government schools around the barrio, but nobody learns anything there. Selena organized reading classes. So of course it had to be a conspiracy to overthrow the government because there are groups of poor people all putting their heads together." Disgust and contempt joined the grief on his face.

"That sort of thing is still going on?" asked Corinna, feeling what a stupid question it was the second the words were out of her mouth.

He gave her a brief, black stare and looked back down.

She could have kicked herself. She felt as frozen as if she really had kicked herself, right in the chest. People were dying while idiots like her blundered around saying *Problem? There's a problem?* At least with plain old cruelty, your suffering wasn't invisible.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, but she couldn't seem to find enough voice to make sure he could hear her.

He took a long breath.

"Yes," he said, speaking too slowly, but not otherwise rubbing in how dumb a comment it was. "That sort of thing is still going on." After another long breath, he added, "It's better than in my grandmother's day, I guess. Then people like Selena just disappeared. Now ... they don't kill prisoners and we don't blow up planes." He took up the letter again. "But this.... I'd kill the rats with my bare hands if I was in Caracas right now."

Corinna could see that it wasn't a figure of speech.

After another long time he said, "How could someone like her change so much? If nothing happened?"

How indeed, thought Corinna.

"How long was she in prison?"

"Only a month. They tried, but they could never make their stupid charges stick." Corinna could see he was proud of his brother's wife. "Then all of a sudden they changed their minds and let her out. To die."

To kill herself, Corinna corrected, privately. That sounded totally out of character for this woman, which meant it would take damage to the brain to make her change so suddenly. But the doctor would have noticed a blow to the head or a drug overdose. The right neurotransmitters could have done it, of course, but they were way too expensive to be handed out to someone as poor as Selena. Come to think of it, her symptoms, at least the stupid smile, sounded like an endorphin overload. Had the doctor tested for anything like that when he'd said he couldn't find anything wrong? Then she answered her own question. Of course he hadn't. Why should he? Stuff that made gold look cheap didn't exist in the barrio.

Endorphins seemed to be popping up everywhere. Wallis's brain samples, Jonathan's vials, and possibly they explained Doran's, and now Selena's, symptoms. If there was a connection, though, Corinna couldn't see it.

"Oziel, tell me, it's very important I know the exact situation —"

"Hi! Anyone sitting here?"

The din of talk, of scraping chairs, of clattering plates rushed into Corinna's and Oziel's private universe. The stranger looked taken aback at the two blank faces staring as if he had teleported in through the wall.

Corinna waved her hand expansively at the chair. "Take the chair. We don't need it." That solved the problem for everyone. The relieved stranger absconded with the chair to a less occupied table and Corinna said,

"Now, where were we?"

"You wanted to know, you said, 'the exact situation'," Oziel repeated mechanically, as if he was reading it off a screen instead of remembering it.

"Oh, yes. Did your sister-in-law ever show any behavior at all similar to what Marco describes?"

Oziel shook his head without needing any time to think.

“When she was very sad, for instance?” Corinna persisted. Oziel shook his head more vigorously.

Then it had to be something that happened in the prison.

“She said ‘nothing’ happened, but maybe she meant ‘nothing painful.’ Did she get any injections? Any sort of medical treatment?”

“I don’t think so,” said Oziel. “We’re all so suspicious of anything that gets done in prison, she wouldn’t have said ‘nothing’ then. If she said ‘nothing,’ she meant ‘nothing.’ She ate, she slept, she was released.”

“It makes no sense,” said Corinna to herself. “These are great big molecules. The lungs won’t absorb them, although I suppose they could –.”

“What are big molecules?”

“Neurotransmitters. Behavior modifiers. I thought maybe they’d given her some, but there’s no visible means of delivery, and there’s no motive. Why would anyone spend thousands of dollars on endorphins for a poor woman, or a felon, however you look at it?”

Oziel seemed to be thinking, coming out of his stunned grief. Corinna was glad to see it.

“Could they have fed her something that lasted for weeks after her release?”

“No, there’s nothing like that. And an injected time-release capsule is definitely something you’d notice.”

“We are not being logical about this,” said Oziel out loud but to himself. “If there’s no plot, we have separate events with no explanation. We should assume they’re up to something, and see where that takes us.”

“But why? What’s the conspiracy *for*?” urged Corinna.

“Selena has been in prison three times. They beat her the other two times.” Corinna inhaled sharply. “As soon as Selena was out, she was organizing again. This time she did nothing. ... She did more than nothing. She did their work for them. She ... she killed herself.” The greyness stole back onto his face.

“I see,” said Corinna in a very small voice. “Okay. Conspiracy. Somebody is using endorphins, and who knows what else, serotonins perhaps, instead of water cannons. They’d have to distribute the stuff – OH.” She stopped abruptly, remembering.

“Food riots. Down forty percent,” she whispered.

“What?” asked Oziel.

“They’re past the testing phase already,” she muttered. “Unless using it in prisons is like a field test. God help us, I wonder how many people they’ve destroyed by now.”

“They kill people, these drugs of yours?” asked Oziel, staring at his letter.

She wanted to say “they’re not *my* drugs,” but she let it go.

“The endorphins wouldn’t kill you, but the horrible feeling you were losing your mind ... that could drive you mad. It would explain the peculiar increase in burial costs Ching mentioned, if what they’re using takes some people the way it did Selena.”

She tried to run the rest of that conversation through her memory.

“Morbier was there too, talking about someone splicing into his computer. Plus, I know for a fact they’re working on something to do with endorphins, and that they clam up whenever I’m there.” She felt choked, as if she’d forgotten to breathe. She took a gulp of air.

“They must all be in it. All the way here on Mars.” After a second, she added, “I doubt this is what UNPB meant when they wanted dangerous research done away from Earth.”

Oziel didn’t seem to be listening.

“Splicing?” he muttered. “What did your boss say, exactly?”

Corinna was surprised that her boss’s silly computer problems should concern him at a time like this.

“All I heard was that he’d noticed a break-in.”

Oziel leaned back and studied the floor, as if vital answers were woven into the gray tiles.

“It is interesting, Corinna.” He said her name as if it was a title. “You seem to do nothing but help me. This is the fourth time.”

“It is? What do you mean?”

He looked straight at her for many seconds longer than ordinary conversation allowed, and seemed to come to a decision.

“What I mean is you have saved me a lot of trouble. Trouble like losing my job and going to jail. I’ll have to be more careful in future.”

“More careful!” Corinna sputtered. “Was it...?” She had assumed he was in daycare because he was too, well, too unskilled for anything else.

“The night life was not healthy in my barrio in Caracas,” said Oziel quietly. “We stole computers and played with them.”

“The night life here is on the boring side,” said Corinna slowly. “Particularly if you can’t sleep.”

“Yes,” he said.

“But,” she began and stopped and then began again. It was a rude question, but she was too curious. “But what are you doing in day care? You could be pulling in serious money.”

Oziel let out a small empty puff of a laugh.

“They’ll hire someone out of a slum with no background and with barely a high school degree to take care of their kids. But their computers? I don’t think so. No, I like children. I make enough to live on and to send money home to my family. I’m out of the barrio.”

Well, she’d meant he could steal it, but that option didn’t seem to be on the table for him. And as far as making an honest living went, he was successful in his own context. Both safe and not starving. How did that differ from her desire for interesting work rather than high pay?

“I see,” she said. He had succeeded much better than she had.

After minutes of silence passed, Oziel staring at his letter, Corinna staring at the wall, she said,

“That means it’s definitely not just Nobel prize-winning research that went

wrong.”

“What?” he said, coming back from another universe.

“They’re not keeping some neat, new project secret because they don’t want to be scooped. Or because they’re trying to cover their tracks after a bad accident. They’re keeping it secret because it’s *secret*. They’d have a fit if they knew I know. And you know what else makes sense now? Brain samples from kids who are rays of sunshine. I’ll bet anything they’re testing natural variation in the endorphin system in different people.” She leaned back in her chair and folded and re-folded her napkin. “I thought Doran’s symptoms sounded a lot like a heroin overdose. That’s what too much endorphin would probably look like. I bet Wallis really did kill that poor kid with some experimental gene therapy that went wrong. Has the autopsy come through yet?”

Oziel shook his head.

“God,” she said, muttering to herself, “brainwashing. Literal brainwashing. World pacification by brainwashing. All using clever little happy genes being made right here.” The train of conjectures kept growing, pulling in what had been random facts.

“Wallis! What was Dicastillo saying about Wallis?” Oziel hadn’t moved, so she tapped his arm.

“At the party,” she prompted him. “When Dicastillo was growling about his grandson being a wild animal. What did he say about Wallis?”

Oziel pulled himself together with a visible effort.

“Wallis?”

“The kid was screaming his head off, he’d just used granddad as a racetrack, the daughter was reciting, and he said something about ... let me think ‘Take him to Wallis and just one treatment will make him a polite and smiling boy.’ Or something to that effect.”

Oziel frowned.

“Yes. I remember that too.”

“Is there any such treatment for difficult kids?”

“I haven’t heard of any. That doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. Although in my professional opinion,” there was the slightest quirk of a smile on his grey face, “he doesn’t need any treatment his mother couldn’t get in a few parenting classes.”

She answered that with wry agreement, then the two of them stared at each other as the implications sank further in.

“His own grandson,” she whispered. “That means Dicastillo is in on it. He’s probably funding the whole thing. He probably thinks it’ll be a great way to deal with pesky protestors who interfere with his plans.” She drew a deep breath. “We’re not fooling around in the little leagues, are we?”

Oziel shook his head.

“His own grandson,” she repeated. “I wonder if they could possibly really believe that they’re doing anyone a favor with this stuff? Oh, hell. Can we warn his mother somehow? Without getting killed?”

“I don’t think so. I can’t see myself walking up to the Señora and saying, ‘Ey, keep Petey away from Dr. Wallis.’ She’d want explanations, and her father would hear about it.”

“Mm-yes. That probably wouldn’t work. Still, watch for an opportunity. If we can, we should warn her. Too many people have died already. We have to figure out something we can *do*.”

She looked at him with wide eyes. Nothing in her extensive education had prepared her to do anything but hand it over to the police, and she had nothing except three pilfered samples to show them. They would laugh at her.

He had gone back to staring at his letter when she mentioned dying.

“What I’m going to do,” he said apologetically, “is go to my dorm. I think I could stand it now.”

He stretched his legs as if he’d forgotten he had them. He took the fateful letter from the table, folded it carefully, and put it in his breast pocket.

“I’ll tell Marco what you said – by secure mail.” He paused.

“It’ll help him just as much as me.” He looked straight at her and didn’t look away.

“*Gracias*, Corinna.”

Chapter 5

One problem Corinna had failed to consider was the difficulty of interacting with Morbier as if nothing had happened. When he came into the lab just before lunch the next morning, she felt as if she had a sign on her saying, "Suspect Me."

She just hoped he would wait till she was done showing one of the techs and a grad student how to pull a cesium chloride density gradient. These things could be ruined by an awkward breath and then, of course, Morbier would give her one of his summing-up looks.

He waited stolidly till she drew the pipette tip out of the solution, completing the demonstration.

"Okay, practice on these tubes. I'll be back in a minute." She turned to Morbier and he came straight to the point.

"Corinna, I'd like you to take this week's trip to check on the exposed rabbits."

"Uh," she said uncertainly. A hundred thoughts were whirling through her head, and she could never think of the right thing to say then. Why was Morbier giving her a job normally reserved for the techs? It was nothing but cleaning rabbit cages. The rabbits might be genetically engineered, but they were still just rabbits. A doctorate was hardly needed for the task.

"Is that, uh, the best use of my time?" she asked, trying to put it politely. "I'm pretty swamped here with things the techs can't do and—"

"I want to be sure it gets done right," Morbier interrupted. "Check the conditions in the habitats carefully while you're there. We've been getting higher death rates in some of them, and I want to be sure that reflects genetics and not just poor care."

He turned away, the discussion at an end, while Corinna was still saying, "Uh, sure."

For some reason, he seemed to be determined to get her out of the lab. Again. What could they be planning that would take all day? And why did they have to do it here? There were tens of labs, Ching's among them, that had the same equipment, where they could perform lengthy procedures without fear of interruption by watchful postdocs.

In any case, her mere physical presence in the lab wouldn't stop them from working on sinister projects. Then she had a chilling thought. Maybe the point

was not to get her out of the lab, but to get her out on the surface. Out where Jonathan's predecessor had died.

If he'd stumbled across a secret he wasn't supposed to know, and if they'd found out, it would be simplicity itself to arrange an "accident" out on the surface. Maybe the empty tank had been that sort of an accident. For a panicked moment she thought she should have refused to go. She should have ... but she knew she couldn't have. If she started disobeying the boss's direct orders, he'd fire her, and in her business that meant she would never get another job.

Then, as she began to get a grip on herself, she decided she must be overreacting. They didn't know she knew, and even though Morbier was obviously involved in something that resulted in deaths like Doran's and Selena's, he hadn't personally murdered them. The investigation of the malfunctioning suit hadn't found any evidence of foul play. There was a long road between finding clever ways for other people to kill people and doing it yourself. After all, the scientists who invented the atom bomb, on both sides of that particular war, had probably been well-mannered people who were kind to dogs.

It would not, however, hurt to plan for all contingencies. Who knew what Morbier was capable of? She needed to check out the rover and her suit by the book. She would take extra oxygen tanks. And she would take a buddy this time, instead of quietly flouting that regulation as she usually did. For a moment, she wavered in her decision to take no extra risks. Rounding up someone was inconvenient and making conversation for umpteen hours was even worse, but she lectured herself that this was no time to be finicky. Her tech, Gordon Smith, would be her first choice, since he had once been a rover mechanic before switching to lab work. However, she had no solid data proving he was not one of Them, in which case it might be worse than useless to take him along.

Most people had to be uninvolved in whatever Morbier and his cronies had cooked up, but the only proven outsider was Oziel. She could take him. So far, he hadn't crowded her, and maybe it wouldn't be too bad. Of course, so far, they seemed to do nothing but discuss death, which might cramp even the pushiest fellow's style. However, she would just have to hope for the best. Tambika and Mei-mei were both much too busy to take a day off. There wasn't anyone else.

Looking on the bright side, there was also the fact that she quite enjoyed rabbit-feeding trips. It gave her another rare chance to see Mars up close and to listen to the whisper of its windblown sand grains on her helmet when she held her breath enough to hear. If the truth were told, she enjoyed the rabbits too. They were alive and real and furry and completely unfazed by their ability to live where no animal had lived before. In addition to the antifreeze genes being tested in them, the rabbits had new, improved hemoglobin that allowed them to live in low pressure habitats where Corinna couldn't even take her suit off. It was strange to think that animals might be developed, in

time, for whom Mars was hardly dangerous.

By now it was well into the lunch hour and, except for a couple of graduate students, the lab was empty. Corinna sneaked her contraband files off her laptop onto her more powerful desktop workstation. Although she'd identified two of the specimens as endorphin-related, the third one didn't match anything obvious, and her laptop's puny 3D modeling abilities couldn't get a handle on it. She needed to try some of the more sophisticated genetic search engines available on the web. Then she'd have her answer in minutes.

What came back in minutes was "no match." That was beyond strange. The first two had been straightforward human genes, one coding for endorphinase, one for a regulator of endorphin production. Could the third have been part of some totally different project? But then why would Jonathan have been carrying it carefully from lab to lab?

She was staring at the sequence on her workstation when she became aware of someone entering the lab. Before she could so much as close the window, Morbier was there.

He looked at her screen.

"GP-19, hmmm? You've already given up on 18?"

"Oh, this is just an idea I wanted to check out. It should radically change the conformation of the arms," she lied desperately, "which should either work better than half measures, or not at all."

"Hmm?" he said again. "Well, show the alignment. If it's too far off, you know it won't work."

Corinna's brain seized up. Only a very similar molecule would line up with the other glycoprotein genes she had, and if this did not line up, it would be obvious she was working on something else. He knew that. He was purposely trying to catch her out, which meant he knew this was not really a glycoprotein gene. But how did he know?

She slowly started the keystrokes of doing an alignment, frantically trying to get her brain in gear. It occurred to her to call one of the graduate students over. They were eternally bugging her when she had other work to do. For once, they could interrupt when she needed them to.

"Tom?"

"Yeah?"

"You may want to ask Dr. Morbier your topological geometry question. It's going to take me a minute to get this alignment up."

The student did not need to be told twice. He pounced.

"Oh, Dr. Morbier, that'd be great. I'm really having trouble with some of my molecular models. Let me show you on my terminal over here."

Since Morbier was apparently doing nothing more than taking a friendly interest in Corinna's work, he couldn't refuse. Still, Corinna was pretty sure she saw annoyed impatience leaking around his impassive facade.

In a twinkling she pulled up some real fish glycoprotein sequences, randomly altered some bases, renamed the sequences GP-19, and removed her trans-

gressions.

"It aligns," she told Morbier over the grad student's shoulder, "but it doesn't look very good. I've left it up on my screen. I was going to get a bite to eat, so I can get back in time to clean up the samples coming out of the extractor."

Morbier waved her on indifferently, apparently abandoning the project of catching her this time.

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The cafeteria at lunch time was quite as bad as dinner time. The hubbub was deafening. Station workers might as well be starlings the way they congregated at meal times, like bored passengers on space liners.

She spotted Oziel eating lunch with a couple of women. She pulled over a chair and joined them. Right now, the last thing she wanted was to sit at a table full of scientists carrying on one of the usual, interminable discussions of lab techniques.

Oziel gave no sign of his troubles. He was a bit subdued. That was all. Corinna wouldn't have even noticed it if she hadn't looked for it. He introduced her to the pleasant-faced, middle-aged woman.

"Doctora Corinna Mansur, who is working for Dr. Morbier. Alice Drummond, my boss."

She was going to have to speak to him about this "doctora" business, even though on a secret level she was tickled at the implied respect. She nodded at Ms. Drummond with an embarrassed smile.

"And Zoë Agnelli, who usually works on my shift."

Corinna nodded again. Luckily she did not have to find topics of conversation because they carried on where they had left off, discussing whether dust from the canyon or dust from the plateau made better clay for the kids when it was mixed with water.

She had arrived late and the two women were soon finished with their lunches and left, after more friendly nods all around.

"You're not usually here at meal times," said Oziel. "Why break the tradition?"

His smile was pleased and welcoming, and downright happy. At first she was happy too, but then she began to worry that he might decide to run with it. Eight hours in a rover fending him off would be horrible. He'd been a pleasant change from most guys, so far, in keeping himself to himself. It'd be a shame if that evaporated. Then she reminded herself to hold on. He hadn't done anything. Yet.

"Oh, I've decided to get a life," she finally answered. "Anyway, Morbier was gunning for me just before I escaped."

Oziel's eyebrows went up.

“He appeared the minute I started looking at endorphinases on my computer. It was uncanny.”

“They must be tracking your net access. They probably have flags set to see if you look at anything to do with those drugs of yours.”

“Jeez, they could do that, couldn’t they? But if I ever found out, I could get them for interfering with my academic freedom, what there is of it. There was a lawsuit about something like this decades ago.”

“Really?” Oziel seemed entertained by the idea. “Well, an untraceable tap would require a hardwired connection at the server, which would take a lot of knowhow.”

“A hardwired.... They could do that, couldn’t they? It wouldn’t even be that difficult. Look up the schematics on the net and then use a logic probe—.”

That’s what Jonathan had been doing while she was at that damn party. Why hadn’t she thought of that immediately? Admittedly, it had happened before she’d understood the scope of the secret project.

“Hell,” she said, “if that’s true, they could also be going over my files looking for god-knows-what. And – oh, Christ – I was using the net to search for an endorphinase match just after he put that damn tap on. They could assume it’s just something left over from my PhD work, but I’ll bet they don’t. ... But maybe it’s not too bad. I’ve been deleting stuff off the workstation as I go along. ... But that was just in case of ordinary boss-type snooping. If they start going through everything I’ve accessed on the whole network Could you clean up any log files and make sure the deletes are really gone?”

He nodded, and smiled again. He said he’d deal with it from one of the game terminals in the park, and he seemed glad she’d asked him.

She suppressed a frown. Was he going to start assuming she owed him something now?

“Game terminals?” she asked. “You mean so they can’t trace it back to anyone in particular? Why not the library or the shops?”

“I know the game terminals work. I’ve used them before to play computer tag.”

“Computer tag?”

“You get into different parts of the system and then you have to hang around long enough to give other players a chance to find you. You win if they can’t get in, they win if they tag you.”

“How can you get into systems all over the place? Sure, a few use passwords, but the big ones use prime encryption or iris scans. You can’t fake that.”

“What happens after you enter the right signal?” he asked patiently.

Corinna frowned at the examination, but answered.

“The computer matches it up somewhere, I guess.”

“Right. So all you have to do is tell it there’s a match.”

“Oh. Sort of like hot-wiring a car.”

“Sí. That’s why they call it splicing. It can be hard to find the splice point,

but there has to be one or you'd have to be physically in front of a physical machine to do anything if it went wrong."

"So, there's bunches of you midnight bandits playing games with each other?"

"On Earth, yes. We had a ring of a hundred and more from all over the world." He smiled at the memory.

"And on Mars?" she prompted him.

"Here there's only two. Me and somebody on the main base at Arsia."

Corinna shook her head.

"But don't you guys think about the damage you could do? What if you destroyed data?" Data, for her, was something you guarded with your life. She was a scientist.

Oziel just looked at her and she realized she'd insulted him.

"Anyway," she said, looking down at the table, "them messing about with my computer may not be the worst problem. All of a sudden Morbier wants me, and no one else, to go out and check on the rabbits." Now that she knew about the network tap, and that they were aware of her endorphinase searches, the order to spend time on the surface looked even more sinister.

He didn't seem to catch the implication.

"The rabbits are in four mini-domes pretty far away from the Station. Morbier could try to arrange an accident for me. I mean, what could be easier once you've got somebody out in a rover?"

"There would be much paperwork if you died under mysterious circumstances," said Oziel as if this was a real possibility, thereby making Corinna's blood run colder by several degrees.

"The poor diddums," she muttered.

"No, seriously. It would draw attention to them. They don't want that. I don't think they're going to try something like that. Not yet anyway."

"Well, that's pretty much what I thought too, but I figure it might be a good idea to find someone reliable as a buddy. I'm sure as lobsters not going alone this time. Best, of course, would be someone who knows about rovers, but mainly it has to be someone who's not going to murder me."

"I won't murder you," said Oziel with something that came awfully close to a conspiratorial wink.

She tried again not to frown.

"Yes. That's what I figured. You realize it's going to be a lot of boring work cleaning out rabbit cages." Judging by the pleased gleam in his eyes, he expected this to be a holiday trip.

"I'll be glad to help any way I can. I haven't been out on the surface yet. Rover rental costs as much as I make in a month. And I'm happy you thought of me."

Yes, she'd gathered that.

"It's just a rabbit-feeding trip," she reiterated. "Do you have any useful skills for that?"

The moment the words left her mouth, she realized there were significantly better ways to phrase the question, even if she did want him to grasp that they weren't going to have fun.

"For rover work, I mean," she added quickly in a useless attempt to cover her gaffe.

"I know nothing about rovers," he said without any defensiveness, as if she hadn't just been rude. "But if there was an emergency, you could do worse. One of the reasons I was hired for the daycare job is that I have basic training as an emergency medical technician. We'll hope that's useless on this trip. Besides that, Corinna, I grew up in a barrio." She looked up and saw him looking straight at her. "My whole life was an emergency in ways that I think you maybe can't imagine."

It was lucky she had decided long ago not to get involved with anyone again. Otherwise, under that intense, black-eyed gaze, things might have become difficult.

"You probably couldn't go Monday?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Well, I work most weekends anyway. I could go Sunday. You're up on your safety training?"

He nodded.

"That'll have to do then."

"I have to work Sunday evening, but we'll be back before then, yes?"

"We'll be back before dark."

"When should I be at the rover terminal?"

"Six am, Sunday."

They both stood up.

"To the park?" he asked. "I still have fifteen minutes before I'm due back."

"Jeez, you can break in and clean everything up that fast?"

"I'm assuming I don't have to break anything. You'll be there to let me in."

"Mmm," mumbled Corinna. It was a simple system that used passwords rather than scans, to make it easy for different people to manage it. She wondered whether being in Oziel's vicinity with passwords was such a good idea. Then she thought that he could probably break in faster than she could remember the stupid things anyway, so it hardly mattered.

Chapter 6

The big metal doors of the rover airlock slid closed behind them with slow precision. The rover rolled on, guided by satellites, toward its first programmed stop an hour away. Corinna took a deep breath. She had been up since four in the morning, going over the truck-sized machine literally by the book. The mechanic on night shift had been happy to help just to keep himself awake. She had found nothing. More importantly, he had found nothing. If They had anything planned, it probably was not supposed to happen until she and Oziel were beyond help, so she could relax for now.

However, now that the time had come to test her assumption about Morbier's unwillingness to kill her, using herself as the guinea pig – and, to be fair, using Oziel too – she was nervous. There was no denying it. She couldn't have felt jumpier if a couple of baby rabbits had decided to take up residence in her midriff and scamper around.

She stared backward through the clear plastic dome covering the top of the front third of the rover and enclosing the control section. Rovers looked something like outsize tanks, except that they had eight big, conical wheels instead of treads. Each cone could roll over an obstacle independent of all the others, and the widest part of the cone formed a very stable wheel. The windowless cabin nestling between the wheels officially had four bunks in it, but Corinna was glad she'd never been in the two meter by three meter space with more than one other person. The nicest place to sit was in the two-seater control section with its 360° view, perched above the main body of the rover. The big airlock had just eased into final position and sealed. It posed an interesting philosophical question. Not only was there no one to hear the door's closing hiss, there was almost no air to transmit it. So did the door still make a hiss? Or not?

Speaking for herself, she was quite sure that if she needed to scream in that endless desert of dusty stone, she would be screaming, whether anyone heard her or not.

Oziel nearly pressed his nose against the plastic, staring up at the mountain towering over Foggy Bottom and at the whole basin rimmed on one side by the Labyrinth of Night and on the other by Mariner's Canyon. He had come on board with nothing, not even a disposable tourist camera.

"We're not going to be *that* busy feeding rabbits," she'd said. "You'll have

time for a picture or two. You want to run back and get a camera?"

He'd done nothing but smile faintly and shake his head.

It dawned on her that it was a dumb thing to say. Even disposables cost money.

"Do you want to borrow a camera?" she asked.

He shrugged in what was perhaps embarrassment.

"It's Marco," he began explaining. "I'm trying to send him everything I can for Juanito. He says it's going better, but I think he's just saying that. He sounds kind of desperate and I'm really worried – and, well, anyway, that isn't the point."

He stopped himself abruptly.

"The point is, yes, I would like it if I could borrow a camera."

She'd come back with one of the lab's cameras.

"I've set everything to auto, so it should just be a matter of pushing this button." She showed him which one. "But let me know if you have any questions, okay? These things have more options than a space ship."

Right now he was photographing towering hoodoos of rock gathered at the base of the broken cliffs on their right, scoured by eons of wind into elongated sculptures. In Earth's gravity and water, they would have tumbled long ago, but here they stood, looking unnatural to earthly eyes, like the property of beings about to stride forth from the crevices. The landscape was more brown and ocher than red, although Corinna remembered it had looked redder to her the first time she saw it. The human brain seemed to absorb the improbable pinks and transfer them onto some template of what a landscape ought to look like.

The sky was the hardest thing to get used to. It was a milky, orange-pinkish bowl with occasional greenish tones, the sort of sky which is beautiful only from behind a stout plasteel window. Nobody, after one glance, would dream of walking into it and taking a deep breath.

Foggy Bottom was now a little whitish dome in the distance. Its central hub was a spherical bubble sitting on the larger, flattened low one. The spokes in the lower part formed a skeleton anchoring the skin that covered the triangular spaces in between, which contained hydroponic farms, oxygen production, and recycling zones. How was it possible for something over a kilometer across to look so puny so quickly?

The desert swallowed the Station. It dwarfed the rover into a tiny bug on a plate as big as the whole world. The rocks and sand and dust stretched forever in time as well as space, contrasting hugely with the shortness of human life in a way that was unhealthy to contemplate for very long. Corinna started scanning for signs of life all but involuntarily.

"Oziel, see that big stone at the base of the escarpment? At about two o'clock?"

He stood and leaned toward her side of the bubble. She leaned away, as much as the cramped, two-seat, space allowed. Anything less, she was sure,

would be misconstrued.

“Which one? The one like a big pig or the pointy one more like a sitting bear?”

“The bear. See the purplish shadow on the shady side?”

He peered.

“Oh, yes. Brownish-purplish.”

“That’s a bacterial mat. It’s part of Shahanjah’s terraforming project.”

“Life starts small, I guess,” said Oziel, dubiously eyeing the shadow that looked like nothing at all. He held the camera up and clicked. “They realize, don’t they, that a landscape of purple slime is not going to be a big selling point?” He sat back down in his seat and refastened the safety belt.

“It’s not slimy. It’s hard and dry. And it’s just there to build up organics. They’re working on resistant blue-green algae already, which are about to the same stage as the bacteria were five years ago. Shahanjah has engineered algae that can survive under partial exposure, and he keeps taking samples at the edges of the algal mats, where they have the least protection, figuring that one of these days he’s going to find a mutant that can make it. There’s also a whole suite of aquatic organisms ready to go as soon as the Sinai lake project starts. More slimy, but also more interesting.”

“Meanwhile,” said Oziel quietly, in the voice Corinna was coming to recognize meant sadness or anger, “the natives have been pushed off into the barrio, hmm?”

Corinna made a wry face.

“Yeah, I guess you could say that. Sealed containers of native bacteria at the Martian Biorepository in Beta Station probably qualifies as a ghetto.”

“Was there really much of a fight? I remember the news making a big thing out of Mars-for-the-Martians demonstrations, but it never seemed like it made any difference to the people who pay for the rocket ships.”

“No, not much. I read a paper a couple of years ago about a five-year study of one of the engineered bacteria out on the surface, which means that the scientists had to have been quietly doing their thing from the minute they landed. The decision to terraform was just a rubber stamp on what they were already doing.”

The infrared scanner in the array of monitors facing Corinna showed the first rabbit dome as a speck of brightness. The ground on the shaded south side of the dome had the telltale purplish cast of terraforming. They were going to need suits for the low pressures and temperatures inside the dome, so Corinna first, then Oziel, slid out of their seats and down five steps to the cabin part of the rover. The suits hung side by side in the back, looking like golems who needed only the word to unhitch themselves and walk.

Corinna managed to avoid contact, even in that confined space, by using the excuse of showing Oziel how to maneuver himself into the suit. The first step was to remove all the gravity-inducing weights that kept their muscles ready for Earth: the lead vests, the arm bands, the ankle bands, and the

lead-soled shoes. Oziel stepped as carefully as he could, but still nearly flew at the suit. Strength was a disadvantage in this case. After only a minor collision, he grappled the thing into submission and managed to get his legs into the lower half of the jointed metal suit. Like most people with nothing but suit drills behind them, she could tell he was going to cut corners by not hooking up the suit's plumbing.

"Um, be sure to hook everything up. Not just check for air."

"We'll only be here about half an hour, yes?" asked Oziel. "Why bother?"

"Safety requirement," answered Corinna. "You might have to rely on the suit for days. Last thing you want in an emergency is to worry about the plumbing." And out here, fifty kilometers from Foggy Bottom, was as good a place as any for an emergency.

Once the bottom half was adequately arranged, the top half of the suit went on like a terribly stiff shirt and locked onto the bottom. The armholes were wide enough so that he could draw his hands into the boxy torso section and check the closure from inside. She ran through the internal controls accessible to him on the inside of the chest section just to be sure he had everything right. Finally, the clear dome of the helmet snapped onto the torso section just below the chin. The only flexible part was the impossibly thin and impervious gloves, made on a principle similar to spider silk, which he was testing by wiggling his fingers. Even in the near-vacuum of Mars' surface, they felt like ordinary gloves because small servo-assist motors in the forearms used sensors to detect muscle action and connected to the gloves. The motors counteracted the positive pressure in the gloves so it took no special effort to use your fingers.

Clumsy in their suits, which felt more like rounded, portable houses, Oziel and Corinna climbed out of the now tiny and awkward cabin. Corinna always disliked the sound of her breathing echoing around the small space of the helmet. It made her feel as if she was breathing used air. Making it worse was the noise of Oziel's breathing coming over her suit radio. Sometimes she just wanted to take the whole damn thing off and listen to the silence of Mars, even though it would be the last thing she did.

Corinna's worries about proximity to Oziel were as nothing compared to the attitude of the rabbits. They scurried madly in every direction. She poured a mixture of vitaminised treats into a special holder that required the rabbits to pass through a low hanging basket one at a time, and from which they were released into a holding area that prevented them from insisting on seconds. In the basket, they were weighed and a laser probe read over a hundred aspects of their blood chemistry in a second. An embedded chip in each rabbit identified it. The process was fast, but dealing with two hundred rabbits still took a long time. She turned to get Oziel started on cleaning out their hutches, and then she saw that he already had. One rabbit snaffled its treats and escaped its basket while she stared in surprise. He was one in a million if he knew enough to look around, see what had to be done, figure out what he

could do, and then just do it without any fuss or muss. And do it right, as far as she could tell. It was as if he'd been cleaning rabbit cages all his life.

"You didn't tell me you grew up on a farm," she said, as she retrieved the second escaping rabbit.

"No, my mother kept chickens for years. They find their own food. And she'd sell the droppings for fertilizer. It was the job of us kids to collect that, of course," he said with one of his small smiles. "For a while she was part of a community garden and used the fertilizer herself. Those were the best vegetables."

"I see. Once you're done with a hutch, wheel all the stuff over to that bin. We attach it to the rover and take this fertilizer back to the Station's gardens."

"Ah, that's what that those strange bins are for on the back of the rover. The replacements, right?"

"Yup," said Corinna. "So how come she stopped doing the community garden after a while?"

"She didn't stop," said Oziel. "It was not their land, of course. It was one of those community benefit things that somebody starts up and that disappear in a few years. Everything is like that in the barrio. Except the poverty. The gardens disappeared because somebody else decided it was time to help us by building a clinic and it was a nice bit of unbuilt land, so the gardens were bulldozed."

"Oh," said Corinna.

He wheeled the full bins out to the rover, while she herded the remaining, shyest rabbits toward the weighing machine. She checked the automated water supply and timed food releaser. Oziel helped her exchange the hundred-liter water container, handling a thing that weighed nearly forty kilos on Mars as if it was a watermelon. She wondered if his exceptional strength and handiness were another reason he'd been hired for his job. A station long on scientists tended to be short on fitness.

Back in the rover, they removed and hung up their suits. She pushed the engine start button. It started. It hummed normally. It rolled off to their second destination without a hitch. Whatever the plan was, it did not involve stranding her at this rabbit station.

The whole situation was so damn silly. It wasn't as if she had come to Mars to spy on them. They had brought her here.

"You know," she began out of the blue, "I just don't get it. Why would Morbier hire a specialist who could figure out what they're doing?"

"Speaking of that," said Oziel, "I've been meaning to tell you. I sent a message to Miguel Sanderas about ... Selena. I thought perhaps there might be things he didn't want to lay on Marco. Apparently not, but he did say he'd seen three more people with the same sort of problem, and that the only thing they had in common was that they'd been in prison."

"Oh, Jesus," muttered Corinna. "Well, with Ching talking about higher burial

costs, there's obviously more than a few people suffering from it. And then they go and hire exactly the person who can figure it out."

He thought for a moment.

"Exactly the person, hm? Aren't there other scientists who study this stuff?"

"Not very many. And those are mostly in secure university jobs because all the big-bucks, behavior modification work that the drug companies are interested in has been done and patented. It's hard to get a job working on endorphins at this point." She made a wry face. I'm living proof, she thought.

"So, if they wanted to make sure you didn't interfere with their plans, the easiest way to neutralize you would be to hire you." She had not considered that angle. "Besides, if they need more scientists, this isn't the sort of project where they can advertise. 'Wanted: Designer of mind control drugs.' But if you're working for them, they can look you over and see if they can use you."

Another angle she hadn't considered. She thought she was the one with the doctorate.

"Nobody's ever even vaguely approached me about anything," she pointed out.

Oziel raised his eyebrows in mock disbelief.

"Sure. In between the time you spend helping everyone, you're going to work on ways to turn their brains to mush. That would be a masterpiece."

Yet one more good point. It was high time for someone besides him to be right.

"So, the eminently clever and educated people who hired me missed the boat. How about the people who hired you? The only qualified person they could find was a man in a field absolutely bristling with women?"

Oziel's small smile became smaller.

"Officially it's because of my excellent training and references. But it didn't hurt that I charmed the director of human services" He left the sentence hanging, leaving Corinna wondering just what he meant.

He noticed her dubious expression.

"I'm glad to see you're concerned, but no, the charm was just my wonderful personality."

Corinna frowned. Dubious did *not* mean concerned.

"Well, it certainly worked on me too," she said with a brittle edge. "Just don't expect much beyond an MRI and a ride."

"Hos—." He bit something back. "*Dios ayúdame!* I was *joking*." He threw his hands up in exasperation.

Corinna continued brittle. Of course he was joking, but that did not stop it from also being true.

"Listen to me," he said in a low and unmistakably angry voice. "It's *all right*. Okay? I'm not after you. You can stop defending yourself."

She leaned over the control panel, stung. What right had he to get angry with her? Guys were always being pushy and uncalled-for. Here she was, confined the whole day with a man, who was necessary purely because another

bunch of men were making her life impossible, and she had every right to make sure it was not an offensive experience.

Although, in fairness, she had to admit that he, personally, had never been either uncalled-for or pushy. The worst thing he had ever done was smile at her.

And that hadn't been too bad.

So, he wasn't after her. Well..., good.

She continued to frown over the readouts on the panel. She saw him reach for a book, although she stared nowhere but straight ahead. The only book in the control section was the rover manual.

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They said nothing for several kilometers, or about ten minutes. Then Oziel asked in a normal tone of voice, as if nothing had happened,

"My mother always said that all knowledge is useful. How about you teach me to drive this thing?"

Corinna knew without a doubt that he was giving them both a way out of a sticky situation. Whether this was his obligation, as the one who had started it, or hers, as the one who had started it before him, she wasn't sure. But he had actually done it, while she was still sitting and stewing.

"Um." She cleared her throat, which seemed to have gone all tight and squeaky while she fumed. "Yes, it's always good, in any case, for everyone in a rover to know how to drive it manually, in case of emergency."

With a sense of grudging gratitude, she struggled to match his neutrality. Sooner than she expected, her embarrassment receded behind an accumulation of instrument reading pointers, steering tips, and satellite dish adjustment methods.

Just before the second of their four planned stops, a whirring noise suddenly interrupted the usual humming of the engines and the grinding, thumping noises of the wheels rolling over rocks. Corinna jumped. *Ohmygod, here it comes.*

"Sorry," said Oziel. He flipped off the switch he had bumped with his elbow that had started up a cabin fan.

Corinna tried to calm down the banging of her heart. It was bad enough feeling jumpy when she was afraid she had a reason. It was even worse when she didn't.

Nothing unplanned happened at the second stop, or on the way to the third stop. They ate lunch while the rover trundled along. She caught him staring impassively at the compartmentalized food packet of mashed potatoes, spinach, and a chipped beef analog made of vat protein. There was a square of pound cake with pink frosting for dessert.

“What?” she asked.

He looked up, saw her inquiring glance at his lunch, and smiled apologetically.

“I get so tired of this stupid food. The *norteamericanos* and the Russians started the space program, and we have to eat their dumb food ever since. How hard could it be to make a good *arepa*? Something someone might actually want to eat? Anyway,” he waved his hand downward, dismissing the subject, “ignore me. I’m hungry and this food is better than no food.”

She grinned.

“You know, even among us *gringos*, I only ever knew one guy who thought space food was actually good. And the injustice of it all was that his wife was an absolutely marvelous cook. The rest of us would have killed for the dinners she made and he didn’t care one way or the other.”

“Life,” said Oziel, “is like that.”

As the rover motored forward, Corinna began to feel a perverse sense of let-down. She had not really worried, of course, but apparently she had not worried for nothing. Of course, the day wasn’t over yet.

The last rabbit stop was near the top of the mountain they had traveled along and up most of the day. As the rover climbed higher, the wind grew stronger, and an occasional hiss of dust on the clear dome surrounding them became audible over the hum of the motors and the grinding of the wheels. They could see oceans of sand and boulders in the basin below and glaciers of rock perched threateningly ahead. As they finally came over the rim of the mountain onto its central plateau, the true nature of the peaks in the distance became clear. They were nothing but the outriders of even loftier land, a massive wall beyond which lay another whole world, the airless plains of high Mars. In the other direction lay the tumbled rocks and chasms of Mariner’s Canyon.

Since they were suited up anyway, they took some time, once the rabbits were done, to sit at the edge of the southern cliffs overlooking the Labyrinth’s basin and to admire the view to the north. Oziel filled up the remaining memory in the camera, so Corinna pushed a few buttons, used the satellite uplink to download his pictures to his Burbidge account, and enabled him to start afresh. Mariner’s Canyon stretched away to their right, looking like an impossibly wide river in a plain of seeming flatness. The tiny, whitish button that was Foggy Bottom could be seen at the base of a cliff just to the north.

What insane dreamer thought you could launch life into the unknown, like a spider on a sail of its own making, and imagine that it could succeed?

“You’ve mentioned your mother several times,” said Corinna, making conversation as they sat, “but not your father.” She didn’t actually ask any question, because once she reached that point she realized she didn’t know what to say. What could she ask? *Did he abandon you? Was he a loser?*

Oziel answered the unspoken thought, voice crackling slightly in the suit radio.

“He died when I was ten. Caught in a crossfire.”

He said no more, and Corinna asked no more. She was going to have to learn to stop asking questions. None of the usual topics was neutral where he came from.

They looked at the landscape, redder from a distance than close up. A breeze she could not feel blew occasional, invisible puffs of dust that whispered on the clear dome of her helmet. Maybe he would enjoy it as much as she did.

“Oziel, if you hold your breath, you can hear the winds of Mars blowing dust grains on your helmet.”

He looked pleased at the thought and she heard him over the suit radio immediately take a deep breath. It seemed to go on forever. The size of his lungs had to match the rest of him, but it felt funny that she hadn't expected it without being reminded. She held her own breath to reduce the noise still further and saw a beautiful smile of wonder illuminate his face. He glanced at her to share the moment and she found herself smiling back. But she couldn't hold her breath anywhere near as long as him, so she had to break down and exhale. They coordinated breathing again to listen.

All of a sudden, he pointed at a tiny dot crawling down the zigzag path that led from the high plateau toward Foggy Bottom along the shallowest face of the northern cliffs.

“Looks like somebody else is out for a Sunday drive,” he said.

They both squirmed around in their suits, pulling their hands into the torso section. She activated her heads-up magnification display, and told him how to do it. It took a while to get the center of focus right on the vehicle.

“That's funny. It's a cargo rover. On a Sunday.” Puzzlement slowed her voice. “Judging by its track, it crossed the high plains from Mt. Arsia. There aren't any research sites on the plain. Not so much as a terraformed rock. Very strange.”

By now the tiny speck trailing dust was drawing close to the Station. Whether because it was fascinating to see something moving in that utterly still world, or because people are always curious about the doings of other people, they both sat and looked. Corinna checked the time to make sure they would still get back before dark.

The vehicle did not approach the colony's main cargo port. It went all the way to the other side. There a tiny suited figure got out, unloaded four crates, opened an airlock using the external safety access and started shoving crates inside. They could see him kicking a recalcitrant box. After offloading, the rover finally turned toward the tip of the Darwin spoke and the cargo port.

This was more than strange. For some time neither said anything, as if waiting for the peculiar vehicle to turn back and realize the cargo had been misdelivered.

“Sunday delivery,” Corinna finally breathed. “The next thing will be doctors making house calls again.”

“And why not use a clipper? Arsia has the biggest clipper port on the planet, yes?”

“Clipper cargo is checked for explosives, drugs, weight, labeling, the works,” Corinna pointed out. She knew. She had spent enough hours filling out endless manifests.

“What part of the Station is that where the crates got dropped? The outer lock door doesn’t look right, and I don’t see anyone coming out in a hurry to pick them up.”

“I don’t know. Let me get a schematic here.” Colored lines and dots and letters appeared on Corinna’s helmet. “I need to rotate it ... like that ... Biohazard containment storage. You need special clearance to get in there, besides dressing up in the equivalent of a space suit.”

“This delivery is strange and that stuff with the brain samples is strange. I bet they’re connected,” said Oziel.

“Well, as an official Postdoctoral Consulting Scientist, I have the clearance to use that storage.” Corinna said slowly.

“How about tonight?” Oziel suggested.

Corinna looked at him dubiously.

“We’re going to get back pretty late, and it may look weird if I’m desperate to get into containment at all hours on a Sunday night. Tomorrow. I’ll say I need more space for my human-transferable RNA enzymes and have a look around.”

The trip back was uneventful. There were no mechanical problems, there were no guidance problems. She had not so much as twiddled the steering bar, except to show Oziel how to use it. The station’s great blast doors opened onto the rover lock without incident. She climbed down out of the rover and began cleaning up her suit, feeling foolish at ever having thought there might be danger.

“Be sure to stow your suit properly, or we’ll get snippy notes from Ming Hue.” Suit techs were selected for their obsessive attention to detail. “And the fertilizer bins have to be put back over there.” She pointed to the other side of the hangar.

He pushed them, all four together in a train, past two ordinary clippers and a sleek, private one belonging to Dicastillo, past three ungainly, specialized research robots with bulbous protuberances and arms all over them, and past a suborbital evacuation ship.

He was painstakingly stowing his gear, with brief, practical tips from Corinna, when a woman in a decidedly non-regulation, gorgeous silver jumpsuit appeared in the hangar.

“Ah, Señor García,” she sang out as she approached. Corinna finally recognized Dicastillo’s daughter. “I decided to leave for Arsia a couple of hours early. Petey is with the butler, but if you are able to start earlier, I’m sure that would be better for everyone.”

Corinna saw diamonds winking in her obsidian hair.

“Certainly, Señora Dicastillo,” said Oziel, nodding politely.

“Yes, I’m afraid he’s been quite impossible today, and the butler means well but he’s not nearly as good with children.”

“I will go as soon as I have stowed my suit, Señora,” said Oziel.

Leira began a rather detailed account of all Petey’s activities that day.

It seemed to Corinna that she was actually proud, in her own way, of her son’s hijinks. Oziel let her boast to her heart’s content, Corinna noticed.

“But he’ll be easier to deal with soon,” Leira reassured him, who had shown no sign of needing reassurance.

“Ah? And why is that, Señora?”

“I’m taking him in for a new treatment which solves the problem once and for all, without all these stupid pills that mostly don’t work anyway.”

Corinna felt Oziel hold his breath. They carefully did not look at each other. Corinna had no idea how to jump into the conversation.

Then he spoke.

“How very ... interesting. You know, I’ve worked with kids for years and haven’t heard about this treatment. Is it experimental?”

“Oh, heavens, no. Of course not.” Petey wasn’t a guinea pig!

“I’d be very interested to know more about it. Maybe there is something about it on the net?” Oziel looked politely inquiring.

Leira Dicastillo was a woman of action, because she stepped to a terminal in the hangar and started a search then and there. Oziel helped her with key words. He called Corinna over and introduced her as a scientist at the Station. Leira remembered her then and gladly accepted her help, but nothing turned up.

“Well, maybe we’re just not getting to a sufficiently specialized database,” he said, to keep the fiction of a well-accepted treatment alive. “But it might be as well to get a second opinion from Petey’s pediatrician on Earth.”

That would slow things down. *Well done, Oziel*, thought Corinna.

Leira nodded thoughtfully, and then gave a delicate gasp after glancing at the thin, silver hands of a watch clasping her left wrist.

“Oh, I must run. But I think you may be right. I hope Petey behaves. By-y-ye.”

She floated out to her clipper and the glittering society of Arsia.

Oziel looked after her thoughtfully.

“It always feels kind of strange. She comes from Caracas. Like me. A very different part of town, of course.”

“Takes all sorts,” said Corinna to fill the silence, and immediately felt stupid. “Why didn’t she speak Spanish, come to think of it?”

He looked at her wonderingly and then said,

“Forgive me, but you *norteamericanos* live in a world of your own. Would you speak English together in front of a person who doesn’t?”

“Oh,” said Corinna. She’d never given it any thought. Everyone spoke English. “English is usually all we know,” she mumbled, but then added, “I do

“speak beginner’s Spanish, you know.”

“But the Señora doesn’t know that. In Venezuela we have Portuguese speakers, German, English, also Creole. It wouldn’t work to have one group pretending the others don’t exist.”

It felt strange to be taught manners by someone she’d pegged as – as what? As a warm, helpful ... poor, uneducated menial. So much for being beyond stereotypes. And yet, she was coming to rely on his help, to look forward to his warmth. He had handled that altercation in the rover better than she would have done. She said goodbye to him with a smile and didn’t worry about how he’d take it.

“I’m glad you could take the time for this trip,” she added, and he returned one of his incandescent smiles.

He went toward the upper levels to tire Petey out with games, and she went the other way to the lower levels and the lab where she could offload the rabbit data and put specimens away. The door was open and the light was on. Jonathan was in there, working late, which was not unusual, but he was by himself, which was. Why was she not surprised? She wondered if there was some way she could rig up a hidden camera to keep track of that fish-faced postdoc’s movements.

Chapter 7

Corinna potted in to work on Monday morning in the usual, semiconscious way, but much earlier than usual. There was always so much to do when new rabbit data came in that it was essential to get a jump on things. Like an automaton, she started pipetting reagents for a visualization gel. If she got it going before she went for the elixir of life known as coffee, the gel would be ready before the rush started.

But she did not have to wait for coffee. She woke up completely when the air was split by a strangled shriek in the tech's lab next door, followed by the heavy thumps of a body hitting a table, chairs, the floor – and then silence.

Corinna cast one glance at the reactions she was preparing – a hundred credits worth of chemicals that would be ruined if she let them sit – and threw down her pipetter and raced next door.

She stared stupidly for a moment at Djamilah lying in a heap on the floor. Her arms were blistering with a bad burn even as she watched.

She reached for her wristpad, but she'd taken it off in the other lab so she could put it back on later over her rubber gloves. No time to go back. Corinna yelled.

“Somebody! Medic to Artemis 56! NOW!”

She lunged toward the tech, put her fingers on Djamilah's neck. No pulse. She started CPR before she was even aware of making a conscious decision to do it.

Push, push, push, push, push, push, push, through what already felt like a million repetitions. Tilt head back. Was she breathing? No. Pinch nose shut, tissue over mouth – no tissue – mouth over mouth. Quick puff in. Hell. Corinna had almost no breath of her own. She'd been holding it, waiting to exhale, waiting for everything to be okay. The same stupid mistake every CPR trainer told every new class not to do. Gulp a couple of breaths. Puff. Puff. Hands back on chest. Push, push, push, push, push, push, push, push. Corinna's arms felt like falling off. She was forgetting to breathe again. Gulp. Puff, puff. Push, push, push, push, push. Soon she would be exhausted. Where were the medics?

In between desperate breaths, she listened frantically for the sound of someone who had heard. It was so early. None of her other techs were here. The grad students would not show up for another hour or two. Breathe. Stop.

Push, push, push. Stop. Breathe. Poor Djamilah. She had worked so hard and so cheerfully. It was not her fault she had less ability for lab work than a wombat. Although it might be her death.

There had to be some other postdocs around somewhere. She deprived Djamilah of a breath to yell again.

“MEDIC! NOW!”

Finally someone’s footsteps pattered down the hall and into the room.

“I thought I heard – Jesus-Joseph-and-Mary!” Tambika from Kilburn’s lab down the hall tapped once at the comm on her wrist.

“What happened?” she asked the moment she finished the call. “No, I’m sorry, don’t say a thing. Here, I’ll take a turn doing compressions.”

The sound of running feet came down the hall and grew louder.

Four medics burst into the room. Corinna found herself shunted aside, now a passive, unnecessary onlooker. She felt void, floating, as the huge pressure on her lifted and nothing replaced it.

Using electrical paddles, the medics restarted Djamilah’s heart. The sound of her ragged breathing filled the room over the sound of Corinna’s residual panting and the medics’ efficient bustling.

One of them came over to the two scientists.

“Looks like electrocution. She should be all right, but she’s very lucky you were around to start resuscitation immediately. Any idea how it happened?”

Corinna looked around the lab. Electrocution? Practically everything there except the beakers could deliver thousands of volts if handled badly. And knowing Djamilah....

“There,” she pointed at the tabletop DNA reader with its cover awry. “If that wasn’t paused, about two thousand volts run through those plates.”

The medic approached cautiously and touched it with a probe.

“Two thousand five hundred volts, at two amps,” he said. “She’s lucky to be alive. Though you have to wonder why those rubber-soled shoes even let the current through.” He pulled the machine’s power cord out of its socket.

God, thought Corinna, if good old Djamilah had fried the circuits on that five hundred thousand dollar piece of machinery, no power on earth, or Mars, would keep her from getting fired.

Djamilah was lifted onto the stretcher by the two most muscular medics and Corinna found herself looking at the soles of her shoes.

“They’re cracked,” she pointed out. “The rubber is cracked right across, right through to the lead inner sole,” she explained in more detail because the medic was too busy to listen.

“Huh? Oh, yeah.” Then, to his co-workers, “Right, move her on out.” And they were gone, leaving an enormous silence in the lab.

Corinna looked at the DNA reader. But the machine *had* been paused. There was the three-way switch, right at “pause,” between “off” and “on.”

She stared at it, convinced it was trying to tell her something that her shocked brain was too numb to hear.

Tambika, who had followed the medics out, came back.

“This’ll be the address to call the nurse’s station once they’ve got her settled.”

Corinna copied the address onto a corner of the bench paper, tore it off, and stuck it in her pocket.

“Did they say when she could be expected to come to?”

“Could be real soon because they said there probably weren’t any cerebral effects.”

Corinna nodded mechanically. It was not normal to be sitting here. She was never sitting here. She was always racing, flat out. There was probably something she was supposed to be doing.

She shook her head.

“There’s probably something I’m supposed to be doing.” She looked around the lab. “Oh, yeah, I was pipetting –”

“You probably better let Morebeer know,” Tambika said gently.

“Oh shit. Of course. Jeez, I’m really losing it, aren’t I?”

“Hey, having people try to drop dead in your lab tends to break the concentration. Don’t be too hard on yourself.”

Corinna smiled feebly, but gratefully. Thank God it was Tambika who had come running to help. Her position was similar to Corinna’s own, and the two of them were like good neighbors, borrowing cups of sugar over the fence all the time, only in their case it was pipette tips and time on ultracentrifuges. Everyone would have helped resuscitate Djamilah, fewer people would have held Corinna’s hand after that.

She started to walk toward the lab’s one big, official deskphone across the hall in the main lab, then stopped. Better to find out about the DNA reader first. It might well be Morbier’s only question.

She went back to the techs’ lab, gingerly plugged the machine back in, and started the self-test. The power came on, but that was it. Unlike Djamilah’s brains, the machine’s had been scrambled.

Morbier was not at his office yet. Taking a deep breath, Corinna called his personal address.

“Yes?” he said. Not “Good morning,” or “Hello.” Just “yes,” with “what do you want?” for a subtext.

“I’m afraid there’s been an accident.”

“Yes?” he said again.

Corinna plowed on.

“The DNA reader glitched and Djamilah Mahmoud suffered a severe electrical shock.”

“Ah?” he said. Even for him, he didn’t seem very surprised. “She will be all right?” he continued.

At least, thought Corinna, he asked about her before the DNA reader.

“I don’t know. It only happened about half an hour ago. I was going to call sickbay as soon as I’d let you know about it.”

“Ah,” he said again. “Naturally, with an incident this serious, you understand that I will need to carefully examine the procedures followed in the lab.”

She had not thought about it, but it was to be expected. However, she was a stickler for lab safety and she had no great fear of investigation. Of course, she hadn’t told Morbier what he was bound to consider the worst news yet.

Corinna took another deep breath.

“The DNA reader glitched pretty badly, I’m afraid. It failed the self-test and the laser probably no longer works.”

“Ahh,” he said.

She wished he would stop saying that.

After she closed the connection, she felt even worse than before. Whether it was a delayed reaction to the accident or Morbier’s “ah’s,” something made her feel like she hadn’t a friend in the world. She just wanted to go home.

But where was home? Her mother’s first question would be, “Jeez, what did you do to get fired?” And her father, well, he might not have been shot when she was ten, but in many ways he wasn’t really there. He would say “Urr” and they would all wind up wordlessly watching a video.

She had to stop thinking like this. Quit brooding. Find her comm band wherever she’d put it down in the lab. She gave herself a little shake, the latest one in a morning where she seemed to have done nothing but try to shake order back into her life. She decided to check on Djamilah herself instead of calling the nurse’s station.

The people sent to Mars, although not necessarily fit, were healthy to the limits of resolution provided by modern medical testing, so Corinna had never had reason to visit the Station’s clinic before. It bristled with equipment to an extent that made her lab look like a low-key high school biology classroom. With few people to care for and with a potential need for every major gadget in the medical arsenal, the clinic had walls of machines surrounding the smallest possible spaces. Djamilah was tucked away behind one of the walls, eyes open, staring at the ceiling.

Corinna caught her breath, thinking oh-my-god, a sound which caused Djamilah to turn her head. Corinna saw with a flood of relief that there was a person behind the eyes and that she was all right.

“Dr. Mansur, I’m so glad you came.”

At first Corinna feared this might mean Djamilah did not have another friend in the world, but that was not the problem.

“I’m so worried about Iskender. Has he been told? Is he okay? Is someone taking care of him? If I’m still here tonight, who’ll look after him?”

“It’s okay, Djamilah, really. Don’t worry. They have really good people at the day care center and I’ll make sure something’s in place for tonight.” She almost said *I’ll take care of him, if that’s what it takes*, but then considered that there was no way to run Morbier’s lab and take care of a toddler. “I’ll go to the center right after this and bring him back for a visit.”

“Oh, thank you! Thank you!”

Djamilah looked so relieved, Corinna was embarrassed.

“It’s nothing, really. So, how are you feeling?”

“Strange. Dizzy, with a bad headache. And if I move my head too much I start feeling like I might throw up. What happened, anyway?”

“I don’t know. You were hit with two and a half thousand volts on the DNA reader.”

“But I paused it,” cried Djamilah, “I know I paused it.”

Corinna nodded.

“You did. I checked. That’s why it’s so weird. It’s just one of those freak things where somehow the machine was carrying current even though it seemed to be paused.”

“So it’s not really my fault.”

The relief in her voice was so tangible, it came to Corinna that Djamilah had been lying there by herself, frantic about her son and beating herself up for having ruined equipment.

“Oh, Djamilah, not everything is your fault, you know.” She smiled to stress that it was a joke. “It didn’t help that your shoes were cracked right through, but the quality of your shoes is not your fault either.”

“My shoes were cracked!” She echoed the words with astonishment. “They weren’t. They definitely weren’t.”

Corinna glanced around, spotted the storage drawer under the bed, and pulled it open. She took out the shoes and handed one over to Djamilah, sole up.

Djamilah reached for it and winced. She reached more carefully and took it.

The sole was cracked right across at the ball of the foot and all the way through to the conductive lead inner sole.

“They weren’t like that when I put them on!”

“How can you be sure? Did you check them that very morning?”

“No, but I did the night before.” In answer to Corinna’s surprised look, she continued, “They’d started to crack a little bit, so I kept checking them. You know, you have to pay for them yourself if you buy them sooner than you’re supposed to, and they’re expensive. But, of course, they’re not safe if they’re really cracked, so I wanted to be sure I replaced them before that happened.”

“Oh,” said Corinna. This was more than strange. It required the assumption that gremlins roamed the Station with nothing better to do than mess about with shoes.

An easier question was arranging something for Djamilah’s son. A few searches turned up the fact that the neonatal nursery also provided 24-hour emergency care for children whose parents died or were incapacitated. A nurse would set up a crib for him in Djamilah’s tiny room, take care of his meals, and walk him to day care.

“That takes care of that,” said Corinna, snapping the cover back on her wristpad. “No, no, Djamilah, really, there’s nothing to thank me for.” She

waved down her protestations of gratitude. "I'll check with your nurse and then I'll go get him now."

Before she was even past the first bank of equipment, the wide, gray bracelet of her wristpad vibrated against her skin, indicating a new message. It was a note from Morbier telling her to be at his office at two p.m. "to discuss lab procedures and safety issues." No doubt he would want to hear all the details, so she better get back to the lab in a hurry and find out what they were. Except for knowing that the reader had somehow malfunctioned and that poor Djamilah did not have very good shoes, she had not done anything to check the exact circumstances at the time of the accident. She always walked fast, but now she began flying down the corridors at sufficient speed to be a danger to traffic.

Oziel glanced up when she suddenly blew in at the doorway of the daycare area and a pleased smile lit his face—

—which turned straight into alarm. She realized she must look wild, rushing in with lab coat flying, her eyes darting everywhere, hunting for Iskender in the whirl of children. She tried to force herself to seem normal, but she was breathing too hard for that.

"I'm looking for Iskender." Then, between breaths, she had a bright idea. "Come to think of it, it might be best if you tell him. It'll be a bit easier coming from someone he knows." She quickly explained what had happened.

Oziel frowned, but took a breath and cleared his expression. He crossed the room to Iskender, who was playing with three other children. He took him aside. Corinna saw Oziel sit down on the floor with him. She saw him speak to the child earnestly. She saw the liveliness drain out of Iskender's face. She saw the terrible, ageless stillness of a human being in fear and she knew, like a stone dropping in her heart and dragging it down, that he would never be as young again.

Oziel picked Iskender up and came over to Corinna. Shyly, she patted the little boy's back and said softly, "It'll all be okay Iskender. Really it will. I know it will." She kicked herself while she said it. She knew nothing of the kind.

He started to cry then and she flinched inwardly for never knowing the right thing to say.

But Oziel smiled at her as if it had been the right thing and adjusted Iskender in the crook of his left arm in a way that said he was going to carry him all day.

"I thought it would be a good idea for him and his mother to see each other...." She trailed off. Oziel did, after all, have a job to do and other children to take care of. She could not really ask him to bring Iskender to his mother, but he was obviously so much more comforting to the child than she could be. To tell the truth, she had to admit there was something about him that was comforting even to her. She had somehow, somewhere, lost the feeling of not having a friend in the world.

"I'll ask my boss, and go with you," he said, as if she had spoken every

thought.

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Corinna took an early opportunity to start taking care of her own problems. Mother and son, once they had each other, clearly could carry on without her.

The first question from Morbier would naturally be, "How did this happen?" "I dunno" was a weak reply.

Unfortunately, as she stood before the culprit DNA reader, "I dunno" seemed like the only answer. The machine had been paused, no question about that, and she was far from being enough of an electrician to diagnose the pause circuits themselves. *Item one: have someone qualified go over the circuits.* She leaned toward the back of the machine to see if there were any obviously fried wires. Her shoes made an unusual squeaking noise as she moved to brace herself for the stretch. She looked down. The floor was shiny. She was standing in a spill.

It had to be something Djamilah had spilled just before her accident. The Geiger counter showed it was not radioactive and Corinna breathed a sigh of relief. UV light did not show any of several other vicious chemicals fluorescing. Corinna breathed another sigh of relief. It did not smell, or react with any of several indicator dyes. Apparently it was just water.

But where had it come from? If Djamilah had spilled it, she should have been holding a container. Corinna put on a pair of lab gloves and began mopping up the puddle with absorbent towels. The damn thing went on and on. She had to reach way to the back of the table. No, all the way to the wall. It came from under the wall. Something had to be leaking back there. She squatted down and removed a wall panel. There was a tiny drip from a pipe back there. A brief examination showed it traveled down the pipe a short distance from a leaky joint. What enormously bad luck that the leak should have chosen a place that would pool right at the reader.

Too much bad luck, thought Corinna. First a paused machine that was not paused. Now this. She looked narrowly at the pipe, held in position away from the flooring by styrofoam blocks. One of them was a cleaner white than the others. She shifted to her hands and knees and shoved her head and shoulders into the wall opening. The white block was firmly wedged under the pipe. There were even marks in the dust where it had been pushed in.

None of the other blocks had visible push marks.

She wiggled the block and pulled till it came out. The leak stopped as soon as there was no strain pushing the pipe invisibly out of line.

Corinna sat back onto the floor with a sudden bump as if the implications had bowled her over physically as well as mentally. The pipe had been purposely and subtly made to leak. The cracks in Djamilah's shoes had been deep-

ened. The pause on the reader had been circumvented.

Why would anyone try to kill Djamilah? Maybe Djamilah knew something too, although that seemed on the silly side of improbable. They presumably could not get at her in the clinic, so she was safe for now. Or had Corinna herself been the target? At the very least, this answered the question of whether They were personally capable of murder.

Corinna tried to think with mounting fear of what she was to say to Morbier. If he was involved in this non-accident, telling him about the sabotage would do nothing but let him know exactly how much she knew. She would have to maintain the fiction of an accident, avoid mentioning the cracks in the tech's shoes, say the puddle probably came from something she spilled, pretend the reader's circuits just needed to be checked. She pushed the block back in where it had been and replaced the wall panel. She'd call Maintenance when the "spill" reappeared.

Her wristpad vibrated in the appointment-reminding pattern. She looked at the time: fifteen minutes to wait and then cross the hall to Morbier's office. She knew before it started that the wait would make her nerves curl right up and out of her skin.

By the time she stood in Morbier's office, she had lost the ability to become more nervous. Even Ching's picture on the teleconferencer, indicating that this was going to be a grilling at the highest levels, had little effect. Good old neurotransmitters, she thought. Use them up and then you don't feel a thing.

There were the usual courtesies. "Please take a seat." "Do you object to recording equipment?" "We can move the video feed if it's too close for you." The silver tube of fiberoptic elements pointed at her like a snake just inches away from her face, but she murmured that no, it was fine. Her attention had been flitting feverishly, but now her mind fastened on minor social courtesies, which served to steady her when the certainty of being right could not. An unnatural stillness enveloped her. She felt that while it lasted she could examine anything, no matter how horrible, with equal dispassion.

Ching had launched into his speech, but she had trouble slowing her nerves down enough to listen. They did not ask her any of the questions she had prepared herself to answer. It was clearly not going to be a hearing with much listening involved.

"— sorry that this meeting has been made necessary, but on Mars we do not have the luxury we might have on Earth of overlooking lapses in safety procedures. Dr. Morbier has checked the lab carefully and has given me his findings." His image bobbed its head at Morbier as a signal for him to proceed.

Morbier read from a sheet of paper, and methodically ticked off each point as he made it. "Lab coats are not laundered weekly increasing the likelihood of chemical contamination." Tick. "Improvised containers are used at some stations for disposable pipette tips and other small disposable items, increasing the likelihood of error on the part of the cleaning staff." Tick. "One of the first aid kits was incomplete and the other had had its scissors removed." Tick.

“Two labs out of the four comprising the area under Dr. Mansur’s supervision did not have evacuation route maps.” Tick.

He carried on for quite a while. Nobody could beat Morbier for a thorough knowledge of lab procedures. Nobody as smart as Morbier could believe for an instant that all those “lapses” were not a regular part of getting work done in a lab. Were you supposed to sit on your hands, costing UNPB thousands of dollars in wasted time, until regulation waste baskets showed up?

He moved on to more specific points. “A spill under the Laser Fluorescence Sequence Assembler was still evident at oh-nine-hundred hours. The presence of uncleaned spills is very poor practice and may have been a contributing factor in this accident.” Tick. “Faulty protective rubber gloves were delivered, but were not tested prior to use as per regulations.”

Faulty gloves? What the hell?

Corinna opened her mouth to protest the whole litany of fabricated charges, but then shut it again. There was nothing she could say that they did not already know, of that she was sure by now.

Ching was speaking again. “In the light of this accumulation of evidence, I support Dr. Morbier’s contention that it is a liability to continue the employment of a person apparently incapable of maintaining ordinary laboratory safety, to say nothing of the special precautions one would hope to see in our more dangerous environment. It is my regrettable duty to second Dr. Morbier in terminating —”

Corinna was shocked as if illuminated by lightning.

They were not trying to murder her. Murders get investigated. They were trying to get rid of her. Nobody would investigate the firing of minor, unsatisfactory cog in the scientific establishment. They had decided they could not use her; they had decided she was getting suspicious; and they had decided to fire her in disgrace so that anything she might say would be discredited as sour grapes.

With an aftershock, she realized that Djamilah’s death would have made her, Corinna’s, supposed incompetence look lethal. Nobody would have ever questioned their judgment then. Morbier’s first question had been about Djamilah, but not because he cared about a human life. The fact that the poor woman was the sole support of a small child was obviously a minor detail to them. A small child that they had had the bloody gall to use in their horrible experiments, no less.

The reason Morbier had insisted she had to be out of the lab checking rabbits was all too clear.

They could have fired her for inadequacy in ten different, trumped-up ways she could never have fought or even detected. If they had let her slink off to some other job, she could never have fought back because she would still have something left to lose. Instead, they had succeeded in cornering her to the point where she might as well fight. Somebody was not a very good strategist. Or they had a clear grasp of just how little a discredited postdoc

could do to them.

“What are my rights in this situation?” she found herself saying with, to her, astonishing self-possession.

Morbier and Ching exchanged looks. Not in the script? Or would her response merely trigger Plan B?

“You may appeal to the Council Ombudsman and have a hearing,” said Morbier with such complete neutrality it sounded like sarcasm. *If you want to waste your time and everyone else’s*, his tone said, *by all means appeal*.

“I would like the record to show, then,” she nodded toward the recording machinery, “that I will be appealing. I assume this puts my dismissal on hold?”

Morbier nodded with no more emotion than a man confirming the weather report.

Ching said, “Yes,” in a snippy tone.

“Am I free to go now?” Corinna asked, the same mask of self-possession still covering her soul.

Morbier nodded neutrally again.

Ching repeated, “Yes, yes,” in an irritated voice.

She stood up, said “Thank you” because nothing else was appropriate either, and left.

It took fewer than ten steps in the corridor before her knees started shaking. She just about ran the hundreds of meters to Foggy Bottom’s tiny park. Quickly, she sat down on a sheltered bench to wait the jitters out. It did not help that she knew exactly which neurotransmitter was causing her to sweat and which one to shake and how long it was likely to last.

Chapter 8

How much time passed as Corinna sat in the auditorium-sized park she was not sure. The meeting with Morbier had taken nearly an hour. She was sure she had not been sitting more than a few minutes. It could not be much past three. So what was Oziel doing there, carrying a book and munching on a bag of crunchy cheese pops that one of the kids had probably not wanted? He spotted her a moment later.

“They let you out of the lab? Not possible.” His eyes glimmered in a friendly smile, but Corinna couldn’t dig up a matching response.

“What are you doing here?” she managed to ask.

His eyes lost their smile, but he sat down next to her on the bench. The crunching noises as he ate his cheese pops irritated her wildly. He offered her some, but she responded only with a few short, tight shakes of her head.

“Ordinary people only work eight-hour days, you see, and have things called overtime and holidays. I’m on the morning shift this week, six to fourteen hundred. We have to be open round the clock for the night workers, and nobody wants to deal with our shift changes right when the parents are dropping their kids off around eight and sixteen hundred and midnight.”

How nice, she thought.

“Now tell me, Corinna,” he said in a voice as quiet as velvet, “what’s gone so wrong?”

She wanted to throw herself on his chest and weep. The voice like a caress, the strength and solidity of him, the promise of safety he somehow managed to project, how did he do these things? Why did he do them? Was this why children flocked to him?

Damned silly, she’d look, flocking. She pulled herself together.

“I found out what they were trying to do on Sunday.”

“Electrocute Djamilah?”

“Yes, but that was just a means to an end. They’re firing me for incompetence because of these terrible lapses in lab safety.”

After a pause she added,

“I think Djamilah was supposed to die, since that would have made my incompetence infinitely worse.”

“Instead,” he said, still softly, “your totally unwanted competence saved her.”

She felt a shadow of a smile. He was right. Nice to think she was good for something.

However, it did not change the fact that she was being fired. It did not change the fact that she would never get another job even close to her field. Who would hire her when the Director for Science on Mars said she was a danger in the lab? If hearings exonerated her, still nobody would hire her because then, at the very least, she was a troublemaker who demanded hearings. Twenty five years of schooling, and it was all going to be for nothing. Did they even pay your passage back off Mars in these cases?

And without a lab, how was she supposed to unmask whatever they were doing with endorphins?

“What’s your next step?” he asked.

She had not thought that far ahead. The hearing, she supposed, for all the good it was going to do. She told him so, but added,

“That’s just to give me a couple of weeks to wrap things up. Hearings are always foregone conclusions. They’re going to discredit me to make sure nobody pays any attention to me about whatever it is that they’re up to. A nobody like me can’t do anything that will make any difference. I’m just dead meat.”

“Corinna, you already almost ruined their plans by saving Djamilah and by having the presence of mind to demand a hearing. You have only two weeks to nail the *putoneros*, but you do have two weeks. If we can get enough evidence of sabotage to jail them, they’re the ones who’ll be dead meat, not you.”

“Yeah, that would be nice.”

“What have you got so far?” he pressed on. He wasn’t going to let her fold.

She told him about Djamilah’s shoes and the propped pipe and the unpaused pause.

“At least the pipe doesn’t have my fingerprints all over it, since I was wearing lab gloves the whole time. As for the pause, I don’t even know how to begin checking the electrical innards.”

His eyes narrowed in thought.

“It’s paused with a computer command?”

“Well, it’s a button on the front of the machine, but it goes through software to take effect.”

“You’re sure it’s the circuits and not the software that they messed with?”

“I don’t know, actually. I just assumed it would be the circuits.”

“Software is much easier. How do you get at it?”

“You need to have access to the root account.”

“Which you have?”

“Well, sure, but what good does that do? I don’t know how to check it and you sure as hell can’t park in the lab and open command windows on the server.”

“I can park myself anywhere. The only way to keep me off a computer is to disconnect it. What’s the account?”

When she did not move, he stood, went to one of the park's game terminals and called out,

"You gonna make me wait till frogs grow hair?"

She joined him then, told him the account and password.

"This'll take a while," he muttered, "since I don't want to leave any trace of access." Within minutes, he nodded.

"*Bueno*. Next. What's the command syntax for pause?"

"'Lsrpause -x -a,'" she reeled off.

He typed command after command. The screen filled up with hexadecimal numbers. He scanned down carefully, as if it all meant something to him, and then jabbed his finger at one particular bit.

"I'll bet anything that's it. 'Pause' is 70 61 75 73 65 in hex and you see it everywhere in this exec file. Except here where there's a 72 instead of 75." Somehow, while he spoke, the numbers were converted to text. It was still gobbledygook, but even Corinna could see that it was a program having to do with pausing. And right in the middle of one bit that was all curly brackets and parentheses and semicolons with words like "else" and "then" and "ObjectMapFetch" was the word "parse."

A mere "r" substituted for a "u" had made the command non-functional and nearly killed Djamilah.

"That was changed on purpose. A accidental glitch usually makes an end-of-file, but that would have been easier to see if anyone looked and they couldn't have pretended someone was careless. You can actually figure out the probability that a glitch would turn it into another English word, and it's very low."

A snapshot of the screen curled out of the terminal's printer slot. He handed it to her.

"You see the problem with this, yes?" he continued.

"Well, yeah. It's still just a probability. It's not proof."

"No. There comes a time when the probabilities add up to something so improbable that any 'reasonable' person –"

Corinna could hear the quotes on the word, implying reasonable juries and the whole nine legal yards.

"– will see it as proof. The problem is that, if you argue it's sabotage, people have to have a reason for sabotage. It's just like needing a motive for murder, or else the law feels you're probably innocent, even if it looks bad."

"You mean they could say, 'Gee whiz, why would fine, upstanding citizens like us do this?'"

"Yes."

"So, let me see if I've got it. The only defense against a charge of incompetence is to prove sabotage. But if I prove sabotage I also have to simultaneously prove everything about their happy gene scheme or they can just wriggle off the hook and – I guess – kill me to get rid of my dangerous ideas. Is this supposed to make me feel better?"

The fact that he always seemed to be right was as bad as his crunchy cheese pops for irritation value. She would much rather be right herself.

He looked down at the floor. When he spoke again, it was in that low, quiet voice which seemed to untwist the knots inside her by sound alone.

“Corinna, there is no way to feel better when a gun is pointed at your head. But if you know what kind of gun it is and exactly where it is pointed, you have a better chance of fighting it.”

She felt the anger draining out of her. What was she doing, being angry with him, anyway? It was thinly veiled hysteria, that’s what it was.

“Two weeks doesn’t give me enough time to find all the evidence I need, do all the sequencing, and do the analysis that will tell me what it means. Analysis can take days – weeks – by itself.”

“You can only do what you can. If it looks like you won’t have enough time, well, we have a few days to come up with an alternate strategy.”

We, hmm? The tiny pronoun comforted her out of all proportion to its size.

“Obviously,” he continued, “you’ll be watched in the lab, so it won’t be easy. Speaking of finding evidence, I almost forgot: I got a copy of Dorie’s autopsy report.” He pulled a crumpled printout from his thigh pocket and handed it to her. “I don’t think it’ll be interesting, though, because nobody acted like there was anything strange.”

“‘Idiopathic cardioneuropathy,’” Corinna read off the sheet with a snort. “The expensive way to say ‘his heart stopped and we don’t know why.’ All the symptoms of CNS involvement and they didn’t even *look* at brain chemistry. It’s way too late now, in any case, even if they’d take my word on what to look for. Hell. I’d bet anything that poor child died because one of their horrible experiments failed, and a competent autopsy would have nailed the bastards.”

“I don’t think there are any incompetent doctors here, Corinna. But there are probably some who can be convinced not to look too hard.”

“Yeah,” she muttered, sliding into hopelessness again as she contemplated the power of the people trying to crush her.

He made a dismissive, downward, “case closed” wave of his hand.

“As I said, you do what you can. Did you have a chance to see what was in the box we saw dropped off?”

“At the P6 airlock? Hell, no. And at this point, I probably won’t either. I mean, what’s my excuse for needing P6 storage? Here I am being fired, but for some reason I need to be in P6.” Her exasperation was spilling out again, even though it was anything but his fault.

“You just say that you may not be in your current job much longer and you need to make sure that everything is stored right for the next person.”

Corinna felt a sudden giddy sense of the ridiculous. The guy really was always right. However, his education had been so expensive, she couldn’t have afforded it.

“You’re right,” she said. “P6 tomorrow. What’s his name, the little dweeblet,

is on duty then and he won't give me any trouble. And now I have to go do deep breathing exercises or something so I can get back to what passes for normal. I'm still feeling pretty hysterical."

She walked toward the exit. Oziel had just said, "See you later," when Kruskal walked in. He was carrying a sandwich bag and a thermos and looked at them both narrowly. Let them once link her with Oziel, and they would probably fire him as well.

"How come they let you out of the lab?" she asked Kruskal without breaking her stride toward the door. She did not feel up to inventing her own diversionary jokes.

She reached her tiny room, but there was no sanctuary there either. Her thoughts followed her in. She threw herself on the narrow bed and brooded.

Chapter 9

When Corinna had occasion to lament some disappointment, her father, in his encouraging way, often pointed out that things can always get worse. She hated to admit it, but evidence was on his side. As bad as her feelings of over-work and under-appreciation had been before, naked hostility was worse.

The terms of her quasi-academic appointment were such that Morbier could not simply lock her out of the lab. She was woefully underpaid because supposedly she was advancing her career by doing her own research as part of this job. The fact that it was all Morbier's anyway had galled her, but the flip side of the fiction now benefited her, because they had to allow her to finish up "her" work. So there she was, trying to think logically about how to collect the evidence she needed, while Jonathan breathed down her neck. He had obviously been told to keep tabs on her. He had obviously been keeping tabs on her for weeks already, and she'd been too trustful to even notice. Morbier himself also came in every hour and looked around as if expecting to find animal waste in the DNA reader and fingerprints on the sterile pipettes.

The gloves, she remembered, her mind skittering fruitlessly among repellent topics. She needed to check the strange comment Morbier had made about gloves. She crossed the hall to the techs' lab, and so did Jonathan, who suddenly appeared to need to do something there.

"Jonathan," she said abruptly, "I just remembered, Mei-mei said there were some tubes of yours with tissue culture cells that she saw in the regular freezer instead of the ultracold."

"What! They'll be useless after even a day in there. I need those for my paper with Morbier, and if I have to wait for another shipment from Earth — where exactly were they?"

"She didn't say. But I'm sure if you look through the freezer, you'll see them pretty quick if they're there. They're in the big tubes."

And he was gone, no fuss, no muss, just as Oziel had said once, days ago. She hoped that would keep him occupied long enough for her to study the gloves.

There was nothing obvious wrong with them, but when held up to the light, tens of little pinpricks showed through every microscopic fault in the thin, rubbery film. Every box in that lab had defective gloves and every box was full, just as they would be if someone had replaced them all at the same

time and quite recently. The other labs belonging to Morbier did not have this problem. Somebody obviously wanted to make sure there was no chance of getting a good glove in that room.

Evidence for sabotage was overwhelming, but evidence for the bioengineered brainwashing scheme behind it was still non-existent. She needed to find a vial of something dreadful with Morbier's name on it. She needed to find a plot to overthrow world governments on Morbier's computer. She stopped abruptly as she crossed the hall back to her cubicle. Oziel probably could get onto Morbier's computer and find god-only-knew-what. But then she started walking again.

It was no good. How would she admit at a hearing that she had all Morbier's private files? The authorities took a very dim view of splicing, and if she was good enough to break into his computer, she was good enough to plant those files, which would be precisely his defense. Could she get a secret but official search warrant for his files? Only if she could show probable cause to suspect criminal wrong-doing, and she had no evidence hard enough to help an underling against a heavyweight. She had come full circle.

Jonathan came bleating into her office that his tissue culture cells were nowhere in that freezer and where were they?

"Have you looked in the ultracold itself?" she asked. "Maybe somebody put them back for you."

He galloped off to the freezer in question. She could hear him banging around, then a string of expletives when he found the cells right where they belonged. Moments later he was back. He kept hanging about, ostensibly to ask a detailed question about reagents, but in reality to read her screen and see what she was working on. As it happened, she had been pondering splicing, not working, and he lacked the ability to read her mind.

This, she said to herself, is intolerable. The humiliation of having this pip-squeak preferred over her was so irritating she could not think. On top of that, it also bothered her that she was bothered. She knew perfectly well that if they'd tried to recruit her for this horrible project, she would have refused, but they'd never tried. Logically, this meant she was too good for them, but on some level it didn't feel like that. It felt like she wasn't good enough.

She stood up. She would go and check out P6 right now. It would get her out of the lab and away from the spies, if she worked it right.

"Here," she said to Jonathan, parking him at a terminal in the lab and pulling up the reagent database. "I'm sure if you go through that you'll find what you're looking for. I need to visit the bathroom." Presumably he would not follow her there.

He scowled at being brushed off, but there was nothing he could do.

In the anteroom to the containment chamber, Corinna was scowling too. Working in P6 was for the techs. She had always thought so, but just now she really thought so, as she struggled with yet another fastener on the biocontainment suit. The miserable fastener was placed, for some reason known only to UN-Space, between her shoulder blades. Was the damn thing on backwards? When she finally had it right, her mood was not good. She waddled toward the lab's internal airlock, feeling like a toddler dressed in two snowsuits by an overanxious mother.

The computer okayed her iris scan and let her into the chamber. She was pleased to see she was apparently alone there, but then an apparition like herself appeared from behind the shelves surmounting one of the lab tables. Her ear mike crackled to life.

"Howdy doody. I'm Benson." He glanced at her ID badge, "Oh, hi, Dr. Mansur. Let me know if there's anything you can't find. I'll be here." And he popped back into his invisible den.

"Uh, right. Thanks," mumbled Corinna. It really was too much to expect the highest-level biocontainment chamber to be deserted. Well, if he ran true to past behavior, he would remain untalkative.

She pottered about, trying to do the things she would normally do when checking storage space. Then she pottered about some more. But no matter how much she pottered, she found nothing with red lettering on it announcing "Illegal." She started to feel hot. The suit was making her itch behind her shoulder blades where she could not reach it, and at her crotch where she would look like an orangutan if she scratched, and around one ankle where the suit was too thick to get at the skin.

Finally, tucked in a corner, but too big to hide in any real sense, was a familiar-looking half cubic meter crate with a broken corner. There had been two days to unpack it, but the crate was still full. Corinna held her breath in excitement and moved closer. One of the damaged boxes inside had a large crack with not-so-frozen sample vials peeking through. Corinna squatted down to peer at them. One was labeled "EDRP-1gen," the standard name for an endorphin-system genome kit, no doubt a commercial preparation ordered from Earth. She had no use for anything standard, but it suggested she was getting close. Three of the vials had gibberish labels. She quickly grabbed them and tucked them into the thigh pocket of her "snowsuit." Time enough to throw them out later if they were useless.

"Dr. Benson?" she asked in her best officious voice. "I hope this is not indicative of the usual handling methods for sensitive materials." As he came rustling and puffing around the corner, she indicated the broken crate.

"Of course not. Heavens, no. Of course not. Kruskal had a rush order that couldn't wait for the next clipper slot, he said, about two weeks from now. He gave it to the Pony Express, they had a new guy working, and, well, there you are. Even so, most of the materials seem to be intact."

Corinna tried to resist asking why it was still there, but she was too curi-

ous.

“Why’s it still here if it was a rush order?”

“Well, I mean, jiminy Christmas, it’s a P6 package. If it’s damaged, I can’t release it until I can verify absence of contamination.”

Bless the bureaucrats, thought Corinna, for the first time in her life.

“Of course. That makes sense. Okay, thanks for letting me look around. I’ll start moving specimens into Freezer 6 early next week.”

First she had to check out the stolen vials. Then tonight, Corinna decided, she was going to take a look around Kruskal’s lab. If the shipment was for Kruskal, it could only mean one thing: he was doing the actual work on this project and if anyone had incriminating vials, it would be him. Together with the three samples she had already abstracted from Wallis, maybe the whole puzzle would coalesce into something suitably damning. She would worry later about how to explain the extralegality of the samples.

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Corinna was not sure when she decided to enlist Oziel’s help in her plans of criminal trespass. What she did know was that she had never felt so friendless in her life and that aid and comfort were about as optional as air. She, a dispossessed and discredited postdoc, was to save herself and the rest of the world, all within the next two weeks. The least she could do was call in reinforcements from the nursery school.

One corner of her mouth was quirked in a sardonic grin at this thought as she slid her dinner tray onto Oziel’s table after her trip to P6.

He looked up, surprised.

“I’m going to break into Kruskal’s lab tonight,” she said very quietly without any preamble. “I’m going to need a lookout.”

He seemed amused and gave her a suppressed, quasi-military salute.

“Awaiting your orders, Señora.”

Corinna grinned at the salute, but then stopped.

“No, really. It could be dangerous. It could put your job on the line, and you don’t have to do this. It would just be nice for me to have help.”

The glint in his eyes turned into a glare, but he was staring at the table, not at her.

“I told you. I’d kill the *putos* with my bare hands, if I could.” He took a noticeable breath. “But I don’t know how to kill them. If you have any ideas, just tell me what to do.”

She gave him a long look, which he returned just as steadily.

“Okay. First some background. I checked out P6 today and—”

“And?” he interrupted, leaning forward.

“The box was for Kruskal. Yes,” she answered his look, “always the same

names. I got away with three vials and ID'ed them this afternoon. One was DNA and one was RNA, and both of them seem to be vaccines against their docility gene. The last one is three different proteins. I have the sequences on my laptop, but I haven't figured out what it is yet. As for the other two, the DNA one seems to be the antisense strand to the gene that makes endorphinase, which is one way to shut that system down. I'd think it would be more efficient, as well as easier to fine-tune, if you shut it down using regulatory genes, but —"

"Ah, Corinna," Oziel interrupted again. "There were three vials. You identified them and two of them are vaccines. Good. Then what?" He chased some peas around his plate with what she now recognized as a polite lack of expression caused by damn gringo food.

"Um. Yes." She started on her salad. "The protein vial is very, very weird. Nothing to do with endorphinase at all, as far as I can tell. There are some DNA impurities in it, but they don't match anything on my system. I'd guess it was a vaccine too, but for what, I can't tell. It may just be something associated with Kruskal's other research. I'd know in a minute if I could search the net, but that's the one thing I better not do."

He nodded agreement, clearly still waiting for her to go on.

"Anyway, the point is that Kruskal is doing the basic lab work for this project. So the thing is to break into his lab, get away with as many samples as possible, and then figure out exactly what they're using, how they're delivering it, and how to cure it.... In 24 hours or less so as not to make it too easy," she added with a shrug.

"It sounds promising," said Oziel hesitatingly, "but — please don't get me wrong — but theoretical. How are you going to break in? Or do the labs stay open all night?"

"A lot of labs do stay open, but not Kruskal's, I'll bet. No, I was planning on using the external emergency access air locks."

She was rather proud of her scheme. Every spoke of the Station had emergency air locks at the tips. The tips poked out past the skin of the dome covering everything, including the hydroponic gardens and waste recycling areas between the spokes. The emergency locks at the spoke tips provided direct access to the outdoors. They could be either emergency exits, if there was trouble inside the Station, or entrances for someone caught outside. They had to remain unlocked at all times or alarms went off. Of course, Kruskal might have alarmed them against entrance, but that seemed unlikely because nobody in their right mind would break into a lab by clunking around in a space suit. And a break-in from outside without a space suit was inconceivable. That was the beauty of it.

Oziel did not look like he appreciated the beauty.

"So you enter the lock. How does that get you into the lab?"

"The end-of-the-spoke labs are the best real estate because you can use your whole end of the hallway as an extra room. The biggest wheels get them.

That's why Morbier has one. Obviously, Ching gets his pick of spaces and his is the next one over to the west."

"So, once you're through the airlock, you're already in their area?"

"Yup."

"Won't an alarm go off as soon as you activate the lock?"

"There's five seconds to turn it off in case it was started by accident."

"But the openings and closings must be monitored."

"Well, yeah, but at that hour I don't think they'll be paying much attention."

"They might not notice you using an airlock in the middle of the afternoon, not in the middle of the night. And you need a space suit to get away." He stared thoughtfully into the middle distance. "What do you do if there's a problem? It takes a lot of time to put on a space suit and cycle through an airlock."

"No space suit." She felt pleased at the strategic brilliance of such an unthinkable avenue of attack. Oziel's eyes widened in amazement. "I'm going to run like hell between the two air locks with an emergency bag over my head and one of the emergency aerosols of canned air. I'll have about five minutes of useful consciousness and I can cover the space in less than three minutes. I timed myself in the gym. And by having someone on the lookout," she nodded toward him, "I'll have enough time to dive for the air lock and fling myself out before they find me. So stop picking nits. The important thing is to do it."

By now, Oziel's expression could have been summed up as *You may have a Ph. D. but you have rocks for brains*. However, all he said was,

"The point is not to plan for success if everything works. The point is to achieve success no matter which road we have to take."

She liked his use of "we," but she said "Go for it," rather gruffly. *She* had considered her plan elegant in its simplicity.

"How do I keep a lookout in this plan of yours?"

"In the hallway leading toward the lab. There's a bathroom facility there. You could prop the door open. We'll carry two suit radios and you let me know if you see anyone. I was planning on doing this at about two in the morning when there shouldn't be anyone around."

"We'll stick out on the security videos like performing elephants. We'll have to fix the cameras."

"I'd planned on just staying out of their range as much as possible."

He shook his head. "That'll never work."

Corinna frowned. She was getting tired of this.

"Picture it," he continued. "You're a guard sitting in front of a bank of monitors where nothing moves and all of a sudden something flits across. It'll draw his eyes like a magnet unless they're closed."

"Well, it's a moot point anyway. I don't know how to jimmy cameras. So unless it's one of your many talents...?"

"My brother is the man for that, but he's a bit far away. All we really have to do is freeze a still image for a while, so I could probably manage it."

Corinna eyed him.

“Why in hell aren’t you making a bundle with a life of crime? You’ve got all the skills.”

“Because I don’t like hell. I told you: I like a quiet life. Anyway, back to the point. We shouldn’t fix more cameras than we have to. So I should be in the lab with you, so there’s only one set of cameras to splice. I should probably come in through the air lock with you too, so I don’t show up on the hall monitors either. But I’m not running around on Mars without a suit.”

She shook her head.

“You can’t do that. It hardly matters if I get caught. I’ve already been fired. There’s nothing they can do to you for being in the bathroom, but if you’re in the lab with me, that’ll be the end of it.” *And if he didn’t want to run around on Mars, why was he pretending he wanted to help? There was no other way.*

He ignored her.

“We need a way to know who’s coming and we need to be able to use suits. Let’s see....”

He pondered and Corinna frowned. All suggestions were gratefully accepted, of course, but where did he get off taking over from her?

“How long would it take you to get into your suit?” he asked. “Less than a minute?”

“I’ve done it in forty seconds in emergency drills.”

“That would solve one problem. I wait just outside the airlock with your suit all ready. You hop into it and I make sure everything’s buckled if you pass out. It also keeps me out of the lab. Running around outside in the middle of the night may look funny, but there’s no law against it. Now, the problem of advance warning.” He pondered again.

“Well,” she said, thinking it out as she spoke, “if there was some way to pipe in the feedback from the bulkhead doors, which are closed at that time of night, we’d know if someone opened one and was coming down the hall. It wouldn’t be as good as human eyes and ears, but it’d be something.” She returned to picking at her now nearly cold dinner.

“Mm,” he agreed. “As you say, it would be something. That leaves the problem of how to hide your use of the airlocks.” He sat so long in thought, Corinna was starting on dessert before he spoke again.

“Wait here. I’m going to check something out on a terminal.”

She thought of following him just to demonstrate that *Wait here* was no way to talk to people. But she didn’t. Flaunting their collaboration to get a few seconds’ satisfaction was stupid.

A long half an hour passed. She was tired of reading the news on her wrist-pad and was about to give up and leave, when he returned.

“Right. I’ve got it. I can get into the airlock sensor stream. Interrupting it is way too obvious, but I can redirect the signal, so what happens at one lock can look like it’s really happening at another one. Now, tomorrow the mid-night shift does the regular weekly scheduled clipper port maintenance check,

so there will be lots of techs going in and out at the rover terminal spoke. You just suit up and leave with the crowd. I'll file an outing for the purpose of stargazing. I'll exit half an hour earlier and be waiting for you near Ching's airlock. You jump out of your suit and into the lock. Same in reverse when you're done. Then we go back in at the clipper lock about half an hour apart. That way I only have to redirect the sensor stream from one lock and the chances of being found out are less."

"And the camera jimmying?" He wasn't the only one who could pick nits.

"Ah, yes. I record tonight's input between, say, midnight and four am, and then tomorrow, I redirect the camera's data stream to come from the recording. That's the second reason why we should do this tomorrow rather than today."

So they settled it. At one am next morning she would step out of the rover terminal airlock. Corinna set her wristpad to vibrate on the same specific frequency as a lab pager she could lend him to strap to his wrist, and they worked out a set of signals. Three short bursts from her to Oziel meant, "Emergency. Get your butt in here and help." A long continuous signal meant, "All is lost. Save yourself if you can." And so on.

"Hey, one more thing," said Corinna as they picked up their trays. "Is your watch Mars-rated?" Wristpads and expensive digital watches listened for the satellite signal to keep perfect time. Cheap tourist watches just approximated the longer hours on Mars that the extra thirty seven minutes in the day required, and approximations weren't going to be good enough. Oziel's watch looked the opposite of expensive.

"Oh. No. Good point. I'll remember to synchronize to satellite time just before I leave."

"Okay," said Corinna, adding in a firm undertone without any double meaning at all, "One o'clock tomorrow and we'll Do It."

Chapter 10

Corinna had no trouble pretending to be preoccupied as she snapped herself into a suit, hidden from view in a grove of ghostly suits waiting for occupants. The cargo pockets of her pants were so full, it was a tight fit in the legs of the suit. She had taken everything: cold boxes, plenty of vials, a scoop, and a labelling scanner, in case she hit the jackpot. Just now, that seemed about as likely as a direct promotion to Chief Research Scientist. Her hands had tremors. This would not do. She might have spoken lightly of how it did not matter if she were caught, but in fact it would probably mean a conviction for breaking and entering. She tried to breathe slowly and evenly and tell herself that all she had to do was damn well not be caught.

She snapped the helmet dome in place and turned the polarization up as much as she plausibly could. Nobody had particularly noticed her yet and she wanted to keep it that way. Now her breath sounded panic-loud in her ears. The suit was too hot, but after moving the thermostat down, it rapidly became too cold. It was like running a fever. She cycled through the lock right after a group of techs and set off around the dome, still of no visible interest to anyone.

It took less than ten minutes to walk past two sides of the hexagonal station. She could make out Oziel looking more like a rock than a person, sitting a little way from the airlock to Ching's lab at the tip of the Faraday spoke. Somehow she knew he had spotted her, but he did not move for a few seconds, probably until he was sure nobody else was around. Wordlessly, they both converged on the airlock. She depolarized her helmet and looked a question at him. Then he cleared his and she could see his face, an eerie, blotchy red and green from the lights of the readouts inside the chest of his suit. They gave each other a nod. He moved to the airlock and poised his hand above the access button. The idea was for him to push it at the last possible moment, exactly when she was free of the suit, to give her the full five seconds to cancel the alarm. Above all, Corinna had stressed, they could not risk setting off the alarm. She took one last look at the exact steps she would take to reach safety, started opening her suit and shut her eyes hard against the frigid near-vacuum.

A cold sharp as knives took her breath away. She barely suppressed a gasp, but after the first tiny, involuntary one, she closed her throat as tightly as her

eyes. The planet tried to turn her inside out. She fought free of the suit, groped blindly toward the airlock, and then she felt three hard quivers against her wrist. Then again and again.

Oh my God. Now what?

She flailed back toward her suit. Oziel lifted her into it, snapped it shut just as swirling stars started to form behind her still-shut eyes. She gasped for breath and gradually regained as much normality as she was going to. It was maybe a very good thing she had not tested any fool notions about running. She looked around. No sign of anything approaching.

She kept her suit radio off. With this many techs around, there was no point taking chances on someone picking up their words. She leaned her helmet against his and spoke loudly, knowing sound would conduct sufficiently where the two helmets touched.

“What the hell was that about!”

“You can’t go dressed like that!” he said, looking exasperated. “You’re wearing a *white* shirt!”

Corinna just stared at him, a hand’s breadth away inside his own helmet. Was he afraid she’d get it dirty? Was it the color of the wrong gang? Had House Dior nixed white for burglaries this season? She supposed it was lucky she was wearing black cargo pants.

“How are you going to hide in white? If you have to hide,” he added.

“Of all the – okay, so what do you suggest? I’m not going all the way back to my room just to make the right fashion statement, believe me.”

“I’ll give you my turtleneck. One of us should be all the way in a suit at all times. And remember: if you hide, pull the neck up over your head. Faces are magnets. And crouch down so you don’t obviously look like a person.”

She could see him pulling his arms in and struggling mightily. Finally he was ready. He unfastened just the helmet, passed out his dark navy top and snapped the helmet down again quick.

After an equivalent series of gyrations, she was finally dressed to his satisfaction and stuffed her shirt into one of the suit’s internal clasps. The heady, spicy scent of him filled her suit. Her heart sped up, not with fear for a change, and her breathing deepened. She sneaked a glance at him and found him looking at her. He was all red and green and blotchy and gorgeous and it was time to go for God’s sake. Her fear seemed to have left her, transmuted into excitement.

Somebody needed to study his pheromones and bottle them.

She had him push the airlock access button first this time, stepped smoothly out of her suit, and into the opening door. Everything is easier the second time.

She slapped off the alarm with a second to spare. The air lock inner door opened onto a dim and hostile lab.

Heart beating much too fast, now in just plain old fear, she tiptoed in on her thick, rubberized space suit socks. The security camera panned the lab

slowly, its red eye blinking calmly and normally. Corinna just hoped that Oziel knew what he was doing and that the camera was suffering delusions. She slipped on a pair of thin rubber gloves.

This lab was even better-funded than Morbier's and even fuller of equipment. The specimens had to be stored in an ultracold freezer and there were two of the huge things in this room alone. It was going to take for-absolute-ly-ever to go through them. This was the only part of the plan Oziel had not criticized, no doubt because he thought that when it came to specimens she knew what she was doing. Wrong. As she carefully opened the heavy door of the first freezer, she was wishing fervently he had come up with one of his bright ideas for how to go straight to the vials she needed.

Her ears felt as large as satellite dishes, searching for sounds that were not there. Two of the five compartments were less heavily frosted, which meant they were used the most. She'd start there. Her eyes scanned tens of frosted plastic boxes for one that looked promising. Nothing. But she was scanning so fast she could be missing things. Must slow down. But then the freezer would heat up too much. She checked the temperature on the front of the door. Ten degrees to go before the freezer's alarm went off, an alarm that would be as bad as the airlock alarm. After the first compartment, she would alternate between freezers to give each one time to cool back down while she worked on the other one.

She had worked through one compartment on each freezer with nothing to show for it, when the thing she dreaded most began: the intermittent prickle on her wrist that meant the bulkhead door at the beginning of Faraday Hall had opened.

They might not be coming here.

Yes, and hydroponic tomatoes would soon taste good.

She had to hide. She closed the freezer quickly and silently and looked at the temperature readout. It would be the first thing a seasoned lab scientist like His Bobness would check. Her strategy of alternating meant each freezer was now only a couple of degrees warmer than ideal – close enough, she hoped.

She looked madly around the lab for the likeliest spot to hide. Under that lab bench behind the big carboys for waste liquids? She was not going to find anything better in the next thirty seconds. She dove under the bench, squirmed as far behind the carboys as she could manage, pulled the turtle-neck right up over her head, as per instructions, and tried to breathe entirely through her pores. At the last minute, she pulled her hands into the sleeves as well. If faces were magnets, hands must be too.

The light flipped on.

She tried not to flinch.

"It's a real problem." It was Kruskal's voice, sounding as loud as a foghorn to Corinna's overextended hearing. "I don't know how long that ass, Benson, is going to sit on that shipment and if Hanzhe orders its release, Benson is just

the sort of nitpicker who'll start filling out report forms in triplicate."

"Somebody with some clout needs to push him." That was Jonathan, sounding nasal and whiny. She could actually see rather well through the mesh of the fabric now that the light was on, but all she could see was two pairs of legs at the other end of the lab. "If I don't have the templates for the vaccine activation study, my paper on that will come out too long after my current paper on methylation and gene activation. At this stage in my career, having gaps in my productivity looks bad, so I need to keep the papers coming, and if I don't have the vacc—"

"Yeah, yeah, right. Look, that's just the ultrapure synthesis. I didn't get you up in the middle of the night to be part of the problem, because I've got the solution. I made some samples right here. Obviously, it's pretty damn difficult without a full industrial-grade fabrication unit, and I don't know how many other people could have done it, but, of course, I managed." He moved over to an ordinary kitchen refrigerator close enough to Corinna's hiding place to send her to the edge of panic. He opened the top freezer section and fiddled with specimen boxes in there. If she survived this interminable interruption, that innocent-looking fridge was going to be her only stop on the way to the airlock.

"Okay," Kruskal continued, putting two small vials in a cold box. "These are only 98% pure, but that'll get you started. So don't go yammering at Benson. Hanzhe would not like that."

Everybody else in the world called him Dr. Ching, but Kruskal had to let everybody know how well he knew the man, once every couple of minutes at a minimum. Were they *never* going to get out of here?

The answer to that was apparently not. They stood around discussing purification techniques for several hours. Possibly days. Finally, Kruskal saw Jonathan to the door, saying,

"Wow, nearly three. No point going back to bed now. I think I'll just take the time to get some work done and then go to bed once the crowds arrive."

Corinna discovered she could fall into a deeper funk than the last one, something she wouldn't have believed possible. Her silent scream —

"No, no, no. Go, *go*, get out of here!"

— had no psychic effect on Bob Kruskal. He continued contentedly pottering about the lab.

She didn't dare move, even to the extent of pressing her wristpad to signal Oziel. And if she could, she had no idea what to signal. They hadn't worked anything out for, "Help! I'm pinned by a bozo and may die of a stroke."

She tried to figure out what Kruskal was doing. Maybe he was setting something up and would leave while it ran, long enough for her to get out. He tonelessly burred a soupy, sentimental top hit she particularly hated. She gritted her teeth and tried to think of an escape.

But there was none. She could not create a diversion without making her presence obvious. The lab was too small to sneak out behind his back. She

could only hope he would have to go to the bathroom at some point.

As if in answer to her thoughts, he stepped out of the lab. Was he really—? No, he was just across the hall. She could hear him doing something over there. By the sound of the clanks and thumps, he was opening and closing an ultracentrifuge. Sure enough, seconds later, he was back. The only good thing was, she had managed to use the time to change position and make herself marginally more comfortable.

Then something worse happened. He walked toward the lock. He started to push buttons. No code for “someone coming out!” of course. Good God, what if these lunatics were waiting for another shipment? What if this whole lab was due to become a vortex of activity any moment? She felt cold sweat trickling down from her armpits.

He closed the inner lock door. He had not suited up. He could not be going out. A few moments later, she could see his legs step back in again. His movements were still unhurried and calm, so he must not have noticed the recent use of the airlock. She tried to tell her heartbeat it could slow down.

Damn all insomniacs, she thought.

There was nothing for it but to wait him out. But if he didn't go *somewhere* before four, the security camera would show her up like a performing elephant, as Oziel had made much too clear. For that matter, if Kruskal and company checked the security data for tonight before it was overwritten, the peaceful image of an empty lab would start an investigation all by itself.

And how long would Oziel wait? She was already more than an hour overdue. He was not likely to sit there forever. He would assume she had been caught and that he should get away while he could. There she'd be, diving out of the airlock into the waiting arms of Mars. She better be ready to try that run she had contemplated when she still believed in luck.

Kruskal hummed the same top hit for the fifteenth time. Corinna could see a lab timer on a bench. It read three thirty. Kruskal stopped humming long enough to yawn. He pushed a button on his DNA reader and potted over to the coffee pot, uncomfortably close to Corinna's hiding place. She felt her neck grow so rigid it started to hurt.

He was rattling something up there and swearing. There was much riffling around in the refrigerator. More curses and muttered comments about damned idiots. Then he walked out. Corinna held her breath.

If he was really going to the cafeteria for coffee, she might even be able to get what she came for before diving out the airlock. She waited, straining every nerve to hear where his footsteps went. They quickly faded out in the corridor. She forced herself to wait until he could have reached the bulkhead door, but her wrist felt no comforting quivers signaling the door had been opened. Slowly, she eased out of her hiding place, ready to make a dash for the lock.

Then came the quiver.

It transformed into a thrill of relief.

She stood in front of the refrigerator. She noticed the coffee pot next to it and could not see what his problem was. There was the coffee, the creamer, the sugar. Knowing Kruskal, he probably objected to creamer. He must have been looking for “real” cream – as real as it got on Mars – in the refrigerator.

There were only two specimen boxes in the freezer, which felt far colder than it should have. It must have been modified to get down to -80°C . There were not that many vials in each box. She counted. Twelve. With fumbling fingers she pulled empty vials out of her pockets and laid them on the counter. She desperately wanted to take the full vials and run, but then Ching would take the Station apart into toothpick-sized fragments. The only way was the original plan: scrape tiny amounts of the samples into her own vials so that there was nothing obviously missing. She scooped a bit out of the original, put it in her vial, scanned and copied the label, and moved on to the next one. By the third vial, her hands calmed down enough to be efficient and automatic. Most of her brain was concentrated on her wrist, waiting for the signal that spelled the end.

She capped the last vial, slipped the cold box back into her left thigh pocket, closed the freezer, and headed for the lock. She sent two short buzzes on her wristpad. “I’m coming out.”

One short vibration answered her. “Ready and waiting.”

“You waited,” she said once she was safe outside, suited up, speaking helmet to helmet. “I figured you’d have given up hours ago.”

“I never give up,” came his fuzzy voice through the plastic. “What happened?”

“Why don’t I tell you when it’s easier to talk? I got the specimens.”

His face, still strangely red and green, lit in a triumphant smile.

They set off around opposite sides of the dome. Corinna took the long way this time, past three spokes. About twenty minutes later she finally reached Darwin, but there were still plenty of techs around. They seemed to be finishing up. A mob of them headed toward the rover lock. They were obviously going to use that instead of waiting singly for the personnel lock. She joined the crowd.

Back in her tiny room, the feeling of triumph subsided. Papers relevant to her hearing were spread everywhere. Difficult as hiding under a bench in Kruskal’s lab might be, it had allowed her to forget about the hearing for a while.

Chapter 11

Corinna spent the week leading up to her hearing whiplashed by emotions. She went from fury at the injustice of it all, to gnawing fear about how she would ever get another job, to hopelessness at the overwhelming power of the people destroying her, to frantic worry about what their efforts at mind control could do to life as she knew it on Earth, and back to rage that she was just one little peon deprived of any power to save herself, to say nothing of the world. None of this was any use in helping her prepare for the hearing. It wore her to a frazzle and she barely slept. That made it even more difficult to approach her problems with a cool, level head, which, she knew perfectly well, was the only kind of head that could begin to handle them.

During the day, she could generally force herself to become absorbed in lab work, so she threw herself at the antifreeze problem, something nobody in Morbier's lab could object to. The irony of it was, GP-18 did indeed seem to function perfectly in simulations. She filed for a patent on it under her own name, something sure to make Morbier disarrange his perfectly parted hair. Under normal circumstances she would never have done it because an irate boss would mean she could never get another job. But now she had nothing to lose. If they granted the patent, her name would be associated with it, which would give Morbier the vapors for years to come. To be sure he couldn't contest the patent, she retained the evidence of which work was hers by taking one of the big backups she'd made when it was still part of her job to be doing that sort of thing. They would probably try to deny her access to her files, but this way she could sort out later which ones she needed, when there were fewer people breathing down her neck.

She quietly arranged with Tambika to run the clandestine specimens through on her equipment. All Corinna needed was the sequences on her laptop. She sneaked in, set up a run in a few minutes, and then dropped in later for the results. Not one single amino acid or nucleotide ever saw the network. She no longer had any doubt that the samples she had stolen from the P6 shipment were trial vaccines to prevent the mind-control molecules from working. It made perfect sense. The people who controlled the stuff would want to be sure nobody could infect them. She wondered if the shipment had included duplicate vials or if she had gotten away with the only copies. Because if she had, there was no way Kruskal's impure versions could be used

for final testing.

Of course, there was not much she could do with trial preps either, since she knew nothing about them. There was no way to know which of the vaccines were effective, how much you were supposed to take, whether they were even safe, or how to take them. Vaccines were normally micelle suspensions, with the active bits trapped in tiny bubbles, which protected them in the stomach and allowed them to be taken by mouth. These were just the lyophilized vaccine molecules themselves, which meant they had to be injected or absorbed through the skin, like in the dark ages. The good news was they did not have to be stored cold so she took to carrying them with her. You never knew.

The days passed and she worked as if demon-possessed. But no matter how fast she tried to push the clandestine sequences through the procedures, it was becoming clear she would not have time to analyze them before the hearing.

She put this point to Oziel at dinner four days before the hearing. She saw him almost every day at dinner now. Perhaps people noticed them sitting together in the swirling dinner crowds, perhaps they didn't. She hoped it wouldn't get him in trouble, but she needed a sympathetic ear too much to do without it.

"You know," she began, "I had a dreadful thought. They could say I'd set the whole thing up for some reason and charge *me* with attempted murder."

"I think, Corinna, it would be so hard to show you had a motive, they would never try that. Besides, why would you go to all the trouble of saving Djamilah then?"

"Yeah. I guess. Anyway, I've been working like a dog, but I'm not going to make it. So, either I have to let them call me incompetent or I run the risk of being killed when I show enough evidence to exonerate me but not to imprison them."

"So, time for Plan B?"

"Plan B! I have no Plan B. It's been all I could do to try to keep Plan A on track."

"It's okay, Corinna." His voice had gone all velvety and soothing. "That's what you've got me for."

"Oh?" she said, with an entirely unwarranted subtext of *and what do you think you can do?*

"If we can't accomplish the primary objective, we need to fall back to a less vulnerable position."

It was peculiar how he talked about it like a military campaign. Still, that felt better than feeling overwhelmed and helpless, which was what she did most of the time.

"We could go along with pretending that all of this just happened," he continued. "Don't defend yourself by claiming sabotage, but by showing how it was a freak accident and nothing to do with you. Get as many people as you

can find to testify that you're good at what you do. Find out who put those gloves in there. It wasn't you, so it wasn't your incompetence."

"That'll never—" fly, she'd been going to say, but he interrupted her.

"I know it's far-fetched to call it a freak accident. But all you want is to stop them from pinning it on you, and for them not to know how much you know. As you said yourself, the important thing here is to come out of it and fight another day."

Well, no, she had only talked about coming out of it, period.

She nodded slowly. He was right. It was not time to be thinking in terms of winning yet. For some reason, that made her feel better.

But then he struck a jarring note.

"Now, the last fork of the strategy, of course, is that if they do get you, we have to be sure it's a hollow victory. We need to send copies of all the data you have to someone totally beyond their control."

Corinna stared at him. He said the most appalling things so calmly. She had never planned for events after her death before.

"Do you know people you could trust like that?" he went on.

She didn't know how to explain to him the hidebound world of academe. Scientists wanted scientific standards of proof about everything.

"A few," she said. "McClintock is a good guy. He was my thesis adviser, and believe me, if someone is less than one hundred percent fair and honest, you feel it on your own hide as a grad student. I sent him secure mail once I knew I needed a job, and dropped a few hints about why, to see how he'd react. He said he'll help as much as he can on the job front, but as for the shenanigans, there was just a lot of stuff about how it was necessary to have proof before I could make any accusations. I don't know how he'd feel about being pulled into the center of the storm by having all the data dumped in his lap for safe-keeping."

"And since you need him to find another job, you don't want to annoy him, I guess," said Oziel.

"Yeah. And as for fellow grad students, I really don't know. I haven't kept in touch with most of them except my best friend, Linda. She just got married, and probably doesn't need any ticking bombs handed to her. I mean, the person we give this to could get killed. As for the others, I don't know.... People can change a lot in a couple of years." The image of Nat sprang to mind. One more thing she had to fight down.

She went on quickly. "I also know a reporter at the London Times." She smiled to herself at the thought of pencil-thin Cholly, ferreting out a drug scandal and pretending to give her the rush of a lifetime on the assumption that she had useful information about an endorphin-related drug. She'd pointed out that he knew perfectly well she wasn't his dream girl and she knew perfectly well she had no scoops for him. Cholmondeley Nymans had found that funny and bought her an extra round of champagne.

"Reporters publish things," objected Oziel. "We need it kept quiet until we

have all the evidence to nail the *putos*.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “We can’t be sure what he’d do with it.”

“What do you think of sending it to Miguel Sanderas?” Oziel asked. “He’s the doctor in the barrio who Marco wrote about. I’ve known him since we were both knee-high. He’s ... amazing. He could have abandoned the barrio years ago, but he came back. I would trust him with anything, anything at all.” After a moment, he added, “Marco sent me another private mail that has to do with this, by the way. He said while he was visiting Quintón, he bought a bottle of Fanta off another prisoner who wouldn’t stop grinning. He gave it to Miguel, who asked for the name of that mind-altering stuff so that he could tell some friends of his at the University what to look for in the drink. Obviously, if we send him all the information, he’ll have everything he needs.”

“Hm,” said Corinna. “I don’t mean to be rude, Oziel, but some little slum doctor doesn’t have the power to withstand the likes of Dicastillo.”

He smiled wryly.

“Funny you should say that. He’s a shrimp, for sure. But it’s not about standing up to Dicastillo. It’s about someone we can trust to hide the information until we need it.”

“We’d be putting him in danger.”

“He has more than enough courage for that. Believe me. He’d sign up in a second to get the rats.”

So they decided that Sanderas would be the lucky recipient of this particular powder keg. Corinna got her laptop, put together a coherent message while Oziel finished up his dinner, and then he went with her to the secure mail station at the post office. Three hundred dollars it cost to send all the pages of sequences and explanations, but she left the booth feeling more hopeful. She had struck the first real blow and it felt much better than being tied in knots by fear.

“How is Marco, by the way?” she asked as they walked away.

“His last couple of messages sounded better. He’s thinking about the future. I’m worried though. He’s saying things like, ‘I’m not going to spend any more time waiting for people to hand me things.’ He never sat around waiting for handouts. He’s an incredibly hard worker. So I’m not sure what he’s saying. Which worries me.”

“Well, he probably just means he’s really going to hustle,” said Corinna in an attempt to be comforting, feeling how feeble it was. But as Oziel turned away to go to his dorm, he had a small smile on his face instead of bone-deep worry.

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Corinna sat in the luxurious, but windowless, conference room in the ad-

ministrative section of the central dome. It was filling up with people's small talk trying to beat back the tense, gaping silence at the heart of the room. A large U-shaped conference table occupied most of it, little carafes of water and glasses dotted at intervals along the shiny surface, looking much too genteel for the mayhem contemplated here.

Across the top of the U sat the members of the Hearing Board. The Station Ombudsman this year was none other than Bukovsky, so Corinna had the happy prospect of seeing the hearing run by Ching's right-hand assistant. Clem Kilburn from the imaging lab and Hideyoshi Sagawa from algology were the other two members of the Board from the Station, both of them quite neutral as far as Corinna knew. And then there was the outside observer she had a right to request, and whom she had so requested. His name was Lev Sninsky and he had flown in from the planetary administration on Arsia in a clipper just before the hearing. She studied him with interest. He had black hair and the sallow skin of a Caucasian spending too much time off-Earth. He hunched over the table, tall, thin and stooped. He needed more exercise. Did he have a background in science? Would he understand the significance of minor points of lab procedure? Some of these admin-legal types wouldn't know which end of a microscope to look through.

Corinna sat on one side, Morbier and Ching on the other, and their respective witnesses further along the table. She was not surprised to see Jonathan there. Djamilah was there, beaming with obvious support to Corinna. *Not a good idea* she thought. Whatever she says will count for nothing if she doesn't act "objective." One of her other techs, Gordon Smith, was just taking his seat. Tambika had come and gave Corinna a friendly nod. She was too nervous to manage more than a weak smile back.

Now that the dreaded moment had arrived, she was both worse and better than she had been. Worse because, despite her best efforts, she could not stop herself from having a dry mouth, sweaty palms, and a pounding heartbeat. Better because there was nothing further she could do and soon it would all be over.

Bukovsky started the proceedings.

There was a prepared statement from Morbier, a summary of all the lax things Dr. Mansur had done or not done. It ended in a sentence so vast and transparent in its hypocrisy that Corinna boggled at his ability to say it with a straight face.

"None of these criticisms are offered in a hostile spirit. On the contrary, I hope Dr. Mansur can learn from them and use them to achieve better success in future positions."

Yeah, right. Then there was a prepared statement from her. She kept it to the bare minimum: "I do not feel any of the charges against me are justified." Finally they moved on to *why* the stupid things were not justified.

"I would like to start by responding to the points raised about minor generalized infractions, such as improvised waste containers." Corinna read from

her prepared sheet in an effort to ward off nerves. "I conducted an informal survey of approximately twenty labs here on the Station." She had spent most of yesterday and the day before on this. "Every single one had some unlaundered lab coats and improvised waste containers. Although these are certainly lapses from an ideal standard that we all strive to achieve, it does not seem to me that they can be evidence of incompetence on my part without also being evidence of incompetence in many other labs on the Station and, for that matter, in labs everywhere. I will be glad to provide the inquiry board with a list of the labs I visited." She waved a printout. It suddenly occurred to her that she had simply looked at the first twenty labs closest to her own, which meant that Bukovsky's and Kilburn's labs were on the list. This was probably – no, definitely – a politically stupid move. Too late now.

Morbier raised a finger, like a buyer at one of those terribly genteel auctions of priceless antiques, and Bukovsky nodded at him to proceed.

"The fact that carelessness can build up over time does not excuse specific instances thereof. Furthermore, given that the carelessness had such dire consequences in this instance, it must be assumed Dr. Mansur has a deeper ignorance of important aspects of safety procedures than I, as the person responsible for her activities, feel comfortable with."

Corinna stared stolidly at the wall behind Morbier while he slandered her, then proceeded. "I disagree that the specific problems related to the accident are in any way an extension of any general problems. The generalized safety infractions are both widespread and harmless. The specific problems that contributed to the accident are all an exceptional concatenation of circumstances that amount to a freak accident, not to incompetence. For instance, Dr. Morbier notes that the floor spill which contributed to the severity of the accident was still not cleaned up at nine am. This," she had trouble keeping her teeth unclenched, "was not a normal work day. I had just finished administering CPR to a nearly fatally electrocuted person. As it happens, I cleaned the spill up as soon as I noticed it some hours later. Whoever noticed it at nine A. M., I might add, did not clean it up."

"Of course," said Morbier after receiving permission to speak, "nobody is suggesting that mopping floors is more important than saving a life. But spills should be taken care of immediately, before there is a problem. If one spill has been ignored until there is a problem, how many others have been as well?"

"Is Dr. Morbier suggesting I add janitor to all my other duties, or is he suggesting that a special work order to the janitorial staff will lead to instant spill cleanup?" There were a few grins around the room, which gave Corinna a fleeting sense of triumph. The board, no doubt, was taking points off for sarcasm, but she could not help it. It was all she could do not to stand up and shout the obvious truth.

She moved on to the next big one.

"The glitch in the DNA reader could not have been foreseen. Routine diagnostics had been run the week before the accident, on schedule, and showed

no abnormalities.” She pointed to another printout. “The electrician has checked the reader, but unfortunately some circuits were destroyed in the accident so at this point it is not possible to tell which one was at fault.”

The longer she talked, the calmer she felt. This was sounding good to her own ears, and there was nothing in it to let Ching and Company know that she was on to them.

Morbier mentioned the gloves, another example, he said, of carelessness that was minor in itself but, combined with all the other instances, had had terrible consequences.

“I questioned the technicians as to which of them had replaced the gloves before the accident,” responded Corinna. “Apparently none of them had. Interestingly, only the gloves in that lab had been recently replaced.” Damn, she thought. Should not have mentioned that. Not the sort of thing you’d notice if you were thinking only in terms of accidents. “Clearly it was a case where one of the grad students or postdocs had wanted to be helpful but had unfortunately restocked with a shipment of defective gloves. It is not common practice to check each glove before use and there is no reason why anyone would have noticed the microscopic defects in those gloves. Again, faulty gloves happen sometimes and are not evidence of incompetence.”

Dr. Sagawa raised a question.

“It is precisely because gloves have been known to fail that workers wear double gloves in dangerous applications. Why was that not done here?”

Corinna waited a beat before responding, trying to quell the impatience in her voice.

“Our application is not dangerous. We’re working on improving mammalian cold tolerance. Neither the DNA, the product proteins, or the substrates are of any danger to us. A few of the RNA-ases could transfer to humans, and when we’re handling those we double-glove and observe full P6 containment procedures. I’m pretty sure that had we double-gloved for everything as a matter of course, Dr. Morbier would have felt it was a waste of his money.”

Of course her boss denied it, but Sagawa did not ask further questions.

“The crux of the problem,” Morbier intoned, “and I would like, if I may, to bring us back to that, is not any specific minor or major instance of incompetence. Explanations and excuses can be brought forward for any one instance. The problem is the accumulation of all the instances. They exceed critical mass, which is where they differ from the other labs Dr. Mansur visited, and lead to disastrous consequences.”

How wonderfully circular, thought Corinna. The same practices are okay if you can get away with them, but are not if you can’t.

“This pervasive laxity,” he continued, “is perhaps most evident in the inadequate standard of technician training and supervision. Everybody in the lab should be alert to spills, to faulty gloves, and to the numerous other problems I have detailed. Basic procedures such as correctly pausing electrical equipment should be second nature to everyone in the lab. That they are not is

simply the most serious problem generated by Dr. Mansur's low standards for safety."

Corinna suppressed a laugh at the irony of it. Her weak point was not going to be lack of brilliance or publications or grants or anything she had feared. No, it was going to be an inability to see people like Djamilah fired for their stupid mistakes.

Before she could frame a response to this newest convolution, Jonathan requested permission to speak and piped up with his two cents' worth.

"I'd like to say that Dr. Mansur does try to be helpful when she can find the time. However, just a few days ago, for instance, when I came to her with a question about reagents, all she did was point me at the computer database."

The little ratbag, was all Corinna could think for a second. After a couple of calming breaths and permission to speak, she asked her witnesses to address the issue of her teaching abilities. Gordon and Djamilah, who, bless their hearts, were putting their jobs on the line for her since Morbier was their boss too, gave her ringing endorsements, as did Tambika. She even added that if this was an open hearing they could have received the same information from dozens of other people because, she said, "Corinna is one of the best teachers on the Station."

Corinna was touched, and this was not the time to feel touched. The only way she could keep her grip was by pretending to feel nothing. She noticed that none of the "established" scientists felt like sticking their necks out far enough to support her.

She then pulled her job description out of the pile of printouts in front of her. She pointed out that training was not part of it. She was supposed to "supervise" the lab, not train everybody in it. The fact that she did help people whenever and wherever she could was something over and above her job.

"And lastly," she wound up, pinning Morbier's eye directly for the first time in the hearing, "if I am somehow responsible for the training of everyone in the lab by virtue of a supervisory position, then it is not really my incompetence that is a problem here. I am not the ultimate supervisor. By that argument, Dr. Morbier should be taking responsibility for these events."

There was a silence. Corinna knew that this direct attack would be seen as shrill, at best, regardless of how logical or true it was. They had caught her unprepared with this unanticipated new wrinkle on the old lies, and her first reaction when cornered was always to lash back.

"We will be taking all your points under advisement, Dr. Mansur," Lev Sninsky intoned unexpectedly in a deep, bass voice. "I had one brief question, if I might. Was the technician involved," he referred to his notes, "Djamilah Mahmoud, not wearing the usual weighted, rubberized shoes? Why did they not protect her?"

Corinna had very much hoped this point would be overlooked. She noticed Morbier had not brought it up either, no doubt for the simple reason that he should have had no way of knowing about the state of somebody's shoes in

the normal course of events.

Djamilah was quite obviously in the audience and eager to answer the question. Bukovsky nodded to her to proceed.

"The shoes had cracks in them."

"You should have replaced them."

"I know, but I did try to keep track and I was sure they were all right. Obviously, I was wrong."

Corinna exhaled a sigh of relief. Somehow, Djamilah had picked up on the mood of pretending it was an accident. She might be a wombat at lab work, but she was a genius at office politics. She was doing a masterful job of being the enthusiastic, naive, truthful tech. It occurred to Corinna that she was a woman with enough smarts to escape from a country that would not even issue her a passport. She could probably run rings around everyone in the room when it came to knowing what to say to authorities.

The meeting broke up, while everyone was requested to wait outside until the board had agreed on its decision. Half an hour later, they were called back in. Corinna took her place with a strange, drained feeling. She had no control over her fate. If she could have trusted to truth and justice, it would have been one thing, but she could do no such thing. Three people, colleagues of Morbier, subordinates of Ching, would be coming up with something that suited their convenience and there was not one thing she could do about it. She folded her hands together to keep from clenching them into fists.

Bukovsky summarized.

"The events in Artemis 56 were highly regrettable and will, we hope, never be repeated now that we have all been forcibly reminded of the need for constant vigilance. Despite their unfortunate nature, the board is not convinced that they form *prima facie* evidence of incompetence. The board therefore will not be issuing a formal finding to that effect as requested by Dr. Morbier."

Corinna sat back, amazed. She had won. Of all the unexpected outcomes, she had won. This was what happened when you called in impartial outsiders.

"On the other hand," Bukovsky continued, "the board does not feel it can dictate to anyone responsible for a lab on this Station exactly how they are to run their facility. Whether Dr. Morbier retains the services of Dr. Mansur is a matter for them to resolve between themselves."

So, she had won, but she was still fired. Bukovsky had, no doubt, made sure of that.

"Dr. Sninsky has some closing comments he wishes to make." Bukovsky leaned back to show she was finished.

Sninsky took over.

"I have to agree with Dr. Mansur that the specific safety problems leading to the accident were both unusual and dangerous only in combination. I find this series of circumstances to be sufficiently improbable that I will be requesting an investigation of the situation. This, therefore, is to inform everyone involved that everything associated with the accident, including computer

files, messages, and the like, is to be viewed as evidence and is not to be destroyed or tampered with until the investigators give permission to do so.” He leaned back, fiddled with his papers, brought one to the top, and continued into the stunned silence.

“Pursuant to Article 10 sub c of the Planetary Charter, I am hereby applying the subpoena powers vested in me to require that the most recent complete backups from all servers on this Station be brought to me before I leave in,” he checked his wristpad, “one hour.” Then he calmly started putting documents away in his briefcase.

The stunned silence congealed. There wasn’t even any of the usual post-meeting small talk.

So much for pretending it’s an accident, was Corinna’s first coherent thought. Facts must speak louder than words, certainly to some people. This, too, was what happened when you called in impartial outsiders.

Two hours later she was still in her room where she had gone for some desperately needed peace. There was a knock on her door. She did not want to speak to anybody. There was another knock, an impatient, loud knock. Reluctantly she rose and looked through the peephole. It was Oziel. He had a bag over his shoulder.

“What happened?” he asked without even saying hello when she opened the door.

“I was going to come find you at dinner,” she said. She hoped he wasn’t offended that she’d holed up in her room instead of talking to him. He had done a tremendous amount for her. “I’m still fired, but they said I was not incompetent. I was careful to stick to the it’s-an-accident angle, but the outside observer decided the whole thing smelled funny and will be starting an investigation.”

“Was his name Sninsky? On his way back to Arsia?”

Oziel seemed strangely agitated. She had never seen him like this.

“Well, yes. What about it?” she asked.

“He’s dead,” said Oziel.

“What?”

“The clipper crashed. And burned. Everyone and everything on board lost.”

“What?” gulped Corinna again.

“So start packing. We’re getting out of here.”

“But – but, wait. What –”

“They don’t know you know yet. The pilot’s daughter is in day care so I heard, even though they’re keeping it quiet. Supposedly so they can tell relatives first. *Va pisa’a!* Get going! Get packed. We’re getting into a rover and getting out of here. If it takes them a while to find us, we may have a chance.”

Like an automaton, Corinna started putting together the pack she had planned for emergencies. Change of underwear. Toothbrush. Food packs. First aid kit. Laptop. Memory cards. Backups. Specimen vials. Cold box with more specimen vials.

“But if we go in a rover, we’ll have to steal it.”

“*Si. Concha.*”

He’d never, ever, dropped into Spanish he knew she didn’t understand. It brought home the scale of the disaster much more than any mere words.

“Oziel,” she said, her brain finally starting to click into action, “what are you doing in all this? You’ll get fired. We’ve been keeping you out of the picture so you wouldn’t be. This makes no sense.”

“Do you think you can escape all the way to Arsia by yourself?”

It was a terrifying thought.

“You see.” Oziel answered her look.

“But why are you doing all this for me? I mean, you’re just about ruining your life. I know your brother’s wife meant a lot to you, but....” She trailed off once she looked up and saw the intensity of his stare.

“Kind of obvious, yes?” he said quietly.

She stared at him for the space of many more heartbeats. Only one thing made sense but,

“But you said you weren’t after me.”

“Well? Was I?” His voice grew even quieter, yet somehow it cut through every sound in the room: the air vent, the computer hum, the ion generator, the radio tuned to the winds of Mars whispering on the skin of the Station.

She shook her head. But then...,

“You’ve been restraining yourself nobly?”

His lips pulled back in a white smile.

“Nobly.”

She was numb. There was no time. There was nothing her frozen mind could think of to say or do. She had decided long ago not to get involved again. She had –.

His grim smile faded and he returned to his earlier, lesser intensity.

“And now, unless there’s something else you’d like to discuss, or you need to fix your hair, or reorganize your computer directories, could we *get going?*”

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Navigating through a surreal world, Corinna sat at the controls of the rover they had pirated. The Station receded behind them. She had a detailed map of the canyons and labyrinths that faced the rover; nothing so convenient for herself. Her universe had changed too quickly and her mind lagged behind in a realm of its own. She had worried about being terminated with extreme prejudice, but now she understood she had never believed it. Oziel, on the other hand, had worried less but planned more. He was a lot clearer than she was on the concept that you could really die.

Commandeering the rover had been surprisingly simple once she realized

that the mechanic on duty would neither stop her nor call security immediately. He had made feeble protests that the rover was signed out for use in a few hours. Corinna said telemetry showed an emergency in one of the rabbit domes that would ruin years worth of research unless she could get to it. They'd be back soon, she lied forcefully. Oziel hauled in two suits of the right size and checked for new filters and full reservoirs. She signed the rover out. That way, for a while, it was not actually stolen. They had driven through the rover lock with the mechanic still squawking over the radio.

"Not good," Oziel grumbled. "He'll report to his supervisor, and they'll be after us in minutes."

"Maybe. But maybe not. It's dinner time. He'd be going off shift at six. He's not going to want to put that off just in case I'm lying. He's dealt with me fifteen times before. He'll probably assume I really do have an emergency and I really will be back. How's he supposed to know we're now outlaws?"

"Let's hope so. Signing this thing out has its bad sides too."

"Well, not signing it out would have raised alarms instantly. This way the whole thing will work its way through channels, and we all know how fast they are."

"True." said Oziel.

They headed south from the Station at just under thirty five kilometers an hour, the top sustainable speed. No voice materialized on the radio ordering them to halt. Corinna turned off the satellite transceiver, which would allow anyone to locate them right to the centimeter, and prepared to navigate the old way, by hand. She studied her maps fast and furiously, plotted a course, then course corrections. She calculated the power the fuel cells could deliver and the rate of water loss given maximum speed. It might be a closed system in theory, but some water was always lost and they were going too fast and too far not to rely on the hydrogen and oxygen reserve tanks. "Yes-s," she muttered at the numbers the computer gave her. They could sustain top speed for forty eight hours. It was seventeen hundred kilometers to Arsia. They could make it in thirty six, even with the detours required by the terrain. They could make it in one mad run, without any nerve-stretching waits for the tanks to recharge.

She angled right, toward the southwest, away from the mountain towering over Foggy Bottom. Before her mind had even begun to catch up, the whitish button of the Station in the distance had completely disappeared and the Labyrinth lay before them. Darkness fell, the total, complete, all-consuming darkness of the Martian night. She sat back after a final few tweaks to the course plotted on the most detailed topographical map she had, augmented by what she could see on the forward telescopic sights. That would hold them for a few hours.

She was not sure what to do once they reached the spaceport. With luck, they wouldn't simply walk into the waiting arms of Ching's henchmen. Without luck....

No, wait, she thought, this couldn't be just Ching. He was Director of Science and lacked the control over clippers that would enable him to blow them up in mid-air.

"You realize," she said, thinking out loud, "only Dicastillo could possibly have the resources and the henchmen in place to pull off a clipper crash."

"Yes, that had occurred to me."

She glanced at him. That sounded rather like *Duh*.

"*Pues*," he muttered, noticing the glance. "Think about it. Arriving alive is obviously the first problem. But then, if Dicastillo controls the whole spaceport, there might be no way to get the word out from there."

"It's possible," he interrupted himself when she looked at him, startled and disbelieving. "If he's blowing up clippers, he's not too worried about investigations, and for that he has to have his hooks deep into the administration. So," he continued, "we may not be done escaping once we're at the base. And if we have to get you all the way to Earth...." He didn't finish his sentence after another look at her.

Damn right. I've had about as much as I can stand. The past week she'd been stretched to bursting, trying not to explode. After that hearing, she'd had all the vim of a deflated balloon. This escape felt like it was happening to someone else. Except she was sitting in a rover now and all she wanted to do was sleep for a week.

Dear God, if he was right and the base didn't mean safety, and goons captured them, then.... There was no way to escape to Earth. None. It took major forgery to smuggle so much as a bar of chocolate. A whole human being was impossible. Which meant that....

Stop it. Sometimes planning for failure was just too depressing. And, besides, success was not impossible.

"Dicastillo can't have infiltrated the entire hierarchy, because Sninsky wasn't part of his group," she pointed out. "There has to be someone in the planetary administration we can go to."

"He might have been the only one in the dark. Maybe that's why they sent him."

She was going to say, *That's paranoid*, but she looked at him, staring fixedly into the black night where there was nothing to see, and said nothing.

She wasn't the only one running for her life.

Her focus on her own problems stretched and popped. He didn't even have to run for his life. He'd just thrown away his safety, his living, the relatives who needed him, everything. Just to help her. And, what was more, there was nothing about him, nothing at all, that suggested even now that he thought she owed him anything for it.

Actions were supposed to speak louder than words. What he said about him implied she'd been wrong about ... about practically everything.

She'd figured the two of them had nothing much to share. But there was more to life than molecular biology. Just because she couldn't discuss N-ter-

minal map kinases with him didn't change the fact that he was intelligent, funny, downright telepathic about how she felt, and loyal like – like someone who could have survived no other way.

She had to admit she'd also held his looks against him. Most handsome men were creeps. But him? Nothing. Not even an echo of creepiness.

So what was her problem?

"Oziel," she said. "About what we were talking about just before we left. Do you want to continue now, or after we've had some sleep?"

"Now."

"Well, let me tell you about Nat."

Chapter 12

“I was involved with Nat for about three years,” Corinna began, staring at the topo map as if it was vitally interested in this information.

“Oh,” said Oziel in a relieved undertone.

She glanced at him. What did he mean, “Oh”?

“I thought you were going to tell me you were married or something.”

To Nat? Not bloody likely.

“No.”

The topo map had no hints about how to proceed. Start somewhere and hope any of it made sense.

“We were graduate students. He worked on nerve growth factors, which is, admittedly, a sexier topic than endorphins. There’s a lot of similarity, though, in the techniques and problems in both those fields. The lab work is all the same, we were dealing with a lot of the same membrane chemistry, the same transport proteins, as well as some of the same problems in signal transduction.” Another glance at Oziel showed him looking at her strangely.

“What?” she said.

He looked down quickly.

“Nothing. Sorry, go on.”

“What?” she demanded more loudly.

“Nothing, really,” he mumbled. Then he caught the look on her face and continued a bit desperately, “I’m sorry. I was just thinking rude thoughts. The two of you lying far apart in bed and speaking long words to each other.”

In spite of herself, Corinna grinned viciously.

“Too right.”

“And he wore glasses in bed, and socks.”

She almost laughed at the picture Oziel painted and began to feel a tiny bit less deflated.

“Well, not glasses. He’d had the usual vision correction surgery. Otherwise he probably would have. Anyway, the point was that I helped him with his work to some extent. I saw us as a partnership, each helping the other, and all that good stuff. Somehow, when I needed help, he generally had a looming deadline. Your whole life is a continuous, rolling, and accumulating series of deadlines in scientific work, so it was legitimate in some ways, but it was one-sided.”

“My deadline is bigger than your deadline,” Oziel murmured.

Again, he brought out a twisted smile on her face.

“Yeah. It seemed beneath contempt to get into some sort of tit for tat of obligations. It wasn’t until the end that I realized it only works when it goes both ways.

“The final blow was the signal transduction project. It’s something that relates to both our fields. I’d had this really great idea that, if I say so myself, was something of a breakthrough, and we were working it out together. I was really excited about it. Something like that could get both of us known in the scientific community and put us on track for good jobs. Nat thought so too, obviously, but he was smarter than me. He realized it would work even better if all the credit went to one person. He presented our results as his at a major meeting and got a great job offer. I wasn’t at that meeting, but a friend of mine emailed me about Nat’s wonderful new idea.”

Silence fell, broken only by the monotonous hum of the rover and the grinding of its treads on rocks. There was nothing but the discolored reflections of ghostly indicator lights, isolated in a deep black sea. Their running lights were off and short range sonar tapped out the obstacles ahead of them, like an invisible blind man’s cane.

“So,” said Oziel quietly. “Not another lover, or drugs, or money. I never knew anyone who broke up over an idea.”

“It probably seems pretty silly to you. Getting worked up over authorship on a paper nobody has ever heard of.”

“No. Cheating is cheating, whether you use your mind or your hands.”

Corinna nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She had not talked about it since it happened, and she was amazed that the passage of time had done nothing to blunt the pain.

“So,” said Oziel, “when he came home, you ripped him apart?”

She shook her head.

“My world just sort of disintegrated. I mean, everything I’d believed about partnership and so on was obviously bullshit. I saw our whole relationship through different eyes, the same things meant the opposite of what they’d meant before. Like those optical illusions where you can either see a seagull or a hag in a hat, but not both. So I just packed up and moved out. I never spoke to him again. I saw him at school sometimes, because I still had a few months to go to finish my degree. He tried some crap about how he just wanted to be sure ‘his’ idea wasn’t scooped by another lab, and that he did it for us, and that he was sure he’d be able to wangle a job for me in his new hotshot lab now that ‘we’ had a foot in the door, and so on and on. But I never spoke to him again.” After a pause, she added,

“I couldn’t even get him for academic misconduct because we’d worked on it together. I didn’t have any proof it was my idea. With an ordinary colleague, there might have been emails or something, but with me and Nat it was all conversations.”

“And so you’ve been seeing hags in hats ever since?”

Yeah. No kidding. How he managed to be humorous and inoffensive on this topic, both at once, was beyond her.

“Well, that was when I really decided guys were a waste of space. But I didn’t have all that good an attitude before then either.”

“Oh? There were earlier Nats?”

He made it sound like they were tiny and bit and had six legs.

“There were a couple of, how should I put it, more ordinary failures before. Guys I turned out not to get along with. But that wasn’t really the problem. The real problem was that men in general seemed pushy and grabby and willing to beg, lie, cheat, or steal to get what they wanted.”

“You mean you.”

“I mean women generally. Anything that didn’t have to shave its face in the morning. They don’t seem real fussy.”

Oziel blew out a slow breath.

“*Dios santo.* You’ll have to tell me how you really feel some time. For a second, that almost sounded like contempt.”

Contempt, thought Corinna, was too weak a word.

After another silence, he asked,

“Would you believe me if I said I know what you mean?”

“I’d be surprised. I’ve never met a man who understands how obnoxious it is. I had one guy tell me, in all seriousness, that it was flattering.”

“Well, it’s hard to see how anyone can have too much when you’ve never had enough. In the barrio, like I said, my family actually does rather well. Once I was old enough to grow a mustache, I had girls falling all over me. I can’t say I got to the point of wanting to spit, but I don’t think I had as big a problem as you either.”

“You got sick of girls?” she said incredulously.

“Some girls. To some extent. Yes. But, understand me, I would have no objections if you fell on me.”

She smiled in spite of herself again.

“The part I don’t see is why. I’ve been pretty discouraging, I would think.”

“Corinna, *mí querida*, how can somebody who is so smart be so stupid? Here you are, fearless, brilliant, kind, funny when people aren’t bothering you to hell, and you ask why? I’ve never met anyone like you. I feel like I’m flying when you’re around.”

She looked at him in flattered surprise just in time to see a little grin appear on his face.

“It has, of course, absolutely nothing to do with your body. I am totally uninterested in your body.”

She laughed out loud, for the first time in what felt like weeks. Good God, what a change it would be to find a man with a sense of humor about sex. She had never met anyone for whom it was not a serious performance art requiring critical acclaim.

He looked at her a bit hesitantly.

“When I was small I remember once, when my father made my mother laugh about something, he saw me looking at them. ‘*Chiquitín*,’ he winked at me, ‘remember when you are big and need to know this sort of thing, if you can get a woman to laugh, she’ll do anything for you.’”

“It’s all part of a plot, hm?” She was still chuckling. “Well, I guess it works. You seem to be able to find hidden passwords into all sorts of systems. I’ve gone from thinking all men are gnats to thinking that there might be exceptions. That’s also, sort of, the problem.”

She looked at him uncertainly.

“You’ve become my friend, just about my best friend.” He looked pleased and nodded encouragingly. “I’ve never needed a friend so much in my life. So I – I don’t want to go off in a new direction. I mean, if it doesn’t work out. I couldn’t stand it. And my track record is not good. It never has worked out for me.” *So much for being fearless.*

“Good,” he said. “Otherwise you wouldn’t be here talking to me. And my record is no better.”

She knew he was trying to make her feel better, but she didn’t believe him. He was single, sure, but given the way he was, that had to be by choice.

“Has anyone you really cared about left you?”

He seemed to grow very still and inward for a moment, staring at the infinite night ahead of them. She almost didn’t hear his answer, he spoke so quietly.

“I was never that lucky.”

The rover grumbled and seesawed its way over a kilometer of sand and rocks before she realized what he meant.

“She never left because she was never yours? She married your brother instead.”

He looked as shocked as if she’d hit him with a brick.

“How did you know?” he finally asked. “I’ve never told anyone. I never even told her.”

“You’ve been so ... destroyed ... by the news about Selena. You had to have loved her.”

“Oh, I did.” His voice was almost a whisper. “I did.” Then with a wry look of pain, “And I got to be best man at the wedding.”

“They were married for a while, weren’t they? This must have been a few years ago.”

“Seven. I was twenty three.”

And in seven years, he hadn’t found anyone who measured up. Other hopefuls, take note. Her exhaustion flooded back and for some reason all she wanted to do was cry. And then sleep. God, she was tired.

“Anyway,” she couldn’t very well say *this is all beside the point* when he’d just told her he’d lost the love of his life, “I’m pretty useless right now. And probably will be for a long time.”

“No, Corinna. Never useless.” He was using that voice that unkinked knots by sound alone. The tightness in her throat relaxed. “It’s all right. You’re straightforward enough to – to let me know if – when you want me. *Si?*”

She smiled faintly and he reached out and stroked her hair, just once. It was, she suddenly realized, the first time he had ever touched her. Her whole head felt warm.

“You seemed kind of mad ... before.”

“Oh, it’s just hard. I’m doing everything I can, and you didn’t even see it. But don’t worry about that. It’s all right now. You take a turn for some sleep,” he said. “All I need to do is make sure the actual track keeps matching the course plotted on the screen, right?”

“And check the atmosphere readouts to see if any vibrations appear that could be a plane.” She crawled down the five steps into the dim body of the rover, stretched out on one of the two lengthwise benches, and was asleep in minutes.

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Corinna opened her eyes. It was still dark. The rover was still crunching and grinding its way forward over Martian dust and rock. Nothing had changed. She was still in a rocking cabin full of the electric hum of motors and a faint chemical smell of plastic and ozone and something sharp, almost metallic, that had to be the Martian dust. While she slept, this universe had taken over and her old life had receded into some unimaginable distance. She had never been anywhere but inside a rover traveling forever to parts unknown.

What time was it? An hour till dawn. Oziel had kept watch all night. He should have woken her and got some sleep himself. Then again, maybe he was getting some sleep up there, slumped over the controls while the rover went god-knew-where. She glanced up into the control section. No, there he was, solid, reassuring, reading a printout propped against the panel so he could track their progress continuously. The light clipped to the page made a little pool of illumination, a poor relation of the hundreds of stars all around him in the clear dome of the rover.

He turned as he heard her moving.

“Ah,” he said with a pleased smile. “Captain on the bridge. This is a relief.” He shifted seats so she could take the place in front of the monitors and main controls. “Nothing much to report. I steered us around a couple of boulders and gullies that there didn’t seem to be any need to go over the top of. Nothing on the radio, since we’ve been out of range for hours. I’ve kept the satellite transceiver off, of course. Nothing on the sensors that might show search aircraft, as far as I could tell. They either don’t know we’ve left and are still getting their beauty sleep, or they haven’t found us yet.”

“You need your beauty sleep too. How come you didn’t wake me up earlier?”

He did not answer her question.

“I’ll go get my sleep now. How’s that?”

Five minutes later he was back with a cup of coffee for her.

She smiled at him. If this was an example of what it would be like to have him after her, she could get used to it.

“You’re supposed to be going to sleep. Why are you running around being nice?”

“You know those guys you were talking about? Who would do anything? I’m just the same. Only smarter.” And he winked at her and disappeared into the rover’s cabin.

Was it possible she’d found someone who could laugh at himself? She couldn’t think about it now, not while she was cooped up in a rover with him for the duration. It wasn’t like there was anywhere she could go, once things didn’t work out.

She turned to her maps and sensors and calculations.

They had traveled – she checked the log – four hundred and twenty three kilometers of the seventeen hundred they had to go and gained six thousand meters in altitude. They had that far to go again through the remaining canyons of the Labyrinth of Night and then the same distance plus another two thousand meters higher across the great plain, as exposed as bugs on a plate. She was hoping that by steering a path through the canyons, they would be hard to spot on satellite images, but it was also slowing them down. They had to follow meandering, jumbled tracks and climb ridges and rock falls, whereas the Syrian plain, just to the south, would have been a straight shot.

She carefully checked the logs of the atmospheric sensors for any sign of telltale vibration. Oziel had been right. There had been no aircraft yet. Keep your fingers crossed, she told herself. We just may make it.

She plotted the rest of their course to Arsia. Then she started studying the map of the mountain in detail, trying to figure out how to get into the base or the spaceport. If Dicastillo really did have thugs at every entrance, it would be smarter to sneak in and see what was going on before knocking on any doors.

She dreamed for a minute about flying to the top and the two of them pretending to be tourists, just merging into the clipper traffic that fountained in the caldera. Hundreds of tourists up there amused themselves on a mountain so high it reached into orbit, and some bright wit had even started a ski slope using polystyrene beads. But unless they captured a clipper, they might as well flap their arms to fly home to Earth.

The main base at the bottom of the mountain was the biggest settlement on Mars. It was better than the spaceport anyway, aside from the fact that they could actually reach it. There’d be more places to hide and more people

to blend in with than up at the spaceport. Cargo distribution, the only real hospital, and the University of Mars were all there. The big fuel factory was there, even though the water to split into hydrogen and oxygen had to be trucked in from Claritas, Newton, and Gorgon in the frigid south. Maybe they could sneak in with the regular traffic, ditch the rover, disappear into the tunnels, and somehow find somebody in the administration somewhere to talk to. Oziel would no doubt object that a plan which depended on everything working was no plan at all.

Dawn began to break, painting the swath of sky between the towering canyon walls a weird pale greenish pink. The bottom of the canyon was still in deep twilight, but the top, two kilometers higher, was flaming red. It was amazing how much difference the mind made to how you saw things. The first time she had seen the gigantic maze of the Labyrinth, the mountainous rock falls, the wind-sculpted lava, the untouched sand dunes, she had been thunderstruck. Now she could only think that they still had all that upward distance to climb. The perfect, tear drop-shaped sand dunes with delicate traceries of miniature dunelets on their surfaces were just something to bog her down. The immensity of the landscape was just that many more kilometers before they reached safety. Mars was smaller than Earth, and when she stood on one of the big plains the horizon always looked a bit too tight. But here, in these cracks right through the planet's crust, much too big for any world with running water or real air, it was the eroded Earth that was the weak sister.

The light spread down toward the bottom, warming the frosts of night into a fog. Whitish tendrils wisped up, shrouding the rover from easy view and lending Corinna hope. She kept expecting to see a regular squiggle appear on the atmosphere monitor, the sign of aircraft engine vibration. Any minute now, the trouble would start if Dicastillo's people had figured out where they were. But the minutes trickled by with no break in the routine. She took to scanning the canyon wall nearest the rover, checking for bolt holes. There were occasional narrow gullies visible through the mist that would offer some cover. The trick would be getting back out again. They were also no good if they had sandy bottoms because she needed rock to disguise the rover's treads. The canyons in this part of Mars were pretty well crisscrossed with several years' worth of tracks, but fresh, sharp-edged ones leading straight into nowhere would look obvious. Still, if her absence and Oziel's was not noticed until the business day had started, they had hours to go before they had to worry. One could always hope.

She dug out her laptop and tried to focus on the sequences of the specimens she had stolen from Kruskal. An hour later she realized with a shock that she had been concentrating so tensely, she had forgotten to keep tabs on the rover. But a quick check showed no problems. They were chugging forward as if they were nothing but the Pony Express.

Several hours later, Corinna leaned back in her seat and rubbed her face. Between staring at sequences and staring at the rover's course, her eyes felt like

two boiled eggs. Oziel was still asleep, which meant – she checked her wrist-pad – he'd been sleeping over nine hours. He must have been pretty worn out, too.

She knew now, in exhaustive detail, what the great, secret project was. It was simple and diabolical and it would have worked if they had been less heavy-handed about it. Instead of engineering something that turned people into grinning morons, they should have just taken the edge off things and made the rebels too busy having fun to save the world. With just a little bit of perspective ... but maybe that was always the missing ingredient in people who thought they could run the world.

The engineered gene was capped with fatty ends, typical of drugs that were to be enclosed in microscopic micelle bubbles and taken by mouth. So now she also knew they were infecting people via food or drink. Caracas was obviously one of the test sites. That soft drink Marco had bought off the prisoner would probably turn out to be fascinating. She wrote down a summary of all the details to show to the administrators at Arsia, assuming she ever got that far. The rover kept on trundling like a boring old bus on an extraordinarily bad road.

Oziel's head bobbed up from below, his glossy black hair not even mussed from sleeping. He was apparently one of those annoying people who wake up looking well-groomed and cheerful, but she was glad to see him anyway. Not-thinking about danger all by yourself was a lonely business.

"Now who's not waking who up?" he asked. "Or is it whom? English is difficult."

"Mm. So where'd you learn all that perfect English, anyway?"

He came all the way up and took the second seat.

"Everywhere I could, because I always thought it might be one ticket out of the barrio. I listened to English-language broadcasts. Everything to do with computers is in English. I read English books. I was a bellboy at the Caracas Regency for three years."

"A bellboy?" Corinna was not sure why she was surprised. "And what? They wouldn't promote you up through the ranks?" she added wryly.

"I quit when I was thirteen. Some of the rich men scared me."

Thirteen, after three years, and his father had died when he was ten. There was a connection, she was sure. She would never have made it in his world. Never.

"Then I was in Florida for four years starting when I was eighteen. I was hired by a construction multinational after one of the big hurricanes there, and then they kept me on. It was mostly general labor in construction, but that was also when I got certified as a basic emergency tech and to do day care." He gave her a sidelong grin. "Too much heavy lifting in construction, especially when you're the biggest grunt around."

He must have worked eighteen-hour days. Like a postdoc. "Well," she said, "admire the view for a few minutes. I'll see what food packs I grabbed."

Moments later, she returned with new coffee and two bowls of stew on a tray.

“Seems to be a USO,” she said apologetically.

Anyone who had spent any time away from Earth knew what that was. Unidentified Stew Object. Oziel grimaced, but ate too fast to talk anyway. The last meal for both of them, aside from the occasional emergency ration bar, was about twenty hours ago.

“What do you keep looking at?” asked Oziel, following her glances at the monitors to his left.

“I’m just waiting for airplane vibration to show up. Any minute now, I keep thinking.”

“It would be good if there were some way to make it send out a beep if there’s a vibration. Then we wouldn’t have to keep staring at it,” he said.

“Yes, well, it would also be handy if we had a military-grade tank. Then we’d be able to find aircraft all the way to Olympus. The good news is that anyone who’s after us is equally handicapped by having scientific field vehicles.”

“Not handicapped enough,” he objected. “Weren’t you the one who was telling me science vehicles had every kind of camera? We must look like floodlights in infrared.”

“It’s not as bad as you might think,” said Corinna. “Suits and vehicles are very heavily insulated and – what’s that?”

She put her stew down and stared at the monitor. The gain was turned up as high as it would go. There was no way to magnify the graph showing levels of atmospheric vibration any more than it already was. Was that a tiny, regular wave, or just the background static that was always there?

It could be her paranoid imagination, but the little peaks and troughs seemed to be getting bigger. By the time she was sure, whatever it was would be on top of them.

Hide now.

Where?

The rover was in very rough terrain, something she had been quietly cursing just a moment ago. There was a gap between two mountainous falls of boulders. They would be visible as hell when viewed straight on. She made a sharp turn toward the gap.

“Turn off everything we don’t need for immediate life support,” she said to Oziel.

He muttered something under his breath in Spanish that Corinna was pretty sure translated as, “How the hell am I supposed to know which switches to push?” But when she spared a glance to see if he was managing, the biggest drains on energy, like heat and ventilation, were off.

Maybe with that extra bit of power, top speed would become more top. The rover trundled leisurely toward the north wall of the canyon.

“Go,” she muttered under her breath. “Go.” The need to talk to the machine

at moments like this was always stronger than reason. The squiggles had grown into nice, regular sound waves. There was something out there.

“Ah, not to teach you your job or anything, but,” said Oziel, hesitating, “but that gully there is a bit closer.”

“Sand. Must have rocks.” With everything off that could be turned off, they were making forty three kph. She could do no more. The squiggles were getting smaller again. They must be going back and forth in a search pattern. That was good for giving her time to hide the rover, but bad once they were hidden and could not move.

“Ah,” he said, “for the tracks. Of course.”

He’d figured it out instead of spending time she didn’t have on questions.

They were almost to the boulders. The squiggles started growing larger again. They were behind the big outlying rocks that had bounced the furthest in their ancient fall, a long, long time ago, when the ancestors of people were still up in the trees, eating insects for breakfast.

The little valley between the two avalanches was far too broad. Their only hope was that the pilot would be looking in the wrong place at the right time, and since he had to scan cameras as well as look, he might be distracted. The plane would probably have one visible light camera, one infrared, and perhaps one millimeter wave, plus all the usual spectrographic equipment that would be useless for finding them. Scientific study of Martian rock did not require fast, simultaneous imaging of something that might get away.

She tucked the rover as far back into the rock fall as she could. The rocks had fanned out at the base, so there was a protective arm providing some screening unless the pilot happened to look in exactly the right direction. If he searched mainly forward, as people usually did, he might miss them. Then she would sprint the rover across the gap and hide behind the other rock fall when the craft returned. If he did not start searching side to side, they might be able to keep up the hide and seek through several passes.

The waves on the monitor were large now. Corinna stared through the gap in the rocks, holding her breath. A ten-meter dragonfly flashed past, headed west.

“It’s a drone!” she exclaimed. “Of all the luck. They’re sitting back at the Station trying to figure out what that thing is seeing on some little screen. Okay. Wait for it to fade west ... run for the other side.”

Run was too strong a word, but the rover reached the other side before the drone’s vibrations started growing again. The drone flashed past the opening, returning east.

Corinna moved back to the other side of the gap, up against their first rock fall.

The vibrations faded to static. They did not return.

“Jesus. Those guys aren’t even trying. Or maybe the drone is running out of power. I’d guess they’ve been searching for several hours and you can’t fill those things up with hydrogen-oxygen tanks or batteries like you can a rover.”

“Or,” said Oziel, “they spotted us and now they’re going to send out the troops.”

“Yeah.” Corinna subsided. “There is that.” She calculated. “We’re about six hundred kilometers on a straight line from the Station. The piloted craft can go about two hundred kilometers an hour, so we can expect them in about three hours.

“We can’t get very far in three hours,” she added, depressed.

“We do what we can,” said Oziel. “Go for it. Now,” he said when she did not move.

“Right.” She had trouble seeing the point. If a plane was being sent out to get them, they were dead meat. Still, they might as well go forward as sit there. He was right about that.

“If pilots arrive, so what?” he pointed out. “As you said, they have to use the same science planes as everyone else. They don’t have nose-mounted machine guns any more than we do. If we can get them out of their plane, maybe we can take it over.”

“And fly to Arsia? Like real people?” She grinned.

The only problem with the scenario was that neither Dicastillo nor Ching, who could certainly scramble research aircraft if he wanted to, had the courtesy to send them a plane to take over. Three hours later, no atmospheric vibrations showed up. Oziel plied her with coffee and told her funny stories about his childhood. Four hours later, there were still no vibrations. She told him unfunny stories about her childhood. Five hours later they sat down to another meal.

“You’d think they’d try to get us during daylight,” she said. “Using an infrared scope is harder than using eyesight.”

“Once we get to Arsia,” began Oziel.

“Optimist,” she interrupted.

“Once we get to Arsia,” he repeated with some emphasis, “we might have a place to stay. I tried to shoot a crypto to my splicer friend before I left. I don’t know whether it got anywhere, of course.”

“Oh. Good. That gives us something to go on. I must admit, I had no real ideas about what to do once we got there. How do we meet him? Or her?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything about him. Or her. Any more than they do about me. If they get the message, they know there’s two of us, we’re in trouble, we need a place, and I’ll get in touch once I find an unoccupied terminal at the base.”

“Oh,” she said again. “Sounds a bit iffy. It is better than nothing, though. And speaking of nothing, I don’t have any real ideas about how to get in either. The only plan I’ve come up with is to try to sneak into the cargo entrance with one of the cargo drones and hope for the best.”

“If they’re not watching the entrances, that will work. But then we don’t have to be that elaborate either.”

“Mm. Well, what would you do?”

He sat for a while in thought.

"I think I would probably try to sneak in with one of the cargo drones," he said finally with a spreading grin.

She chuckled.

"You go get some sleep," he said. "In another six hours we have to climb out of the canyon and onto the plain and I definitely don't want to be at the controls for that."

"Yeah. Okay. Keep one eye on that atmosphere monitor and the other on the course."

- + -

Corinna zigzagged their faithful rover up the slope she had chosen to reach the plain. It was one in the morning, pitch dark, and she did not dare use anything as visible at a distance as headlights. She did what she could with the maps, the sonar, and the infrared. So far no cliffs or precipices had loomed disastrously. Oziel slept.

He was saving her life, risking his own, and treating it all as if it was a perfectly normal thing to do. He asked for nothing, he applied no pressure. She'd assumed someone carrying so many burdens would be bent when you got to know him better, but he seemed to be like those firs in the far north that had mountains' worth of snow thrown on them. He was arrow-straight. Anything less, and he probably would have broken. It was scary to think of the pressures he lived with that had made him that way.

Maybe it was because he knew all about pressure that he never applied any. Instead, he was warping space-time and putting himself at the bottom of the deepest gravity well. He was definitely smarter than other guys.

The rover crested the top of the canyon as dawn broke. The entire planet was spread out before her. They were so high up, the sky was nearly black overhead even though a bluish glory of sun filled the eastern horizon. The horizon itself was invisible, shrouded in the tenuous atmosphere that lay mostly below her. There was a dust storm far to the south, a ochre smear. It was late in the season for storms, but not unheard of. She had to hope they would be inside Arsia before it spread. The plains between the Labyrinth and Arsia rolled on and on and on, an orange sea with no shore. The tip of the mountain called Pavonis was just visible to the northwest. Mount Arsia itself was big on the western horizon, sides sloping symmetrically upward to the flat top. It looked like they would be there in another couple of hours, but reality, as it usually is, was less benign. She knew she was seeing only the top of the giant. Most of it was hidden behind the curve of the planet. They had over four hundred kilometers to go.

At least now the rover's top sustainable speed of thirty five kilometers per

hour would translate into thirty five kilometers covered on the ground, traveling in a straight line toward their goal. They might be as exposed as bugs on a plate, but they were faster bugs. There were still no signs of renewed pursuit, nor was the rover showing any indications of being difficult. She was beginning to feel quite affectionate toward this rover. She would have to think of a name for it, and when they reached Arsia she was going to paint it across the front.

Oziel woke up a couple of hours later and they ate breakfast. He took the controls and she took another turn sleeping. It was beginning to look like they were really going to make it, even if the mountain refused to look any closer as time trickled by.

When Corinna woke at noon, there was all the difference in the volcano she could ask for. It filled half the world. Old lava flows and debris fields as big as mountain ranges stretched north and south from halfway up its flanks. She knew the main base was tucked into the groove where the southern skirt of debris lay against the western side of the mountain, but that was still below the horizon.

She organized some lunch and commented,
"It's starting to look like we just may make it."

He shook his head at her sadly.

"Don't they teach you anything at these graduate schools? Don't you know that saying such things attracts the evil eye?"

"Hah. A few hours ago it was you making plans for our arrival." She munched on another Unidentified Object, a breaded protein thingy that was soy pretending to be, she guessed, chicken.

"Guilty as charged, but," he said solemnly, "two wrongs don't make a right."

She made a face at him and checked the controls. They had two hundred and thirty kilometers to go. Just two hundred and thirty. Less than seven hours. They would be in by nightfall. Admin would be closed. They might have to avoid Dicastillo's goons for the night.

"So, what are you planning, when this is all over?"

He pretended to wince at this repeated assumption of success, but did not comment.

"Me? I'm planning nothing. I'll see what happens."

"You can't teach nursery school forever."

"No?" His tone said, *Why not?*

"Well, I mean, come on. You're smart, resourceful. You could be doing so much more."

After a long while, he answered,

"I don't want more. Quintón, he wanted more. Forget it."

She could not think of a reply immediately. She had gotten no further than opening her mouth when a plane flew by low overhead, followed rapidly by another one.

The atmosphere monitor showed the squiggles plain as day and she felt like

kicking herself. They'd started ignoring the smallest vibrations because there were so many irrelevant ones this close to the spaceport, and now they'd missed the big one. Although she had to admit that there was little they could have done out here in the flatlands even if they had known it was coming.

She could have sworn there had been a slight thump after the first aircraft passed, as if a clumsy pigeon had landed too hard somewhere toward the back of the rover. She twisted around in her seat, but from the control dome she could not see anything unusual. Maybe the rover had gone over a rock. There was no time to think about it because the second plane was performing peculiar gyrations, much too near the rover. She and Oziel looked at each other, at the planes, and at each other again. Were they going to be bombed any minute? Should they suit up and get out while they could? Or was this a bunch of tourists out on maneuvers?

As the plane dipped past them again, a couple of crazy-ass guys draped in cameras waved at the rover. Definitely tourists. The first plane continued quietly on toward Arsia, ignoring them. Finally, the second plane leveled out and followed the first one back toward Arsia.

"They don't seem to want anything with us," said Oziel suspiciously. "Looked like tourists. We are getting close to the port."

"Did you hear the thunk?" asked Corinna, tracking the disappearing plane with equal suspicion.

"No. What thunk?"

"I'm going out to have a look," she decided. "Maybe it was just a bump we went over, but I want to be sure. We're too close to slow down. Don't stop the rover. I'll just crawl around while it's going."

"Are you crazy?" exclaimed Oziel. "Think about it. You're in a suit like a house. How are you going to keep your balance if we go over a rock? No, I don't care what you say. We're stopping." He matched his actions to his words.

She shrugged and climbed down the five steps to suit up.

The back of the rover looked perfectly normal as she clumped around outside, although dustier than any rover she had ever seen. The planes showed no signs of coming back. They had probably just been tourists and she was probably just jumpy. She climbed laboriously onto the bumper that ringed the rover about a meter above the ground. That was the only way to see the roof above the cabin and – and the spreading black stain on it. Gingerly she moved closer. It was a violent corrosive. She could see it bubbling as she watched in horror, sending up wisps of gas that dissipated instantly.

Underneath that were the oxygen and hydrogen feed lines to the fuel cells. Once those were corroded, there would be a spectacular explosion. They might have minutes. They might have an hour.

Cranking down the gain on her suit radio as far as it would go, just to make sure any listeners had to be very close indeed to pick up the signal, she commanded,

“Oziel, get suited up with everything you can carry in there. Food. Water. We have to abandon ship. Instantly.”

He asked no questions.

“Sí,” he said.

She picked up her cold box from where it was strapped to the outside of the rover. It had stayed well-frozen out there. She would have to strap it on outside her suit. She cycled back through the lock, took her helmet off and opened the top half of her suit. She started strapping the contents of her carry bag into the internal holders on the inside of the torso section, laptop first. Sleeping in this thing was going to be hell. They divided up all the available emergency food. At two thousand calories a day each, that was going to last three days. Great. She was going to lose weight on this trip, except that she did not have much to spare. He'd lose even more. The oxygen-carbon dioxide scrubber and recirculator would work for a week. They filled the long, emergency water tubes and draped one each down the space suit legs. A drinking hose snaked up to the top of the suit. The water recirculator, though she did not like to think about it, would work over a month with all this extra water. Power for the suit was functionally limitless, so long as the occupant was alive, since it used the heat gradient between inside and outside for energy, as well as the motion of the wearer. Photovoltaics on the suit's surface provided an added boost. Assuming they ever reached their destination, they were going to need something besides body suit underwear, so they both tucked their Station suits in the last remaining nooks.

She took one last look at the instrument panel. Two hundred and twenty kilometers to go. They should be able to do a minimum of fifty a day. About four days. Piece of cake. Her hands were shaking as she closed the torso section of the suit.

Chapter 13

“How are we going to hide out there?” Oziel moved his head to point to the great outside. They stood like unwieldy robots inside the cramped rover.

“We aren’t,” she stated flatly. So close, they had come so close.

He stood and thought.

“Come on. We gotta get out.” Why was he just standing there?

“Wait. They have to have space blankets here, right?”

“In the emergency locker. What for? Our suits have to keep us warm. A space blanket won’t do squat out there.”

He had pulled the silver thing out. “Now, something gluey,” he muttered. “Something gluey.”

There was nothing gluey.

“What the hell are you talking about? Let’s get going.”

“If there’s some way to make sand stick to one side, we can spread it over us and look like part of the landscape.”

“Oh.” After a moment’s thought she said, “Lubricant. We can drain some of the crud out of the tread bearings. Got everything you need from here?” She told him where to drain the lubricant out. “Let me know as soon as you’re done.”

He nodded, snapped his helmet down, and stepped into the lock.

He cycled through and out. The lock returned to its inside position. Moments later his voice came back saying the blanket was covered in goop. She entered some last commands into the navigation console and stepped into the lock just as the rover started moving again. There was a panicked shout over the radio.

“It’s okay, Oziel. I’ve set it to accelerate toward Arsia, but it’ll only be at five kph when I jump out.”

It was indeed barely moving when she jumped, but she fell over anyway. It was amazing how much harder everything was in a suit. She hardly felt the fall, buffered as she was by low gravity and by the layers of water, underwear, food packs, and all the sundries.

They set off, Oziel draped in a disgusting blanket of sandy glop, while their trusty rover trundled off to its destiny. Corinna felt very upset. It seemed like such a poor return for excellent service, an all-too-pervasive problem, and here she was passing it on.

"I wonder if that's how long it took them to find us, or just how long it took them to get that elegant scheme arranged," said Corinna, so she had something to listen to besides the sound of her breathing and his breathing over the suit radio.

"Yes, what was the scheme?"

She looked at him in surprise as she realized that in the rush she never had given him an explanation, and that he had not wasted time by demanding one.

"That thump was corrosive they dropped on the rover that they were probably hoping we wouldn't notice. I think they aimed it precisely because at some point it's going to eat through to the hydrogen-oxygen feed lines. And then boom."

She heard him let out a whistling breath and saw him look at the distant speck of the rover.

"Would that look like an accident? Some kind of rust that just happened in a bad place?"

"I doubt it. It's an awful lot of rust to happen all at once. They're probably hoping to be the ones to report the 'accident' and to be able to get away with pretending that an oxygen leak caused the problem."

They trudged further.

"How are we going to get into Arsia now?" said Corinna breaking a long silence. "The cargo idea may not have been all that swift, but now we can't even do that."

"No." He did not sound happy either.

"And we're leaving these cute tracks," she continued the catalogue of their misfortunes as she looked back over her shoulder. "Once they search far enough out from the rover, they'll find them."

"Can't worry about that," he said shortly. "Can't do anything about it."

They trudged further in silence.

"Actually," she said, "we can. We could travel at night instead of during the day. It would make us a lot harder to find."

"All right," he said, without any argument, like someone who was fed up. "Where would you like to stop?"

It was the first and only sign he'd given of losing patience. He was, as he'd said, good in emergencies.

She surveyed the terrain. There were a series of shallow furrows a few hundred meters away, miniature dunes shaped by wind.

"How about there? We could deepen one of those a bit, perhaps, then spread the blanket over the top."

There was a sudden hiss of static on the suit radios, which shocked both of them and started them searching in all directions for danger.

"There," said Oziel grimly.

Their tiny rover, a speck some fifteen kilometers away, was blowing up in a spectacular fireball with a plume of smoke blowing north. The electromagnet-

ic pulse had carried far in that empty space. New flashes exploded every couple of seconds as oxygen and hydrogen tanks blew up. That would be visible in Arsia. Of course, assuming the wrong people were on the rescue squad, they were better off out here. Then again, out here there was just a few centimeters of suit between them and all of Mars. It was impossible to know which choices were best. There was nothing to do but soldier on.

She started helping him make their sandy bed as useful as possible. There were a couple of hours of daylight left, but maybe the goons would spend them admiring the mess the rover had made.

Hours later, her wristpad beeped at the pre-arranged time. She was sure she had not so much as closed her eyes, so she did not understand how the beep could have woken her up. She moved to sit up but the blanket felt oddly heavy. Her movement brought an answering movement from Oziel.

“Onward and upward, Captain?” was all he said. Then, “What’s the matter with the blanket?”

“I don’t know. Let’s push it up and find out.”

And they found out. The southern dust storm had moved north. The good news was that it had already covered their tracks with the same layer of grit that had weighed down the blanket. The bad news was that it was sandblasting them.

“Oh, man,” was all Corinna said, quickly getting under the blanket again.

“I guess we could call Arsia for rescue and hope for the best,” she said a few minutes later.

“Let’s keep that in reserve,” Oziel finally spoke. “We’re not dead yet. We were going to walk by compass readings in the dark anyway, yes?”

She nodded and then remembered he might not be able to see that. “Yes.”

“So, we just drape the friendly blanket over us and go.”

Well, yes, there was no reason why they could not do that. She had no idea what the wind speed was, but there was so little air that it hardly mattered. A three hundred kilometer per hour gale might as well be a breeze. Their legs would still get sandblasted, but the suits could probably withstand that for days.

It took a while to get coordinated, with the blanket arranged over both of them so that nothing stuck out and they could both move well. They wound up with his arm around her shoulder to hold the blanket in place on that side, and hers around the fat waist of his suit. He shortened his stride to match hers and somehow managed to stay in step so that they did not pull their covering in different directions. She showed him how to project the compass readings onto his helmet as well. That way there were two pairs of eyes making sure they stayed on course. They walked like that for hours, changing sides every so often to change the positions of their arms. They did not talk much. Their problems loomed too large to allow any other subject to be discussed, but the problems themselves were too depressing to dwell on. Every so often, one would have to grab the other to prevent a fall when they stum-

bled onto rocks in the dark.

Oziel spoke after an hour or two of silence. All their conversations on this hike had immense pauses.

“As soon as they can search for us again, they’ll find us, I suppose. By the life signs, or something, right?”

He sounded depressed.

“There aren’t any ‘life signs,’” said Corinna. “That’s science fiction. We’re not leaking air or water vapor or anything. The suits are sealed. Our transceivers are off. There’s a bit of excess heat that infrared could pick up. The suits would show up as big blobs of metal using the right kind of sensors, but those aren’t standard equipment. Mineralogical surveys don’t need to worry about rocks running away.”

“Oh,” he said, sounding less depressed.

Exhausted, with half the night still to go, they sat down for a rest and for something to eat. The dust storm beat upon their blanket.

“I’ve been thinking about how to get in,” said Corinna between mouthfuls of a tough, proteinaceous ration bar.

“Yes?” he said after many moments had passed.

Her brain felt like gelatin too.

“Water is brought up in robot tanks from the south. There’s a constant series of them, traveling down empty, coming back full.” Well, duh, of course they came back full. She rested for a bit. “Anyway, they hook up to a pipeline at the base, offload, and head south again. But if they have a problem, they’re shunted into a holding area where a technician can look at them.”

“So we hitch a ride on one and then make it spring a leak, or something?”

“I was thinking more in terms of unplugging the photovoltaics. No point committing water vandalism if we don’t have to.”

“How fast do they go? Are we going to be able to jump on one?”

“The robots I know are programmed to go around obstructions, but to stop if something they missed looms up close. Then they go around. So we can probably just stand in front of it.”

“And get squashed like bugs if it has difficulty making up its tiny mind,” grumbled Oziel. “But it’s the best idea so far, Captain.”

It was the only idea so far. She suddenly had to know what this “Captain” business was.

“Hey, you’re the guy who started us on this trek. You’re the guy who keeps us going. What does that make you? The admiral?”

“You’re the only one who knows enough to get us through this, Corinna, *mi cielo*. That’s why the ‘Captain.’ I can only hold your hand.”

How did he do it? Through two suits and a dust storm, he warmed her right down to her toes.

“Well,” she finally said, “you do a better job of it than I ever knew was possible.”

They walked the rest of the night after that, coming up with word games to

stay awake toward morning. After she won too many of them, Oziel switched to Spanish, which kept her both more awake and less triumphant.

The mountain was still shrouded by the dust storm when dawn broke. They could have been walking in the same place on a treadmill for all the signs the landscape gave them.

“We can walk during the day,” said Oziel. “They can’t fly through this.”

After a few hours sleep and another emergency ration bar, they set off again, looking, no doubt, like a strange ungainly spook in the sandstorm, had any Martian gremlins been there to see them.

The days and nights melted together. Corinna wondered how much further her world could shrink. She had started out on a limitless green and blue planet. That had dwindled to a kilometer-wide Station. From there she had moved to a rover whose opposite walls she could just about touch with her outstretched hands. And now she was in a suit, sharing space with spare underwear and a smell that needed considerably more room than she could give it. She wondered whether Oziel’s aroma had gone as far over the line as her own.

“How’s your food holding out?” she asked at one point, the same as all the other points during which they walked blind under their shroud. Their eyes had nothing to rest on in all that time but the ghostly green trceries and numbers projected onto their helmets.

“One of the good things about being really stressed,” he answered, “is I don’t have much appetite. A ration bar every couple of hours, and I can forget about it. How about you?”

“Yeah. Same here.” It was the first time he had said anything about fear.

“How about the waste systems?” she asked. “Still up to spec?” The commonest problem with long term suit use was not running out of oxygen or leaks in the shell or anything spectacular. It was the solid waste disposal system. Uric acid crystals and a brown dust that looked like it came from Earth had to be removed through an access latch every couple of days or oftener. The processing was the most complicated part of the suit, and if it started to leak or fail, it caused incredible problems. It was also the sort of thing people refused to mention until it was a disaster.

“Seems to be okay,” he said. “I don’t know how to tell if something’s going wrong with that.”

“Oh, you’d know.”

On the third day, according to her wristpad, the dust storm finally thinned and they had the satisfaction of seeing Arsia fill three quarters of the world instead of only half. The storm died away completely in the middle of what they hoped would be their last night out. The sky filled with stars, which ended much too high up where the huge bulge of Arsia blocked them out. But at the top of that ominous black standing wave, some of the stars moved. They were spaceships with people in them who meant her and Oziel no harm, who did the two of them no good, and who knew as much about them as the stars

themselves.

“Look,” said Corinna, unable to keep the quaver out of her voice. “That light. That’s the base.” This time she was not about to say they were almost there.

When dawn broke, they could see two of the water robot trucks rolling toward the mountain, and three heading away. She had judged their course perfectly to intercept the line of robots about thirty kilometers south of the base.

“I sure don’t want to hide till nightfall at this point. Do you?” she asked.

He shook his head inside his helmet emphatically. Now that she could see him more clearly, he seemed to be turning all black. After a moment she realized it had to be his beard asserting itself.

“You know, as we get closer to the base, we should stop using the radios. Go back to leaning our heads together and talking through the helmets.”

“Just say when.”

This close to their goal, Corinna could well believe that space was expanding. Nothing seemed to get any closer, no matter how long they walked. Neither of them spoke. Making hopeful noises sounded stupid; making pessimistic noises even stupider. There were only so many stories from childhood she wanted to tell, though she could have listened to Oziel’s forever. Or at least for several more days.

Since neither of them spoke, Corinna heard the noise when it came.

She had spent six months listening to the winds of Mars. She knew what the planet was supposed to sound like. Now there was a peculiar little hum added, more like the distant drone of a lazy fly than anything.

“Can you hear that?” she asked, turning her outgoing radio signal off and leaning her helmet against his. “That sort of buzz?”

He listened, but shook his head.

Suddenly she knew.

“It’s a plane! That’s what it’s got to be. A plane.” She scanned every which way, but Oziel spotted it.

“There.” It was just a dot, flying back and forth out from the base.

“Looks like a search pattern to me,” said Corinna. “Time to get under our security blanket. They probably combed through the rover wreckage and realized the suits were missing.”

They lay down near the sandy wind shadow of a few boulders. The pebbly ground this close to the mountain showed their footprints if you knew they were there, but made them very hard to spot. They threw the freshly sand-covered blanket over themselves, and held it up off their suits as much as possible by holding their feet and forearms vertical, their elbows resting on the ground. The suits might lose almost no heat, but what they did lose escaped through the helmets. By making a tent of sandy blanket, there’d be no warmth to show up on any infrared scanners.

They lay there for hours, Corinna was sure, but her wristpad said it was only thirty minutes when she carefully pulled her arm in to check. The suit’s arm stuck stiffly up on its own. After several more hours that condensed into

minutes when she checked the time again, the drone became unmistakable. She froze. It passed over the top of them and continued south. She heard it come back, a little further to their left. Gradually, it receded and disappeared altogether. After another eternity, they finally emerged from their cocoon.

“I think, Corinna, the *putoneros* have started trying. Let’s hope they keep failing.”

An hour more of walking brought them to the road beaten into the sand by the stream of rolling water trucks. They sat down to wait for the next one.

The first robot stopped like an attentive cab driver when they stood up. Corinna unplugged the connection between its solar panels and its fuel cells while they were accessible, trusting that it had enough hydrogen stored to reach the base, and they climbed on to a servicing ledge at the rear. Two hours later, it offloaded water for fifteen minutes and then, finally, the slow-moving truck rolled through a low tunnel sized for it. It paused in an air lock and then rolled into a large hangar. They dropped off the back immediately and tried to stay low while they found the quietest spot out of security camera range. There did not seem to be any techs around. Their helmets fogged up.

Air. That meant air. Well, it meant water vapor which meant air. Corinna yanked her helmet off, and Oziel followed suit. For a minute they just breathed.

Chapter 14

Huddled in the corner of the holding room for ailing robots, sitting right under the security camera so that they would not show up on its scans, and hidden behind a large water truck, they eased themselves out of their suits. Oziel's was like sandpaper from the thighs down, Corinna's from the knees. She pushed at the metal experimentally. It was still solid as a rock.

"I guess we could have walked through the storm for another couple of weeks."

"Except that we would have been as bored as oysters."

She gave a little snort of agreement.

Both of them pretended the smells liberated from the suits did not exist. Both of them were rumped and dusty and bedraggled. Oziel's cheeks were covered in a black beard. Stick a knife between his teeth and he could pass for a pirate, no questions asked. Corinna did not even want to think about what she could pass for.

"Wow," she said, checking her wristpad, "it's only three. If we could get to admin, we might be safe before nightfall."

"We need to make ourselves less filthy first, yes? Or we'll be picked up by the police for outgassing before we even reach admin."

"They're going to have to take us as they find us," argued Corinna, "but if we see bathrooms on the way to the elevators, let's use them, by all means."

She looked around the cold, silent room full of waiting shapes. The techs obviously had more urgent things to do.

"We need to sneak out of here, but once we're in the hallways, we can try to act like we belong there."

"No, we should avoid people when we can. We look like scarecrows and we still don't know who's who. The fact that Dicastillo, or Ching for that matter, can scramble planes from here whenever they want does not look good."

"All they've got to do is say it's for research."

"Sí. And if they nab us in the hallways, they can say they need *us* for research." He stood up. The empty suit lay like an ailing humanoid robot on the floor.

She finished repacking her bag. Then, to his obvious amazement, climbed back into her suit. The suit, she remembered, had plans of the base stored in its memory. She stared at the trceries on the helmet.

“We’re going to get lost,” she said, “sure as lobsters. Try to remember this: we go out that door, which according to this leads straight into a hallway. Turn left. That’s north, into the mountain. Second right. After half a kilometer, another left. Then the first left takes us to the elevators. This thing says there are actual bathrooms, in other words with showers, fifty meters past the elevators. This is all storage and utility down here, but it’s also the emergency shelter, which I think is what the bathrooms are for. So. Did you get all that?”

Much to her surprise, he had. He repeated it flawlessly.

“How long do you think the commands are when I’m splicing?” he asked with a small smile at the look on her face. “A few turns are nothing. And before you get out of there, can you find a terminal for me to use?”

“The elevators go up to a mall level which is bound to have public access machines. Level 15. Admin is level 20, at the top. Why am I not surprised?”

They hid the suits as well as they could in a dusty corner under the tattered space blanket and headed for the door.

They avoided one encounter with a utility worker by ducking down a side corridor. The halls stretched on like rifle ranges, long, endless, and offering no cover. Feeling like a grubby bulls-eye, Corinna followed Oziel down the left turns and right turns and left turns. At least they were moving targets; maybe that was why no one spotted them.

They piled into the bathroom, and Corinna nearly broke into hysterical laughter. There were twenty stalls, four showers, toiletry dispensers, a wall full of wash basins, all waiting for a disaster which, she could not help feeling, had just arrived in the form of their uncouth selves.

She washed, turned the blowers on full to dry, brushed her knotted hair, and put on clean underwear and body suit. Maybe this was how butterflies felt when they finally emerged from their old, cramped cocoons. She pulled on her Station overalls, decidedly the worse for having been wadded up and slept on, and looked like she’d acquired a wrinkled layer of blue bark. When she stepped out of her shower cubicle and saw Oziel repacking his things, his suit looked just the same. She gave him as much space as possible, and he politely ignored her too. Corinna finished studying her hollow face in the mirror. She must have lost ten kilos on this adventure. They were ready to push the door to step out when they heard voices out there. Exchanging one alarmed glance, they faded back.

“Into the stalls,” hissed Oziel. “Crouch on top of the seat, but don’t lock the door.”

Corinna wished that besides crouching like a frog, she could also breathe like one, through her skin.

The voices would either pass on down the hall or – or they would come in, damn it.

Well, it made sense, she supposed. People did have to use toilets, although she hoped not hers.

Two pairs of shoes went clumping down the whole line of stalls to the

wash basins. A dull, male voice continued the same conversation these two probably had every day of their working lives.

“Well, that’s just it, Sam. It’s like I said. That’s just it. You work all week, and then all of a sudden it’s ‘Hey, Jeff, do some overtime on Wednesday.’ Then ‘do some overtime on Thursday.’ Then Friday. I mean it’s all damn week. This is, what, like the twentieth time in two days they’ve had us doing this search?”

Meanwhile, “Jeff” was clumping around on his flat feet.

Another voice mumbled, “Yeah. It’s not like you have any choice.”

“Well, they can’t say we’re not looking everywhere.” The first fellow’s tone implied that they could make him go through the motions, but they couldn’t make him work. “What was the description on these goops we’re looking for?”

Corinna held her breath again.

“Just a Hispanic male and Caucasian female, both late twenties or early thirties. There’s pictures at the station you’re supposed to look at.”

“Hispanic male. Caucasian female,” the one named Jeff was muttering. “Yeah, sure. That could be just about anyone. And when I get sued for false arrest, you watch, it’ll be my ass on the line and nobody else’s fault.”

Corinna could hear him banging open doors as he walked down the line of stalls and closed her eyes. It was all over. As he neared her door, she had to open her eyes, desperate though she was to shut everything out.

Her door slammed open. She had a fleeting impression of a pudgy, pasty guy in an olive drab uniform. His head was turned away to continue his complaints to his partner. He wasn’t even looking.

He hit the last door. “It’s like I said, Sam...” and his voice was cut off by the closing hiss of the door to the corridor.

There was no sound in the stalls. Minutes went by. First Oziel, then Corinna, climbed gingerly down, and out, and stared at each other, afraid to speak.

“Those were just ordinary security guards,” he whispered.

She nodded. “I wonder what they’ve told admin we’ve done. I wonder if there are signs up for us: Wanted, Dead or Alive.”

“Maybe we better find my friend first, before we do anything stupid.”

“Maybe we should try to look less Hispanic and Caucasian.”

“What do you suggest?”

“If I had a towel I could use it as a head scarf and try to look Muslim.”

“You don’t have a towel.”

They stood for a while, nonplussed.

“We shouldn’t be seen together,” said Oziel after some thought. “That just makes us more obvious. And I guess I look hopelessly hispanic with all that,” he nodded at himself in a mirror, “but also less like my picture. I think, unless you object,” he raised his eyebrows to Corinna, “I’ll leave it as is.”

She gave him amused permission.

“Okay,” he said. “Now, I’ll go up first to fifteen and try to find one of those terminals. You take another elevator. When you get out, try to spot me. If you

can't, stare at the stores nearest the elevator where I can find you. If we see each other and I move away, follow me without being obvious. And wet your hair down again and plaster it to your head. If you're not covered in curls, you'll look less like yourself."

"It only stays plastered about five minutes," she muttered, but did as he suggested.

She had never been so sorry to see anyone go as to see the door to the corridor close behind him, blotting out his reassuring nod and smile. She supposed she ought to try equally hard to keep his spirits up, but she kept forgetting.

She hid in the bathroom another few minutes, then scooted out to find her own elevator. She waited an eternity for it to arrive. Did that mean someone was using it? Who would be in it? Should she try to see before they could see her? The decision was taken out of her hands when the elevator pinged, made her jump, and whooshed open its doors. It was empty.

With a small measure of relief, she stepped in and pressed fifteen. It seemed like the damn thing stopped at every floor and took on people. She pretended to be looking for something in her bag and kept her face down. She hoped the musty smell of her overalls was less obvious to everyone else in the small space. Nobody seemed to care. Most of them got off on fifteen.

A quick scan showed Oziel across the central plaza of the mall, standing nonchalantly at one of the rings of five terminals put there for the convenience of the shopping public. He glanced past her, but gave no sign he saw her. She tried to look at a store window and him, simultaneously. So far, there were no wanted posters to be seen. Nor had she spotted any security guards. If there was no all-points alert, security guards were the only people they really had to worry about. She tried desperately to look like someone who'd never done anything more strenuous than shop.

Minutes trickled by, then tens of minutes. What was he doing there? Writing the great American novel? More minutes passed, every single one of them a large and solid presence that seemed to intend to stay forever.

He glanced past her again and he moved away. Her breath caught in her throat and she tried to drift after him. It felt like a visible string stretched between them.

He went down a hallway. She followed at a distance. He was buying a ticket into the planetarium.

Finally, something she approved of.

Minutes later, she too was inside, flooded with relief at no longer hanging around in the hallways, feeling like the X that marked the spot. The show ran continuously, so she had to wait for her eyes to adapt to the dark. Soon she could make out his shape, waiting for her. They stood a few more minutes in the entrance hall by the dim light of galaxies evolving in human time. Then they found seats in the outermost ring, comfortably hidden by the artificial night.

“So what’s the deal?” she whispered in agitation.

“It took a while to make contact. She’ll meet us outside here at nine as soon as she gets off work. She says she’s quite short.”

“Short, huh? That’s as bad as the description those two guys had on us. And it’s about four thirty now.”

“Are you going to be able to stay awake?” he whispered.

“With all this comfort, warmth, and dark? No way.”

“Better set your timer.”

She set her wristpad to vibrate just before nine.

“And use me as a pillow,” he indicated the shoulder nearest her, “if it can make you more comfortable.”

She curled up in her seat and wedged herself against him. Muscles, she thought muzzily, make excellent springy-soft pillows.

At the appointed time, the quiver at her wrist woke her up. She found herself lying in the crook of his arm, head on his chest, his arm resting loosely over hers. His heart beat loud and slow. Had she moved? Or had he? Or both?

Corinna plastered her hair down again in the planetarium’s restroom. They stepped out into the blindingly bright hallway and waited for someone small to show up.

“You haven’t told me yet, you know,” said Oziel gravely.

“Told you what?” she asked absently, scanning for little people.

“Whether it was good, sleeping with me,” he concluded, suddenly grinning and about to burst out laughing at the look on her face.

A tiny middle-aged Asian woman came up to them before Corinna had even begun to find an answer.

“So nice to see you again,” said this perfect stranger in a high, musical voice.

“And you. They’re all fine at home,” said Oziel in what was obviously the countersign.

“Let me take you to our place. It’s on level ten. Everything is ready for you.”

Corinna’s former notion of angels as tall, winged creatures underwent a radical alteration. Henceforth they were going to be short and have the roundest faces and the smallest smiling eyes she had ever seen on a human being.

Chapter 15

Corinna's mind suffered another disconnection as she sat at the table occupying most of the tiny kitchen of Oziel's improbable fellow splicer. Now her mind was stuck in a rover, stuck in a bathroom stall, stuck in an elevator. It stayed stuck anywhere but where it was: safe, of all the improbable things.

Maybe because she was safe, for now, she started worrying about where she was going to sleep tonight. She had envisioned herself and Oziel dossing on anonymous couches, buffered from any ... decisions. But the living room, which was central to every room in the apartment and adjoined the kitchen where they sat, had only one couch.

"My name is Anicut Ingush," the little woman introduced herself. Oziel followed, and then Corinna abruptly remembered to blurt her name.

"I'm an accountant at the University," their diminutive hostess continued. "The only accountant, in fact."

She was in the process of telling them she was from Irkutsk in Siberia, when Corinna suddenly thought she was going to die of heart failure. The hugest man she had ever seen had come into the apartment silently and stood behind her. He could have been a sumo wrestler, although maybe a bit old for that now. He was dark-skinned and had startling dark blue swirls painted on his face and disappearing down the collar of his very white shirt.

"Ah, Momo," said their hostess with another of her trademark smiles that caused her eyes to disappear into joyful arcs. The big man sat down at the fourth side of the table and seemed to fill the kitchen to bursting.

Corinna tried to catch her breath. How threatening could he be with a name like Momo? As she looked more calmly, she realized the swirls were tattooed, not painted. That must have hurt.

"These are my friends, Oziel García and Corinna Mansur. A good Russian name, you know, *golubchenka*." She smiled and bobbed her head energetically.

This was all moving too fast for Corinna. Who was the huge man? And what was a golub-whatever? And her name was not Russian. "English, I believe, actually, at some point in the past."

"Mororua Taranaki," the little Siberian woman introduced him more formally.

So what were they supposed to call him? Mr. Taranaki sounded strange under the circumstances.

“He runs the worm farm,” added Aniot.

“Earthworms,” the big man explained to Corinna’s bewildered look. “For the recycling and the vegetables. And call me Momo. Everyone does.”

“What you really need to explain to her,” said Oziel with a sidelong glance at her, “is why you have designs on your face. Otherwise she’ll keep looking like someone who got off the metro at the wrong station.”

Everyone burst out laughing, including Corinna. He was, it appeared, a Maori from New Zealand. The tattooing had spiritual significance, although very few people had the complete designs these days. Yes, it had hurt.

“Oh,” said Corinna, “something urgent. I have a cold box of specimens which will keep frozen for twelve hours, which only gives me another three or four before they start warming up. They’re really important. Do you have access to any lab freezers?”

“I do,” said Momo, “down with the worms. Would it work to put it in our kitchen freezer overnight and take it down tomorrow?”

“That should be fine,” she said, relieved, as she handed the precious box over and saw it put away. Oziel had to duck his head to give Momo room to open the freezer door above the refrigerator.

Corinna’s mind settled down gradually, helped by a dinner that melted in her mouth. Maybe it was just the contrast with a week of food packs and ration bars, but it felt like the food of the gods. The main course included wonderful little three-cornered, herbed wonton-y things floating in a delicious broth. She made a pig of herself eating two helpings of a layered pastry for dessert. The meal stopped more than hunger; it satisfied a need for flavor sadly neglected by USOs.

Oziel discussed what had brought them here, while Corinna concentrated on eating.

Aniot first, then Momo, both forgot their dinners in astonishment as the story unfolded.

“Ai,” Aniot murmured at one point. “That is terrible. They must be stopped.”

“They called her the Revolutionary at home,” said Momo, fondly patting her hand.

“They must be stopped,” she repeated. “I have to say, I assumed you did some silliness and were trying to leave the planet quietly. Now that I know you are running for the law instead of from it, I would like to help. Momo?”

“Count me in,” was all he said.

Corinna munched silently, amazed. Quietly, without any particular fuss, they had just enlisted in the fight. It took people like that to restore the balance after the Morbiers and Dicastillos of the world had trashed it.

“We’ll see if we can find an honest man after dinner by combing the network,” said Aniot. Then she continued in the same melodious tone, as if what she said next was not thunderingly embarrassing, “I don’t know what sleeping arrangement suits you.”

Corinna came back to reality with a thud.

“We have a small storage room which is just big enough for two, or you can also use the couch,” Aniut nodded toward the living room.

For one desperate moment, Corinna pretended it was not up to her to answer the question and tried to sip tea casually. The silence told her that this tactic was not going to work. The living room, she noticed, had a neat pile of boxes wedged in one corner. The storage room had already been emptied out. Should they now also take over their hosts’ living room, just so she could maintain her space?

“Oh, it doesn’t matter either way,” mumbled Corinna into her tea cup, fiercely annoyed with herself for feeling embarrassed. “We shared a rover, we can certainly share a room.”

The two unlikely geeks settled down at Aniut’s terminal and started speaking computerese. Corinna felt shut out, even though she knew it was nothing they were doing. She began to understand how Oziel must feel when she spouted biology.

She tried to make herself useful putting the dinner things away, but, with space at such a premium, she could tell that everything was meticulously organized and that she had no clue what that organization was. It would be no help to tuck everything away in the wrong place. Momo loaded the dishwasher. Letters and numbers scrolled up the screen, apparently full of meaning for Oziel and Aniut. Corinna sat and watched everyone work and felt useless.

“Bad news,” said Oziel after an hour or so. “Sninsky was based at the spaceport, not the main base. All the auditors seem to be up there, which is interesting. They must get offices with a view or something. Two of the higher-ups down here have a lot of emails to and from Ching. And those emails use prime encryption.”

“That’s standard for anything budget-related,” Corinna pointed out.

“But these are short messages, going back and forth all the time. Budgets or grants or something would be long and grouped at deadlines, yes?”

“Yeah. I guess. That does seem funny.”

“So we don’t know how far the rot has spread,” Oziel said. “We better get to the spaceport to be sure we’re outside it.”

All four discussed how to go about this while making up a mattress in the tiny room where Corinna and Oziel would sleep. Momo stood in the doorway, keeping out of the way. Aniut apologized for having only one narrow pad and dug out every blanket she owned to make a softer surface for the second person.

“We’ll take turns,” said Corinna, but Oziel had already put a pillow on the blankets and was clearly going to be first for the uncomfortable spot.

They shut the door and settled down to sleep in silence, while Corinna tried to find a way to fill it before it became difficult.

“Admin tomorrow,” she said.

There was also the small matter of the three vaccines she still had in her waist pack. Would it be a good idea to take them, just in case? They’d need an

incision to get into the bloodstream, unless a hypodermic needle conveniently showed up. Should she discuss that? If the two of them had been caught today, she'd wish she'd taken them. But horrible things could happen with unproven vaccines. Allergic reactions. Anaphylactic shock. Death. It would really be better if they could hand everything over to a responsible party and avoid the risk.

"Yes," answered Oziel, "admin tomorrow. Should I hit the night switch?"

"Uh, sure," she said.

He reached up to dim the lamp to the faint pseudo-moonlight that meant night on stations, domes, and tunnels everywhere away from Earth. Rolling over, he added,

"Good night."

And that was that. Pushing people was apparently against his religion. She was not going to have to make any big decisions tonight. When was she going to make them?

Well, not tonight.

She was not sure if she was relieved or ... or something else. While they were stumbling around outside, encased in their suits, she had imagined what she might do when they were free of them. She had enjoyed the thought of falling into his arms then, when she could not. Now they were here, in one warm, quiet room, not encased in anything, and she hesitated again.

She was just as cooped up as in the rover. If sex with him turned out to be horrible, where could she go? A voice in her mind, which she suspected of coming straight from her hormones, guffawed at the idea of sex with him being horrible. But she was cooped up and you never knew. Or, worse yet, what if sex was great and she fell for him like a skydiver and he decided she was less than he had hoped? Whichever way you looked at it, it was a risk.

Not, sneered the voice. A risk? Imagine that. Everything is a risk. Putting one foot in front of the other is a risk. Enclose yourself in a glass box and fill it with formaldehyde and then nothing will ever happen to you again.

She rolled over to face the wall. Was that Nat's last legacy? No hope for the best. Just fear of the worst.

Chapter 16

Corinna woke to an empty room, but moments later a blond apparition walked in. It was Oziel. Even his eyebrows were now brown. His eyelashes were still black as ink, which made him look like he was wearing mascara. The pirate's beard was gone. So was his uniform Station suit. Somewhere he'd scared up a set of clothes pretending to be blue denim. He looked like a tourist with more money than brains.

"Jeez," said Corinna. "Been up a while, have you?"

"The next cable car to the port is at ten, so if you want any breakfast, now is a good time. Anicut got you this." He laid an anonymous burgundy jumpsuit on top of her blanket. "They left for work a couple of hours ago because they're on the early shift today."

"And what should I do? Go all blonde too? Shave my head?"

He waved his hand in a 'no.'

"Bald hasn't been the fashion in years. It would look like an obvious disguise. And I own the blond idea."

Before she had time to point out there was prior art on that, they heard the main door of the apartment click open, and they both froze. But it was just Momo.

Then they found out it wasn't just Momo. It was Momo with bad news.

"I was going up to the admin level with some paperwork. Security was there, using iris scanners on everyone. One of them I know pretty well, so I asked why. He said CTS had a major theft and they were looking for the culprits. After that, I checked, and Security was at every floor where I stopped the lift *and* at the station for the skycar to the spaceport. It's no good even trying to go up there."

"*Mierda!* It's worse than that. They'll start going over apartment telemetry any minute and find two extra people here! We have to get out or we'll get you in trouble."

"You need Level Three warrants, the violent crime kind, to read other people's telemetry" said Momo. "I'd guess Dicastillo hasn't infiltrated that Level – yet – or they'd be here already. So I don't think that's our worry."

"Well, then I guess the good news is that they must not control everything down here yet," said Corinna.

"And the bad news," said Oziel, "is they control enough to get us the minute

we step outside. We have to make sure they can't destroy all Corinna's evidence, at least."

There he was, planning for failure again. He was also right again, of course.

"Where's a safe place to hide the memory and the samples?"

Momo stood a while in thought.

"The safest place for the samples is down in the worm farm. The data should be encrypted and hidden wherever we can manage it. I'll call Aniot. She'll know the best way to go about it."

Aniot arrived within minutes. Once Corinna explained what she wanted to do, Aniot felt that hiding the information only on Mars wasn't good enough.

"If Dicastillo is crashing clippers, what's to stop him blowing up the whole base?"

What! That's preposterous! Nobody would ever do that! Then Corinna remembered she'd felt the same way when Oziel turned up with the news of the clipper crash.

"Or anywhere else that has evidence he wants to destroy?" Aniot continued. "He could probably get at anything on Mars. We should be sure a copy goes to Earth as well."

"Yeah," said Corinna. "That'd be nice." With the subtext, *using which of your many fine private satellites?*

"Well, I only tried it once before, and only to send a one-sentence birthday greeting to my sister as a joke, but I've piggybacked on weather data. That uses its own automated satellite relays. Not normal comm channels."

"How in hell did you—" began Oziel at the same time as Momo said,

"The critical data for life support systems also gets relayed straight to Earth so that there's an independent record in case of accidents."

"I can't wait to see how you do that," said Oziel. "But won't it be awfully slow?"

"Even in the old days, when data went at 300 characters per second, it got there eventually. And the sooner we go, the sooner the transfer can start."

"Go where?" Corinna wanted to know, while Aniot called her department to let them know she'd be gone "a while." This looked worse and worse. Corinna had kind of been hoping she could just hide under a bed in a safe place until all this was over.

"Air recycling," said Momo. "It has a direct feed through telemetry satellites. Parts of that can be sealed, too, which may be useful. And it's right near the worm farm, so I know the whole place like my own bedroom. There are good places to hide people, not just data cards down there."

"Down there," repeated Corinna. "Isn't that like umpteen floors down? How do we go if they're guarding all the elevators?"

"Recycling is all pipes and ducts," said Momo. "The pipes go all over the base. Let me think. I'm not sure where the closest pipe closet is."

"Pipe closet?" Corinna muttered to Oziel.

"Access hatches into the main trunks of pipes," explained Momo, the de-

signs on his forehead still crooked in thought. "I think there's one between Dubrovsky and Epsilon. Take your things, and we'll go."

"Things? I have all my data right here," she patted her waistpack, "and the samples are already in a freezer somewhere, right?"

Momo nodded.

"Also anything critical while you hide until Earth gets Dicastillo."

"Jee-sus." she muttered. "That could be months. Where's my steamer trunk?"

Once more, she was slinking through the hallways by herself. Soon she would start screaming just at the sight of a hallway. Oziel could tell how much it bothered her and made sure she followed Anicut and Momo, walking together up ahead. He went last himself.

She wasn't happy that he thought she needed special help. And she was even unhappier that she did need it. She was far past the point where she would have done anything to be safe, if there was any way she could have bought safety.

They turned down a last endless corridor. Momo and Anicut slowed down, waiting for the one security camera to pan away, and then scurried to a blank bit of wall. Momo inserted a coded key, a panel swung open, and there were the pipes. Just like that. She supposed it made sense. As head honcho of the worm farm, he was a member of the recycling section and had keys. Key usage was recorded and they'd just marked their trail in red, but he was following proper procedure, in a sense, and it would not raise any instant alarms. Anicut first, then Momo, disappeared into the hole in the wall. He pulled the panel closed. Her turn next, once the security camera was out of the way again.

Her heart in her throat, she fumbled at the panel, but it opened by itself. Momo pulled her in.

"Head on down. I'll follow as soon as he's in."

Corinna's breath caught as she looked ten floors up and then ten floors down the dizzying hole. Ladder rungs protruded from the wall. She wondered whether someone Momo's size even fit between those gargantuan, color-coded pipes and the wall holding the rungs.

There was some saying about a journey starting with the first step. What other step could it possibly start with? Thank God it was down, not up.

Of course, assuming they survived, they might have to climb all the way back. She could see Anicut, two or three floors down already, working her way steadily along. Corinna saw her wince as she stepped off the last rung, and she was still holding her knee when Corinna jumped down beside her.

"It's nothing, *dushenka*," she whispered when she saw Corinna looking concerned. "I had arthritis in that knee. The medicines took care of it, but this," she looked up at the infinite pipes, "is obviously a bit too much."

The worm farm seemed wonderfully deserted. It was a vast, cavernous space, over a hundred meters across, the bowl of the ceiling excavated in an

arch so that it would be self-supporting. The dim light showed rows upon rows of broad trestle tables with deep pans of brown earth on them. At the far end were big cribs, filled to different degrees with compost in various stages, and a broad, high freight door, currently open.

The two of them waited at the bottom until Momo caught up, Oziel just above him.

Momo looked around.

"This is not right," he muttered. "Birgitsdottir should be running the mixer to turn the heap in crib seven. You two," he turned to Corinna and Aniut, "stay low, make sure you're not seen, and hide under those worm flats over there." He nodded toward one of the closest tables. "Security cameras don't cover most of this section, so that's good. Oziel and I will go see what's going on, if anything."

Corinna was not sure she appreciated being told to sit still and keep quiet while the men did the real work. She was not totally useless. But she crouched down and followed Aniut to the tables. The lights dimmed. Momo must have done that. It would make the security cameras less useful and it would put anyone in a helmet at a big disadvantage. Hidden under a table, she could see Oziel's and Momo's legs heading away in different directions, and then they were gone in the forest of trestles and vats standing on the floor. She could hear nothing. They moved silently.

Suddenly there was a yell and a shout and all hell broke loose. Male voices bellowed, "This way!" "They're over here!" Big, booted feet pounded along a passageway. Maybe someone noticed when the pipe closet was opened and scrambled a welcoming committee; maybe there just happened to be a patrol there.

There was a sound of a door rolling closed and then grinding.

"Momo tried to close the door, but they jammed it." Aniut listened carefully. "Sounds like they couldn't get in all at once. I hope that gave our fellows time to take cover." Aniut spoke quietly, but even at normal volume, nobody would have heard anything over the sound of all the humming and whirring ventilators, aerators, and mixers in the room.

There was a meaty thud followed by a gurgle.

Who was it? One of ours? Or one of theirs? Corinna started to cautiously poke her head up to have a look. Aniut pulled her firmly back.

There was another big, dull thud.

"I have to know what's going on!" she muttered urgently to Aniut.

"No, you don't," said Aniut. "You have to hide."

When Corinna seemed about to argue, she added,

"It's a war, *dushenka*. In a war, everyone has to do what they do best. There is no time for anything else. I know. I spent my childhood running and hiding. We were refugees during the Siberian war."

"The war of independence?"

There was a sound like a side of beef hitting the wall, quite far away.

“Yes. That was when I learned my computer skills. That was how we managed to get tickets out of there to Ulan Bator. We couldn’t have made enough—” there was a sound of abruptly sprinting feet, a strangled gargle, then a yell of surprise from another direction “—to pay for those in a year. And then I robbed banks for a while. I had to learn enough accounting to do that well.”

There was a shout of, “This way, you moron!” another dull thud, an “oof” sound, and then a series of punches hitting someone. But whom?

Running feet came straight up one of their rows. Strange feet. Corinna shrank as far down as she could. She hoped the burgundy jumpsuit was dark enough. Aniut tracked the booted feet carefully. Quick as a cat, she turned a vat under the table on its side and rolled it into the aisle the booted feet were going to take.

A loud yell punctuated the man’s belly flop onto the floor. Before he could unscramble his limbs or see the two sets of staring eyes under the table, a huge silent shape appeared and threw him somewhere. He broke a table in his fall, but there was no further sound once the table had finished breaking. Momo was obviously all right. The noise of fighting moved away from them again. It was not like the vids. No one yelled. The bellyflopping guy showed what happened when you gave away your position.

A loud thud was followed by a sharp cracking noise that had to be a bone breaking. But no scream.

“*Mierda! ’S muerte?*” Then more thunks and thuds.

Oziel was still okay. Corinna tried to keep quiet and not laugh in relief, hidden under her earthworm bench. Maybe, if Dicastillo destroyed all the evidence and won, the four of them could just spend the rest of their lives hiding and eating worms in the basement.

“So you see,” Aniut returned calmly to her topic, as if they just happened to be socializing under a table, “all knowledge is useful. You never know when a skill will be handy. Here I am, making my living in accounting.”

“It’s just a matter of time before they come back with more people.” That was Momo’s voice, only a few rows of tables away.

“*Sí*. We need a quiet computer to send our information. Before they finally get us.”

One set of footsteps came toward them at a walking pace. Momo never made a sound when he moved. Corinna poked her head up above the earthworm beds.

Oziel’s face was scraped, a cut above his eye was bleeding in a thin stream, his shirt was torn, and his eyes lit when he saw Corinna.

“We got ‘em,” he announced, “for now.”

“Are – are they *dead?*”

“Just knocked out. I think.”

“So we need to change hiding places before they wake up,” said Aniut matter-of-factly.

“Momo’s aren’t waking up in a hurry, believe me.”

Now that the first relief was settling down, Corinna found herself resenting the feeling that she was supposed to applaud. It was not as if her part in all this had been a cakewalk, crawling around under benches, never knowing which moment was going to be her last.

“Well, let’s get going, then,” she muttered.

“Air recycling first,” said Momo. “It has blast doors, and there’s a computer station. Then we’ll go where they can’t just break down the doors and haul you out.” He took Anicut’s hand and headed off.

Oziel and Corinna followed behind. He was practically bouncing, fizzing with triumph. She kept her eyes fixed on the floor.

“Oy, Corinna,” he said, “what’s wrong?”

There were disadvantages to that damn telepathy of his. She just wanted him to leave her alone until she got over her fit of pique.

“Oh, nothing. I’m just jealous. The two women cower under tables while the men take care of everything.”

He laughed out loud for some reason.

“It’s one of the things I love about you. You don’t care where the truth falls, you tell it.” He swept her up in a hug that lifted her right off her feet and nearly cracked her rib cage before he suddenly remembered to loosen his hold. He set her down gently.

Oziel on adrenalin was a bit overwhelming.

“You’re good at so many things, *querida*. Let me at least beat people up for you.” A pirate’s gleam shone from his smudged, scraped, bloody face. He looked ready to take on another ten goons or so.

Then he added, suddenly more serious and subdued,

“Waiting well is harder than fighting. I know. I’ve done both.”

“So where’d you learn this?” she muttered at him as they crept through the hallways behind Momo. “Or is it just on the Y chromosome?”

“I was always fighting,” he muttered back as they crouched and waited for an all-clear from Momo.

Peaceable Oziel? Who played with children for a living? Who, before now, she’d never seen do anything worse than clench his fists?

“It started out I had to, just for my brothers and sisters,” he answered her look. “At seventeen, I ran with a gang for six months. Almost broke my mother’s heart.” He paused. “Then she set the whole family on me and almost broke me.”

Momo finally waved them on and they raced for the air recycling section. He said there would probably be two techs on duty, since it was dinner time. The problem was how to get the techs out and themselves in. He and Oziel did not currently look like respectable citizens. Corinna might be on a wanted poster. They could either try their luck with Anicut or start a fire in the hallway. Anicut raised one eyebrow when Momo suggested that, and marched in.

“There’s big trouble in solids,” they heard her sing out. “Higgins needs

everyone there. Momo sent me to tell you.”

People in Recycling knew Aniut. Moments later the two techs were hurrying down the corridor with their gear. Big trouble in solids was something you wanted to stop quickly.

The three of them ran to join Aniut in the huge room full of two-story-high pressure vessels and recirculating fans the size of houses. The roar was immense. Momo and Oziel stopped at the blast doors.

“Get started,” Momo nodded toward the computer. “I’ll sort out the next step.”

Aniut needed an address and Corinna could think of no one off the top of her head except Jolly Cholly of the London Times. They needed the UN, but maybe the media was not a bad way to prod the folks at the top into action.

Momo stepped outside the doors. Trouble? No, Oziel was looking merely watchful.

Corinna fumbled around in her waistpack for the memory chip, slotted it in, queued the files, and watched Aniut start the transmission.

“I’m also sending copies in a high speed burst to every server I can get in to here. Some of them will also try to transmit to Earth later, so at least one message should get through no matter what Dicastillo does. In some ways it’s bad that the direct one is so slow, but in other ways maybe it’s good. They may not even realize it’s anything but the usual trickle of telemetry.”

“How slow is slow?” asked Corinna.

Momo came back carrying two space suits, one in each arm. She did not like the look of this.

“About two hours,” said Aniut.

That gave Dicastillo way too much time to organize interference. But there wasn’t a thing they could do about it.

“Once you’re done,” Momo had come up to make himself heard over the ventilator roar, “take a suit. I had to grab them off the tech’s pile, so who knows what condition they’re in. It’s hard to find ones in his size, but it shouldn’t matter too much for a short time in the gray zone.” He turned to Aniut. “Can you fool them that we’re still in here after we close the doors?”

Aniut thought a moment.

“I blocked any incoming commands so they couldn’t override the door. So they also can’t see what we’re doing on this machine. I could set a sendmail to push random encrypted files out, which will look to them like we’re messaging someone from here.”

“Sounds good. Set the doors to close, wait over by them, let Oziel send the actual close command from in here so it’s coming from inside, then he sprints like hell to get out before they grind shut.”

Oziel, Corinna wanted to say, is not expendable. Even if he can run the fastest.

He made it with several meters to spare. Corinna picked up her suit and ran after Momo, breathing as if she was the one who had just sprinted for her

life.

Momo ducked into another cavernous space, a vast, unpeopled tank farm. Booted feet sounded in the long corridor they had just left. They came closer.

Momo led his little group on, around and behind the tanks. Out of range of any cameras, she noticed.

The feet stayed somewhere up the hall.

"Trying to get the doors open," rumbled Momo, with an wicked grin at Aniut. Her small eyes looked back with the same sinister smile.

They went out through another exit and another meter-thick door.

"We're out of the reinforced emergency shelter section," said Momo. "Some of us in Recycling are part of the team going over the emergency section millimeter by millimeter in preparation for the comet landing eighteen months from now, and it turned out that back through here..."

The cavern seemed to be dead storage, left over from construction perhaps. Hulking machinery being cannibalized for parts lay around in various states of dissolution and decay. The air was bad.

"Ah!" said Momo. "Right. Suit up."

What? Here? What for?

Oziel leaned over to her and spoke softly.

"When the man says, 'Suit up,' then you suit up, *querida*. Come on." He helped her by holding the suit for her.

"Yes, but —" and then she closed the helmet and her mouth. Explanations later.

Momo was pulling at a peculiar bumpy section of wall. He jerked his head to have Oziel come over and help. Together, they peeled back a tough, rubbery sheet that had been laid as a seal over a pile of rocks. Corinna could feel the pressure of a sudden rush of air around her suit. Then she understood. There must have been a rock fall and the puncture had been temporarily patched like a tire, using a rubbery sheet and the base's own air pressure to keep the layer in position. In a place where the air was already so bad, the pressure sensors probably wouldn't register the loss, especially if she hurried. That was probably why Momo, his hands full holding back the sheet, motioned urgently with his head for her to go through. She clambered over the rocks. Oziel followed her as the whistling air rushed past, pushing them into the blackness. She felt the whoomph of air pressure when Momo let the sheet go from where he stood on the other side and it slapped back into place.

Neither he nor Aniut was coming in to the tunnel. He was going to get cleaned up at one of the utility showers and report all the unconscious bodies in the worm room to one of his friends in Security. It would go on the books as a brawl, and the Dicastillo's goons were hardly likely to point out that, no, they'd been attacking civilians without going through the formality of an arrest warrant. Then, for as long as he and Aniut could, they were going to go about their business as if nothing had happened. Corinna felt painfully jealous.

She and Oziel stood in a sightless world, except the splotchy green and red

glows from the helmets illuminating their heads. She could hear nothing, since the suit radios were off in case they were within range of other receivers.

She switched on her suit's chest light and went first through a lumpy crawl space. It opened into a natural cavern.

The space was house-sized, but not huge. The roof was all glassy congealed lava, with long, pointed projections reaching down, like the root tips of the mountain searching for something. It must be an ancient magma chamber, Corinna guessed, which was never shaped by water once the lava drained away. Deep inside the mountain some of the interior chambers might be enormous, big enough to build towns. Without water, there were also none of the sculptures and crystalline jewels that make Earth caves unearthly. Here it was all sweeps of smooth rock, fluid motion stopped for all time. The floor was weirdly flat where the lava had pooled, as if someone had made it that way.

There were also several openings that led out.

They had to find *this* one if they ever wanted to get back. Her breath stopped for a moment as she realized how close she'd been to just charging ahead.

Oziel had caught the same thought. He shifted a large stone and put it near their entrance. They began to cross the space when she stopped and carefully walked around an irregularity in the floor. It was a lava pipe, a passage over a meter across, going straight down. Corinna's brain spun at the thought of how far that blackness might reach. She leaned gingerly toward the hole to shine her light down it. Oziel added his light to hers, but even then the hole went down forever, plenty big enough to swallow a person in a suit. They backed slowly away from it.

She chose the largest hole leading out of the chamber, one he also marked with a rock, but it led to a rockfall and an even narrower crawlspace than the last one. They squeezed into another natural chamber, much bigger than the last.

There was no way the suit radios would reach through that much rock so she switched hers back on and motioned Oziel to do the same, with the gain turned as low as it would go.

"We better not go much further," she said. "I've been spelunking exactly once, and the first thing they said was how easy it is to get disoriented and lost."

"Spe- *qué*?"

"Yeah. Funny word. I don't know where it actually comes from. It means exploring through caves. And I think we better not. We're far enough in that they'll never find us here in any case." Corinna quite liked this thought.

"Yes," said Oziel, "that's what's worrying me."

One side of her mouth quirked into wry agreement.

"Well, yes. There is that. Let's check the suit supplies and see how long we

can wait for Earth to get their act together. The food pouch on mine is full of rat bars. Looks like enough for ... for-just-about-ever.” Part of her groaned inwardly. She was getting really, really, really tired of tasteless ration bars and living in lumpy suits and rebreathing her own air—.

“Ey, we won’t have to eat too many of them,” said Oziel. “My water is almost empty. About 100 ml.”

Hell. You needed some two liters a day to survive. More perhaps for someone his size. How much did she have? Maybe she could use the emergency transfer tube to give—.

“Jee-sus. I’ve got less than a quarter of a liter. Two hundred measly ml.”

“Pues, I haven’t pissed in a while, so that’ll add about 600 ml.”

The water recirculation system that she always tried not to think about.

“I’ve got a bladder the size of a walnut, so say some extra 300 ml for me. The liter or so we lose breathing and through the skin isn’t completely recaptured, and doesn’t get us very far anyway because you need it replaced to keep breathing.” She paused.

“Man, it would’ve been nice if we could’ve just sat here quietly chewing rat bars until Momo came to tell us it was safe to go out.” Suddenly, rat bars were the good alternative.

She fiddled with the controls inside her suit for a bit. “It’s telling me if I sit still and do nothing, I’ll start getting organ damage in a week. And really uncomfortable sooner than that.” She told him the steps to get the same readout in his suit.

“Four days for me.”

Hell. Hell, hell, hell. There wasn’t a bureaucracy on Earth – in the universe, she was willing to bet – that could receive a message, decide on its legitimacy, formulate the response, mobilize the necessary resources, and then actually do something in less than a month. Maybe a year.

“We wait as long as we can, I guess, and then sneak out and try to find water. Let me see if this suit has the Station schematics...”

The worst of it was now she kept thinking about thirst. She wasn’t even thirsty. Yet. But she could feel part of her mind probing for it all the time. *Does your mouth feel dry? No? How about now? Do you need a drink? Maybe just a sip?* She was going to have to force herself to think about pink elephants or some damn thing just to try to get it to shut up.

The Station map was there all right, but it had toilets and bathrooms marked. Not the location of every tap. All they needed was a tap. And come to think of it, a bottle of some sort. They couldn’t clump around in full suits until they found a regulation connector to refill. That led to an involved discussion of logistics. Oziel wanted Corinna to stay safe in the cave while he got water. She would have been glad to stay safe, but only if they both stayed safe and she didn’t have to wait around, sick with worry about why he wasn’t back yet. Waiting was a lot harder than doing. Besides, she knew more about Station plumbing than he did and he’d be out there with only one pair of

eyes.

He admitted the point that two pairs of eyes and more knowledge was better. After some back and forth, they decided they'd go together when they went.

Now there was nothing to do but sit back and wait. She couldn't even chew on one of her many fine rat bars for amusement because if she did, she'd get thirsty. Eating was going to be a minimalist thing.

"There's a strange noise in the rock," said Oziel, who'd leaned all the way back till his helmet rested on the stony wall. "I could swear there is." He tried to stretch his neck so he could lean an ear against the inner surface of the helmet.

Corinna squunched down instead of up and put her ear against the metal of the suit. Sure enough, there was a sound almost like a distant chain saw, sometimes reaching a crescendo, sometimes becoming quieter and lower. Then her eyes grew wide and she popped her head back up into the helmet.

"I bet that's the sound of them drilling their way into the air room." She let out a chortle. "It's going to take them hours if they have to cut their way in since that's all part of the blast-reinforced emergency shelter. Which means they haven't figured out an override for Anicut's door lock. So the message will reach the relay and get to Earth."

"Bueno. Now we wait."

And wait. And wait. And wait.

They sat in the silent, free-form cathedral shaped by a hand too old and too large to understand, and waited. The drilling was still going each time she checked, long after the message would have successfully gone all the way through. That was the good news. The bad news was that Dicastillo's men still had a free hand.

Then an even more depressing thought came to her.

"All the stuff I sent concerns the people based here. If Dicastillo can pretend he wasn't involved, they may never get him... in which case... I wonder if we could start an underground society in the caves? Bleed off air from the base. Steal food. Like in the stories."

"We'll worry about that when it happens, Captain," said Oziel with a small smile as he took her gloved hand in his. "For now, chew on a rat bar."

Chapter 17

You could get used to anything. Without a padding of smelly clothing, lying down in the suit provided all the comfort of stretching out on a tree branch. Yet when Corinna woke up in what her display told her was early the next day, she had to admit that the evidence indicated she'd fallen asleep. Then, as if she'd spent her whole life living in a suit, she found herself dropping back into her routine from the days she'd spent out on the surface. She went behind a weirdly elongated lava outcrop to deal with personal hygiene issues. She emerged, sipped a tiny sip of her now-400 ml stock of water, ate a ration bar, and discovered she'd done everything she needed to do for the day. She should have remembered to bring a book.

Oziel wasn't there, so he must be at the entrance to their hideout, trying to keep track of whatever news there might be. It was the only place where other radio signals could be picked up from repeaters in the base.

She clunked her way cautiously out to the rock fall passage. He looked pleased to see her, as far as she could detect any expression through the helmet and lurid reflections of green and red glows on his face. She said nothing, since they both had their suits set to receive only.

As she approached, staticky chatter coalesced into speech.

"You want me to check *which* quadrant, sir?"

"Look, they've defeated infrared before."

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, I've looked everywhere."

"I'm not some damn rabbit farmer. Sir."

She rolled her eyes at Oziel and he gave her a sardonic nod. It was all conversation and no context. Were these people looking for them to kill them or to rescue them? What they needed was a news bulletin.

Then a second day passed. Corinna had the layout of every Mars base in the suit's data bank memorized. Using the help manual, she had mastered the art of altering labels on menu items or replacing them with icons, and she started showing Oziel how it was done. She no longer needed the nagging mental imp to ask whether she was thirsty. Her tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth and even her nose felt dry.

Corinna wondered, as the third day rolled around, whether taking the suit apart from the inside, as in the manual under Emergency Servicing Proce-

dures, would really be that bad an idea.

The worst of it was that when not somehow staying occupied, there was nothing but this huge, overwhelming, all-encompassing thirst. Her kidneys were starting to ache. It had to be even worse for him.

And not a word on any of the transmissions they eavesdropped which even hinted at Dicastillo's arrest.

"I guess," she finally said, "we're not going to be doing this the easy way and coming out safely. We have to go look for water."

He nodded. She heard him say "*Si*" very quietly so that he hardly moved his mouth. It was definitely hitting him harder than her. Time to go. Her heart went back into her throat and stayed there. She'd forgotten in a few short days just how much she hated running through hallways with a target painted on her back.

It was dinner time and shift change, both good. People would be paying less attention.

They crawled to the entrance. Oziel pushed the rubbery sheet back and held the opening so she could get through. *I couldn't get out by myself. ... I can't get back in by myself either.* Both horrible thoughts overlaid on plenty of horrible fear. None of it helped matters.

They climbed out of their suits and started making their way to what Corinna hoped was the closest source of water, a tech's area in the hall with all the tanks. They ran through the cavern with bad air and no cameras. Now they were going to have to be careful. Without Momo and his knowledge of exactly where the cameras were, what they covered, and when they panned around, they'd have to be lucky to stay out of sight.

They reached the tank farm. Not far now. *Stay careful! Don't start racing straight to the water! Go slow.* But it was so hard. She could just about feel that first gulp of glorious water and feel it running down her chin.

She was following Oziel when it happened. She saw his back stiffen. *What? Now what?* She stared around wildly and caught sight of a uniform disappearing behind a tank in the distance. Behind her was one who didn't bother disappearing. There was another one to the right.

They were outnumbered. It was all over.

But one thing was certain. She refused to be changed into a grinning idiot. She reached into her waist pack and pulled out the three vaccine vials, shielding herself from the goons' view as well as she could behind Oziel. To hell with the danger. She tipped half the contents of all three into her mouth and found saliva from somewhere to swish them around. Then she bit down hard on her tongue. She winced, but it had worked. She could taste blood. Now the other half. She repeated the dose and swished. The beefy fellows, at some invisible signal, began to move toward them. No matter. It would take them some time to march past the remaining four sets of tanks. She ditched the empty vials under the lowest stair of the steps spiralling up the side of the closest tank. She grabbed Oziel, whose gaze had been flicking from one set of

thugs to the next, obviously trying to calculate a useful move. She started kissing him.

She felt his bewilderment, his why-the-hell-is-she-doing-this-now? But within a heartbeat she felt him decide he didn't care why now. A charge flowed between them, as electricity might move in a world where light was liquid. He wrapped his arms around her, pulled her to him, and set the previous charge to nothing by what he was doing with his tongue. She had nearly swallowed so she could draw in the volume of breath this work required when she remembered that she wasn't here to swallow. She had things to do. She put her hand around the back of his head, held on, and bit.

He jerked back with all the strength she had expected and she hung on like a limpet. Within another second, the beefy guys had surrounded them.

A crude voice said,

"Time to quit froggin', loverboy. You two are comin' with us."

Oziel looked at her, shocked, hurt, wondering whether she was some kind of pervert. But she hadn't seen him swallow yet. That was good. The vaccine needed as much time as possible to get into the bloodstream. Maybe that was calculation dawning in his eyes. She hoped so. There was no way to explain. The goons pulled her away toward one hallway, but she kept looking back to him staring at her with equal tenacity. It might be the last time she ever saw him. The tanks closed in, as if nothing had happened.

Chapter 18

Corinna sat in a small, white, windowless room, relentlessly illuminated by the ceiling light. They had taken her wristpad and her waist pack. The only good thing was she'd thrown herself on the liter bottle of water standing on the bare floor next to a little pile of ration bars and finished it in what felt like one gulp. She remembered the thugs looking at her weirdly and refilling it. The place smelled like a recently emptied utility room, judging by the sharp, chemical odor of cleansers and disinfectants. She had been here for hours and hours and hours. She wished she knew whether Oziel was all right. So far. She circled back to worrying about what was going to be done to her. And to him. It felt longer than a night, but she knew she was not hungry and thirsty enough for that. After what must have been a few hours, she banged on the door and yelled.

"Hey! I need a bathroom!"

There was no noticeable response. However, a long time later after much more yelling, the lock gave an electronic click and the door opened. A bulky male guard plunked a small chemical toilet down in one corner. Without looking at her, he left.

Hmf. No doubt her jailers were deeply concerned about using male guards for a female prisoner in direct violation of the Geneva conventions – or some set of human rights rules – but had not been able to locate a suitably thug-gish female on short notice. Well, at least she had somewhere to pee now.

She wondered again whether Oziel was all right, her mind running in circles that were driving her mad. She wondered when they would finally bring her some more water and some more food. She supposed that meant it was still night time and that breakfast was in the future. Or maybe they had no intention of feeding her. Just take her out for a last walk on the planet's surface as soon as they could work out the logistics. She wondered if they had the same thing planned for Oziel. Sometimes she thought she was more worried for him than for herself.

Sometimes she thought she wasn't.

She finally fell into a fitful doze on the hard floor, but the first time she moved she woke up. They did not seem to have anything set up to hold prisoners, such as cells. That meant she and Oziel were not in the hands of the police. It could mean Dicastillo's people had never really expected to catch

them. Or it could mean they did not plan on holding them for long. It was certainly not because they planned on letting them go.

Someone scraped against the door, and it clicked and opened. Corinna realized in a detached way that, as time went by, if it went by, not having any control over the opening of that door was going to be the thing that drove her insane.

There were two beefy guards this time. That did not look good. Being worked over by a couple of male guards was an even worse option than suffocating and evaporating away on the surface. One guard stopped by the door. The other one advanced on her. She was sitting on the floor, her arms clasped around her knees.

“Stand up.”

“What for?” She tried not to quaver.

“I said, stand up,” the thug growled, grabbed her upper arm and hauled her up as if she was a doll.

She stood.

She saw the syringe in his right hand. Oh God no. The worst option of all, unless any of those vaccines worked.

He moved to jab the injector at the exposed skin of her neck.

She pulled back. “What’s that?”

He did not answer. Instead he grabbed her arm harder.

She felt the contents of the injector prickling through the pores of her skin and into her neck. She knew it was useless to fight, but it took all her willpower not to give them the satisfaction of struggling.

Then the two guards left.

She sat back down on the floor again, clasped her hands around her knees, and leaned her head down on her knobbly kneecaps. For a time, she had no thoughts beyond an unending wail of injury and rage. They had ruined her life, tried to kill her, kidnapped her, and stuffed her in this closet. And then they had the unmitigated gall to manhandle her without answering a simple question. Why that should be worse than all the other violence combined, she could not say. Her muscles and joints grew stiff from sitting rigid. She unclasped her arms and shifted to sitting cross-legged and slumping against the wall. The motion moved her mind from its wounded stupor.

She remembered Oziel’s voice coming over the suit radio in the dust storm saying, “We’re not dead yet.” No, and if the vaccines worked, there was still hope.

The good news about the injection was that it must mean they intended to keep her alive long enough for the stuff to take effect. Maybe that was what they had planned for her after their docility gene started working. They would take samples of her brain to see what was happening and where. It would be interesting, she thought. For the person at the right end of the scanner. Until they had destroyed too much of her gray matter, she would actually be the best person on Mars, except for Wallis, to tell them what it all meant. She

even grinned at the black irony of it all.

Of course, if the vaccines worked and the injection did not take effect, they would probably take her apart, molecule by molecule, to find out why not. It would not do for them to find out it was not taking effect. It would not do at all. The stuff ought to start being incorporated within twelve hours, with noticeable effects certainly within a couple of days. The full effect would probably take about a week to develop. So, assuming the guards had arrived at the start of a new day – when were these meatheads going to bring her something to drink and eat? – she should start smiling too much after they brought her breakfast tomorrow.

In the meantime, she could spend her time going insane staring at the four walls, the ceiling, and the floor, waiting for the first signs that the vaccines had *not* worked. She decided to vary the routine by pounding on the door and demanding water.

An interminable number of minutes later, it could not have been an hour but it felt like it, she had won through to having two water bottles and another little pile of emergency ration bars. They obviously did not want her bugging them every few minutes. Just for that she would have done it, except she really did not want to see them either.

The hours ran together into what must have been a day. Since they did not feel called upon to bring her meals, and since the glaring white light stayed on all the time, she had no way to know. Hunger was no real indicator. She was too stressed to feel ordinary hunger. She would gnaw on one of the ration bars and lose interest half way through. In a different way, it was the same with thirst. She felt thirsty almost constantly, in a nervous, dry mouth way that could not be relieved.

She tried running through the periodic table and remembering all the steps of the Krebs cycle, just to keep her mind moored to reality. It was like lofting weather balloons into the vacuum of space. The thoughts vaporized without reducing the nothingness in any way.

She could think of Oziel, but that made her want to cry. If the damn happy gene was supposed to have taken effect, nothing would give her away faster than tears. She leaned her head upon her knees again to hide her face from prying hidden cameras or peepholes, and thought about how he had sacrificed everything to help her escape. He had lost his job, risked his life times out of number, now he was risking his mind, yet he never waited for any return from her. Nothing. Not so much as a kind word. A man who truly believed that the best things in life are free.

She thought about driving the rover with him, and about walking across Mars together. She had not imagined that stumbling over rocks, holding on to each other, could become a good memory. She wondered if next time, if they both managed to come out of this as the same people, she would hesitate again.

She began to wonder if the guards would ever come back for her. Maybe

she would start to hear voices soon. The damn toilet was starting to smell of something besides chemicals. The door clicked and opened, shocking her so much she involuntarily jumped. She was irrationally furious and humiliated that they should see her looking frightened when they came in. However, for all the notice the guard took of her, she could have been a fly. He dropped off another bottle of water and a pile of ration bars and left. Time stopped again.

They did so many things to make sure she had no sense of time that it must be intentional. If she did not know whether it was early or late, she could not fool them by pretending to symptoms early and putting them off their guard. Putting on a happyface was going to be difficult in any case, when her only feeling was one long scream of boredom and fear.

We're not dead yet, said an inner voice.

No. And the good news was that although she might be going insane, she was not yet insanely pleased.

How long she spent in the company of nothing but her own dissolving mind, she didn't know. It was certainly torture, but she was not even sure it was intentional. Quite possibly, they simply did not care.

The lock clicked and the door opened. She had been in a doze on the floor, acquiring a new set of bruises in the continual effort to find a comfortable position, so she had not jumped. This gave her a small sense of accomplishment and made it easier to paste on a goofy smile. It had to be time for the goofy smile by now.

The guards flanked the doorway, but did not come in. Ching entered instead.

Now what?

He had a smile on his lips, not shared by the rest of his face.

"And how are we feeling today?"

Corinna very carefully kept the stupid little smile up. What she wanted to do was pound his face to pulp, glasses and all. Instead, she held the smile intact, even though it took more strength than she thought she had.

"Oh, fine."

The right tone. Remember Selena. *That's nice, dear.* She should keep him talking and hope some useful information appeared.

"Be nice to go for a walk, you know, around."

"Yes. We'll try to get you out for a good long walk." He seemed pleased.

Corinna smiled some more. That sounded like they meant to leave her body somewhere out on the surface.

"Oh, good. Can we go soon?"

"You've been sick. You realize that, don't you?"

"I'm fine now," she nodded, with the continued silly smile.

"Yes, I'm sure you are. We'll have to take you where we can do some tests in a little while. First I had a few questions. Are you getting bored?" He looked at her carefully through his reflecting glasses.

"Oh, no," she said, and just managed to restrain herself from saying *There's*

this cute toilet to look at, and having my brain sucked out to look forward to. Sarcasm would be a dead giveaway.

"You worked on endorphins in the past."

Now where was he going? Keep the stupid smile in place. Don't let it slip.

"Oh yes." Endorphins did not make you lose your memory, just your mind.

"Are there gender differences in how people react to high levels of endorphin?"

Whoa, what was all this about? Coming to the local expert on endorphins at last, were they? The only person of another gender around here who was likely to be having these problems was Oziel.

As fast as those thoughts flitted through her mind, the overriding resolution to stay goofy at all times kept the smile on her face. Luckily, slow response times were an expected symptom.

"Oh, I dunno. Hard to say, really." If the vaccine had worked on her, it had probably worked on him. Was he over-reacting or under-reacting? "Depends what the problem is, really."

A third security guard came up to the door. Where did they get all these goons? Dicastillo was fielding a private army on Mars.

"Sir?" He seemed hesitant in front of the prisoner.

"Yes? What is it?" When the man did not speak, Ching said impatiently, "She's not a problem. What is it?"

"A call, sir. I think it's urgent, sir."

"I told Bukovsky to handle everything. Tell her that if she feels unable to run the office without coming to me for every little problem, she may not be suitable in her current position."

"Uh, yes, sir. Of course, sir. It came via her office, so, uh, anyway, it's, uh," he seemed to be having the greatest difficulty spitting his message out with Corinna there, "it's Dicastillo asking for you, sir."

"I see. All right." He switched on his wristpad and removed the ear piece to hook over his left ear.

He obviously didn't care what Corinna heard or might think in her supposed endorphin stupor, as if she was dead already. But the social nicety of turning away when speaking to someone else was stronger than any of his conscious assumptions. He looked at the wall while he talked.

Ching's side of the conversation made it clear that Dicastillo wanted an update and he wanted it now.

It started out with "Hello, my dear Diego," which surprised Corinna. Even his daughter addressed him with more formality. The equivalent would have been for Leira to call him Poppakins.

"Yes, everything is entirely under control."

"Yes, thank you for your assistance. Extra personnel are always invaluable."

"We'll be doing tests for a few weeks."

She hoped that was not in reference to tests on her or Oziel.

"No, I'm afraid you do not understand the scientific value of this opportuni-

ty. Cutting it short is not an option.”

She had a creeping certainty he was talking about his two prisoners. She would prefer not to be killed at all, and certainly not sooner rather than later, but this was no way to speak to Señor Diego Dicastillo. Even she could have told him that.

“I have the highest respect for Dr. Morbier, but he is not aware of the current situation.”

“No, I did not know he had, as you put it, ‘abandoned ship’. Such a rash act was unnecessary in any case, regardless of how clever he thought she was, but it is completely superfluous in light of current events.”

What the—? Morbier had never expressed a high opinion of her abilities, not even by the quiver of an eyebrow. Knowing him, he was covering his ass against being tagged an accessory to murder once his partners-in-crime succeeded in killing her.

“No, Diego. I appreciate your concerns, but they are not valid here. I cannot jeopardize the scientific value of my project for short term and extraneous objectives.”

She would bet money that his friend Diego did not view it as Ching’s project. The goofiness of her smile slipped slightly into viciousness as she contemplated the financier seeing a pet scientist on a leash while the scientist saw an animated cash machine.

“Yes. I will certainly take your concerns under advisement. Now, I am afraid I have tests that need to be performed within a relatively narrow timeframe, so if you will excuse me?”

Apparently, Ching did not feel he knew his friend Diego quite well enough to hang up on him. Even without that, though, he had probably done enough for Señor Dicastillo to tell his goons to send Ching back to Earth, shrinkwrapped.

The little man turned back to Corinna, not noticeably ruffled.

“Yes,” she babbled with a suitably muzzy grin, “never cut scientific work short. I never did. You shouldn’t either.”

“Heh, heh. No, of course not. It is always important, of course, but it is especially important when the work extends far beyond the boundaries of science. This will solve a vast array of problems stemming from negative thinking. It will save millions of lives. I certainly cannot let any minor considerations stand in the way of something so vital.”

Corinna almost forgot to keep her inane grin in place. Of course. He was saving the world. Anybody with half a brain could see that.

A whole brain, however, was a distinct handicap.

“Now let’s go for a few tests,” he was saying. “Just a few tests to make sure you’re really all right.” Ching turned to the door and the light flashed off his blind glasses.

Once they were out in the hallways, maybe she could find a chance to make a break for it. The important thing was to keep her eyes stupid and not look

like she was looking.

Ching walked beside her. One guard walked in front, one behind. Ducking into something sideways would therefore be her best bet. It was desperately hard to decide when to do it, though. If she just took a hallway, like the three they had already passed, it would be ridiculously easy for them to recapture her. She could yell for help, but knowing the way people reacted to uniforms, that would probably get her nowhere except beaten up in a deeper dungeon. But if the hallways were not good enough, what was? Should she try for a door, any door? This was going to be her only chance to run for it, but she could not tell whether she was passing up opportunities or avoiding lost causes. Deciding to make a run for it was one thing; deciding when was another.

Then Ching opened a door coded to his face, and it no longer mattered what she decided. There was another guard inside. He opened an inner door.

There was Oziel, chuckling to himself. They had not been giving him any better facilities than her, because his obstreperous beard was all over his cheeks again. He looked up.

Corinna's eyes met his. The air seemed to solidify between them and hold their gazes locked. Then Oziel's face split into a broad smile and with the silliest salute, he said,

“Señora Capitán.”

Melting with relief, Corinna knew the vaccine had worked in him too, that he had understood what she had done, and that he was doing his best to play his part. Unfortunately, he didn't have a clue. He was doing a good imitation of drunk, not a doof on snowball.

“The tests must be simultaneous, but he's not ready yet. We should give him a booster,” she heard Ching saying. “It may not be a gender difference so much as a mass difference.”

He was moving toward Oziel. Corinna had no idea if the vaccines would work against a repeat dose. Ching had to be stopped at all costs. Her muscles tensed. She felt light and focused from having more adrenalin than rational thought in her head.

She threw herself at Ching. As they fell, she grabbed at his hand in his pocket and wrenched the injector away. She gave no thought to stopping her fall. Ching was going to hit the ground first. He did, and shrieked.

Ratbag, she thought as she grabbed and twisted his right arm behind him. *If you're getting too old for this, you shouldn't have started it.* She yanked him to his feet and held him as a shield in front of her. In her left hand she had the injector pressed against his neck.

She looked around and saw Oziel struggling with a guard, and the other two guards who had been behind her near the door lunging toward him. Sexism was working for her. Hah. No doubt they thought they could take care of her at their leisure.

“BACK!” she barked.

As if in slow motion, the two men kept bearing down on the struggling

pair. They were all just private security. Unarmed, except one who'd pulled out what had to be an illegal stunner, and if he got close enough to reach Oziel—

“Tell them,” she snarled at Ching, pressing the injector deeper into his neck. His cracking, terrified voice was barely loud enough.

“Do as she says,” he croaked.

But they didn't. The guards seemed to consider both her and the under-sized Ching irrelevant to the real danger. Muscles spoke louder than words.

“STOP! OR HE GETS IT!” She bellowed as commandingly as she could.

That slowed them only for a split second. She wasn't holding a gun. They didn't see how she was any kind of a threat.

She was going to have to make good on her warning. And she was going to have to do it in a microsecond. No time to think about doing unto Ching what he would do unto others. It was her only chance to save Oziel. She pressed the injector. Let Ching take his own medicine. Do him good.

He screamed as the poisonous molecules prickled into his skin.

The guards stopped, forming a wall between her and Oziel. Suddenly, she had their full attention.

Maybe this wasn't so good.

But one of the three was lifted into the air — with the stupidest expression on his face — and Oziel slammed him into the other two, bringing all three down.

He lunged after the falling guards and wrenched the stunner away.

Corinna edged toward the door, still dragging Ching, as if he was a prize of some kind.

Oziel moved toward the door, keeping himself between her and the guards, stunner in hand. The guards were going to be back in action in a heartbeat.

“Let go of him,” Oziel commanded her in a voice that had her arms obeying before her mind could protest.

He stuck the stunner in his waistband and picked the old man up in one motion. He swung him around to build up momentum and threw him into the guards, bringing the whole group down. Ching wailed as he hit the guards. There was a dull crack when he fell, followed by such an ear-splitting scream, it froze Corinna for an instant. Then she dove for the door—.

And slammed into it. Oziel, right behind her, would have slammed into her if his reflexes weren't so fast.

The door was keyed to Ching's face. Of course. Nothing was going to open it—.

It exploded inward and another four guards with CTS logos on their shoulders burst in.

Oh shit. Ohshitohshitohshit.

But oddly enough they didn't even look at Corinna and Oziel.

“Him,” barked the leader, pointing at Ching.

Two of the beefy guys hauled him upright off the floor, and he let out an-

other bloodchilling scream. It shocked even the guards. At some point they'd figure out he'd broken his arm, but she doubted that was going to stop them from delivering him to Dicastillo shrinkwrapped. Because that was what this had to be about.

Oziel was pushing her, gently, surreptitiously, urgently.

Duh! Get out while you can! Instead of standing around sightseeing like an idiot.

She slipped out, Oziel right behind her, and she heard a couple of the guards shout behind her. Two boiled out of the room after them.

"RUN!" he yelled. But he didn't. He charged the guards so fast he was on them before she saw him move.

No! Abandoning ship to save yourself was despicable. But that collided with Anitut's voice saying *You do whatever you do best. There's no time for anything else.* Corinna was worse than useless here. He was right. She ran as fast as she could, throwing desperate glances back the whole way.

A couple more guards had run out. She'd never seen anyone fight like that, not even in vids. Two of the guards were moaning on the floor, a third – she was looking when it happened and couldn't even see what he'd done – sailed through the air and hit the floor and didn't move. Oziel wasn't using the stunner, maybe because his bare hands could do more and he was using them both, as well as throwing bonecrushing kicks. Two more guards ran out. She'd heard somewhere that a master of karate wouldn't stand a chance against a good streetfighter. She could see why now. He was fighting all three of them, but one of them broke away to run after her.

Hell. Me and my sightseeing is going to get us all killed. She found she could run a lot faster than she thought. But she could hear the feet pounding behind her. This wasn't going to work. Terrifying hands grabbed her—.

But not all that well. He only grabbed one of her arms. She dropped to the floor, he bent to haul her up, she tried to kick his feet out from under him. Her face was a hand's breadth away from the video feed and throat mic on his collar, but she was willing to bet it wasn't recording this interaction. It'd have a wire connection to the main comm unit though, to make sure it couldn't be jammed. She grabbed for it as she finally succeeded in making him stumble. The box came out like a fish on a line. Every kind of comm in the world would pass through emergency calls. Luckily, she had only one guard to deal with so she could catch at it with her one free hand, mash the red button, and start screaming,

"Help!"

She wriggled and dodged a blow to her head to knock her out and shut her up. She kept screaming and struggling for all she was worth.

But there were too many of them. Oziel couldn't get to her – she could see him trying to – her guard was dragging her off somewhere, trying to bash her head in. At least he was too busy to turn his comm off. Judging by how desperate he was, he must be hearing voices in his ear asking him what the trou-

ble was.

The bulkhead doors at both ends of the hall opened and emergency services personnel poured in.

At last, at last, at last. Thank God Almighty—

A huge blow hit her head.

Chapter 19

Corinna awoke in the quietest ship she had ever heard. She must be on a ship, not the Station, because the acceleration was strong enough to push her right into the bed. Mars didn't have that kind of gravity.

Had she been hurt badly enough that they were sending her to Earth? No, she could move her fingers. And her toes. She could even sit up.

There was an eerie absence of vibration. There wasn't even any ventilator hum. And the cabin was huge: about four meters by six. This wasn't the hospital cabin on any ship she knew about.

There were two doors, which meant it was a corner cabin. She was being treated like absolute royalty. She stood up carefully. When she felt no dizziness, she decided to trust the acceleration field's stability, and began to move toward one of the doors. The first door opened when she twisted the old-fashioned knob – a strange accoutrement for a ship – and found she had walked into a bathroom. It was a silly bathroom to have on a ship, because the relation between the water flow and the fixtures meant they could only be used in one specific orientation. She hated to think what would happen to the toilet when –

Then she finally understood what she felt and saw. This was not acceleration. This was gravity. And the only place with gravity like this was Earth.

She stumbled back to the bed and bumped heavily down on to it.

What? ... How...? It would take over a week to get to Earth. I can't have been out for a week. ... Can I?

She tried to check the time, but there wasn't any display anywhere with time on it. Nor did she have a wristpad.

That means I'm not among friends.

Was she sure? It was easy enough to find out. If the second door opened, then maybe. If not, then not.

The second door did not open.

So, she'd been smuggled all the way to Earth. It could be done.

She sat down with a thump on the bed again, her heart beating too fast, her mind racing. If she was a prisoner, there were probably cameras. She should make sure she looked blank. If she was a prisoner, why was she a prisoner?

Well, she could tell Dicastillo where she'd sent her messages about his hap-

py gene scheme. Then he could do whatever people like him did to silence information. Had she maybe already babbled everything under the influence of any one of several drugs that would work? No, she couldn't have. Then she'd have been dumped out of an airlock days ago. They must not have had suitable drugs for babbling on board ship. And people who were adept at pulling out fingernails might also be hard to find on short notice.

But she had been drugged into amnesia, at the least, for the entire week-long flight. She even knew which of three drugs they had probably used, given that it had cleared out of her system without noticeable after-effects.

On second thought, though, getting her to babble seemed like a side issue. From Dicastillo's perspective, that is. From her perspective, it was life-ending, but from his, it was pointless. All the evidence was still on Mars. They'd get him no matter what he did to her.

Unless Unless he'd already destroyed all the evidence on Mars. Once upon a time that thought seemed crazy. Now it seemed so simple and obvious, her heart shrank at the certainty he'd done it. One good tear through the skin of Burbidge, say by crashing a research drone into it, and everything in there would dry out into dust within hours. Including the people.

Where was Oziel? He was probably back at Foggy Bottom by now. If it was still there.

Maybe he was still at Arsia. It would be harder to kill everyone on a much bigger base, especially one dug into the mountain. Wouldn't it? Unless you blew it up, and the mountain buried the base for you.

The fact that she was a prisoner, now that she thought about it, must mean everything that mattered was already obliterated on Mars.

She tried to go back to thinking about something else. Anything else. Her mind kept circling around the missing week, or however long it had been, trying to fill it in, trying to remember anything. After a while, dream sequences came back to her, so unmoored and disjointed she couldn't be sure they really weren't just drug-induced dreams.

There was someone talking next to her. She was sitting in a chair. The world was full of shapes and colors. They were very nice colors.

"You gafo. Is this what I pay you good money for? She's coming to."

It was such a nice voice. The speaker, he was over to her left somewhere. She looked over to her left. Yes, there was someone there, a stocky person, much taller than she was. You're sitting, silly, a voice in her mind told her. Of course he's taller. She giggled.

Somebody behind her was speaking. He also had a nice voice. A very nice voice.

"Sir, you wanted her system clear as soon as possible, so I gauged it as best I could. I can't give her anything here, unless —." The voice fell silent.

Life was so sad. He wanted to give her something, and he couldn't. It was always like that. She wondered whether she could see him. It was hard. It involved turning around and looking back and up. The chair started to move. How strange. Chairs had always stood still before. She giggled again, and waved to the delightful-looking woman who was shining a light in her eyes.

"A cousin of my wife's," the stocky man was saying as he quietly passed the woman some funny-colored money.

Such a nice man. He was giving her a present.

"She reacted badly to the nausea medication, so I'm just trying to get her home as quickly as possible."

Another man had showed up. He stood on the other side of the woman and he wore a funny peaked hat, like a chocolate soldier. That was strange, because he didn't look like he was made of chocolate. He was touching the hat and saying,

"Home, sir?" and started talking into his wristpad.

There was a funny rumble from the stocky man, almost like an unhappy dog. He was looking at the woman who was doing something with a light pen. Corinna didn't want anyone to be unhappy. Everyone should be happy. The world was full of beautiful colors.

"We don' hafta go home, y' know. We don' hafta go anywhere. We can —"

"Are we done, ma'am?" said the stocky man, looking red. "I should really get her home."

The delightful woman waved him through and Corinna waved back. The man in the peaked hat opened the door of a flitter that had pulled up to her chair. The chair had wheels on it. Oh, she thought. This is a wheelchair.

"We'll have the little lady home in no time," said the chocolate soldier so kindly, Corinna tried to take a good look at him too.

"Where's Rico?" growled the stocky man. "What are you doing here? Who asked you to bring a flitter?"

That didn't sound very nice. She tried to focus the stocky man again. He didn't look very nice at all, now that she could see him better. The voice in her mind, she realized, was trying to say something. You'd think someone who studied this stuff would recognize a goddamn drug when it's given to her.

You've been drugged, it yelled at her.

Drugged?

She should get out of the chair.

"Oh, hell," said the stocky man. "Take her home. We'll take care of her there."

And then someone put a funny-smelling mask on her face.

She wondered what story they'd given to the nursing attendant who had to have taken care of personal hygiene and fed her while she was comatose. In the next instant, she wished she hadn't thought about food. Judging by how ravenous she suddenly felt, they hadn't fed her very much.

Well, if this was Earth, food should be plentiful. Except in this huge room. It maddened her to think of a planet full of food just beyond the door and no way to get at it. Then she noticed the little stack of ration bars on the night table right next to the bed. To think there had been a time when she had disdained the leathery things. She started tearing at one, while slogging over to the sink with the rest to soak them in water so she could eat them faster.

Some time later, a search of the room having turned up no further caches of emergency food, she sat back down on the bed. It was the only place to sit besides the floor. She went back to thinking about what came next.

And then she immediately tried not to think about what came next.

She should think about escape. She had to escape.

But where was she? Escape was only possible *from* somewhere ... and *to* somewhere.

Judging by the opulence of the bathroom's sculptured taps and the wall-covering of light blue silk, the part of her dream that said she was in one of Dicastillo's houses must be true. This room must be a guest room. She supposed Dicastillo couldn't very well have dungeons for his enemies, because if the wrong people stumbled across a private jail, there'd be a scandal. Nonetheless, depending on how difficult this room was to break out of, it would make a fine prison. When she checked, she found the second door was not only locked, but also set flush with the wall. There were no hinges to take off, even if she'd had the tools to attempt it. Nor did the room have any windows she could climb through or signal out of. She wondered how much time she had before they came to take her apart. The door would probably click open once the other drugs had completely cleared out of her system, so that there would be no unforeseen interactions.

The smooth faceplate of the electronic controls near the door gave no hope of susceptibility to jimmying. When she looked closely, she noticed that one large panel of silk was separate from the rest. Some exploring and prodding revealed a tastefully concealed set of buttons, and random tapping at them made the panel recede noiselessly toward the ceiling. Behind it was an enormous screen.

That was all. Just a damn video screen. An extremely expensive, damn video screen. Great, she thought, if I can figure out how to turn it on, I can watch schlock until they come and take me away. Or find out how much of Arsia had been destroyed. And how many people died.

She wasn't sure she wanted to know, not yet anyway, but she pushed at the buttons nevertheless. Nothing happened.

She sat back down on the bed, discouraged and breathing heavily from the exertion of dragging herself around in the enormous gravity. A year ago, she

used to run through this stuff like it wasn't there. If it came to running now – and if she was lucky, it would – she'd probably collapse before she reached the door.

So, this was it. No windows, a door she couldn't open, a bathroom that functioned only as a bathroom, and a night table with a shiny black surface glowing with the usual electronics: a blinking clock showing noon, a comm panel, and a baby monitor. An elliptical, black remote rested on the night table's glassy surface. The remote did nothing, and a quick check showed its power pack had been removed. The comm panel didn't register any addresses that she tapped in. The baby monitor's green light winked restfully on and off, on and off, to show that it was ready to perform its function of monitoring babies. Unfortunately, Corinna had no babies for it to work with.

However, somebody here obviously did. Otherwise the thing would have been an invisible part of the black background. Would yelling "help!" into its speaker bring someone running?

Yes, the guards, most likely, who could be trusted to hear every word just as well as the mother or nanny.

But would the guards come if she sounded like a baby? They might ignore that. And then, if some neutral third party opened the door suddenly... The idea couldn't be dignified by calling it a plan, but before it was even complete in her mind, she leaned forward, the better to hide her face from any cameras, and tried to make a noise like a discontented infant. To her own ears, she sounded more like a cat than a human, but maybe none of the guards were fathers and wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

Nothing happened, so she mewed again.

Corinna jerked backward on the bed when a sharp, irritated woman's voice broke into the silent room, speaking in Spanish.

"What was that?" the voice demanded.

Corinna was speechless. She hadn't said anything the woman could be annoyed–.

"Is that so?" came the voice again. "You said your partner's 'a whiny brat'? I'm glad to hear it. I would not like to think you could be referring to Pedrito."

Corinna realized she was hearing only one end of a conversation, apparently between the guards and a woman who had heard them over another intercom system somewhere else in the house.

"Well," she continued sharply, "I don't know what you two are still doing here, when I told the staff to take the evening off, but if you're here anyway, you can make yourselves useful by looking for Pedrito."

There was silence on Corinna's end while the guards no doubt tried to say they couldn't leave their post. It occurred to her they might be checking their security displays, so she lay back on the bed and tried to look as oblivious and harmless as possible.

"Less of the backchat, if you please, and more service. Otherwise I'll see you

sacked. Pedrito was playing with the monitors, and when I went to make sure he was all right, he hid somewhere. I just heard him crying. If he gets out into the garden, he could go over the edge. So get out there and start searching.”

The woman sounded close to screaming, her voice was so shrill.

Well, thought Corinna, so much for that idea. It sounded like the guards were being dispersed all over the place, which would have been very nice if she could have got out of this room, but she had as much chance of going over the wall as “Pedrito.” She wondered whether the “edge” referred to something physical, or possibly mental. Was he a kid who hated plants and became delusional at the sight of them?

And then the door slid silently open.

Leira Dicastillo stood on the threshold, stock still in shock at seeing Corinna leap out of bed. From a room not far away came the high-pitched sounds of a kid shrieking in triumph.

“I’ve got it!” And then the rapid patter of his little feet down the hall and away. A millisecond later she heard the bellow and heavy thumping of the guard in pursuit.

Corinna suddenly knew who ‘Pedrito’ was. And that he was no longer lost. Unfortunately.

Leira looked up the hallway toward the footsteps and back at Corinna.

Why hadn’t she called the guards?

Instead, Leira pointed at a specific door down the hall and whispered, “Bathroom!” as Corinna streaked past in the indicated direction. She heard Leira set off after the guard, screaming, “Petey!”

Doors started opening and closing, apparently at random, up and down the hall as Corinna ran past. She wondered if, perhaps, the kid had snatched the guards’ handheld lock control. That would account for them abandoning their station to run after him, and for the behavior of the doors, and, quite possibly, for the door she needed locking in her face. Then it opened again, long enough for her to leap through it, but closed behind her. Was that random or was she trapped again? Whatever Leira had planned for her couldn’t be any worse than her father. Bathroom, she’d said. Corinna plunged into the bathroom, closed the door, and clutched the sink, gasping. Then she sank to the floor, still gasping. It was amazing what adrenalin could do for you. She hadn’t even noticed that run. But now she felt like her lungs were about to burst.

After God-only-knew how many minutes of gulping and wheezing, her breathing slowed down to merely strenuous, and she began noticing the room she was in. It had the same opulent taps, but other than that it resembled the other bathroom as Buckingham Palace resembles a bank. It was big enough to get lost in. There was a bath the size of a swimming pool sunk in the floor. There was a shower with multiple heads visible through frosted glass walls, and a toilet tucked in its own alcove by the door. The washstand above her as she sat on the floor looked like a perfect, giant scallop shell rest-

ing on a single swirl of stalk. The jewel box on the boudoir table spilled out things that were too refined for costume jewelry, in which case that was a diamond tiara, a sapphire pendant the size of a robin's egg set in diamonds, and an emerald necklace and earrings. This had to be Leira's own bathroom.

And in Leira's own bathroom there would be no security cameras. The risk of a splicer breaking into that data stream and publishing those pictures would be unacceptable, to say nothing of the security guards themselves watching at the wrong moment. Corinna's breathing slowed down some more. She should try to find a place to hide because the inevitable search would start soon. At the bottom of the bath might be good, if she could find some bubble bath and a long enough something to breathe through, unobtrusively.

Too late. The door opened before she could so much as scramble toward the pool, but it was Leira.

"Are you all right?" she whispered breathlessly.

"I don't know," said Corinna, also breathless. "Am I?"

"*¡Dios mío!* I don't know if any of us are." She was going to say something else, but they both heard the guards yelling to each other in the hall outside. Leira pointed urgently at a panel Corinna hadn't noticed before, while she herself moved toward the door.

Corinna realized the panel was another door and found it opened into a closet big enough for a Manhattan apartment. She had no sooner closed the door than she heard the bathroom door wrenched open and a shrill, "Do you mind!"

She heard a male voice gasp and say, "*¡Perdón, Señora! ¡Perdón!*" and the door banged closed again. In the midst of her troubles, she had to stifle a snort of laughter. Leira must have cut short the search of the bathroom by sitting on the toilet.

Corinna waited to see whether the guard had been only temporarily squelched, but apparently he was too mortified to face Leira again or to explain to his colleague why he should take over the search of that particular bathroom himself. The panel leading to her closet opened slowly and Leira peered in with wide eyes. Corinna stepped out without saying a word.

"I – I don't know what to do," Leira choked out.

Something had gone very wrong in the Dicastillo household if his daughter was helping outsiders escape her father's security men.

"What's going on?" asked Corinna.

"I took Petey to his pediatrician today."

That's nice, thought Corinna. Next she'll tell me she bought a new hat.

"He'd never heard of that treatment." Leira broke down, sobbing. "Father doesn't care what happens to Petey. He doesn't care about anything. It's all my brother and his precious sons. Father –"

"Have you," Corinna interrupted, "heard anything more about 'that treatment'?"

"I ... I think so. I hope not."

That made no sense. Corinna took a deep breath. She led Leira over to the boudoir chair, sat her down, sat down on the floor herself, and began.

"Leira, I'm really, really sorry to be the one to tell you, but there's no time, and you have to know. I've studied everything there is about 'that treatment.' It permanently affects the brain and makes you incapable of anything except feeling happy. It was invented to keep rebels docile. It's being used in prisons here right now."

The heiress, leaning on a few emeralds apparently without even feeling them, opened and closed her mouth a few times. Finally, without producing any actual sound, her lips shaped the words,

"I – I heard something about that. I couldn't believe... Fa–, Father ... Petey ..."

"It's hard even for me to believe."

Leira had stopped crying. She sat, stunned, silent.

"Now that you know, your father may try something even against you. I think it would be a good idea for you to get the hell out of here, same as me."

"Where would I go?" Leira whispered, but it sounded like a wail anyway.

"Anywhere! A hotel, if that's all there is. Just out of here and away from his guards."

"If I use my credit, he'll know where I am, regardless. What's the use?"

"So use cash."

"Cash?"

"Um, yes. Cash."

"I don't have any cash." The wail was back. "What would I do with cash? Under normal circumstances."

Corinna realized she needed to rescue Leira as well as herself. She abandoned her first thought, starting with "pawnshops."

"Listen, I know this is a dumb question, but where exactly are we?"

"What do you mean?" Leira was clearly doubting whether Corinna had as firm a grip on events as she'd hoped.

"Well, you were speaking Spanish, so I assume we're in Venezuela?"

"Yes, Caracas."

"Excellent. Sanderas is here somewhere. If I could get in touch with him, I'm sure he could help. He'll get us both out."

"And Petey!"

"Yes, of course. And Petey."

God help her, if she had to spend time in the confines of a flitter with that brat. Where was Oziel when she needed him?

"Do you know if the guards routinely trace calls made from here?" Corinna asked.

"I – I don't know. They're probably not tracing calls from my pin. Yet."

That was when Corinna noticed that Leira wore the latest model comm pin, one of those that should have a warning label on it about being swallowed by

small children.

“Go for it,” she urged. “Miguel Sanderas. Runs a clinic in Petare.”

“Petare....” Leira’s eyes went even wider at the mention of the slum, but she gave the necessary voice commands.

A tired man’s voice answered.

“Sanderas here.”

Corinna spoke up.

“*Miguel Sanderas?*”

Leira took the pin off and handed it to her.

“Yes, indeed. What can I do for you?”

“Do you know Oziel Garcia?” It would not do at all to get the wrong Sanderas.

“Yes, Señora, I know Oziel Garcia. Now, would you mind telling me what’s going on or else letting a weary man go home? It’s been a long day.”

Corinna would have bet he never had short days, in his line of work.

“I’m sorry. I don’t even know what time it is. This is Corinna Mansur.”

“What?”

“I’m somewhere in Caracas” – she looked questioningly at Leira, who mouthed back,

“Top of the CTS building.”

– “at the top of the CTS building, if that means anything to you.”

“*Dicastillo’s* building? What are you doing there?”

“He kidnapped me. I need to be rescued. Right now.”

“*Oy, mierda,*” the voice at the other end breathed. “So what’s your situation?” he asked, not wasting more than a second.

“Right now, there’s just two guards to contend with. I don’t know how many more could be called out if they wanted to.”

“Holy God, you need an army. You need muscle. And I, Doctora, believe me, am not muscle. Give me a minute. Let me think.”

Corinna prepared to give him a minute, but before it was over, he said,

“Do you have a flitter, perhaps?”

Leira nodded.

“Yes,” said Corinna.

“Okay, there’s no way we can match *Dicastillo’s* strength. The only thing is to be faster. And I’m going to need some help. And a flitter. Then, assuming there’s pursuit, we can draw them off with one flitter, while you make it through in the other one. I’ll call you as soon as I have things ready.”

“Now, wait a –” but he had closed the connection. She stared at the comm pin in her hand. He would leave a hole like a meteor crater in the lives of those around him if he died.

She looked up to see Leira staring at her, eyes as wide as ever. She pulled herself together.

“Well, we better be ready when he arrives. You’ll probably be gone for a couple of days at least, so take what you need for Petey. Without letting any-

one see you packing. And, listen.” She took a deep breath. “Have you heard anything from Arsia?”

“*Arsia? Mars?*”

Corinna nodded impatiently and managed to restrain herself from saying, *No, Arsia, North Dakota.*

“No. Why? Should I have?”

Corinna shook her head. It didn’t necessarily mean anything. If only Oziel had been killed, it wouldn’t necessarily make headlines on Earth. Nor would a subtle destruction of evidence. Although anything subtle would probably take more than a few days to arrange. She let herself feel the tiniest bit relieved.

“Stuff for Petey,” she reiterated. “Hurry.”

Leira nodded, but didn’t move.

“What are we going to do about Father?” she whispered. “He’ll get us sooner or later, if we don’t do something about him.”

Yes, there was that. Corinna had let herself settle into the notion of escaping first and getting Dicastillo later, from a position of slightly more strength. But going for the jugular at the earliest opportunity was probably exactly what Dicastillo himself would be doing, even if he didn’t know where to find a pawnshop either.

Corinna was, after all, inside his house; the house where he felt safe enough to store valuable prisoners. There had to be evidence of what he was up to all over this place. Especially all over his personal, private computer.

“Do you think there’s any way I could get at his computer without the guards noticing? It would probably take all of five minutes to mirror it.”

Leira looked dubious.

“I don’t know. It would be simpler for me, wouldn’t it?”

“You? Could you do that?”

“I’ve mirrored memory before.” Leira sounded offended to be thought so incompetent. “It won’t be difficult, assuming he left it on, so it doesn’t start checking for the correct iris patterns. But he usually does. It’s just a home machine.”

“Okay,” Corinna said slowly. “Go for it. I’ll wait here.” Well, obviously, she thought. Where else would she wait? Something about being under pressure brought on inanity.

Leira left her with the comm pin, in case Sanderas called before she returned.

As time oozed by far too slowly, Corinna thought she should have asked for her watch too. Without any way to tell time, she was convinced about an hour had passed before Leira breezed back in, looking smug.

Leira protested that she’d been gone barely ten minutes. She patted the pocket on the sleeve of her upper left arm.

“I have the chip. Now let me just throw a few things together. Nothing from Sanderas yet?”

“No. I was getting worried, but if it’s really only been ten minutes, maybe

we're still all right."

"I think so. I went looking for the guards to dress them down for their atrocious behavior, so I know they're back in their room, trying to stay cool with all the electronics they have in there, staring at monitors and drinking coffee."

"They've given up on hunting for me?" Corinna was incredulous.

"No, I think they figure they'll pick you up on a monitor sooner than they'll find you by hunting through closets."

Without Leira's help, that would have been true.

"I wonder they don't call in ten or twenty assistants."

"And let everybody know they've failed? I don't think so. Not while they're hoping to catch you again quietly."

"If they have their eyeballs glued to the monitors, we'll have to come up with some diversion to get out."

For a moment, Leira's eyes widened again, but then she went back to looking smug.

"Petey will manage that. He's good at that."

It was Corinna's turn to look horrified. She could just imagine Petey's idea of a diversion, if given a free hand. The whole building would probably end up a smoldering pile.

The comm pin finally warbled, and Corinna grabbed it to start pressing buttons until she remembered that there were none. She ordered it to open the connection.

"Doctora?"

She was never going to get used to that Hispanic formality. Never.

"Yes," she said.

There was a little click of static. These days, static occurred only on antiques. So much for comm pins small enough to swallow.

"We got a chip," she continued quickly. "It may be encrypted. Can you line up a person to decrypt?"

"There's no shortage of splicers here, but I'm not sure we want them with us. Any other ideas?"

"Try Cholly Nymans. He should be able to line someone up, pronto. I have his address memorized." She gave it to the doctor, and could hear him delegating to someone else the task of calling London at two AM, local time.

There was more static on the line. Corinna was beginning to wonder whether it was really static. If she'd heard that pattern of clicks in some of her equipment, she would have assumed interference. On a call that could mean someone eavesdropping.

Jee-sus. She hoped not. What had they said so far? Pretty much everything. Maybe that was why nobody was trying very hard to recapture her. This way, she'd tell them everything they needed to know.

Leira reappeared as Sanderas was pointing out that they hoped to have some muscle ready at his end, should that prove necessary. Corinna had lost the thread of what he was saying. The muscle was needed here, not there.

"They'll be out in front of the clinic somewhere," he was saying as a whole burst of static happened and a voice suddenly interrupted.

"Doctora?" the unidentified man said with hesitation.

"Who's that?" Leira asked suddenly and sharply, taking her comm pin from Corinna.

"Oy," said the voice, taken aback. Then he continued, sounding resigned, "Yes, I was ... there on Monday. But what I wanted to say was I'm certain someone has been listening to this conversation. That static is not right. You must get out of there instantly."

Oh, shit, thought Corinna.

"What!" exclaimed Leira. "But I thought you'd come here. Where should we go?"

"Go to where you dropped me off. And *don't*, don't say where that is over this connection. Just go, as fast as you can. We'll meet you there."

"All—, all right," she quavered. Then, obviously taking his words to heart, she cut the connection without even saying goodbye. "*O Dios mío.*" She seemed about to wring her hands. "I have to finish packing. Petey has to.... *O Dios...*" She ran out of the bathroom into her bedroom, leaving Corinna in a quandary as to what to do. What did Leira mean, "finish packing?" There wasn't time, for Christ's sake. They had to leave *now*, but she couldn't run after her into the bedroom and risk being seen on the monitors.

The seconds trickled by, congealing into minutes. Corinna had just decided to take her chances with the security cameras when a noise like a troop of fighting chimpanzees broke out in the distance. Above it all rose Petey's delighted war whoops.

Now! thought Corinna. Go, go, go. But she was stopped almost immediately by a luggage cart in front of the bedroom door to the hallway, piled with three suitcases. Their outer surface imitated tapestries. With cold certainty, Corinna knew this was Leira's idea of a few things for a couple of days. She grabbed the handle and towed it behind her, heart pounding.

There was a cloud of white powder billowing out of a room down the hall, and the sound of thumping bodies.

Now where? thought Corinna, standing irresolute in the middle of the hall, forming an excellent target, with no clue where else to go. Leira popped out, covered in white dust, carrying Petey covered in the same stuff, and made urgent motions with her head, pointing somewhere down the hall.

Corinna set off in the indicated direction, wondering what the white stuff was. Pesticide? Cocaine? Were they all going to die?

Leira caught up, hurried through an archway into a huge room. Corinna had a fleeting impression of cream-colored furniture and the biggest Persian carpet she had ever seen and a peculiar wall of stars.

No, it wasn't a wall. It was a huge window, which was opening at a word from Leira, and they were running on flagstones through potted plants and trees. The stars were the lights of Caracas stretching on forever below them.

Below them. Corinna's gasping breathing acquired sudden depth when she grasped how very far below them. The CTS building was a skyscraper. This was a penthouse. Going over the edge here would be anything but figurative. She concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other and dragging the jolting suitcases over the cracks in the flagstones.

Where were the guards? They must be right behind them. She kept hallucinating the sound of pounding footsteps, but they vanished every time she threw a desperate glance backward.

Chapter 20

Corinna blindly followed Leira, stumbled through an opening in the low stone wall around the rooftop garden, and found herself dragging the suitcases over gravel. Rows of flitters were parked at a lift-off area. Thank God. She had maybe another fifty steps in her before her heart and lungs exploded.

There were still no guards. Had Petey killed them?

Gull-wing doors on a flitter started opening as Leira scurried up. She set Petey inside, took one look at Corinna and helped her inside. Then took a look at her suitcases and began struggling to lift them in. Corinna reached out to try to help, but could do little more than lean on them to push them toward the back between wheezing breaths. Petey was shrieking.

“Shut up,” she muttered, without hope. To her surprise, he did. Maybe nobody had ever told him to shut up before.

Leira finally jumped in, and the flitter lifted off smoothly, closing its doors at the same time at a word from her. Corinna took the luxury of a glance to see how close behind them the guards were ... and saw that they weren't.

“Sheesh. What'd you do with those guards?”

“That was Petey. Yes,” Leira said, turning to her little boy as he jounced up and down on the cabin control panel between the two seats. Affectionately, she flapped some of the white powder out of his hair, “you're Mami's clever little boy, aren't you?”

“Um, before you do that, what is this stuff? I mean, if it's toxic, we—”

“It's just flour. Petey squeezed a plastic liter bottle of oil at the guards' faces and followed it up by exploding a bag of flour on the desk fan they had running. Such a clever little man, aren't you?” she cooed at him again.

“I see.” It certainly had the virtue of simplicity. And the guards had probably thought nothing of seeing Petey horsing around, raising hell in the kitchen and everywhere else. She wondered where he got the idea. Saturday morning cartoons, probably. He, meanwhile, still bouncing and sending fine flour dust into the cabin's limited air, was going to give Corinna a coughing fit any second now.

“Did you see that? I got 'em! I got 'em! Did you see that?”

“Yeah,” she muttered, the coughing fit coming on as per schedule, “me and the guards, both.”

Leira turned the ventilation to maximum and tried to get Petey to sit still,

which had about as much success as Corinna expected. Maybe they would reach wherever they were going before she tied him up.

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a shopping mall. Not far any more.”

“And you dropped this fellow off there who we’re going to meet?”

Leira nodded. She seemed ... reticent.

“Who is he?”

“I don’t actually know his name.”

“Oh. Is he, how should I say this, *okay*?”

“Yes,” said Leira. “It was something he said that made me think I really needed to follow Señor Garcia’s suggestion and get a second opinion before taking Petey in for that treatment.”

“*Oh.*” This was getting stranger and stranger. They’d obviously had a far-reaching conversation, he lived in Petare, and she didn’t know his name. “So how’d you meet him?”

Leira didn’t answer the question.

“That’s them don’t you think?” She pointed toward two little figures standing next to a scuffed rental flitter in a vast parking lot full of air and ground cars.

The two figures were looking up at them.

“Let’s hope so,” said Corinna.

Leira pointed at the spot on the heads-up display where she wanted her craft to land, and said,

“Fast.”

It spiralled in at dizzying speed, being a literal-minded machine. The gull-wing doors were opening before Corinna was sure she’d recovered her stomach from where she’d left it, at the top of that descent.

Miguel Sanderas – it had to be him – came running up to help her out of the flitter.

“Thank God. We were getting worried.”

He was a small, slight man, barely taller than she was, with a firm, gentle touch that seemed to draw the anxiety right out of her. Talk about a bedside manner – he must be an extraordinary doctor.

“Yes, well, the guards are going to be following sooner or later, so don’t quit worrying yet.”

He smiled reassuringly and was about to say something when Petey, continuing the theme he’d been developing in the flitter, started telling the whole parking lot that he’d-got-’em, he’d-got-’em, he’d-got-’em.

Oh Christ. All they needed was that squirt drawing everyone’s attention to them so that when the guards started questioning bystanders about where they’d gone—.

Suddenly Petey stopped yelling. He’d been caught up and spun around by a large man who looked so much like Oziel, Corinna’s jaw dropped, briefly. He was almost as tall, almost as strong-looking, and as handsome, in his own

way. Leira's mystery man had to be Marco. He'd set Petey down now and squatted next to him, saying very seriously,

"Ey, *Señorito*, an adventure, yes? Come on. You have to help your mother," and he lifted the little boy into the rental flitter and showed him how to do his bit by strapping himself in. There weren't any further shrieks or protests.

"Right," Sanderas continued, "you and the Señora and her son in that flitter." He indicated the rental. "Marco and I will draw them off in the one where they expect you to be."

"No," said Corinna. "I have no idea where to go and autopilot may not be enough if we have to exercise any initiative. She's got the chip, which is all that really matters now. You take her and the boy. Marco and I draw them off. I should be able to pilot that thing."

Sanderas was obviously torn, wanting to be everywhere at once. Marco was standing there, both in a fever of impatience and looking at the ground, as embarrassed as she'd ever seen a man.

"Come on," said Corinna. "It's the best idea."

"My things," cried Leira, making motions toward her flitter, as Corinna shooed her toward the rental machine.

Marco strode over and stuck his head inside the door of the sleek flitter.

"Get *going*," cried Corinna to Leira, still dithering toward her suitcases.

As Marco caught sight of the luggage, Corinna heard him mutter, "*Dios ayúdame*," sounding so much like his brother, it caught her heart.

"Oy, *mierda!*" exclaimed Sanderas softly, pointing to the distant speck of a flitter on a non-standard flight path, headed toward them.

For a moment, Corinna wondered what had taken Dicastillo's men so long, and then realized it couldn't be anything good. They must be coming after them in force, if it had taken them this long to assemble the troops.

"Go, Señora Dicastillo," Marco said urgently, but still somehow deferentially. "I'll bring them." Corinna saw him wave his hand in Oziel's downward, "case closed" gesture. He shoved one bag under his arm, grabbed both the others, raced over to the rental, and flung them in.

Leira, meanwhile, motioned Corinna urgently over to the control panel of her flitter and said, "Speak!"

"What? Speak what?"

Leira touched another couple of controls, and then ran toward Sanderas's flitter while Marco ran the other way toward Corinna and flung himself into the passenger seat.

"Doors. Close," said Corinna experimentally, and was astonished when they did. Leira must have transferred voice control over to her. Which was very nice, but she'd be more comfortable using manual. "Go. West. Fast," she commanded. Time enough to figure out manual later, when she'd drawn the goons away from noticing small rental flitters slowly and unobtrusively headed east.

It took her endless seconds to call up the right heads-up display to track the

flitter following them. It took more seconds to catch a glimpse of the rental, quietly staying parked in the lot, apparently unnoticed. Sanderas sure knew how to keep his head in an emergency.

Dicastillo's men were gaining on her. "Faster," she urged. The flitter calmly continued at its previous speed. Desperately, but deliberately, she called up help screens. The stupid thing had to go faster than this. Then she saw it. It had user-defined speed ranges, currently set to "average." She selected "racing" at the top of the scale, and tried saying "faster" again. The thing pressed them into their seats at, she guessed, over two gees as it smoothly accelerated to four hundred kph. She hoped it had every automatic avoidance device known to science. The other flitter was no longer gaining. She called up more help manuals, and found out Leira's flitter also had something listed as "overdrive." This little sports model might be able to run loop-the-loops around the guards' flitter while it led them on, if she could figure out how to make it do loops.

She leaned back, turned to Marco, extended her hand, and said, "Corinna Mansur."

He shook her hand and nodded.

"Si. Doctor Sanderas said. My brother wrote us about you."

He spoke in Spanish, and Corinna had already gathered that he was less than familiar with English. She tried to pull together enough of her Spanish to continue, but he said,

"It's okay. I can understand some English, if you don't speak too fast."

"Well," she grinned, "then we're even. The same goes for me and your Spanish."

He gave her a faint smile back, and that was when Corinna noticed he looked like he'd forgotten how to do it. The settled sadness of his face was so deep, it seemed embedded in the shape of his bones.

She gave attention to their pursuers again, who had accelerated enough to keep up. So, they hadn't been going at top speed either. She wondered what their maximum was. Then she wondered what her maximum was.

"They're going to call for help pretty soon, when they realize they may not catch us. Time for a change of scenery, don't you think?"

She headed south toward distant hills shrouded in night, but visible as ghostly green trceries in the heads-up display. Infrared showed that the dark land beneath them crawled with people, invisible because they were mostly too poor to have lights. When she'd led the guards far into the country, she looped back and seemed to lose them.

She slowed down a bit to make sure she didn't lose them entirely. She kept scanning the display, but leaned back again, and tried to find something reasonably neutral to talk to Marco about.

"Leira said you and she had talked, and it sounds like she has a lot to thank you for. How did that all come about?"

The question met with silence, and when she glanced over, she was sur-

prised to see Marco looking so far beyond embarrassed that he needed a whole new category, all to himself.

“So what’s the problem?” she wanted to know. “I’d think having a multibillionaire in your debt is a good thing.”

“*Dios santo*,” he muttered, so that Corinna could barely hear him over the subdued whine of the flitter. “*She* is not in *my* debt. Didn’t she tell you?”

“Well, no, or I wouldn’t be asking you about it, would I?”

“*Dios santo*,” he muttered again.

Corinna waited, checking the displays. Damn, the pursuing flitter cut in from the side, together with a second one, which looked faster and meaner. Time to see what “overdrive” on the racing scale meant. They were pressed back in their seats again, and once they reached top speed, Corinna blew out a breath. Overdrive seemed to mean five hundred and fifty kph. The other flitters were falling behind, but not far enough for her tastes. She decided to find out just how good autopilot was on this thing, since she and Marco were entirely at the mercy of the machine in any case. She headed for the canyons between the skyscrapers of the business district and, if they came out of this alive, some truly spectacular speeding tickets for Leira once the satellite had processed her transponder signal.

They emerged on the western side and were over other dark hills in moments. The two pursuing flitters were somewhere behind them, fighting with traffic.

She glanced over at Marco to see him looking at her as if she was a tiger and he was cornered. Her driving wasn’t *that* bad. Or maybe it also had to do with her embarrassing questions.

“Marco, for heaven’s sake, I don’t know what you’re worried about. I mean, if it’s something you don’t want to talk about, tell me to mind my own business. I was just curious. It seemed so odd.”

“It was odd,” he said quietly. “It was certainly odd.” He visibly took a deep breath and seemed to come to a decision. “I don’t know how much it matters if you know. But don’t tell anyone, okay? Especially, for the love of God, don’t tell Zielo.”

“Well, sure,” promised Corinna, bemused in spite of his seriousness by his faith that her word was enough. He was a lot like his brother that way.

“Doctora, listen.” But then he said nothing.

She waited.

“Juanito was dying. If we’d had the money to deal with it early, it wouldn’t have been so bad, but at that point he needed hundreds of dollars worth of medicines. Not bolivars. Hard currency dollars. The nerve growth factors were the worst, but without them the doctor said Juanito would probably be retarded. There was the – what did he call it – phage treatment for the resistant bugs. Vitamins. It just went on and on. You get so tired of begging. Mami certainly didn’t have anything extra. She’d already given me everything she had. Zielo was sending a fortune. I don’t know how he did it. Nothing was

enough. I guess I'd given up. It was soon after Selena died and I knew he was going to die. I had nothing left to lose. So. Well. I decided to steal it."

"Oh," said Corinna. Suddenly his embarrassment made sense.

"Drugs in the barrio are kept in safes, so I went for one of the easy rich pharmacies. Ziello mentioned that he was taking care of Pedro Dicastillo, the name of his regular nanny, and a few other details. I used that to get to know her, and once you're in one of these rich buildings, well, it's not that difficult to figure the place out. I marked a pharmacy that was in the shops on the first floor. I knew I might not find what I needed, but at least then I could trade for it later on. I had three friends help me, and getting in was easy. The hard part was how fast the cops arrived. It was like they came up through the floor. In Petare, they never ... I mean, I should have known. Some of my neighbors would have known, but I didn't want to ask them for help because sometimes guys blackmail you then. So, anyway, it was just me and some friends and the cops boiled up. I drew them off, so my friends could get away. I would have been caught, except I broke into the Señora's penthouse. Scared her three quarters to death."

"Her *penthouse*! What'd you do? Take the express elevator?"

"No. One of the coded keys I faked got you into the emergency stairs. I don't think they realized how fast I could run up ninety floors. Anyway, I was up on the roof before anyone knew it, and there was this nice dark house to hide in. Only it turned out the Señora was home. I knew it was all over. I was going to kill myself. I was just trying to decide which side of the building to jump from. Anyway, she helped me. Which is the only reason I live. But Ziello will kill me if he ever finds out."

Corinna sat, speechless. She stared at Marco instead of the heads-up display. He pointed at the two dots following them again.

"Oh, shit," she said, and concentrated on outrunning them. "After this loop, we'll do another one to the north, and then—"

"Doctora, I don't know how much charge these things hold, but I doubt it goes long distances."

"Oh, shit," she said again. "Of course." Now that she looked, she saw that the slider scale was down to one quarter. "One more loop, I guess, and that's all the time we can buy Leira and her chip." She concentrated on diving and weaving through the canyons of the business district again. It was the best cover around, although an accident here would be catastrophic. The autopilot, however, did just as well as the first time. This would be a nice little car to fly if you weren't being chased by thugs looking forward to sucking your brains out.

When she was out over the ocean, headed north, she said, "I'll get them as far as the islands and then loop back at maximum speed to — to where?"

"If we can make it there, I'll show you where to land near the clinic. I, well, I got in touch with Quintón's friends, if you know what I mean. If things go right, even Dicastillo's troops will have a hard time dealing with them."

Corinna let out a whistling breath. She needed an army, Sanderas had said. And here it was.

“Must be nice folks, if they race out and do good deeds whenever requested.”

Marco looked embarrassed again.

“Well, I did tell them it would help stop the problem of guys going *loco* in prison. Which is true,” he added, as if he needed to justify himself.

He was, Corinna decided, a *lot* like his brother. Solid gold in a crisis. The biggest difference she could see was that Oziel had an air of being willing to try anything, whereas Marco just wanted silence. Yet he was the one whose wife had died, while Oziel traveled between planets and ... heard about her death all alone and without being able to tell a single soul his heart was broken.

Life was much more unfair than it had to be.

“So, anyway,” Corinna continued in the lull as they raced out over the ocean at the “fast” setting, giving overdrive a rest, “it’s hard to have a coherent talk under these circumstances, but you were saying that Leira helped you. How, in the middle of all that was going on, did you happen to start discussing your son’s medical needs?”

Marco shook his head.

“We didn’t. Like I said, I was desperate. I was rambling on about ... Selena. About ... what happened to her. Suddenly the Señora said, ‘After just one treatment?’ And then she started helping me.”

“Oh-h,” said Corinna to herself, as the pieces fell into place. Yes, she could see the light bulb going off in Leira’s head as that story unfolded.

“You’re wrong about one thing, Marco. She *is* in your debt. She is infinitely in your debt. And don’t you forget it.”

There was an odd sound, like hail hitting the skin of the flitter, but not like hail, because there was only one of them.

“What was that?” asked Corinna.

“I think that was a bullet bouncing off.”

“Oh, hell. Okay. Hang on to your hat. We’re going in.” The acceleration flattened them both once again into the soft suede upholstery of the perfectly padded seats.

At five hundred and fifty kph, the flitter covered the distance to the barrio far enough ahead of the pursuing guards to avoid being shot right out of the sky. Once she landed, she just had to hope they had enough of a head start to reach the clinic, and that there was enough of a wall of gangsters to keep the guards away till their boss could be arrested.

She magnified the view ahead to its maximum and told Marco to indicate the landing spot as soon as he could identify it.

“There,” he said suddenly. “Not too close to the clinic, because the gang might shoot at us since they don’t know who’s in the flitter.”

Corinna touched the same spot and said,

“Land. *Fastest.*”

The flitter dove like a hawk.

“Je-e-e-e-sus,” mouthed Corinna as the ground came rushing up.

And then, the flitter smoothly slowed and settled down in a perfect three point landing.

After just one gasp, she ordered, “Doors, open,” and they were both tumbling out into a dark street with graffiti on some walls, old cars, and shuttered shops.

Corinna ran after Marco as fast as she could go, which wasn’t very fast. She’d just about had it with all this running in all this damn gravity. He was holding back for her sake, she could see. He ran down a side street, glancing over his shoulder to make sure she followed. Corinna heard the two pursuing flitters whine by overhead, mostly hidden by the houses.

Would the guards blow up the houses to get the two of them? It would be the surest way to kill them.

But the flitters passed on and landed a few streets ahead.

Marco slowed to a walk.

“That’s where the clinic is. They must have traced it from that tapped call.”

Corinna gratefully also slowed to a walk and breathed long, ragged breaths.

“It could also be that the Señora must have an embedded tracker chip, being as rich as she is,” added Marco. “They know its frequency.”

“She’ll have it turned off,” said Corinna. “It’s not like she wants anyone to know where she is.”

“Yes, that would make sense. They probably figure they’ll cut us off this way.” He had a strange, dark look on his face.

They had entered a narrow and extremely smelly track full of dumpsters. Marco’s walk became cautious. Then he hunkered down behind one of the dumpsters and pointed. Corinna realized she could see part of the next street and the two powerful-looking flitters parked in the middle of it. Across the street were wrought iron doors protecting glass ones on which was written, *Clinica de la Comunidad de San Juan*. The guards had climbed out, about eight from each flitter, and the ones from the rear vehicle formed a tight knot. Coming out in force, indeed. She wondered whether to be flattered that Dicastillo thought she and his elfin daughter rated eight guards each. The guards were all in helmets and full-body bulletproof suits. They weren’t moving.

Corinna finally saw why. The street seemed deserted except for Dicastillo’s men, but now she spotted a gun barrel. After the first one, suddenly she could pick them out everywhere. The street was alive with armed men behind the parked cars, inside the houses, up on the roofs. Dicastillo’s idiotic guards had just stepped right out into the middle of it, assuming they had to be the biggest muscle around.

She opened her mouth to say something, but closed it again at Marco’s look of alarm. He pantomimed someone listening, then shooting. Any sound could make you a target. She hid completely behind the dumpster with him and

whispered,

“They landed right in the middle of the gangsters?”

He nodded.

“That’s many more than just Quintón’s gang. Some of the others must have come out too. A cooperative effort.” His mouth twisted in a strange smile.

Maybe it was the first such effort in living memory. What people would do to stop going *loco* in prison.

There was the noise of a cheap, rasping megaphone, but Corinna couldn’t make out the words. She could see the guard with the most stripes yell a thin, unamplified response.

After some more back and forth, a thing the size of a grenade launcher pointed down from a roof and she heard Marco gasp.

“¡Dios santo, No!”

A car exploded in a sheet of flame.

But that was all. Apparently, it was just some sort of demonstration.

However, unless somebody started getting his act together, this could turn hideous in no time.

The guards seemed to think so too. There was a discussion going on between Mr. Maximum Stripes and somebody at the center of the second knot. The discussion seemed to grow heated, and the second knot loosened up enough for Corinna to see Dicastillo himself at the center.

She gasped and glanced at Marco, who threw her an equally bewildered look. What was Dicastillo doing here? He must know the chip was gone, but was he that desperate to recover it? In that case it was going to be good. Or maybe he just hadn’t been able to find a sufficiently trustworthy henchman on such short notice.

Surely, the gangsters would kidnap him, now that they had him. They could get a ransom to retire on from someone like that, and it would get him out of her hair, at least short term.

The discussion continued, but the gangsters didn’t like being left out, judging by the impatient bark coming from the megaphone. Corinna thought she heard a word she recognized: “flechette.” She’d heard of flechette rounds. They came out of the gun and exploded into whirling razors, sometimes hard and sharp enough to shred steel.

The guards seemed as clear on what this would do to their bulletproofing as Corinna was. After a final curt sentence to his boss, Max Stripes yelled up at a roof and threw his guns and ammunition down. His men eagerly followed suit.

A rasping, mocking order came from the megaphone and the men hesitated. Then they took off their helmets and stepped out of their bulletproof suits, leaving them in a pile, before heading away. It must have taken them a moment to decide that walking home in their Y-fronts was not a fate worse than death.

Now Dicastillo stood unprotected in a barrio street surrounded by guns

pointed toward him instead of away. It was obviously a new experience for him. She saw Sanderas appear on the steps of his clinic, and then, God help her, Leira wandered out, clutching Petey.

Her father started toward her like a charging bull, and stopped only because a bullet dented the asphalt in front of him.

What the hell did he think, Corinna wondered. That his daughter still carried that chip and that he could just rip her clothes apart till he got it? Or did he no longer think at all? Leira looked ready to faint from fear.

"I better go out and help," Marco said. "You stay here till the thugs have cleared out. Will you be okay? There won't be anyone around for quite a while even after they've gone."

"Hey, a dumpster is downright cozy after facing the prospect of Dicastillo's company."

That earned another faint smile, and he strode out into the street and interposed himself between the enraged father and his daughter. Marco indicated that Dicastillo should go into the clinic. Unfortunately, it looked like the gangsters planned to leave him alone. Dicastillo, however, didn't seem to know when he had it good, because he was snarling at Marco. Marco towered over the billionaire, his arms slightly flexed, his hands curling in an imaginary grasp. He looked like he was going to throw the tycoon across the street any second.

Corinna saw one of the gangsters approach and some conversation. Then Dicastillo went inside, Marco right behind him, herding him in.

The pile of weapons and bulletproofing melted away. The street became quiet. Corinna came out from behind her stinking dumpster and picked her way around bits of trash she tried not to identify in the dark. She scanned nervously left and right, and kept glancing behind her, listening hard for any sign of movement in the shadows. It was less than a block to reach the clinic, but it felt much longer, and it was with vast relief that she yanked open the door, which had been left unlocked for her. She locked the metal gate and the glass doors behind her and followed the sound of voices to Sanderas's office. She could hear, in particular, a breezy, English accent that sounded far from local.

The big screen deskphone showed a fellow, thin as an exclamation point, with a long nose, droopy amused eyes, and tousled, wispy hair. It was Cholly Nymans, far from local indeed. Judging by the vicious compression of Dicastillo's mouth, it was the only way to be. Corinna joined Leira on the other side of Marco from him, and within range of the video feed. Dicastillo was responding in a tight, even voice to something Cholly had said.

"I have no idea what you are all playing at. I received word my daughter had been kidnapped. I came to rescue her and have been assaulted instead. I will not let this outrage pass."

"I think you'll find you have to, old chap," said Nymans. "Have a look at this, why don't you?" And he switched the monitor to display a long file of names

and addresses.

Dicastillo choked and then made a futile attempt to pretend it had been a cough.

“Yes,” said Nymans, reappearing. “Contact logs, correspondence, orders, budgets” – he disappeared again while a spreadsheet scrolled up the screen – then popped back. “There’s a perfect match between some of the scientific data sent earlier to Dr. Sanderas by Corinna Mansur” – he nodded to her with an added twinkle – “so there’s no point trying to pretend this has nothing to do with it.”

That was all information from Leira’s chip and her own first message. Nothing about her most recent message to Cholly, Corinna noticed. What the hell had happened to that?

“If you turn yourself in quietly,” Nymans concluded, “it’ll save theatrics all around.”

Dicastillo struggled briefly for control of his shock, and won. His usual air of hard indifference returned. He glared at Nymans.

“You will be hearing from my lawyer,” he said, and closed his mouth as firmly as if he was going down, but determined not to drown.

“My pleasure,” said Cholly affably. “It’ll give me more to write about.”

Dicastillo didn’t look like he could get any madder, and Corinna wondered how long an ambulance would take if he popped a blood vessel. Judging by the amount of time the cops were taking, the forensic entomologists would scoop him up well before the medics.

He stood up to walk out and found Marco between him and the door.

“I’ll have you up on charges of assault, false imprisonment, and everything else the best-paid lawyers in the country can think of, you cunt. You’ll be so beggared by the time I’m done with you, you’ll be glad of the chance to sell yourself to the prison guards.”

Not a muscle moved in Marco’s face. Not a muscle moved in his body. He radiated enough menace to fill the room. Corinna suddenly realized it took no courage for Marco to stand up to Dicastillo. What took all his strength was *not* ripping apart the man who, ultimately, had murdered his wife. The only thing restraining him was probably the thought of what would happen to his son if he went to jail for homicide.

Dicastillo backed down and sat in the same chair again. He called a lawyer briefly, but only to alert him to call, and maintained stony silence.

“Cholly,” said Corinna, “it’s vitally important to reach Arsia and Burbidge immediately. It’s entirely possible he,” she glared briefly at Dicastillo, “plans to do something to the Stations to destroy all the evidence there. Can you get a direct line? Instantly?”

Cholly’s downward-sloping eyebrows went further up at this scenario.

“Bit extreme, wouldn’t you say? Of course, the whole thing is a bit extreme. Let’s see now....”

He looked to the side, tapping away at something and briefly saying things

like, "Yes, priority one." "Yes, I mean it."

How, she wondered, could she be sure it was someone trustworthy, if there was nothing but an audio-only connection?

"Ah, Pickle," she heard Cholly say before he switched over to the Mars channel he'd achieved at last. Nicola Terwilliger was the name of the Times reporter on Mars, which, knowing the English, had become Nickle and ended up as Pickle. When he reverted to Caracas five minutes later, he said now all they had to do was wait for Oziel Garcia. On visual, he added significantly.

Good old Cholly. He'd already thought of the trustworthiness problem, and he must have wasted no time in pumping Sanderas for information, because he knew exactly who to ask for. Now, as he'd said, all they had to do was wait. And wait. And wait. Maybe, if the base truly had been obliterated, the wait for that one voice from Mars would stretch forever.

Nobody seemed able to make conversation in front of Dicastillo, but the police arrived after interminable minutes passed, and broke the oppressive silence. Dicastillo stood up and looked at his daughter once, balefully. She shrank further behind Marco. Her father seemed severely disappointed in her for not following him blindly into murder and beyond.

She piped up from behind Marco's large back,

"I wasn't going to have you hurting Petey." There was no change in her father's glare, so she threw out another defense. "You always said yourself, Father, life is not fair."

Dicastillo ignored her and told the police curtly that they were to arrange for his son to meet him since he had to give him power of attorney until "this nonsense" was over.

"That will not be possible, Señor," said the senior officer. "Your son was arrested an hour ago on a charge laid by the Fanta company. They accuse him of being complicit in adulteration at the local bottling plant he owns."

Once he and his son had been convicted, Corinna thought, control of everything would pass to Leira, but Dicastillo didn't seem to consider giving her power of anything voluntarily. The police took him out to their bulletproof flitter without further words, followed by the doctor and Marco.

When they came back, the doctor had a sardonic expression.

"They wanted to know who burned the car. Why do they even bother asking? They can just fill in 'perp. unknown' on their useless forms and save everyone time."

"What I don't understand," said Corinna, her eyes wandering back to the phone's screen every few seconds, "is why the gangsters didn't kidnap Dicastillo. I mean, all's well that ends well, but for a while there, I was really worried when they didn't." Then suddenly she thought that this was a rather insensitive thing to say with Leira standing right there, but she seemed to be in complete agreement.

Marco, who looked harried about something, said,

"I had the same question. The leader said, 'I don't need to fuck with the

kind of trouble he'd bring. I got a business to run. Don't the cops want him for anything?' And when I said they did, he said, 'Well, fine. They deserve each other.'"

That, thought Corinna, might be the worst insult a gangster could hurl.

Marco, meanwhile, grew even more nervous.

"We should get the Señora's flitter," he said when Corinna looked questioningly at him. "It's been out there far too long. We'll be lucky if there's more than the hull left, but I didn't want to leave before Dicastillo was arrested."

"Oh," said Leira. "Oh dear."

Corinna kept looking at the holding pattern on the screen of the phone.

"Doctora," said Marco very quietly, "it's at least ten minutes before we can hear from them."

"Yes," she said, "you're right," and forced herself to follow him out. Leira brought up the rear.

Once Corinna saw the two flitters that had carried Dicastillo's security guards, it occurred to her to point them out to Leira.

"Those are yours too now."

"Oh." Leira looked even more shocked and numbed by the realization. She stood there. "I'll call Alejandro." She seemed to be speaking to herself. Then she added more firmly, "He'll know what to do."

"Is that your lawyer?" asked Corinna.

"He's our – my – butler."

Corinna suddenly saw how things had always worked in Leira's life. Alejandro did it. Alejandro would message the family lawyer. Alejandro had busy weeks ahead of him.

When Corinna flew Leira's flitter to the clinic – it did still fly – Leira took its stripped condition calmly. The leather had been cut off the seats and there was nothing left of the cabin electronics except empty sockets and tortured wires. But maybe, given the way her whole life had been stripped and turned inside out in the last few hours, she was more confident of fixing the flitter than all the rest.

They returned to Sanderas's office, and the screen still showed a holding pattern.

Corinna couldn't stand it. She opened the connection to London.

"Still nothing, Cholly?"

"If Pickle can find Garcia immediately, we should hear from them in another," he checked something off to the side, "two minutes and forty five seconds. Garcia doesn't have a wristpad, so it'll take some minutes to locate him, and then for him to reach a vid link. Start worrying in ten minutes."

Easy for you to say, she wanted to tell him. Everything she cared about was on Mars.

Six and a half minutes later, Oziel appeared, warm smile, reassuring nod, and all.

"Everything is fine at Arsia and Foggy Bottom."

Corinna felt such a huge wave of relief, she sat down. Luckily, there was a chair there.

“Burbidge had a lot of power failures, but nobody was hurt. We’re all really glad to hear you’re okay. After Corinna got Emergency Services involved during that last fight, even – uh, I mean, Director Singh also understood that CTS needed investigating. But at first he couldn’t get any orders from UNPB about what to do because all the CTS-controlled comm satellites were down.” He paused just long enough to turn the silence into sarcasm.

“That was what CTS did to stop Corinna’s message will all the evidence from reaching Earth. Then they realized it was going via the telemetry satellite and just blocked the signal with one of their biggest ships. The message was still cached on the servers and it was sent first thing after the situation was under control at Arsia.”

“Hey, Cholly,” she muttered on their open connection. “That should be in your email. Isn’t it there?”

She saw him lean sideways to push a few keys elsewhere, and heard him mutter,

“Bloody hell. Pushed into the bottom of the inbox. It was the general public box, you know.” He gave her an apologetic glance, raising his eyebrows a bit. “I’ll have to start coming to work awake.”

“It took some work to get it under control,” Oziel was continuing, “and then Singh seemed to be pretty sure he was done. Momo managed to convince him that all the physical evidence was on Mars and that meant Dicastillo would try to destroy it. Singh finally ordered a general alert. Everybody was looking for bombs, viruses, *anything*. One of the water techs found a leak in the heated part of the wastewater treatment tanks. Flow tracking on those isn’t so exact. So in a few days about a thousand liters got into fissures. As soon as the warm flow stopped, it would have frozen solid and cracked off the whole face of the mountain on that side of the base. Momo’s convinced nobody could have survived it. And burying the evidence under a whole mass of bodies would make it look more like an accident, not less.

There was complete silence in the room where Corinna sat. She realized her jaw had dropped and she closed her mouth.

“The water is being heated to keep it liquid and being pumped gradually back where it belongs. So don’t worry. Everybody is fine. And Dicastillo can add a couple of thousand counts of attempted murder to his rap sheet. I’ll wait to hear that you’ve received this and ... and any other messages you have for us. Over to you.”

During that curious pause he looked ... Corinna wasn’t sure exactly what his expression meant, but it wasn’t calm or confident. More like he wanted to teleport to Earth by the power of his eyes. Where had they actually reached him? It felt like yesterday to her, but over a week had gone by. What was he doing now? He was probably back at Foggy Bottom, back at his old job, unlike her. What was he thinking? How did he feel?

She couldn't ask any of the questions she wanted to. Instead she said she was going to fill up on *arepas*, and then call and make him jealous by describing the experience.

Marco added something, Corinna wasn't sure what, because it was in slang so quick and strange, she could make nothing of it. Anything of a personal nature was obviously going to wait for a more private connection. Miguel Sanderas spoke to Oziel in the same slang before the packet was squirted across space, but Corinna was pretty sure she caught the phrase "street rat," said with a broad grin.

After the connection was closed, she sat there, at loose ends. The disadvantage of surviving, she now realized, was that she'd have to figure out what to do next.

Leira, Corinna noticed, looked like she was having the same problem. There was nothing now to stop the heiress from going home, but she made no move to do it. She was curled up in one of the doctor's chairs, clutching Petey who had fallen asleep clutching her, and staring with wide eyes at nothing in particular.

Corinna decided that she could follow her own advice to Leira, and book into a hotel, but Miguel Sanderas wouldn't hear of it.

"You'll stay with me," he said. His inflection made it a statement, and his nod included Leira.

The doctor, Corinna thought, could obviously diagnose more than mere diseases. He called his wife, and when she arrived she turned out to be like him in that respect. She didn't ask any questions. She didn't talk about what happened. She admired Petey, and told them how happy she was that they could stay at her house. Araguela was her name, and she was, it turned out, a full-blooded Guahibo Indian.

Marco carried Señora Dicastillo's concept of overnight bags one more time to a car. Corinna waited outside the machine, unsure how to thank Marco or what to do next or what, for that matter, to do with the rest of her life. She was on Earth, with the clothes on her back, and no direction home. Except in the amount of baggage, there was little to choose between her and Leira.

Marco closed the trunk and said to her quietly,

"Tell Ziello, when you see him, that we all miss him at home."

Corinna looked up abruptly.

"Uh, I will, but I don't know if, or when, I'll see him either. I have no idea what's happening next."

She seemed to keep winding up on the wrong planet. When she thought she cared about Earth, she'd been on Mars. Now that her thoughts were full of places whose pathways didn't pull her down, she was on Earth.

"Listen, Marco, I don't know how to thank you for everything you've done." She had the feeling people of the opposite sex didn't run around hugging each other here, especially not when they were as sad as Marco. She extended her hand and he grasped it.

“You saved my life and my son’s life. You have nothing to thank me for.”
She just shook her head, wanting to stay some place where they all missed her. Her closest alternative was to get into Sanderas’s car.
As it rolled away, she heard the doctor ask,
“And maybe tomorrow I could show you around the clinic, Señora?”
Corinna hid a smile. Miguel Sanderas didn’t miss much.
“I would be delighted,” the new boss of CTS answered, inclining her head gracefully.

Chapter 21

The first thing Corinna did after some eighteen hours of sleep was check with UNPB whether anyone had identified the mystery sequence in her files of evidence. Its importance was flagged on the first line of the Readme introduction. The file name was in all caps. Short of making the font blink in red, she'd done everything possible to make it clear it had to be studied now, now, now.

Nobody had looked at it yet. They probably had lawyers going over her files, not molecular biologists. Muttering under her breath, Corinna did it herself. She had to bother Cholly for a copy of her own files at what was night for him, and then she had to trek all the way to the University to find computers with fast connections. Then a ten-second search of one of the big sequence databases gave her the results.

But, after all that, the results made no sense. The proteins matched a standard malaria-hepatitis-encephalitis vaccine. It would do no harm, that was the good news, but what was it doing as part of Kruskal's sinister special order? She looked at everything. She even looked at the impurities their lax process hadn't filtered out.

Part of the DNA impurity matched regulatory sequences for a vicious flu virus, the part that made it reproduce so well. That was certainly nasty, but it hadn't produced any flu symptoms. The rest of it matched nothing – except that the superior search program she was now using served up matches to six different self-splicing introns. Introns didn't occur naturally in viruses, but once a human cell was infected, these introns would cut themselves out of the sequence. And when Corinna did that and searched for the significance of what remained, an inverted copy of the brainwashing gene popped out, plain as day. Flip the damn thing back to front, and you had a self-reproducing docility disease.

After what felt like minutes, she realized she was forgetting to breathe. She took in a bit more air. She exhaled slowly, as if the world might shatter if she did it faster. If the two vials that really were vaccines hadn't worked, she would have successfully inoculated herself and Oziel with their awful gene. Talk about not using unknown preps.

She tried to get over her shock. Her hand reached for her new wristpad and she called the highest functionary she knew of at UNPB.

When she finally had him on the line, she explained.

“They were planning to, or already are, using public health vaccination programs to try to infect people with their happy gene.”

“*What!*”

“Yes. I’d suggest halting any programs using malaria-hepatitis-encephalitis vaccine until the purity of the supply has been checked.”

“I’d say that, too. Thank you for that information. I’ll get off the phone, Doctora, so I can get started on this.”

For the next couple of days, Corinna just knocked around, still not knowing what to do. She supposed she ought to fly back to New York and get serious about looking for a job, but not one single part of her wanted to do that. The whole idea felt like a chore the size of Mt. Everest, so she rattled around Caracas instead. Leira invited her to stay at the penthouse for as long as she liked, and she thought, *Good idea. Why not?* After one day, she found out why not. Petey was there. Working in a lab for eighteen hours a day started to look good.

Meanwhile, the UNPB investigators kept calling her for information. Investigations had been launched in all directions. Where had such-and-such been stored in Morbier’s lab on Mars? Had it also been stored anywhere else? How about this-and-that? Had *it* been stored anywhere else? One of the first things she’d told them was where to find her samples and her lab server backup at the Arsia base station. The backup, she pointed out, would have an inventory list on it.

Yes, but the problem was there’d been that unfortunate series of power problems which hit freezers and servers. So they were looking for pennies behind the couch, as it were, not in the wallets where you’d expect to find them.

“‘Unfortunate?’” she said. “More like convenient, no?”

“Well, not so convenient for the people who lost material. I understand there are even some law suits pending for willful negligence, for instance from, let me see here, Jonathan Franzen, Tom—”

“They destroyed *everybody’s* work? Not just the evidence?” Why was she surprised? As if anyone who believed in brainwashing would carefully respect other people’s priorities. If they’d destroyed Mei-mei’s work, Tom’s work, and her own for that matter, she was glad she wasn’t there, trying to pick up the pieces.

“And Jonathan? Are you serious? I mean, I can see him in a snit because somebody slowed down his publication schedule, but he was the Tech Flunky-in-Chief, for cryin out loud.”

“He was? Interesting. Let me make a note of that. In any case, we don’t really have anything on Morbier, so—”

“You mean he destroys evidence so there’s no evidence?”

Did I just say that out loud?

“Well, uh, broadly, yes.”

“You know, that makes no sense. That lab was much too big and complex for Morbier to have covered up every last trace of his part in the project. He didn’t have the *time*.”

“Well, yes. That’s why we’re looking for stray samples everywhere we can think of.”

“The project was spread over at least three labs. There’ll be plenty of evidence of his involvement in the others.”

“Wallis’s lab also suffered power failures. And Ching’s lab is so huge, we’ve only started inventorying everything.”

“Why not ask him? I’d think he’d be glad to help about now.”

“He wasn’t before. He just gave us a really long lecture about the value of scientific research.”

“Yes, but that was then. Have you asked *lately*?”

No, nobody had.

She’d told the higher-ups at UNPB what she’d done to Ching, and they wrote it down as a clear case of self-defense, but nobody seemed to draw the obvious conclusion.

“Well, if I might make a suggestion, set up a video conference where Morbier can see you ask Ching whether he has any files that incriminate him. Meaning Morbier. I’ll be glad to feed questions to an investigator, if that would help.”

It would help, they said. They set up the call, and she was sitting next to an Inspector Abbas, out of camera and mic range with a direct line to the Inspector’s secondary ear piece.

Morbier’s head was on one monitor. He looked just the same, as if he’d never left Burbidge and was about to give Corinna one of his summing-up glances.

Ching’s smiling image appeared on another monitor. He seemed delighted to see everyone. His right arm was in a cast, and it didn’t seem to bother him one bit.

“Why, Philip,” cried Ching. “You here too? How nice. Yes, indeed.” His head bobbed up and down in pleased nods.

Corinna saw a slight shade pass over Morbier’s face.

When Ching was asked about his files, he responded sunnily.

“I have lots of files. Lots and lots of files. It’s a very important project. Everyone should see it. I’ll be glad to show you all,” the sweep of his left arm included the world, “the files.”

Even Corinna was surprised at the extent of his goodwill. There must have been enough in that injector to sozzle a horse.

“So,” Abbas continued to Ching, “nothing has been lost?”

“Oh, no. No, no, no, not at all.” He wagged his head from side to side and his glasses slipped askew.

Morbier looked greenish, but his voice, when he spoke, was even and controlled.

“I am glad Dr. Ching has his files—”

“And samples, Philip. Everything. I have saved,” he made another all-encompassing sweep of his arm, “everything.”

Morbier lost another fraction of his coolness, but he continued as if no one had spoken.

“—but they have nothing to do with me.”

Corinna murmured for Abbas’s ear only,

“That’s nonsense. Some of the samples will match the ones on Morbier’s inventory list. You can bet your bottom dollar on it.”

“Philip, you old boffin,” said Ching with another sunny smile at Morbier’s words, as if he had just now processed what his former colleague had said. “Don’t talk rot. You told me many times that you were most interested — that’s the way he talks,” he explained kindly to the detective, “‘most interested in receiving significant funding as a major contributor to the success of this revolutionary project.’ You said—”

Morbier interrupted him abruptly.

“Nor am I responsible for what you may have imagined I said.”

“Imagined? Oh, no. No, no. Not at all.”

Morbier, meanwhile, said he would not discuss anything further without his solicitor present, and that was the end of that. Within hours, plenty of matches turned up between Ching’s samples and Morbier’s inventory list. The next day she heard that Morbier had been charged, was out on bail and was plea bargaining.

The cover-up in the Burbidge labs was massive, but, as Corinna had suspected, not total. Her tips had already provided some results, so the authorities decided, with uncommon logic, that she was the best person to unravel it all. They hired her for two months, using Morbier’s salary for the purpose, to close down his, Ching’s, and Wallis’s labs, and preserve as much evidence as she could. The irony of being the one saddled with picking up the pieces after all would have been funny if it had happened to someone else. To console herself, she kept dropping into lists of things to buy with all that nice, new money. But then she lectured herself about saving it, since she’d be unemployed all over again once she was done. Good jobs for a molecular neurobiologist took far longer than two months to find.

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Two weeks later, Corinna watched Mars approach through a space ship’s porthole for the second time in her life. She’d had a week of being a celebrity on Earth, which, as far as she was concerned, was more than enough for the rest of her life. It was a toss-up whether unnecessary reporters, of either sex, or unnecessary males were the more pestiferous. She’d told the story of the

happy gene scheme so many times it was starting to sound nonsensical, like a word repeated too much. Besides, sticking to a coherent story was difficult, because so many aspects had to be glossed over, such as the fact that Marco knew a billionaire (“Oziel García has worked for the family”) and the “spontaneous” attack on two flitters full of security guards (“Dicastillo apparently landed in the middle of some gang territory issues”).

She’d taken all sorts of job application materials to work on during the long, boring voyage to Mars. She’d taken technical data to help prepare her for what she needed to do in closing the labs down. She hadn’t looked at any of it. She used the lack of her trusty laptop as an excuse, even though UNPB had given her a sleek new one with the latest, greatest quantum memory storage and nifty nanotech zippers in the case. Eating, sleeping, and vegetating with other bored passengers in front of a wide screen video was all she’d accomplished. She supposed it made sense that she was exhausted enough to sleep for a week, but it still felt strange. It didn’t help that the ship was arriving in the middle of the night by her body clock, even if it was the middle of the afternoon at the space port.

When a penetrating voice came over the public address system, she found she’d fallen asleep while waiting for Mars to grow large enough to land on.

“We need to request everyone’s cooperation with an Accommodation Alert. The downstream consequences of the flight cancellation three weeks ago—”

That had been one of the CTS-generated “emergencies” for her sake.

“—and another cancellation due to technical difficulties this morning have resulted in two hundred and thirty two passengers who need quarters. Passengers with options for alternate local accommodation are urgently requested to make the necessary arrangements, so that the maximum number of hotel beds are available for transients.”

Well, that’s me, thought Corinna. She’d been booked into a hotel at UNPB expense before she caught her clipper flight to Burbidge, but under the circumstances, she was sure Anicut and Momo would put her up. Besides, although the space they had might be a storage closet, Anicut’s cooking beat any hotel.

She messaged them, and a reply bounced right back saying they’d be delighted. She hadn’t specifically told anyone when she was arriving, since she didn’t want them to feel obliged to travel all the way to the space port to meet her, but her arrival was no secret and they’d probably been expecting to hear from her. The reply added that they hoped she wouldn’t mind sharing on the same basis as before. No, she certainly wouldn’t, especially since it was probably another waif of a friend of theirs who’d been bumped by the same cascading series of flight stuff-ups.

The next time she woke up, it was because the ship’s orientation had changed as it docked with the orbital transfer station, and now one of the safety belt buckles was digging into her ribs. She dimly remembered the strap-yourself-in-announcement, but she didn’t remember vagueing out before it

was even over. She sleepwalked through the transfer and into the orbital shuttle. She sleepwalked out of the shuttle and into the security concourse at the end of which—

—was Oziel.

Suddenly and completely awake, she looked at him as he looked at her and saw nothing else. Why wasn't he at Foggy Bottom? He looked like he might leap the security concourse in a single bound to reach her. That crazy blond dye job of his came as a shock. Again. She was never going to get used to it. The alarmingly black roots were about a finger's breadth long by now.

Then she noticed a herd of professional-grade cameras targeting her, and realized all four of the reporters based on Mars were taking her damn picture. Enough already, was all she could think. She tried to make herself as expressionless as possible, preparatory to telling them that any pictures and interviews would have to wait. She was authorizing nothing right now. Thank God there were privacy laws these days that gave her the power to tell them to get out.

After she'd passed through all the sensors checking for any contraband, she dealt with the reporters first. She was so annoyed they'd intruded — and at a time like this! — she had no trouble giving them her coldest don't-mess-with-the-scientist face. They melted away.

But Oziel was staring at the gray-blue utility carpeting on the floor, hands clasped behind his back. He seemed to be in formal mode. Closer up, he didn't look like he wanted to leap anywhere. She must have been reading too much into it.

Corinna hugged Aniut. Then she — she supposed if she hugged Momo, she better hug Oziel too, or it would look funny. But he could have been at military parade rest, except that his eyes weren't forward. Hugging wasn't something people did during parade rest. Maybe she better not hug Momo.

Damn those reporters. Now everything was awkward and constrained.

"It's so nice to see you all again," she said.

Oziel looked up when she happened to be looking at him.

"Yes," he said.

That was all. He went back to looking at the floor. He seemed ... well, nervous, if that was possible. She'd never seen him nervous about anything, and they'd gone through things much worse than meeting a shuttle.

Was it something she'd done? Or hadn't done? Actually, now that she thought about it, she was feeling kind of nervous herself.

This is stupid. She made herself slow down with a deep breath. Maybe she should stop jumping to conclusions and just ask.

"What brings you here?" she said.

For a moment, his face grew expressionless and impassive, almost as if he was angry and trying not to show it — trying not to show something, anyway — but then the look disappeared and he answered with a small smile.

"One of those reporters you just chased off paid for me to come out here

and take her over the ground we covered, in the main base and outside.”

“Oh! I’m sorry. Was this part of what you’d authorized her to do?”

“Of course not! I wouldn’t—”

Another woman came bounding up, carrying a professional reporter’s vid camera. Was there an endless supply of these people? This one looked young enough to be an intern. Apparently that’s what she was, because she didn’t remember to request permission before starting with the questions.

“Hi! I’m so glad I caught you! You’ve probably already talked to the other reporters, but I hope you’ll consider giving me your take on what you’ll be doing at Burbidge.” She pointed her microphone at Corinna, and, noting Oziel’s presence with a nod, added, “Are you two an item now?”

Before that last, Corinna had merely been tired. Now she frowned. *An item*, indeed. Stupidest term she’d ever heard. The intern looked taken aback but she got over it immediately. Oziel, on the other hand, did not. He was back to having no expression at all, standing like a statue, staring at the floor.

“I’m not giving any interviews,” Corinna said slowly and clearly, not deigning to notice the idiotic question.

“Oh, I’m real sorry to hear that. Well, I’ll get in touch with you to make arrangements for later.” Then she turned to Oziel, not giving up.

“So? *Are you two an item?*” she asked.

He looked up. If his expression had been turned on her, Corinna would have felt like crawling into a safe and pulling it closed after her.

“Did you not hear the Doctora?” he said, looking down at the reporter as if she barely came up to his waist.

“Well, if she speaks for you then you two must be an item.” The woman was grinning all over her fatuous face.

“If all the people who don’t want to talk to you were her partners, she’d be a very busy woman.”

His expression seemed to get through to the intern.

“Uh, well, um,” she said, and disappeared.

Corinna breathed a sigh of relief that he’d got rid of the pest without saying anything printable.

The four of them were gathered around Aniut’s kitchen table before Corinna really recovered from her irritation. Oziel’s formality seemed to be fading at about the same rate. Was he worrying about what she thought while she worried about what he thought?

She’d been gradually realizing that when Aniut said she’d be sharing the tiny room “on the same basis as before,” she meant with the same person as before. Oziel was apologizing about this.

“If I’d known this was going to happen,” he was saying, “I would have found some other time to show reporters around.”

So he’d picked this time on purpose. He’d get paid no matter when he showed the reporter around, so it had to have been to meet her flight coming in. But then why wasn’t he happier to see her? Maybe he’d had second

thoughts once he saw her again. Or maybe he just thought it would be nice to get together again, the four of them, old friends who'd been through the war together. She told herself there was nothing wrong with that.

"Hey," she said. "It's okay. Don't worry. We shared the room before. We're not on worse terms now. I guess."

"No," he said immediately.

Then, when Aniot started distributing bedding and Corinna objected to his insistence that she take the one foam pad, he seemed ready to sleep out on the surface in a suit. She gave up and took the pad.

Aniot pulled delicacies out of the cooler and off the stove until the table was piled with preserves and pickles in jars, with bread, with cakes on plates, and with downright good tomatoes – no doubt Momo's private supply.

"This may be the moment," said Corinna, grinning in anticipation, "to show you what I brought. I had the usual twenty kilo luggage allowance, but, of course, I couldn't carry anything I'd need to take back, since I've already got at least twenty kilos here. So I filled my bag up with...."

She pulled out a golden jar of cloudberry preserves to the sound of Aniot's delighted gasp, followed by pickled herring, and a kilo of powdered milk made from milk, not plastic. Last, she pulled out a pint of real, true sour cream from a cold box, which she'd kept carefully charged every moment she'd had access to a power source. Aniot was nearly jumping with delight. Next, to Momo Corinna slid a foil-wrapped something that had filled the freezer side of the cold box. He unwrapped one end of the three kilo package to find a slab of tuna. Corinna could have sworn he had tears in his eyes. To Oziel she handed the remaining contents of her case: two of the biggest bags of the best Venezuelan coffee she'd been able to find.

"¡Dios santo! ¡Café!" He stood up, obviously to start making coffee immediately, but stopped and turned to her, one of his incandescent smiles illuminating his face.

She felt her own smile light up, and felt herself lean toward him and then just kept moving. They had their delayed hug after all.

When she sat back down, she tried to make sure she wasn't glowing too obviously. Now, at last, it felt like coming home.

"By the way," she said, just after Oziel had finished making a dreadful racket, grinding coffee beans in Aniot's blender, "I'm forgetting. Marco said to tell you that they all miss you at home."

Some of the incandescence left his face.

"Sí," he said, muttering it to the blender. "Me too."

"Anyway," he smiled again at Corinna and went back to measuring coffee into a clean cloth Aniot had given him to use for a filter, "what exactly happened in Caracas? Marco sent me a complete *empanada* of a message. He made it sound like the army had been called out."

As the aroma of coffee filled the kitchen, she launched into a detailed description, starting with the blue silk room and the dreadful gravity. However,

before she even reached the point when the guards were bellowing in a cloud of flour, Oziel tapped her arm.

“You know, this is all wrong. This either waits till after you eat, or you eat while you talk. We can’t have someone who still hasn’t gained her weight back wasting her time like this.”

Corinna came back to here and now with an amused puff of laughter.

“What? You’re going to make me eat my vegetables, like a recalcitrant toddler?”

“Mm-hm,” he nodded firmly, “if you need to be taken care of like one.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, grinning and taking a small helping of tuna sashimi that Momo had cut from the now unfrozen end and her third helping of the particularly delicious, herbed, wonton-y things. Aniut looked on happily, her eyes like horizontal commas.

The four of them talked and ate, and then ate some more until finally they were too full to allow their brains to sustain a conversation.

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Corinna lay back under the silver blanket on the narrow foam pad in the narrow little room, hands clasped under her head, and stared at the ceiling. Now it finally felt like it was really over and they had won. Unfortunately, that still didn’t solve the problem of what came after these two months. She was going to have to find a job doing something, somewhere, somehow.

Before she could get rolling, worrying about it, Oziel came in. She knew as plainly as if he’d spoken that he was giving her time to settle in without having him looking on. She’d realized during dinner that she didn’t actually need to get used to his crazy blond hair. At the rate she was going, it would all be black again long before she’d managed it. He was wearing one of Momo’s big vests over his bare chest and sweatpants held up with what looked like string. He’d obviously felt he had to borrow something to wear. He busied himself refolding his blankets, putting his pillow in place. He gave her as much space as if they were two lineworkers who happened to be in the same dorm. Except that it was very inconsiderate of him to be so easy on the eyes. She looked back at the ceiling.

“It’s funny,” she said, still looking at the ceiling. “We seem to be doing everything backwards. We sleep together without sleeping together. Now we’re living together without living together.”

She could tell he turned towards her.

“Corinna,” he said slowly, as if the matter required serious thought, “do you think we should do something about it?”

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Glossary of foreign words

terms of endearment or affection

querida f. (-o m.)	darling, dear (lit. 'desired one'), also used between close friends
mí cielo	my sky
mí amor	my love
mí vida	my life
mí hija f. (-o m.) =mí 'ija, mija	my dear (among friends, not lovers) (lit. 'my daughter', 'my son')

Exclamations

Dios santo	holy God
Dios ayúdame	God help me
pura verdad	pure truth
Ey, Oy	interjections, like "oh"
raro	weird
perdón	pardon [me]

Food

arepa	unleavened fried and baked bread made from maize, eaten with or without filling
empanada	a baked or fried patty with sweet or savory filling, also used figuratively to mean mixed up or confused

Terms of annoyance, anger, denigration

qué vaina	what nonsense
putoneros	men who visit whores
mierda	shit
hostia	lit. "communion wafer," part of <i>me cajo en hostia</i> , "I shit on the wafer"
loco	fool, crazy

Russian terms of affection

golubchenka, golubchiki	dear (lit. "little pigeon(s)"; different endings are different declensions)
dushenka	dear (lit. "little soul")

Other

's muerte?	is (he) dead?
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