

None So Blind

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Chapter 1

The ocean seemed an odd color as they fell toward Earth. There were ribbons and streamers of grayer water veining the blue, as if a vast hand had spilled bleach and left it to trickle away.

Corinna held the arms of her seat and stared out the porthole. She wished the ship would slow down. But it wasn't the ocean she was afraid of meeting.

A faint reflection of Oziel's face shared the porthole with hers as they both looked out at the approaching world. He didn't look worried, but he never looked worried. He'd grown up in a barrio of Caracas and faced calamities on a daily basis, and his definition of fear came from a different dictionary than hers.

Of course, he was only going to see his old neighborhood again. And his family. Nothing for *him* to worry about. Once they landed, he'd just be traveling a few kilometers to his home.

So would she. She drew back in her seat again.

The whole thing—her, him, being together—it was never going to work. They'd saved each other from death on Mars, but that was starting to seem simple compared to life on Earth.

She hadn't had so much as a nibble on any of her job applications. Work that used a Ph. D. in molecular neurobiology might, if she was lucky, show up once in a year. He'd finished high school, and he could find a job tomorrow. He'd done day care on Mars, he could earn a living in construction or as an emergency medtech, he could do anything.

Oziel moved closer and laid his sandpapery cheek against hers.

"Beautiful enough to cry, isn't it?"

She leaned back toward him and saw the frown evaporate from her reflection in the thick glass. His reflection smiled on its background of white clouds and blue ocean. The pictures she'd seen of his family showed a whole clan of black-eyed gods and goddesses.

His family. Would they wonder why he'd brought back some clueless foreigner who didn't even speak Spanish properly yet? She looked at her own reflection disapprovingly. Nothing to charm perfect strangers there. Just straight eyebrows, straight nose, straight cheekbones, and, right now, an excessively straight mouth, trending down at the edges.

"Quit worrying, Corinna. Nobody's going to mess with you."

“Hah,” she said, breathing in the air around him. Even in the oxygen-challenged atmosphere of an orbital shuttle, it was good.

“And if anyone tries anything, if they just look at you funny, I’ll break them in half,” he continued. “How’s that?”

“Including your mother?” His mother had raised five children alone after her husband had died from a stray bullet. She had to be a formidable woman.

“My mother has seen too much to look funny at anyone. Wait to worry about her till you meet her, yes?”

“Yeah. If she’s anything like you, she’s seven feet tall and three feet broad, and when I make a floater, she’s the one who’ll break me in half.”

“Corinna, I’m not even two meters. And she’s smaller than I am. Really. She still hasn’t broken Quintón. Why should she start on you?”

“When is he coming out?”

“Another four months.”

“They only gave him eight months for dealing spike?”

“He managed to dump his load before the arrest, so he was only charged with being a *cómplice*.”

“Will I meet him too?”

“Let’s hope you don’t have to,” was all Oziel said.

“Yeah” she muttered, only half joking. “The fewer giants to contend with, the better.”

“Ey, as far as that goes, you’d do fine. You could take him with one hand.” His reflection in the window had a big grin. “He’s a shrimp. He missed most of the Norwegian and German blood in the family.”

“Norwegians and Germans! I didn’t realize you had Norwegians and Germans in your family.”

“That’s where we get our size, and our woolliness. That’s not from the Indian side.”

“Jeez. The stuff I don’t even know about you. So, am I going to meet them?”

He moved back a bit and looked at her.

“It was a long time ago, *mí cielo*. After they paid for their half hour, or whatever they got, they didn’t stay in touch with the family.”

She felt it like a blow. The simplest questions were so often a bad idea in his world.

“You see what I mean?” she said in a small voice. “I’ll do my best not to be a complete idiot, but you see what I mean?”

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Once they landed in Caracas, there were plenty of distractions, at first. After nine months on Mars, fighting with the gravity took all the energy she had, but she did stop several times at the windows in the security concourse to ad-

mire the view stretching on for ever and ever. The spaceport surmounted a huge platform on one of the peaks between the city and the sea. The *teleférico* on the south side ran down to the long valley containing the city itself. Eastward lay forested summits of taller mountains, and far below the spaceport to the north lay the twinkling Caribbean Sea, dotted with distance-shrouded islands. One of the weird swathes of greyish water extended toward the horizon.

She eyed it, trying to dredge up what she'd learned about oceans in long-gone ecology classes. Nothing surfaced, and the longer she stared, the less she liked the lifeless-looking water. It gave her a weird feeling, as if she'd glanced at her forearm and seen the veins under her skin running brown. Water was the blood of the planet. There had better be a simple explanation.

"See that, Oziel?" she said, pointing. "What causes that?"

He looked out the same window.

"Those shaded bands? I don't know, but I haven't been to the sea that much. Maybe it's always there."

"I doubt it. Although it might be something seasonal."

They reached the end of the security concourse and he took her bag. It was like having a sack of cement lifted from her shoulders. She really should have stuck with her exercises on Mars. She was already feeling as if she could barely walk. If he carried her as well as her bag, the gravity problem would be solved. But she didn't joke about it. He'd probably pick her up, right then and there. He never paid the least attention to how things looked.

While they stood and waited for their turn to ride the cable car down to the valley, Corinna tapped away at her wristpad to see if there was any news about ocean surface striations in the Caribbean.

"It's weird," she muttered. "Not a word about it even on the local beach reports. It's got to be some sort of algal bloom. You'd think somebody would mention it."

"You would?" said Oziel. "You think an ocean full of green slime is a selling point for the tourists?"

"Sure," she grinned at him, "if they're biologists."

They stepped into the *teleférico* for the ride down, and she tried to look in all directions at once to admire the infinite view.

"Corinna," he said, his eyes fixed on one of the foothills far away down the valley, "you can almost see my mother's house from here."

It didn't look too intimidating. Just an indistinguishable speck on a hill near the horizon. So far.

When they got off the metro at Petare, she saw a large square, an imposing church, and streets lined with stores. The whole effect was similar to a seedy part of New York, where she'd grown up, but with more buildings old enough to have faded grandeur.

Then he made a detour to a hotel near the station, and took a room. She didn't think for a minute that booking hotels was standard operating proce-

dure for anyone in his family, but she didn't protest. She merely collapsed into a chair and worked on breathing the amazing air, full of humidity and smells and an indefinable freshness that no ventilation system ever achieved.

It didn't take long before she had enough energy to do more than sit and breathe under all the gravity. She started worrying. Why was he paying for a room in a hotel? Was it so obvious that she couldn't fit in? Then again, maybe she really couldn't. She'd never squashed in with innumerable relatives in a tiny house.

She looked up at him as he stood next to her, watching the street scene through the window.

"Are you doing this for me?" she asked.

"I wanted some privacy," he said, meditatively tracing a line down her neck, leaving a trail of warmth. Then he squatted down in front of her chair and added with a smile that went right through her, "For both of us, I hope."

She felt her answering smile light up.

"Oh," she said. "Yes."

"What?" he asked as she ran her hands through his hair. "Isn't the gravity—"

"I need all the exercise I can get, don't you think?" she murmured. "I wouldn't be in this pickle if I hadn't slacked off on my exercises."

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As they walked away from the hotel and toward his mother's, they left the streets and used the barrio's narrower tracks. It was no longer like a seedy part of New York. Nothing had prepared her for this, not pictures, not her own attempts to imagine the place. It was mainly the smell. The smoke from cooking fires was the best component. The rest was rot of many different kinds: vegetable and fecal matter, and the repellent odor of mud with too many people living on it. Corinna had to force herself to try to walk and breathe normally. If she looked like a princess who needed her own private air supply, that would make an even worse impression than asking dumb questions.

Poverty she could touch was also different from any picture. She could have cut herself on the jagged edges of sheet metal walls; she could have looked inside people's homes through windows that were just holes in the wall with shutters. But in front of almost every one of the garage-sized brick and tin houses were red- and yellow-flowered plants in pots, and improvised awnings shading benches. Chickens wandered the tracks as if they owned the place. She did her best to concentrate on the flowers and the chickens and to ignore everything else.

In the distance, she could see the classic rickety patchworked shacks of junked metal and cardboard and plastic that looked as if they had walked out

of the landfills without permission. As, indeed, they had. They had no windows to speak of, and as the sun beat down on her head, she realized how hot it must get inside the dark, cramped huts. It was lucky that Oziel came from the “good” neighborhood.

He walked along, effortlessly avoiding the dreadful-looking rivulet that chose its own way down the road, but she couldn’t help picking her way around things. She kept reminding herself she was only here for ten days. She could deal with this for ten days, for heaven’s sake. At least she was managing not to hold her breath anymore.

Everybody seemed to know him, and on a Sunday everybody was home. Or, to be more precise, out on the street. He stopped to talk everywhere. It had taken them ten minutes to go a few hundred meters, and now more shouts of “Hola, Zielo!” and “Ey, García!” rose above the cacophony of radios. *Come on*, she wanted to say. *We’re never going to get there*. But maybe that was just as well.

Then, suddenly, there was more than a mere shout. An exquisite young woman came flying down the path and threw herself into his arms, looking overjoyed. Corinna hadn’t counted on former lovers turning up, which was stupid and –.

“Graciela,” he introduced her.

His youngest sister. Not an old lover. Corinna smiled and said hello, and felt relieved of a weight at least equal to that of her flight bag.

As she looked at the stunning woman more closely, it was easy to see the family resemblance in her smiling black eyes, her high cheekbones, and her smooth skin like polished copper. But she wasn’t tall. Just medium height, like Corinna herself. That meant both of the two youngest, Graciela and Quintón, were smaller than the other Garcías, which made sense, since they were actually cousins. Corinna knew that Oziel’s mother had taken in her dead sister’s two babies right when her own husband had died and things couldn’t have been worse. The five children had grown up together, and Corinna had never heard Oziel speak of the two youngest as anything other than his brother and sister.

She caught sight of a group of three people waiting for them next to a small brick house near the top of this endless hill they were climbing. She recognized Oziel’s middle brother, Marco, still full of the same bone-deep sadness, as if his wife had died yesterday and not three months ago.

Corinna braced herself. This was it. The two women were almost as tall as Oziel. The younger was his sister, Silvia. The older –.

Jesus, what was she supposed to call her? Señora Ruiz y Vasquez de García? Yoana? Ma’am? Oziel was introducing “*mí Corinna*” to “*Mamí*.” That was no help. She felt like a shrimp.

“Come in, come in, *mija*,” said his mother in a warm alto voice, radiating friendliness and comfort. She put her arm around Corinna’s shoulders as she led her in to the little house, and Corinna quit waiting to exhale and started

smiling.

It was up three steps, and the front door opened straight into a room that was half of the house. A gas burner on a shelf and a small propane tank stood at the back wall. There was an old, grayish couch that looked like something from her own graduate student days, and a big table with a reddish speckled plastic surface. It took up too much of the small space, and crowded the raft of mismatched chairs. The other half of the house was two tiny bedrooms with their doors open to catch the breeze. The back door stood open too, and showed a little yard with a small shed. It was the outhouse, she suddenly realized.

“What’s all the food for?” asked Oziel, and Corinna noticed there were boxes and bags lining two of the walls.

“I thought you’d enjoy a trip to Macuto, after all that time on dry spaceships.”

Oziel’s smile lit and widened.

“What a good idea, Mamí.” He turned to explain to Corinna. “It’s a public park by the sea, about an hour away. And dinner is inside the bags. They’re doing a feast for us.”

She’d never thought that within a minute of walking into this house, she’d be grinning like a kid. She loved picnics, and it would be great to see the ocean again. Always assuming that the spilled-bleach problem didn’t reach all the way to shore.

On no particular schedule, more people kept arriving to whom she was introduced and whose names slipped like fish from her grasp. His Uncle Rafael’s whole family arrived, and other people whose connection she didn’t get. She began worrying again about the impression she’d make when she had to start addressing everyone as “hey, you.” They brought yet more bags of food, all of which, Corinna couldn’t help thinking, were going to have to be carried, one full gee notwithstanding.

Oziel was surrounded by a crowd of nieces and nephews radiating enough energy to power small cities and insisting that Tío Zio had to see a plant in a pot, a small photo, and a decorated piece of paper that must be a prize for something. Corinna understood, in a way that she hadn’t before, how far she was from being the only person who loved him.

Then she became aware that his mother had asked how the trip was, and when Corinna looked back at her, there was a kindly smile of amusement on her face.

“The trip,” said Corinna, trying to get over her embarrassment about being caught gawping at Oziel. “It was boring. Which is good.” She could hardly tell his mother that her son had made it a lot less boring than the same week-long trip going out.

His mother laughed.

“Yes, when the bus breaks down, you get out and walk, but you can’t do that in a spaceship.” She asked how it was to live in a dome, and was it true,

as Ozielito had said, that books and videos were free.

“Yes,” said Corinna. “It’s cheaper than shipping people home if they go crazy.”

Without any discernible signal, like a flock of birds setting off, everyone started to leave.

“Who’s got—?” Corinna began and stopped herself. The usual reminder to remember spare batteries for heat packs and cold packs was stupid here. There wasn’t any equipment that used them.

As they headed down instead of up the hill, she had the energy to notice that the view was breathtaking, stretching from the mountains, over the high rises of the city, and out to the entire valley. She was starting to understand what Oziel meant when he said that in the barrio, they actually did rather well.

However, she should have remembered that letting her attention wander was not a good idea. Before she knew it, she’d stepped right in one of the toxic puddles, and then she was marooned in a sudden squadron of shrieking kids. The girl in the lead was “driving” a warped bicycle tire rim by pushing and steering it with a forked stick, while her crowing friends jostled Corinna on all sides as they raced to catch up.

When the whole Garcia clan got off the train at Macuto, for a moment Corinna could do nothing but stand and stare. After nine months on Mars, it felt impossible that any place could be so green, that there could be such infinite blue water and endless air. Mountains rose precipitously from the rocky coast, their summits trailing an afternoon mist. The sea was glass-calm and the tide was out.

She walked at the end of the group crossing the short wiry grass toward a picnic area under a grove of coconut palms. Each tree had clusters of heavy-looking, green, oblong fruit, but people were spreading out under them as if gravity didn’t exist and coconuts couldn’t fall. The grassy area ended at a sandy crescent of beach meeting the limitless sea. She’d never seen anything so beautiful in her whole life.

There were over thirty people in their group. She’d counted the adults during the train ride, but the kids moved too fast. All of them were busy starting the fire, setting out food, and chopping vegetables. Not one of them would let her do anything. They seemed to feel she was the guest of honor and she was to sit and do nothing. She was embarrassed. She wandered down by the sea just to get herself out of the way.

Little wavelets splashed slowly and softly on the shore, making a sound that was life itself, a sound that existed only on this perfect world and nowhere else for light years in any direction. Visiting the seaside really was an excellent idea. She took a deep breath of unprocessed air.

Unfortunately, the main thing that struck her was that it could have used some processing. It had unpleasant undertones of something like wet, dirty dogs and the insides of students’ refrigerators. She sighed at the thought that

you couldn't have everything, and walked along the shore.

The wavelets were tossing up and leaving behind lines of brownish-grayish scum. It did not look right. It wasn't the usual off-white, stranded sea foam. It wasn't seaweed. It looked like something you'd get in a scummy pond. But the ocean was not a scummy pond. Or it had better not be. A dead ocean would be a dead planet. The tranquil water hid its problems under a silvery sheen that slowly became golden as the sun neared the horizon.

Corinna noticed someone approaching and turned to see Oziel. She felt herself light up at the sight of him and he lengthened his stride to cover the remaining distance faster. Then his arm settled around her shoulders, hers around his waist, and they slowed to a saunter, not in a hurry to be anywhere else.

The sun was setting, turning the smooth surface of the strange-smelling sea into a mirror of delicate aquamarine, apricot, and rose.

"They're almost ready," he said. "Another half hour or so, then we can start eating."

"When the breeze is right, it smells mouth-watering now. And speaking of that, does the sea normally smell like this here?"

He sniffed.

"Not very good today, no. It used to smell of sea, not like this."

A minor mob of Oziel's nieces and nephews went tearing past and rushed into the water. They must be done with their dinner-making tasks and have started a game of "last one in is a rotten egg."

Or something worse, thought Corinna.

"Is that a good idea?" she said to him dubiously. "With the way the ocean smells, there's probably been a sewage spill or something."

He sniffed again.

"That's not sewage. That's something else." When she continued to look dubious, he added with a one-sided grin, "Trust me on this."

There he was again, certain that he was right, and about biology, no less. She started tapping away at her wristpad to find out what was really going on and to have the rare satisfaction of telling him he was wrong. No doubt, in a second she'd be able to say, *Aha! It's a spill from the fish processing plant two point seven kilometers up-current, and that's just as bad.*

Doing any kind of search on a wristpad's small screen was like trying to carry groceries without a bag, but she didn't want to go to all the trouble of extracting and putting on the eye screen. The little thumb-sized projector would give the illusion of a screen as big as she wanted, but it had to be clicked onto the earpiece, which had to be hooked on her ear, and both had to be extricated from their nests in her wristpad, and the minute she had it all set up, dinner would be ready. So instead, she tried to think of the best way to narrow the search down. If she had to guess, most of the beige scum was what scientists called golden algae. Only a doting scientist would have named the diarrhea-colored muck "golden."

The search for chrysophyta trundled, and she hadn't scrolled down more than two tiny screen's worth, when she noticed the blinking zigzag in the upper right corner. What the—? Her security software was telling her someone had planted a spider on her wristpad.

"What are you doing?" asked Oziel, who'd spent the last few minutes teasing a nephew who was laughing at him for not being in the water.

"Trying to prove you wrong," she said absently. The security program had never so much as hiccuped until now, despite all the sensitive data she'd handled in the last two months while shutting down a genetic brainwashing scheme for the United Nations Planetary Bureau.

"Well?" he said with a sly smile. "It's not working, is it?"

"Don't be so sure, wise guy. I haven't even begun. And the reason is," she added seriously, "because I seem to have attracted a spider."

"A spider! Doing what?"

She shook her head, her lips thinned in frustration.

"The stupid security software is always getting in my way when I need to send emails, I never use it, and now I don't remember what to do with it to find out. I guess I'll just tick the delete box."

"Wait," he said, "don't do that. I want to know what it was."

Once a splicer, always a splicer. She supposed this counted as keeping up with current hacks. With a crooked smile she unclasped the wide gray cuff-shaped bracelet and handed it to him.

"Go for it. I have no idea how you'd even start."

"Pues, I've never had a wristpad to play with, but we should be able to find something between the two of us."

Working together, it took very few steps for Corinna to discover that the spider collected a log of anything she accessed about golden algae, and periodically squirted the results off somewhere.

"How bizarre," she muttered. "Why plant illegal spiders for the sake of this muck?" She poked at the slimy stuff at the water line.

"It might be legal," countered Oziel. "Looking at interest in local conditions or something. It should be easy to track to its source, if that's the case."

But it wasn't. Whether that was because they were working with a wristpad, or because it was an illegal spider, Oziel wasn't sure. He finally hit the delete icon, and handed the wristpad back to her.

"You know, if they're planting spiders and doing god-knows-what-all," said Corinna, "maybe I should take a sample of this stuff and see what I can see. Do you think I could find a microscope somewhere? At a local high school, perhaps?"

He nodded. "We'll find something."

A shout toward Oziel from a man near the fire told them to come eat in a few more minutes.

They headed toward the group, but Corinna pulled him back before they reached it.

“Listen, before we join them, I have to know something.” He looked at her as if wondering what was coming. “How am I supposed to address your mother?”

He considered the question briefly, then said,

“I don’t know. Let’s ask her.” And before she could stop him, he called his mother over. “Mamá, she needs to know what to call you.”

Corinna blushed hotly.

“Anything you are comfortable with, *mija*,” his mother said. She spoke so quietly, Corinna felt most of her embarrassment fade away. She’d heard Oziel make bad feelings melt by sound alone, too. Now she knew where he’d learned it.

“But you haven’t found anything yet?” his mother continued, reading her red face. “Then call me Yoana. I call you Corinna and that’s all right, isn’t it?”

Corinna let out a helpless little laugh.

“Well, *of course*.”

She was going to have to speak to Oziel about his outrageous straightforwardness. He’d never warned her when they first met that he was going to be embarrassing the hell out of her. He’d wasted time on minor stuff, like that he came from a barrio.

Yoana hurried back at a call from Silvia, and Corinna’s intention of teaching Oziel a thing or two dissolved with one look at his questioning, am-I-going-to-catch-it-now expression. She gave up with another helpless laugh.

“You know exactly what you’re doing,” she said. “How come I’m not even mad at you?”

“Because you know exactly what I’m doing,” he said.

She tried to find a comeback that showed he wasn’t always going to be right when his gaze shifted to something over her head. He straightened and stiffened and both his hands curled into fists. Then she noticed that the whole group was on alert, oriented to the same direction, like cuttlefish she had spotted once when diving, who all pointed toward a barracuda she could barely see.

“What?” she asked.

“You see the fellow in the blue shirt and trousers?”

She nodded. Handsome-looking fellow, even at this distance, but not otherwise remarkable.

“That’s Quintón.”

“Quintón! I thought you said he was –”

“He got a one-day pass, supposedly to see his long-lost brother.” Not once taking his eyes off his approaching cousin, he added, “Mamá thinks it’s good for him to be with his family. I told her, he’ll just use it to set up some prison drug deals, and then he’ll bring the sons of rats with him.” He interrupted his dark stare at the distance to give her a quick, tentative glance, and she realized she wasn’t the only one who wanted to make a good impression.

She studied Quintón, noticed the four men who seemed to be with him,

and didn't know what to say.

"Mamá is ... I love my mother like life itself, Corinna, but she's fried about this. She keeps thinking Quintón will see reason."

"Fried" meant crazy around here. His mother was anything but that.

Corinna looked at him and thought, *You never give up either*. She wondered whether to say it out loud.

"You can't blame her," she said instead, trying to lighten the mood. "It got you out of the gang when you were seventeen."

He didn't seem to think that was funny. He went back to staring at Quintón, tendons standing out like ropes on his fists and jaw muscles clenched. The youngest, even at that distance, had to stop pretending he hadn't noticed his formidable oldest brother. Quintón said something to a white-shirted man next to him, and all five of them stopped for some sort of conference.

Given the look on Oziel's face, she would have done more than stop. She would have run until there was a mountain range between them. It was one thing to hear about how he'd been in a gang for a while, long ago. It was another to watch him revert into a gangster.

"Hey, Zio," she said, wishing she could change him back into the man she knew. "Can I call you Zio, by the way? Or will it make me sound like a four year-old?"

He turned to her and underwent an amazing transformation, as if a vast shape on the horizon turned out to be a bank of clouds instead of a tidal wave.

"You, *mí amor*, can call me anything you want." He reached over to stroke her hair.

Oh! she thought, melted by how he changed for her. It took her a moment to do more than look at him.

"So, uh, what's – what's going to happen, if four gangsters join the party?"

"Five gangsters," he corrected her, his scowl coming back. "Quintón invited them, which means there are rules they'll follow. They won't do anything. And you watch. Mamá will un-invite them so fast, they'll think they hit a revolving door. That's not the problem. The problem is the guy next to Quintón."

"The one in the white shirt and black trousers?" He was a lean, unremarkable man of medium height, neither young nor old. Nothing about him, at this distance, explained the attention he commanded.

"He's one of the bigger gangsters. It's against the rules of Quintón's release for him to see any of them, forget talking to them. By law, we're supposed to report it." And Oziel, like the rest of his family, just looked at the approaching men.

It was on the tip of Corinna's New York tongue to say *here, you want to use my wristpad?* But she knew it wasn't funny, and she knew plenty of them had phones that could make a simple call. She could see, with a sharp tightness in her chest, how nobody here would betray one of their own, no matter how

much they hated what he did, or how much they hated what he did to them.

As the group approached, Corinna realized that three of them were bodyguards for the lean man in the middle. They seemed to be headed straight for the knot of people surrounding her and the picnic table. The main gangster's black hair was slicked back and he had a heavy, obviously intentional, five o'clock shadow that gave him his own personal air of darkness. But the breath stopped in her lungs at the sight of his eyes, like two chips of sooty ice, frozen since the dawn of time. She looked away and practiced being invisible. Seeing gangsters in the movies was one thing. In real life, even unarmed as this squadron seemed to be, they had a terrifying feeling of brutality about them.

She stole a glance at Oziel and saw his feral glare, still fixed on the approaching group. Yoana was staring at her youngest with a different but equally furious glare. Uncle Rafael stood on Oziel's other side, creating a phalanx of large, ominous family members. A showdown loomed.

It might be less embarrassing for everyone if bystanding guests weren't right in the middle of things. It might even be a good time for bystanding guests to go collect seawater. Corinna took an empty jar that had carried basting sauce, and headed down to the shoreline.

She spent as long as she could rinsing the jar, and then finding the perfect sample that had as much beige goop in it as possible. Twilight was descending, but even in the fading light, the muck thrown up on the beach did not look right as she poked at it with her shoe. It was smooth as paste, without the lumps and blobs of an ordinary algal bloom.

She turned around to head back, relieved to see that nobody was fighting, but it didn't take more than a few steps to notice that something was wrong. The whole group seemed unnaturally quiet and tension pervaded the air like the hum of a high voltage cable. A couple of the henchmen had stripped right down to their boxer shorts, which looked like swimming trunks, and the third one had taken off his shirt. They'd spread out, but they were all still covering the main guy, who was disappearing toward the public toilets at the park entrance. Everybody carefully didn't look at them, or at Quintón, or – Corinna was close enough to see what the problem was.

Everybody also didn't look at the small, fussy man with a small, fussy mustache, dressed in a uniform with gleaming brass buttons and a cap with a brass medallion. He seemed to resent being dwarfed by Yoana and Rafael.

Had he noticed the cardboard boxes with "barrio" written all over them? Or the gangsters?

Corinna was close enough to hear his voice, every bit as self-important as the rest of him.

"Permit, please. I would like to see your permit. Groups larger than ten require a permit."

Maybe it was just the boxes –.

"I also need to see the prisoner's day pass," this with a curt nod toward Quintón, "and the identity cards of the men accompanying him."

Yoana said her son was here to be with his family. He had no men with him.

The men, without their white shirts, had melted away among the other beachgoers, which only put the policeman in an even fussier frame of mind. He pulled his citation datapad out of its holder, and Corinna quickly dug into her waist pack for her passport card. There was a chance he might become reasonable in the presence of a wealthier foreigner.

She walked up brightly, and, purposely misunderstanding him, said with a big smile,

“Hi. I heard you ask about visas.”

The policeman hadn't noticed her gringa-ness in the crowd. He looked surprised.

“Beautiful park here,” she said. “And this time of the evening is so beautiful, with the colors on the sea. Sorry, my Spanish is not too good, but I think the visa is okay. I'm in transit to New York, but to tell you the truth, I'd much rather stay here. We don't have anything like this scenery in New York.” She prattled, and planned to continue prattling until he put his damn datapad away.

He hadn't written anything yet, she'd accomplished that much, but he showed no sign of putting the pad away. On the contrary, he eyed her as if she was a caterpillar he'd surprised in his salad.

“Nothing may be removed from national parks,” he announced with a nod toward the jar she'd set down on the grass. “Unless you have a permit. Do you have a permit?”

Jee-sus, this little brass-buttoned loser was really reaching. And she'd thought she could help by drawing attention to herself. She tried to think fast, while he placed her passport card suspiciously on his datapad's chip reader.

“That's just seawater. I didn't realize that could be a problem. I'll be glad to pour it back. I was, uh, just taking it as a souvenir of this beautiful place.” She hoped it was no part of his official duties to lock people up for loopiness.

He handed her card back and said in an unsatisfied way that it seemed to be in order, and that if the jar contained only seawater, he supposed it didn't matter, but he needed to see it. He swirled the liquid around discontentedly, and returned the jar. Then he went right back to his citation pad.

With grim determination and the same bright smile, Corinna launched into another attempt at distraction.

“It's wonderful to be here, right after that endless space flight. I just got back from Mars, you know. And three families of my friends have come out to welcome me home. They were all helping to get the fire going here.” She almost blew her lines by laughing at how expertly all the people picked up on this cue and sorted into three groups, two of them drifting to other grills. Enough kids were down in the water to reduce the numbers nicely.

“From Mars?” he said, finally finding a topic besides permits. He looked at her, looked at her data on his pad, and suddenly exclaimed, “Oy! You were on

the news weren't you? About that horrible gene stuff they were doing?"

She nodded, pretending to be surprised. Both she and Oziel had had their fifteen minutes of fame in the last two months because of the brainwashing scheme. This particular cop must have seen the interview a week ago, just before they left for Earth. She waved Oziel over.

"This is Señor García. You probably saw him too, in that case."

Oziel turned on the charm and the policeman finally became wreathed in smiles. The damn datapad was put away. Yoana gave him some of the cookies that were one of several desserts, and, at last, they got rid of him.

Corinna had drawn breath for a sigh of relief, when she realized it was too early for any such thing. Oziel was saying something to Quintón with enough menace to be planning murder, and, with one short jerk of his head, ordered Quintón to walk with him down the beach. Quintón trailed after him like a man on a chain. Nobody seemed to dream of interfering, and Corinna thought she better do it herself, or Oziel might earn himself his very own jail time.

But before she could follow him, she became aware of Yoana watching her steadily. It wasn't too hard to imagine what she must be thinking. Something along the lines of "it must be nice to count for more than a whole truckload of us locals."

Corinna looked at her feet, suddenly hot from embarrassment.

"I'm sorry," she said.

She didn't doubt Yoana knew she'd been trying to help, but that didn't change the insult of the whole situation. If only she'd been left in peace to blend into this group with as little weirdness as she could manage. If only there weren't whole classes of people with more money than brains. If only she knew what to do with herself. She couldn't walk away, without looking like she was walking away. She moved toward a box to pretend to be busy setting out more food. Hot sauce, for instance. Damn all policemen.

Yoana walked over to her, and Corinna felt herself tense even more. Oziel's mother put a gentle arm around her shoulders and said in her warm quiet voice,

"You have a kind heart, *mija*. It's all right."

Before Corinna could do more than stare up at her, she gave her a small hug and went to start handing out food. Corinna could feel her realigning the bad atmosphere with a pull like gravity, irresistible, unnoticeable, if you were used to it. Was there anyone, she wondered, who had the oceans of strength needed to do the same for her?

Which left the question of Oziel. Corinna glanced around and saw him by the meager light of the remaining twilight, sitting down on the beach with Quintón, looking for all the world like a father reaming out his delinquent son. Quintón's lazy, backward-leaning posture, carelessly propped on one hand resting on the sand, expressed all the insolence of the standard rebellious son. She couldn't see his face, but she had the impression he preserved his unruffled arrogance to be irritating, like a cat beyond the reach of a dog. Neither of

them looked safe.

She took a tortilla to use as a plate, loaded it with fried plantains and a delicious-smelling *arepa* filled with beef, onions, cilantro, and garlic, and headed toward the two of them. As she approached, she found she didn't know half the words Oziel was using. That was probably just as well. But at least they seemed to have moved on to Quintón's more general shortcomings, because Oziel was saying, "You're going to pay that back, you understand? You are going to get a job in the prison shop, and you are going to pay that back. Starting yesterday."

Quintón's answer, bored and slow, as if all this was in a day's work, included something about smug pricks who didn't have a visible job themselves.

"You'll have to find one when your hotshot bitch kicks you out, but at least I make my own money."

Corinna's eyes widened. The insult hit at both her and Oziel on so many levels, she wanted to ream him out herself. Oziel tensed, shifted, and was going to beat Quintón to pulp. She hurried her last few steps, they noticed her, and she had the satisfaction of seeing Quintón look shocked that she'd overheard. She murmured into Oziel's ear, trying to imitate the small, fussy policeman,

"Ey, do you have a permit for beating up brothers in parks?"

Oziel sat back with a mirthless laugh. Quintón tried to pretend it was all the same to him, but he relaxed visibly when he saw he didn't need to run for his life.

She turned on him.

"Listen," she began. "He saved the life of this hotshot several times over. He did more than that. He saved *me* in – in many ways." Her Spanish was not up to this level of emotional overload. "I owe him more than I could repay if I paid him for the rest of his life. Instead what does he do? He sends money instead of taking it. He didn't even have a real watch on Mars, because he was sending every last penny he could home."

She knew she wasn't being coherent, but it was everything she could do to speak to him at all.

"Señora, my apologies," Quintón tried to interrupt.

She rolled right over him. Señora indeed. She supposed she should be glad it wasn't Doctora.

"Do you have any idea what it's like to be so far from home that it's just a star in the sky, without a friend in the world, with no money –."

As he sat on the sand, she could see one of the black tracker bands around his ankle, and abruptly she remembered where he spent most of his time.

"Oh, hell," she said in English, hoping that, like many people, he knew enough to understand. She couldn't handle grammar and feeling, both at once. "I'm sorry. Of course you know what it's like." Quintón's arrogance was overwhelmed by amazement. "It's just that Yoana is a wonderful person, and your relatives are the kindest people I've met. That doesn't make it right to take advantage of them."

He looked like a man trying to pull himself together after being pole-axed. Oziel was sitting there, waiting for developments, and Corinna was sitting there because she had no idea what else to do.

“*Si, Señora,*” said Quintón.

He still looked mortified, possibly because of the insult he’d managed to perpetrate, although it would be nice to think he realized what a jerk he’d been.

“What’s this *Señora* stuff?” she grumbled at him, continuing in English. “My name’s Corinna.”

“*Si, Señ – Si.*”

He couldn’t seem to use less than a title, not to the woman who, although smaller than his oldest brother, had her own methods. He made an incoherent comment or two, backed away toward the safety of the disapproval of the rest of his family, and looked set to avoid her for the rest of the evening, if not the rest of his life.

Oziel lay back and stretched out on the sand, one hand on the small of her back as she sat there, still holding her tortilla, trying to calm herself down.

“It’s not true, Corinna,” he said suddenly in the darkness. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“I know, Zio. When I understood that, I realized I owe you everything.”

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Some time later, Marco’s voice came from the grassy section behind the beach, many meters away.

“Ey, can I interrupt or do you want me to get lost?”

“We’re just talking,” said Oziel, “but she says such nice things, I don’t know if I want to listen to you.”

“Impossible!” exclaimed Marco facetiously. “Quintón was spooked after just a couple of words from her. He was even polite to us the whole time till he left.” Marco was close enough now for Corinna to see the beginnings of a grin on his sad face. “He has to be back by ten, so he just caught the metro, taking one of the first of the desserts with him. That’s what I came to tell you about. The *empanadas* are ready.”

Corinna had never seen anyone enjoying his food as much as Oziel. He’d been eating while they sat on the beach, and now he took thirds, or maybe it was fourths, while Marco fished one of the sizzling filled plantains out of a pan of hot oil for her. When she’d cooled it down enough to try, she found the fruit and the sweet, creamy filling had amalgamated into ambrosia. The neat package bore the same relation to other plantains she’d eaten as *petit fours* do to flour.

“If you care anything about food,” Oziel told Silvia when she called him

something that sounded a lot like *pig* – while she put a sizzling *empanada* on a special plate for him – “stay away from spaceships, space stations, orbital shuttles, research domes, and, judging by what she tells me,” he nodded toward Corinna, “most of North America.”

“And airplanes,” added Corinna.

The friendliness in this group, especially without Quintón and company, continued to take Corinna by surprise. Except for three teenage boys, who had been bragging about electronics and had now moved on to motorbikes, there wasn't even any one-upsmanship, at least none that she could detect. She wondered if some people, when they had enough real problems in their lives, quit trying to make them with their relatives.

Yoana asked Corinna about her work, so Corinna tried to explain molecular biology and bioengineering and what was involved in mixing DNA from jellyfish and geraniums. She soon realized she'd started at the wrong end. First, she needed to explain DNA. Yoana shook her head and said she wished she'd finished high school, but Corinna knew that wasn't the problem. All Yoana needed was a better explainer.

Silvia also disagreed, although for other reasons.

“If it's just for that,” she said “don't bother. That big lunk finished high school,” she nodded toward Oziel, “and he doesn't know what she's talking about either.”

“Yes I do,” he protested. “I've been listening to this stuff for *months*.” And to prove that he did, he explained Corinna's words to his mother, who sat on the other side of him, doling out coffee from a pot the size of a young oil drum.

“She changes how things are born.”

Corinna nearly choked on her coffee at being put next door to God, but then she had to admit he had grasped the essence.

“Like plant or animal breeders,” she nodded.

Then she took a second helping of dessert and was contentedly chewing when she realized he and his mother were no longer talking about bioengineering. She heard Yoana ask something about why he was staying in a hotel.

Well, so much for there not being any problems. Corinna knew it couldn't last. His mother seemed to be a wonderful woman, but she was still a mom, and moms were just that way. Her next sentence was probably going to be something like, *Of course, staying with us would be hard for Corinna. She's not like us.* Or, worse yet, maybe that would be his next sentence.

She was listening with both ears, when someone on the other side of her asked her to pass along another jar of coffee. The jars had been washed out from whatever they'd carried to the feast and now served to stretch the supply of coffee cups. She missed Oziel's answer and by the time she was paying attention again, his mother was laughing out loud. Whatever he'd said, it had resolved the whole situation in a second. He should have gone into diplomatic service.

When Corinna had a chance, she murmured to him,

“So what did you tell her?”

He looked at her, questioningly.

“About ...?”

“Why we’re in a hotel.”

“I told her the truth.”

The truth? wondered Corinna. But which truth?

He answered her look.

“That I couldn’t make love with you if we’re sleeping in the living room.”

“Oh, for ...” She reddened. “For Christ’s sake.”

“What?” He raised his eyebrows as if he was surprised. “You think she thought we were just good friends until I said that?”

Corinna stared into her coffee for a while, and tried to stop being embarrassed. Nobody else was. *He* would probably have no qualms about telling his mother that the spaceflight was not boring. Hell, he’d probably be surprised that Corinna did.

“Well?” he said softly to her, “Do you still think my mother’s going to break you in half?”

“No. You were right. There was nothing to worry about.”

He looked pleased.

As long as Corinna had known him, over three months by now, Oziel had a way of being sure he was right. Even more annoying was that he’d inevitably turn out, in fact, to be right.

Corinna leaned over and asked Yoana plaintively, loud enough for most people to hear,

“Has he always been right, or did it happen gradually?”

The whole family burst into laughter, except Oziel, who grinned sheepishly.

“Always,” said his mother definitely. “He got it from his father together with his looks.”

“Always,” said Marco, and Silvia, and Graciela, and another five or ten assorted cousins.

“And if Quintón was still here,” said Marco, “he would say always too.”

She had, apparently, touched a nerve. “Hah,” she said to him, under her breath.

A campfire had been built down on the beach, and many of them went to sit around it in a large circle. Some people were still eating dessert, no one was in a hurry. Corinna had never been in a group like this. She was different, no question about that. Her Spanish was odd, her skin was whiter, and she could lose them almost instantly if she mentioned anything scientific, but, and this was the point, none of it mattered. Oziel’s mother called her “*mí hija*,” my daughter, although its meaning was closer to “my dear,” and surrounded her with kindness. Everyone took care of her, included her, made sure the jokes went by slowly enough for her to catch them. If time could be frozen, she would have stopped it as they sat around the fire, in a circle that went on forever, while Oziel told them about Mars, and they told him about relatives in a

distant town who were having a hard time, about young folks who had finished high school and older ones who had married, and about even older ones who had died.

The subject of Quintón came up, as it was bound to, but, somehow, nobody dwelled on it and the conversation soon veered to humorous comments on the policeman. What, they wanted to know, did Corinna really have in that jar? When she explained that it was, in fact, just seawater, they ribbed her about it with shouts of laughter. Trust a scientist to try to carry the sea home in jars. One of the cousins, who was a baggage handler at the airport right on the coast, said the strange ocean smell had happened several times in the last month or so.

“Not every day. Sometimes, when the wind is right.”

“Just the last couple of months? So it doesn’t generally smell like that?”

“No, it’s only happened recently.”

“Then it’s definitely not some normal local phenomenon,” said Corinna.

“Which makes it more likely,” said Oziel, glancing at her wristpad “that the spider is there because somebody is scrambling to figure out what’s going on.”

“You caught a *spider*? On a *wristpad*?” said a teenager, as if this was the coolest thing. “Or did the software just see one go by?” That would be much less cool.

Oziel grinned.

“Come here, Raoul. I’ll show you.” He stretched out his hand for Corinna’s wristpad, and she handed it over, amused at the speed with which it had become common property.

Oziel tapped away at the little screen, tripped across the same spider again, and deleted it. However, he was frowning when he returned the wristpad.

“There was another spider planted on there,” he said to her in an undertone. “Examining the first one is what attracted it, as far as I can tell. I got rid of it, too, but this one is definitely illegal, because it takes your name and sends it off somewhere.”

She stared at him. “You mean someone is keeping tabs on me, specifically, because I tried to find some information on beige goop?”

He nodded.

Chapter 2

Corinna walked past shacks with parts of their walls made of nothing but cardboard. They looked hopeless against mere rain, to say nothing of all the misfortune coming down here.

She and Oziel had slept in at the hotel after the picnic and took their time getting up. As they sauntered up the hill toward his mother's place for breakfast, she said to him with a small, secret smile,

"We're getting our money's worth out of our room."

He glanced down at her with a low chuckle she could feel in the middle of her chest. It was just about the sexiest sound in the universe.

She didn't understand the first signs of trouble as they walked along. Neighbors greeted Oziel as usual, but they were also saying something about a lot of family. A big group came in overnight, some of them said. Oziel began walking faster.

There had been an invasion at Yoana's house, as far as Corinna could see. Yoana herself was at work, but her house was open and too many people to count were milling around. Families were extended in these parts. Everybody was talking at once. Oziel had no difficulty parallel-processing ten different conversations in two different dialects and was introducing her to a bewildering array of faces. If he thought she was going to remember anyone's name, he had a totally erroneous assessment of her intelligence. However, it probably didn't matter, since they'd be going back to wherever – Amuay, that was it – after their visit. She didn't remember her Venezuelan geography well enough to have a clue where that was.

"On the coast," said Oziel when she asked, "toward the west," and then introduced her to yet another person. That relative had young cousins of Oziel's at someone else's place, so he said, "I'll be right back, okay?"

She nodded. It would be a relief to have a lull in the introductions. She was also starting to become seriously interested in her delayed breakfast, although she wasn't sure how to go about finding any in the crush of people.

Some of the visitors were discussing schools and the head of the family, whose name she couldn't remember, was asking about the local fish sellers.

Corinna found herself next to a shy young woman who was one of the few people not talking. Kids were running around, between, and sometimes over, the mass of adults. One of the kids caromed off Corinna, making her sit down

suddenly.

“Well, hello,” she said, as the two of them disentangled themselves. “And what’s your name?” It was a little girl of about five, with long black hair like silk and the face of an angel. Somebody, Corinna couldn’t help thinking, really needed to map the genetics of this family. The child was flushed and overheated, she’d been tearing around so much.

“I’m Ilona,” said the kid, breaking into a delighted grin as soon as she saw that she wasn’t in trouble for knocking down an adult. “And you’re Tía Corinna,” she concluded, looking even more delighted to be able to show off her knowledge.

With a jolt of surprise at being so suddenly and effortlessly elevated to family status, Corinna said,

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Tía Yoana said you’re from Mars.”

“No, not exactly. I think she said we arrived from there. I’m from New York.”

“Where’s New York?”

Corinna had never in her life been asked that before. She had to collect her thoughts for a moment before saying,

“You know where the United States is?” The girl nodded sagely, her long black hair flowingly following the motion. “Well, it’s a big city in that country.”

“Everybody’s rich there,” she announced. “Are you rich? You don’t look very rich.”

A clash of thoughts stopped any answer Corinna could give. On one level, there was the automatic response of *no, of course I’m not rich*, which was ludicrous in this company. Denying wealth was a defense against envy, she realized. Not necessarily a truth. Nor was everyone rich in the US, not by a long shot, not even by barrio standards.

“I don’t know, Ilona,” she finally said. “They wouldn’t call me rich at home.”

“You’re not at home,” the child pointed out.

The García straightforwardness must be genetic.

“Here, they would probably call me rich,” said Corinna, surprised at how hard it was to admit it.

“Ilona!” the shy woman unexpectedly interrupted. “Behave yourself! Speak politely or don’t speak.” She turned to Corinna, obviously to apologize for the child, so Corinna broke in before she could start.

“No, no, not at all. No, it’s fine. No, really.”

But the young woman sent Ilona off to play with the other kids before she committed any more blunders.

To stop further apologies, Corinna changed the subject.

“My Spanish isn’t up to keeping track of all this.” She looked around to include the entire hubbub of voices. “What’s the occasion?”

“Oh!” said the young woman with wide eyes, very much like a fawn about

to disappear back into the underbrush. "Oh, Tío Estevan decided we had to do something."

Estevan, that was the name of the head of the family. "Had to do something" sounded strange. Surely, at the likely income level represented here, they didn't take the whole family on a weekend trip across the country just because they were bored.

"Do something?" asked Corinna as encouragingly as possible.

"Yes." The girl seemed to be growing a bit more comfortable as the strangeness of talking wore off. "When my father lost his job a month ago, it was bad. But then when *El Mejor* moved the fishing fleet away, about four of the men lost their jobs, including Tío Estevan, and then *La Marka* closed the store where I worked and I lost my job, and it was just going on like that in the whole town. Tío Estevan said we needed to come here while we still could." She shook her head apologetically, as if it was somehow her fault.

So this wasn't a visit. Corinna had heard about this sort of thing, about a lack of jobs in the country, about people moving to the city and camping in the slums in the hope of finding some way of keeping body and soul together. But she'd only ever heard about it. It was different to see a couple of dozen people who had to start over with nothing.

She looked around at the mob. Where were they all going to sleep? On the floor right here? What were they all going to do? Now that she had some idea of what this really meant, she was dumbfounded at the lack of panic, or even quiet desperation. People were laughing and talking, drinking coffee, and Graciela was setting out food on the table.

"Why did the fleet move away?" asked Corinna, trying not to feel apprehensive about yet another symptom from the sea. How many more were there going to be? Maybe this was just one more case of overfishing followed by regional collapse.

The young woman shook her head again, apologizing now for her ignorance.

"They just do. You know how it is."

No, thought Corinna, looking around. I don't. Her own urgency to land a good job suddenly seemed remote, like worrying about not having enough salad forks for a place setting. With a queasy sense of double vision, she wondered whether seeing the world from a *barrio* perspective could make her lose her own. She'd spent twenty years of hard work on her goals.

The smell of food wafting through the room became more than Corinna could stand. Feeling incredibly foolish, as the only person with anything like real money in the whole house, but also feeling very hungry, she took advantage of the spread to forage for breakfast.

"What a difficult situation," she said to the quiet young woman, sitting back down next to her and starting to work on a couple of bean-filled tortillas. "*La Marka* is a supermarket chain, isn't it? Will you be looking for the same sort of work here?"

“Oh! I’ll take anything I can get. Tía Yoana said Chirica’s might need someone to help clean up.”

Sweeping up at a hair salon was probably less wearing than sitting at a checkout all day. What a choice. The only good thing was that in this family, it wasn’t likely to be a choice between that and prostitution.

“How about the men?” she asked.

“Tío Estevan may try to do something with fish. He knows fish.”

This gave Corinna an image of the tall, portly Estevan Vasquez shaking the fin of an equally large and portly halibut.

She had opened her mouth to ask for details when Oziel sat down next to her. He gave her a pleased smile, but he’d joined her to talk to the shy young woman.

“Lorena, how’s Ilona been on this trip?”

The woman shook her head.

“She’s had the runs. It was a real problem on the bus, but we had nice drivers most of the way, so not too many disasters.”

The runs, Corinna knew, was a term for diarrhea, and she didn’t even want to imagine the complexities of hours on a bus in that condition. If Ilona was sick, she sure didn’t act like it. Even in this group, she was remarkable for being outgoing.

“Oy, Ilonita,” Oziel called to her, and waved her to come closer when he snagged her attention in the hubbub. She came bouncing over, flushed again from exercise, and he caught her up in a hug. “How do you feel, Ilonita?” he asked, putting one hand on her forehead.

“Fine,” she said.

“Cold sometimes?”

Cold! thought Corinna. In this weather?

“Yes, sometimes,” said the little girl.

“I’m going to push a bit on your stomach,” said Oziel. “You tell me if it hurts.”

But it wasn’t a case of telling.

“Ow!” she cried.

He asked if she could stick her tongue out as far as he could, and made a goofy face while doing it. Corinna noticed that the little kid’s tongue was oddly brown. Then he let her scamper off to rejoin the other kids.

“Can I use your wristpad, Corinna?” was all he said, his eyes following Ilona, full of concern.

“Sure. What’s going on?”

“I thought when I saw her that she looked feverish. It seems to be coming up really fast and it looks bad, so I’m going to call Miguel.”

He reached Miguel Sanderas’s clinic, and after talking to a couple of people, had the doctor himself on the line. Oziel began speaking in quick barrio slang to his old childhood friend, and Corinna couldn’t follow what he was saying. She could pick out a few words about a sick child, and she was pretty sure

she heard him call the doctor a “street rat.” It was just about a term of affection between the two of them. She’d heard the doctor call him that once.

Oziel handed the wristpad back to Corinna.

“Miguel will call back in a few minutes to tell us when to bring her over. You want to run back to the hotel and get that jar?”

Jar? What jar?

“Your jar of seawater,” he explained to her puzzled look. “I asked Marco about where to find microscopes. He said Miguel has one, and if we’re going there now, you can look at your sample while we’re there.”

She’d forgotten all about the seawater in the excitement. But he hadn’t. She looked at him in disbelief that he could remember everything under these circumstances. He could be running armies with his abilities. Or gangs. It was just lucky he didn’t want to.

“Good idea,” she said. “I think I can find my way there and back.”

But he detailed a cousin to keep her company to make sure she had no problems. Everybody, herself included it seemed, just followed his instructions as if it was the only way to do things. Corinna found it very strange, but nobody else seemed to think anything of it.

By the time she returned about fifteen minutes later, Miguel had called back. They should come as soon as they could, because he should be done with the current batch of patients soon, and who knew when the next crop would come in.

Oziel carried the little girl, and her silent mother scurried along beside him, her fingers knotted around a bit of handkerchief. They walked fast through the barrio’s nameless tracks, and Corinna decided Oziel must be right about Ilona. She was taking an interest in the dogs and chickens along the way and seemed quite lively, but now that Corinna knew what to look for, she could see that the flush wasn’t healthy at all, and she even noticed the little girl shiver a few times when the chills came on. The fever seemed to be spiking very fast.

The barrio’s tracks were not nameless Corinna found out when she asked Oziel about it. The inhabitants knew exactly what each corner was called, but the city did not put up signs any more than it put down sewers. The lack of the latter became more problematic the further they went into the poorer parts of the barrio.

The amount of energy that compensated for the lack of services was in evidence everywhere. People carried firewood and containers of water or fuel. That obviously took hours of someone’s day in every family. Everyone walked everywhere, which took time. There were no buses, certainly no cars. If there had been, there were no roads they could have used. The smell in some areas was stomach-turning. Latrines were dug, but there was too little free land to move them often enough to keep the odor down. She wondered what this place must have been like fifty years ago, when five million people lived here instead of five hundred thousand. The same, but ten times as big, she sup-

posed.

Oziel talked every now and again to Ilona's mother, but even he couldn't seem to jog her out of a settled fear that seemed much deeper and harder than worry. When Corinna held her breath during a bad stretch, he said,

"We'll be there soon. How are you doing?"

She gave him a half-smile.

"Um. Fine. Fine," she lied.

"It'll be more fine soon." He wasn't fooled. "Look, there's the clinic."

The track opened onto a main road, capable of handling anything modern civilization wanted to run on it. Apparently, in this electric age, civilization mainly wanted to run buses, whining taxis, disintegrating mopeds, and bicycles. She'd seen the clinic at night under hectic circumstances a couple of months ago, but the main thing she noticed in daylight was the dinginess of its white front wall. It made Corinna's heart ache to think of the sacrifice and dedication behind that flaking paint, and the lack of recognition it advertised.

The clinic had two floors and had been built as a big residential house long ago. The main door opened onto a courtyard, which doubled as an extra waiting room on weekdays, judging by the benches along the walls.

A young trainee met them at the door.

"The doctor is still dealing with the knifing cases, but he says he'll be out as soon as he can, and I'll go get a nurse for the child. You were going to use the microscope, is that right, Señora?" she asked Corinna.

Corinna nodded with a smile. She wasn't used to the formality yet. She was never going to get used to the formality. She still remembered her disorientation when she first met Oziel and he'd referred to her as Doctora.

"Knifing cases?" said Oziel, looking worried. She could see him wondering whether it was someone he knew.

"You go on," he said to Corinna. "I'll join you once Ilona is taken care of."

Corinna tried to give some encouragement to the silent, frozen mother, and then followed the young trainee upstairs to the room that served as Sanderas's office and lab. It still looked the same as on her last memorable visit, but this time she had to do more than use the phone. She needed slides, coverslips, eye droppers, and it looked like she wasn't going to get any help finding them. The young trainee never came all the way into the room.

"You can find what you need, yes?" she asked hopefully, and scurried back to her patients almost before Corinna had finished nodding.

After much rummaging through cabinets and drawers, Corinna could look at her sample at last. She peered through the microscope. Then she peered again. The whole field of view had only one type of algae in it. The crystalline husks gleamed like shards of glass, but even dead and broken like that, it was easy to see they were all just one kind of diatom.

That was simply not possible. Pollution would have killed indiscriminately and there'd be dozens of different critters in the sample. There were thousands, millions, of different things all floating in the top few meters of the

ocean. There was nothing that would kill one and only one species with the pinpoint accuracy of a hitman. It was so far from normal, Corinna felt cold, as if she'd just heard a window smash in a house where she was alone. It was definitely bad, but she wasn't sure yet how bad.

Finding the microscopic hitman was going to take a lot of detective work. It would probably take a whole genome scan. That cost thousands of dollars she didn't have and couldn't get. She leaned back and stared at the microscope in disgust. She hadn't expected this to be one more thing that reminded her she didn't have a job.

If she had a job, she could apply for a grant. If she had a job, she could pay for some of the supplies herself. If she had a job, she wouldn't have to worry about using up her savings, or feel bad that Oziel was using up his so they could stay in a room of their own. He'd quit a steady paycheck so he could return with her, and now that she was here, she was starting to have an inkling what that meant. If she had a job, she wouldn't have to feel that every moment not spent looking for one, like this moment, was wasted.

You have to quit obsessing, she lectured herself as she did over and over, several times each day. *You'll find a job when you find one*. Besides, job or no job, if she was back in New York, her former graduate school professor would let her use his lab, and she could start figuring out this weird dieback. It was yet one more reason, a more politically correct one than disliking the smell, to get back to New York.

Oziel came in as she frowned at the microscope.

"The nurse gave Ilona intravenous antibiotics. We'll see what Miguel says when he looks at her." Then he sat down beside her and looked at her, eyebrows raised in a question. "What did that poor microscope do to you?"

"It's being obscure," she said. "It's telling me there's something strange going on and it's not telling me what it is." She explained the die-off composed of identical cells. "Somebody else must have noticed this. Just about every algologist around the Caribbean must have noticed this. I think I'll ask Dr. Sanderas whether I can use his computer for some web searches. Trying to do that sort of thing on a wristpad is like using a teaspoon for a shovel."

"He'd probably rather you didn't waste the time asking, if I know him. He'll say yes, so just do it." Oziel nodded toward the waiting computer.

"What? You take full responsibility?" She quirked one side of her mouth up at his cavalier attitude.

"Certainly. He'll be glad it's not worse, since he knows me. But let me start it off, so that I can deflect that spider," he added.

"Mmf," she said, still skeptical.

After quite a bit of tapping to enter obscure commands, he motioned her at the keyboard again.

"A sophisticated spider," he muttered. "Wherever it's coming from."

However, better facilities didn't guarantee better information. The computer, as computers so often do, told her what she already knew. A few water

quality and fisheries bureaus around the Caribbean had noticed strange algal diebacks. They all said there “must have been” an algal bloom, although nobody had actually spotted one. Everybody suggested further work, but nobody had done any.

“I wonder,” she stared musingly at the display, “whether they’re being entirely forthcoming. These are, after all, government agencies. They’re probably more concerned about preventing panic than providing information.” She looked significantly at Oziel.

He flexed his fingers and gave her a little grin. Getting into a few internal servers in low security, low-level agencies was nothing for a splicer of his ability, but unfortunately the results of the search were also nothing. Internal documents had no better information on the one-celled hitman than public ones.

“Is that spider somehow interfering?” He was muttering to himself. “No, it’s still fooled. ... Maybe the files are encrypted,” he said, tapping at the keyboard.

“Diatoms? *Encrypted*? They’re one of the commonest algae on earth. What’s to encrypt?”

He was staring at the screen.

“*Raro*,” he muttered. “I did a machine-level search on the word ‘diatom’ and this time I have some hits, but only in trashed files.”

“People are collecting diatom data only to erase it?”

“It’s not an ordinary erase. They’re trashed. They have random stop bits everywhere.”

“Why would people do that?” she asked in complete bafflement.

“I don’t think they would,” he muttered, continuing to tap away. Then he raised his eyebrows at something he saw in the hexadecimal gobbledygook scrolling by and leaned back. “They aren’t trashing them. It’s that spider. It does more than just report back to someone: it also blows up files.”

“Jee-sus,” breathed Corinna. “And it’s doing this all over the whole net?”

Oziel looked at a few more servers.

“It’s the same pattern at the Belizean Water Quality server.” Then it turned out to be the same at an institute in the Yucatan, and then another in Nicaragua.

“This is starting to look like more than some splicer’s prank,” said Corinna. “God only knows what these weirdos are trying to cover up, but this is a great way to do it. All the separate people in their separate offices think the destroyed data is nothing more than a lost file or two. They never accumulate enough information to see a pattern, so they never realize it exists.”

Oziel nodded.

“Whatever the problem might be. I haven’t answered the main question for you, have I?”

“Well, that’s research for you. You start looking, and all you find are bigger questions. Now, what I could do in the next few days is grow some of these diatoms in a couple of small aquariums and see what happens. If I give them

perfect conditions and they all die anyway, that means there really is a big problem." As she thought about the logistics, she asked, "Petare probably doesn't have aquarium stores?"

"No. The better suburbs would be the place."

"I'd need two small tanks and two bubblers," she thought through her inventory out loud. "I need to go back to the sea and find some live diatoms, and that means I need a high-powered hand lens. Jeez, that's pretty complicated, and you're probably fully booked with these new arrivals, right?"

He shrugged apologetically.

"Well, you can work out an itinerary for me tomorrow and I'll set off."

He had just started saying something about watching out for pickpockets when Miguel Sanderas came in.

He and Oziel embraced like brothers, and Miguel told Oziel he'd grown. That was obviously an old joke between them. He greeted her with a hug too, and said how glad he was to see her again. Now that she saw him and Oziel together, she was struck by a curious similarity between them. At first glance there seemed to be none, since the doctor was small, only slightly taller than Corinna, and looked older than Oziel, even though he wasn't. But something about their eyes was the same. Both looked out at the world the same direct way, seeing everything, worrying about nothing.

Miguel, she gradually realized as the two of them talked, was not just a friend, but Oziel's best friend. She'd never seen him kid around like that. as if ... as if it didn't matter what he said. That was the difference. He wasn't taking care of Miguel, the way he did with everybody else. When Oziel's father had been brought home dead and Oziel suddenly had to fill his shoes for four younger children, it was clearly Miguel who'd been a companion, not a responsibility.

"How's Ilona doing?" Corinna asked.

The doctor became serious and paused before answering, the way doctors do when they're working out the words to deliver bad news.

"I think it's typhoid, unfortunately. We have her on antibiotics, but everything indicates the disease is a resistant strain. Her symptoms are getting worse almost by the minute, as if we weren't giving her anything, and she may not make it through the night. It's lucky you brought her in when you did. Of course, we have to wait for the bacterial probes to confirm all my guesses."

Corinna was speechless. She had not envisioned an answer other than *we've given her A, B, and C, and she'll be fine in a couple of days*. Typhoid should be an entirely curable disease.

Yes, she thought, curable, but as lethal as ever if not cured. Needless death happened all the time in the barrio, but surely not to Ilona, with her hair like silk and her smile like a clear sky. Oziel had carried her just minutes ago. It couldn't be.

If it had been up to Corinna to restart the conversation, it would have died

in its tracks, but Miguel continued.

"It could have been worse, as usual. Cholera has also been reported from the squatters' camp at Amuay, and if she'd caught that instead of the typhoid, we'd be going to the funeral already."

"But ... so many of them had jobs. They were living in a squatters' camp?"

"No," said Oziel. "They lived down by the coast on almost a hectare of their own land. But the flies don't remember to turn back at the edge of the camp."

"Oh, man," muttered Corinna. She could picture the scattered cabins among banana plants and plots of yams. It would smell of sea and greenery, except right near the outhouses. At sunset, after work, some of Estevan's family probably used to wade out from the shore and net fish for dinner. And now this.

"So, what's the next step? Can Ilona stay here? How can we take her back, if she's so sick?"

"She has to stay here," Oziel said, looking at her as if he wondered why she asked. "She has typhoid. With latrines and flies and open sewers, we could start an epidemic. If we haven't already."

Somehow, he managed to say it without making her feel like an idiot. At least she'd known enough not to ask any stupid questions about taking her to a hospital nobody could pay for. This must be a favor Miguel was doing for his best friend, since the clinic didn't usually board patients.

"Of course. I wasn't thinking. So her mother will stay here?"

Oziel nodded.

"I still can't get over it," she said in a voice made quiet by the tightness in her throat. "Children shouldn't die." And if the ocean wasn't full of dead stuff, they probably wouldn't.

"We'll hope she doesn't," Oziel said as quietly.

Miguel, after a silence, said that he had to get back to his patients and that it had been a great pleasure seeing her again. He sounded like he meant it literally, not just as a polite social phrase.

She cleaned up her slides and put the scope away, so they could head back to all the hundreds of other things Oziel had to do to help the new arrivals.

They retraced their path toward home and Corinna reverted to discussing algae. That felt much less difficult than one dying child.

"Assuming I do manage to grow the diatoms here, that's only the first step. Then I'll need to find some untainted algae and repeat the whole thing once we're in New York."

He didn't say anything, and when she glanced at him, he was staring at the packed dirt underfoot, as tense as if he'd stepped on a tack.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Corinna," he said, still looking at the ground, "I thought you realized ... I don't know how I can go to New York. Now."

It was on the tip of her tongue to say *same as before, you get on a plane and fly there*.

"What do you mean?"

“What do I mean?” he repeated with a slight edge. “I mean money.”

He'd never had a lot of it, but she didn't understand what had changed now. He had just as much or as little as yesterday. She could see him read the questions in her eyes and the slight compression of his lips as he didn't say something. What he said instead was,

“With the family coming in from Amuay, I have to find work immediately. This is going to take every *centimo* from every one of us. I can't afford to take a month off now. And I probably can't afford to do anything easy like day care either. It's back to damn construction.”

Go without him? She could feel her whole mind yelling *No*. He was the love of her life. Ocean-size disasters weren't supposed to touch *her*, personally. Catastrophic job losses were one thing, but this felt like a blow to her stomach.

“Zio! You have to come with me to New York! I mean, hell, I still have to visit with my own mother. How am I supposed to survive if you're not there to hold my hand?”

He started smiling at the way she'd echoed words from a few months ago when they had both nearly died.

“*Mí cielo*,” he said, taking her hand and kissing her palm, “As well as I'll survive without you.” He looked down again. “But I don't know how I can go. I would ... I would try to join you when I could.”

They both knew that was just a defense against hopelessness.

“Oh, Zio,” she said again. She noticed he didn't suggest she change her plans. “I don't suppose you'd let me just pay for as much as I could?” It didn't take more than a quick glance to see the answer to that. “It figures.” This was getting complicated.

Money in the barrio was a real pain. It had the same overwhelming importance as water in a desert or air on a space station, and she was already tired of its stranglehold on life here, after a mere couple of days. She'd always been able to live without the things she couldn't afford, which was starting to look like the definition of wealth.

“You've just got to come with me,” she said again. “How'd you get to Florida when the construction multinational hired you?”

“I flew standby on any duct-taped plane I could find. I went from Caracas to Bogotá to Havana to Mérida to Miami. It took a week.”

“How much did it cost?”

“About six hundred bolivars.”

“Thirty dollars! Excellent.” She still had the Caracas - New York leg of her return ticket from Mars, which, logically, didn't count as “her” money since passage home was employer- and government-funded. “Listen, I cash in my ticket and for that we can both go standby and then take the bus in Miami. Or continue on standby if there's enough money.”

The way his face lit, she would have gone all the way to New York with him on used bicycles. But he also looked dubious.

“And then what?”

“Quit making excuses,” she said, trying to lighten the mood. Then, more seriously, “Couldn’t you get work in New York?”

“I’m sure I could, and it would pay much better than here, but the US requires foreigners either to have a job, coming in, or a US sponsor.”

“Jeez. Yes, the construction company hired you in Caracas, didn’t it?”

He nodded.

“Well, couldn’t I be your sponsor?”

“You have to guarantee my support and ticket back in case I’m totally useless. I think you have to have a job.”

You have to have a job. You have to have a job. It was like a goddamn refrain in her whole life.

Stop it. Quit obsessing. ... Now.

There was one easy way out.

“My dad could be your sponsor.”

“No, Corinna.”

“Why –”

“I said, no.”

He felt about as movable as a block of granite on that topic.

“Well, how about my best friend from grad school? Linda helped me through the stickiest time of my life. She’ll be glad to do it. And she works for a microbial services firm, so Immigration can’t complain.”

“Corinna, do you have any idea how much paperwork is involved and what you’d be asking of your friend?”

“No,” she said grumpily. “I’m one of those ignorant *norteamericanos*, so what do you expect? *I’ll* fill out the damn paperwork for her. Whatever it is, we’ll get it done.”

He looked thoughtful, but still not entirely convinced. What was it going to take?

“In that case,” he said slowly, “it would probably be better, from the money side, than staying here. But – don’t get me wrong, *mí cielo*, I want to go with you – but if we leave together, we’ll have to leave later.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but he continued before she could.

“Most of us work. I’m one of the only ones who has the time to help Tío Estevan and his family. They need places to stay, they need to find out where to buy food, to catch the bus, to look for work, to send their kids to school. There are a thousand things.”

Let them sort themselves out, she wanted to say, but she kept her mouth shut.

“A week can make the difference between their kids getting into their own grade at school or having to wait for months and finding other things to do in the barrio. Depending how much money they have left, a week can be the difference between finding a job and begging. Like you’d say, *mí Corinna*, it’s not optional.”

She stared at the track, with its embedded plastic bags and disgusting wet

patches. She didn't know what to say. One of the most amazing things about him was his unswerving loyalty, which had meant loyalty to her. She hadn't thought about the fact that loyalty was loyalty and would apply to others, too.

His mother's house came into view at the end of the next track, but Corinna had too much on her mind to be done in the next thirty seconds. Even though what she had to say could have been condensed to *what about me?*

"There's a good view at the top of the hill," he said, reading her thoughts as he so often did.

They headed slowly up a track leading to the top.

"Zio," she began, and fell silent. She wasn't sure how to say it. "Zio, if we have to wait till Estevan's folks are settled, it'll ... I mean ... well, I came here on a visit." She stressed *visit* slightly.

He looked down at the packed dirt of the alley and she could have sworn she felt his stab of pain inside her own chest. He kept looking down, as if he didn't want to see this place that she didn't like, which was his home.

"Oh, Jesus, Zio, listen, I'm sorry. I—I don't mean it like that. Or—in some ways, I guess I do. But, well, there's no point trying to pretend I could live here when I don't see how I could." Maybe this was why people married the boy next door. You wouldn't have these problems with the boy next door.

But you did have other problems with him; little things like selfishness and betrayal. Nothing so major as an unpleasant smell in the street.

There was an empty spot at the top of the hill. A couple of shacks had fallen down quite a while ago in high winds, because the exposed location was not kind to barrio architecture, so no one had rebuilt there. A few broken corner posts were the only things that hadn't been carried off.

"I owe my family my life, Corinna. I have to help them. I'd feel terrible if I didn't."

He looked at her, tentative yet already resigned to something she was pretty sure she wasn't going to like.

Anyone with any intelligence could see that only total commitment was any use in the slum. Even that wasn't always enough. But she had commitments too. She hadn't spent twenty years on schooling just to piss it all away because ... because she had to wait while somebody's life was put back together. She really, really did not like a world where you had to make these choices.

"The problem is, I can't take months and months of time off either. We may be fifteen-minute celebrities after that whole Mars business, but academically I'm behind the eight ball. If I have too big a gap in my employment, coming on top of the whistleblowing, I'll never get another real job in my life."

Besides, her idea of their relationship was that she would help him move up and out of the barrio, not that she would move down into it. However, faced with articulating that assumption, she thought maybe she needed to blunt its edges before giving it to him.

He was looking at her more tentatively than ever.

"I know it's hard, Corinna. Please," he said in a low voice, "don't make me choose."

She couldn't help thinking that it had been a nice few months while it lasted. The best, actually. Ah well.

"And who would you choose if you had to?"

"You, of course."

She was silent in surprise. She'd been so sure of getting a different answer, it took her a second to realize that she'd heard him right.

"Someone who's very lucky," he went on, "might get one of the things he wants out of life. From the first time you really smiled at me, I knew what that was." His voice became very quiet. "That doesn't mean it's easy to throw the other things away." He reached over and stroked her hair. "*Mí Corita.*" It was the first time he'd used a diminutive of her name.

So he would do whatever she asked, if she asked it. It warmed her from the inside out.

But would she be able to do the same for him? Nothing unbalanced could last. She'd proved that herself in too many one-sided relationships. Did she even have it in her to give everything away like that?

And if he gave everything away, could the one thing remaining sustain him for the rest of his life? She wasn't sure she wanted to find out.

"We'll go reasonably soon?" she asked.

He nodded, definitely and hopefully.

"You have to remember, I've spent most of my own life trying to figure out how not to live here."

"Well, then, whatever it takes, I guess."

His smile lit the hill.

They retraced their steps hand in hand.

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Midday slowly shaded into afternoon for Corinna. Oziel, as usual when something needed doing, was in the thick of things, doing it. He put up frames for one-room *ranchos*, as they called them here, squeezed in near his mother's and Marco's and some other place they'd found. She saw him and Marco go past with an enormous piece of corrugated tin for a roof. As with so many things in the barrio, it was probably best not to ask where they got it. The next time she saw him, he was whacking a pick-axe into the rock-hard packed dirt, digging a hole for a new latrine.

She scrounged up a lunch of several *pupusas* from a street vendor and managed to give three to Oziel as he ran past on his way somewhere. His four years as a construction worker in Florida had obviously not been wasted and

she began to see why his mother had an actual house. Corinna's own finely honed skills as a molecular biologist, on the other hand, were useless. She did what she could by babysitting kids and making coffee. She made it quite wrong the first time. Apparently, the desired proportion of grounds to water approached one to one.

Sitting in the doorway to Yoana's house, Corinna tried to make sure the eight little kids inside stayed inside. It reminded her of her trip to a bat colony, with its uncountable, zipping, meeping denizens, fizzing out of every available opening in the cave. One of the kids swooped past with the message that he was thirsty. She found him a drink of clean water flavored with guava juice, and then a buzzing crowd of others appeared who were also suddenly thirsty. A contest developed to see who could drink the fastest, which was sure to result in spills. She decided to wait till they'd finished spilling before she cleaned up the floor, and went to sit back down in the doorway.

Oziel marched past carrying five boards at once and stopped to hand her a piece of paper.

"Can you check around on the net and find out the procedure for admitting kids to school after classes have started? The list is the likeliest schools we're going to need. *Chasgracias, querida.*"

"Sure," she said to his disappearing back.

It made sense. Everybody else had enough to do without starting web searches. She worked at it on her wristpad and passed a list back to him with the information filled in as he ran past going the other way.

"Tienes madera, mí cielo."

That was a new one, but judging by his incandescent smile, it meant "thanks."

She barely had the floor cleaned up when he had another job for her: finding out about the regulations for selling fish. Between the whirring kids and the byzantine intricacy of retail regulations, she was afraid her information might land Estevan Vasquez in jail for selling children to fish instead of the other way around, but she did her best.

It was strange, watching Oziel in action. As far as she could tell, once he had shown up that morning, priorities were set, tasks identified and delegated, and people stopped running around and started working. Without displaying any bossiness, he bossed as effortlessly as he breathed. She supposed he'd had lots of practice as an oldest brother. She supposed she should have guessed when she'd seen toddlers, notoriously the hardest market to impress, obeying him.

And she had just asked him to abandon all these people so she wouldn't be lonely in New York.

Yet, even now that she'd understood what she was doing, she couldn't say that she would change it. She did have to find a real job so that twenty years of schooling didn't go to waste, but mainly, she admitted to herself with some shame, she just wanted to get away from all these problems. Smelly streets,

uprooted families, and dying children had always been on the other side of the ocean for her. She was starting to realize that they would never be somewhere else again, but at least if they weren't right in front of her face, it might hurt less.

It was going to be in front of her face much longer than she'd hoped. Long enough to get thoroughly bored of making coffee. Actually, she was already bored. She hadn't thought this through. She'd been imagining a brief tour of an exotic locale with Oziel to show her around. But he was too busy even to talk. Forget tour guiding.

He finally sat down during one of the coffee distributions.

"So, how does it look?" asked Corinna. "Are things going to work out?"

"They have to," he said with a half-smile at what, to him, must be a silly question.

She supposed they did. The alternative was dying of exposure or starvation.

"Do you think they'll be able to find work?"

"They'll manage, I think. They're hard workers. Of course, the highest paid jobs they had were in fishing fleets, and there's not many of those around here."

"So what was it with the fleet?" asked Corinna. After seeing slides full of nothing but dead diatoms, she was beginning to think that maybe she didn't want to know. Fish, after all, lived in the ocean, together with diatoms.

"The usual. The fleet belonged to TransLineas Mejores. They're a multinational, so when they decided there were more fish somewhere else, the fleet left and the people like Estevan, well, they come and move in with their family in Caracas."

"But what was the original problem? Overfishing?"

"I have no idea. Thanks for the coffee. Another one will be great in about an hour. I have to get back. We're trying to put something up next to Marco's for about ten of them." He shook his head and ran off.

Before she could sink into boredom again, she decided that this was stupid. If she was staying for weeks, she better find something to do with herself before she went nuts from babysitting. There had to be tech jobs she could do. She started tapping away at her wristpad and found that there were rafts of them, mostly for glorified dishwashers, that sounded too dreadful for words. It was the same old problem: she had to narrow the search down. But what should she narrow it down to?

The pay might be a simple criterion that would get rid of most of the bottom-feeding stuff. She went to the trouble of extracting the eyepiece from its slot on the back of the wristpad and using it to scan the projection. As she scrolled through the remaining listings, a job counting algae for the Fisheries Department went by.

Now there was an interesting possibility. It was outside her field and not the sort of thing she would normally have considered, but a tech job was a tech job, and this one might give her a chance to find out what was happen-

ing with the dead diatoms. She called then and there, sitting on the top step to Yoana's little house, watching one of the neighbors tending her potted flowers.

Yes, said the man at the temporary work agency, Fisheries had a sudden increase in the volume of algae they needed to scan. They needed someone, pronto. Could she start immediately?

She could. She piped her academic background and work experience to him and heard him say, "Oh." She asked a few more questions, and found out the salary equalled that of the three top earners in Oziel's family combined. If she put her wages in the family kitty the way everyone else did, that would go a long way toward mitigating the effect of his lost earnings until he found work in New York. And why shouldn't she? They treated her as part of the family, Oziel had insisted on paying for the hotel, Yoana provided all her meals, so why shouldn't she act like any other member of the family? Making coffee was not the best use of her talents.

"I am sure Señor Guzmán will want to speak with you. He prefers to make the final decision himself. I'll give you his address."

"I should mention that I don't have a work permit yet."

"Not a problem. We can process that for you as soon as we hear from him."

Her possible future boss, when she reached him, sounded pleasant, if somewhat harried. He seemed to grow noticeably relieved as he spoke to her.

"We get all sorts as temps," he said, with the clear implication that he was glad to see she was the right sort. "One last thing, how much do you know about running computers?"

"Well, obviously, it's not my field, but I did do the backups for the lab at my last job, and I was the fallback sysop, for all practical purposes."

"Ah, *bueno*." He became even more noticeably relieved. "We've had some problems with lost files in that lab, and I'd like to know there was someone there who could keep a closer eye on it."

"Oh!" said Corinna, and stopped herself just in time from asking whether these were diatom-related files. He sounded intelligent enough to connect the dots and start asking questions about how she knew.

Before she disconnected, it was official. She was hired to start the day after next. Guzmán would have liked her to start the very next morning, but had too many meetings downtown to have time to show her what she needed to do. The Fisheries labs were right down on the coast, which meant it would be a long commute.

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By dinner time, the two dozen new arrivals were tucked away around the barrio, some in the new dwellings, some on the floors of their relatives'

shacks. Estevan, his wife, and her sister were staying in Yoana's house. Everyone in the two clans gathered there for dinner, but Ilona's mother and father were not there. About thirty conversations were going on at once and a radio squawked out the world news. The din was immense.

Corinna quietly boggled. Everybody simply scooted over and made room, and nobody made polite noises about the excellence of the hotel down the street. When family members asked for help, it was given. She knew she was seeing the social security system to beat all social security systems, stretching back millions of years. Her welcome, her seamless absorption into this family, even Oziel's unquestioning sacrifices for her, began to fall into an overall pattern. But it took such boundless generosity. Nothing like it had ever been asked of her.

It also explained something else that had been puzzling her. Everyone in the family worked, many of them at two jobs. Admittedly, it was all menial work, but it still seemed weird that they could never really get ahead. Now it no longer looked weird. Now she could see how one disaster could empty out the family piggy bank, and in the barrio having only one disaster at a time was a bit of a luxury. Self-funded social security was not an easy answer.

Dinner was going to be a matter of grazing one's way through the dishes covering the table. Silvia, the acknowledged cook in the family, was directing Graciela, Yoana, and five other bustling females, in the complicated choreography required to feed dozens of people using only two propane burners perched on a tiny stove like a toaster oven.

Corinna tried valiantly to engage the new arrivals in the question of why the fish had disappeared in their area, but couldn't get much more than head-shaking over the disastrous consequences and then quick changes of the subject to more cheerful topics. "You were on *Mars*?" they would marvel. "Like Zielo," they would say, equally in awe. "What's it like?"

Some of them asked about her studies at a university. "That must be so difficult," they said.

Both are much easier than surviving here, she wanted to tell them, but didn't know how to say it.

It was getting on towards eleven at night, and she'd had no luck in pinning someone down on the first causes of the fish question. Instead, she was concentrating on dessert. A *quesillo* had appeared on the table, but the limiting factor, she discovered, was bowls. The other food could be piled on a tortilla, and the tortilla itself polished off when the food was finished, but a portion of flan required a bowl. There were eight bowls in this relatively wealthy household and people were cleaning them up for the next taker in what was obviously a well-known drill.

Perseverance paid off, and soon she'd retreated with her very own bowl of *quesillo* to one of the steps outside the doorway. She sat down to eat and enjoy the cool evening breeze. Three cousins from Rafael's wing of the family were already there, occupied in an animated discussion of the pros and cons

of the new arrivals. They carried on without hesitation as she joined them. She had to admit that although the barrio had its disadvantages, there were definite advantages too, at least when dealing with Oziel's family. She had never felt more included anywhere in her life. And she was sure it would have been the same if she'd been a little green Martian instead of a pinkish human.

All too soon, it was her turn to head toward the back and slop some clean water from the bucket over her bowl to get it ready for the next person.

"Oy," she heard Oziel say, "there you are. You're going to have to wear an antenna with a flag so I can find you in these crowds."

She grinned at him.

"Or peacock feathers, like our friend Leira Dicastillo."

"Not in this group. They'd get all tongue-tied if you looked that rich."

"You mean the only reason everyone's so nice to me is that I have dreadful fashion sense?"

"I'm sure it helps, *mí cielo*." Then, getting serious, "I'm glad to hear they are nice to you. I wasn't entirely joking about breaking anyone in half who wasn't."

"Well, let's hold that in reserve for the really hard cases. Meantime, the worst thing that's happened is that I can't get anyone to listen to my questions about why the fish disappeared."

"That's easy," he said, taking her hand and walking over to Estevan. Somehow, he had his uncle's attention without interrupting a soul. She wondered how he did it.

Estevan's answer, though, didn't clarify much.

"Who knows why the fat fish do what they do? The catch was fine for years. This year, suddenly, boom, it's all over. Our Captain found one school last week, and before we knew it, a Colombian boat shot at us to make us leave. Maybe it's just as well the whole thing closed down."

It took Corinna a second to realize that fat fish referred to the corporation and not to actual fish. By the time she had that straightened out, she nearly lost the rest of what he said. It did not sound like overfishing. The usual pattern then was a years-long, gradual decline in the catch before a sudden catastrophic fall. Just to make sure, she asked,

"Did the fleets have to go out farther every year?"

"No, not really."

"Did the sea smell different this year?" she then asked.

That finally caught his interest.

"Strange you should say that. Sometimes it would smell like an old dishcloth which never dries out during the rains."

"Ah," she said, and asked no more questions. The mythical house with the broken window was now filled with the stealthy footsteps of large men downstairs. It sounded like fisheries were already collapsing. The disaster for Estevan's family was just the microscopic beginning of that catastrophe. But it could get much worse, considering that the oceans produced half the world's

oxygen. If enough algae died, collapsing fisheries would come to seem like a nice problem to have.

Chapter 3

Corinna set off for work early on Wednesday, freighted with warnings from Oziel regarding muggers, pickpockets, and even unwanted males. Apparently they were sometimes a problem here, especially for foreign anglo females. She remembered her *grandmother* talking about that sort of thing, and had a hard time believing any place outside the derelict Middle East could be that far behind the times.

But it turned out that it could. There was one greaseball, but one was all it took, who used the rush hour crush to rub up against her. She turned around, incredulous, outraged, and told him to piss off. She could have been a barking dog for all the notice he took of what she said. She wound up having to tell him off loudly enough to bring other people into it, and then she felt like she'd made an exhibition of herself, which left her furious. If he'd used the sleeve of her shirt to blow his nose, he couldn't have made it clearer that she didn't count.

She was still seething when she got off the train and headed to work. What a great way to start a new job: scowling, scattered, and sick of the human race. Her opinion of her grandmother's strength of character jumped numerous notches.

The Fisheries field station was built out over the water, obviously to facilitate pumping seawater into aquariums in the labs and for docking research boats at the west side platform. Once she entered the building, her first impression was of large glass sections of wall, too big to be called windows, that showed soaring green mountains meeting the turquoise sea.

A cheerful receptionist paged Guzmán and located him in one of the labs. Corinna set off to find her new boss. She found a pleasant-looking, middle-aged gentleman fixing the timers on a bank of aquariums. He was clearly working as fast as he could, and Corinna suspected that he had the misfortune to be one of too few competent workers and that he had to run himself ragged to keep the place functioning. She knew how that went. By the time he noticed her, she'd been doing deep-breathing exercises long enough to muster up a real smile. She introduced herself.

When he showed her into the phycology lab, she saw another tech there, a stooped young man about her own age, who was looking carefully at some growth medium cooking on a hotplate. That made as much sense as watching

a dryer spin his clothes, and Corinna suspected he was not one who worried about making the best use of his time. Guzmán introduced him as José Diaz. Then her new boss took her through what would be her tasks, starting with sample acquisition during field work at sea and the method Fisheries used for labelling, and ending with a demonstration of the exact method for counting algae. It was going to be a boring job. However, at the top of the shelves lining the walls was a set of unused four-liter tanks.

“Señor Guzmán,” she began. “There’s an experiment I wanted to run involving some diatoms. Would it be okay if I set up three of those little tanks by the window over there?”

He looked surprised, but said,

“Certainly. What’s the experiment?”

“There’s a peculiar die-off, and I’m wondering what causes it.”

He looked at her thoughtfully and nodded.

Maybe the answer was common knowledge, if you asked the right people.

“Do you know why it’s happening?” she asked.

“No idea. There are only about a million factors operating in the ocean. It could be anything. We’re supposed to count the algae. Somebody at Headquarters is supposed to make sense of it.”

His pleasant expression didn’t change, but something about the way he said it suggested he didn’t think they had sufficient sense at Headquarters for the purpose. Corinna was starting to like this gentleman.

“Don’t use anything too expensive,” he added, “but otherwise, go right ahead.” And with a wave of his hand, he disappeared down the hallway at a trot.

Corinna started working, while José talked. He seemed to be delighted that there was someone else in the lab to relieve the tedium, although talking clearly reduced his efficiency yet another notch. She buzzed around, finding more backlogged tasks at every step, starting with the pipette tips that should have been sorted and loaded days ago. José could have been doing that instead of watching beakers come to the boil, but he was telling her entertaining stories about office politics, which was useful in its own way.

“So the safety officer got them to pass a rule that only qualified people can clean the glass on the computer screens.”

“Jee-sus,” muttered Corinna.

“And Arman, who’s one of the computer guys, has a big cross on with Philomena. He points out something on her screen, and leaves tracks all over it. She hates that.”

Corinna hated it too, and, now that he mentioned it, she noticed that every screen in their lab looked like nice monochromatic fingerpaintings.

“So Philomena is cleaning it off, right in front of him, and he lodges a formal complaint. Good old Guzmán says he wants it understood at the highest levels that this sort of thing will not be tolerated. He makes a big show of looking up a qualified person on his list, and of course Arman, being a *comput-*

erista, is actually qualified, so Guzmán gives him the job of cleaning the screens. Arman was radioactive, but what could he say? He's been trying to find ways to shaft Philomena ever since."

"Jee-sus," Corinna muttered again. Office politics were the best proof that the law of conservation of energy was a lot of nonsense. Something was made out of nothing all the the time.

Then she looked up from the microscope and the slide full of algae, thereby losing her count. Someone who took care of the servers would be in a good position to make files disappear. Although by the look of things, Jose had not been irritating him by cleaning any monitors.

"Who else does he have it in for?" she wanted to know. "He's not the one making files disappear in this lab, by any chance?"

Jose looked shocked, and then immediately tried to pretend he hadn't.

"Who told you that?"

There was only one person she could have heard it from, so there was no point pretending otherwise, even if it suddenly seemed like a bad idea to bring it up.

"Guzmán," she said.

"He's blowing it way out of proportion," Jose said defensively. "There may have been one or two files that had a problem, but, *mierda*, that sort of thing happens all the time, to everyone. Get one cosmic ray in the wrong place at the wrong time, and you've lost a file. I keep telling him, it's nothing to do with me, and he keeps coming back with the same stuff. Gotta pay attention. Gotta do this. Gotta do that. As if I don't. I work hard the whole day, but I've never found a boss who appreciates what I do."

Corinna could believe that. Luckily, she'd bent her head back down over her microscope, so he couldn't see the little grin she failed to suppress. Humorous as it was, though, she wondered whether he was covering something up, or whether he was really as clueless as he seemed.

Before leaving to go home, she had the main sysop, who was not Arman, establish her computer account, and saved one file called "diatom" with a few meaningless numbers in it. Oziel could put a tracker on it tonight and see what happened. After five, she spent almost an hour setting up the aquarium tanks. That had the added advantage of allowing her to avoid rush hour.

Corinna got off the train one stop past her usual one to go to Sanderas's clinic and see Ilona. It was also closer to the public library, where Oziel could do his splicing.

Each day, Corinna dreaded hearing horrible news, because forty eight hours had made a terrible difference to the bright little girl who'd knocked her down. When Corinna entered the small room, she reflexively held her breath against the awful odor of disease, the faint, sickly sweet, acrid smell overlaid with disinfectant.

Ilona lay motionless on a cot set up in one of the examining rooms. If she was conscious, she didn't show it. Her eyes weren't quite closed, leaving a

ghastly sliver of yellowish-looking whites showing. She seemed somehow shrunken, and her skin had a strange, parchment-like, yellowish cast, as if she was dying from the outside in. Intravenous fluid and antibiotics snaked down a clear tube to her left arm. But her hair lay on the pillow in a shiny cascade of black silk, looking as healthy as ever. Her stony, silent mother, sitting beside her, smoothed it. It would look just as beautiful if Ilona were dead.

Oziel came in just then, no doubt having heard Corinna had arrived. He took her hand, and she managed not to break the awful silence by bawling. She tried to give the poor mother a comforting touch, and stroked Ilona's hot, dry face, but there was nothing, absolutely nothing, she could do. She and Oziel walked all the way to the library, he sat down at a nice anonymous terminal, and still she couldn't find anything to say. Everything was either too big for words or too unspeakably small.

He tapped away, and asked,

"So where is that file? Why didn't you put it in your own account?"

"I did," she said.

"You did? Then it's not on the Fisheries server."

"What?"

"Gone," he stated.

They stared at each other.

He started tapping at the keyboard again. He finished, stood up, and they walked out.

"That should track anything that wipes a file in the next week, although if the spider is as good as it seems to be, even that may not be enough to find it."

"Won't they realize we're onto them?"

"Probably. The advanced spiders automatically avoid sites with effective tracking, so files should stop disappearing. Then they're usually set to try again after some time, and that's when we'll get them."

"Sheesh. Wouldn't that also mean they become aware that they're being tracked once Corinna Mansur works there?"

"Could be. They already know it was your account that had the diatom file in it. Of course, since you work in the algae lab, that doesn't mean you're concerned specifically about them. But if you think it's a bad idea, I can go back and take the tracker off."

"No. It's the only idea, and the alternative is to do nothing, which is worse. The other thing I thought of was to email some of the other places that have lost files and to alert them to what's really going on."

Oziel shook his head.

"Even if you encrypt it, doing something like that could lead them to you even faster. Write to those labs instead. On paper," he added when he saw her wondering how that differed from what she'd just said. "Nobody can monitor that."

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Corinna knew she'd acclimatized to the barrio the day she didn't notice the smell. She jumped down the three steps of Yoana's house to the dirt road, trundled down the hill, merged with the river of people heading to work, and realized she'd walked all the way to the station and onto the train without once holding her breath.

Things were going rather well. It was the middle of her second week counting algae, and today one of the biweekly ocean sampling trips was scheduled. She was looking forward to being paid to cruise around the Caribbean for a day. Guzmán considered her a genius because files had stopped disappearing, although the downside was that now she had no evidence of a spider to show him and nothing she could do except hope that was the end of the matter. Nor had any of her tentative queries to other labs led to anything but polite thanks and comments that these silly splicers' pranks were annoying.

The best thing was Ilona's return home a few days ago. Corinna would have bet money against that outcome a week ago, and yet Ilona was home. She was weak and thin, but she was home. She and her siblings were at Yoana's while their *rancho* was being built, so Corinna saw her at breakfast. Ilona had sat all the way up to eat, and even been lively enough to need distraction while Oziel gave breakfast to her brother and sister.

"See, *mija*," Corinna said, "you take this string, and do like so," she tied the ends, "and then you can do this." After a few deft movements, she presented her with a cat's cradle, lighting a glorious smile on the little kid's face. Then she'd wanted to do it herself, so Corinna began the process of showing her, but she fell asleep almost before she'd made the first cradle. She'd caught a cold. Like typhoid, that was a disease Corinna had only read about before, and the cold had led to heart complications, which Miguel said was not uncommon, so now she slept all the time. It was always something in the barrio. But the important thing to remember was that Ilona had survived and was back and would get better.

At the Fisheries lab, there were about five things that needed to be done before the boat left, and Corinna didn't have the drill worked out yet. It hadn't taken long, she thought ruefully, before she was running everywhere to keep up, like Guzmán.

She started a batch of growth medium for some culture flasks, so they could run through the sterilizing autoclave while she was out, and, while it was cooking, shepherded her gear together for the collecting trip. Her boss had said it was fine if she used some dry ice and old styrofoam shipping boxes to send a few of her own samples to New York. Her doctoral professor had said he'd be happy to store the stuff in a freezer for her, so if she did drum up the cash for further research, the samples would be right there, waiting for her.

She glanced at her three aquariums on the way back to the hotplate when José wandered in half an hour late. He was doing well today. No doubt he realized he would be conspicuous by his absence if he missed the boat entirely.

“Hola, Corinna. Oy, you have the growth liquid cooking. *Dios santo*. I would have been in deep shit.”

It was actually his job, but Corinna was sure it would have required divine intervention for him to show up early enough. And if the growth medium wasn't sterilized, she wouldn't have the culture flasks she needed to do her own work, so it was simpler to just get it done. He seemed to be taking it as a personal favor.

“Hey, quit worrying about it,” she said. “It's no big deal. You got all your stuff ready for the sampling trip?” She wasn't officially the lab manager here, but she did not seem to be able to stop herself from making sure the job got done. Old habits die hard.

“Oy,” he exclaimed again, blinking nervously and ferreting around for supplies.

She took the big flask of growth medium off the hot plate and poured it into the smaller flasks lined up on two trays, sealed all the flasks, taped twenty petri dishes closed that needed to be sterilized too, and loaded the works into the autoclave.

José was what Oziel would no doubt have called a shrimp, with some justification in this case. A thin, weedy, slightly stooped academic, he was a type who felt homey and familiar to Corinna. He had a way of blinking his eyes in startlement that made her think of a rabbit. His abilities as a tech improved slightly on closer acquaintance, even if he was still nowhere near pulling his own weight in the lab, but he was polite, mild-mannered, and easy to get along with, so things could have been worse.

“What do you think of my experiment?” She nodded toward her aquariums. Not only was the aquarium with plain diatoms in it unnaturally clear, but the other one with fertilizer in it was the same. The third aquarium, the control with the same water but some healthy algae in it, resembled pea soup. Like a good scientist, she'd proved what she already knew: this was no ordinary die-off. And, as also happened so often in science, it told her nothing about what it actually was.

José was blinking at the tanks, obviously trying to think of something to say.

“You should sell your secret to the aquarium trade. You could make a lot of money.”

She burst out laughing, which she saw made José brighten, but it was gallows humor. She could see herself raking in money while the ocean died, while the years passed and the air lost its oxygen and built up toxic amounts of carbon dioxide, and while she and everyone else had plenty of time to approach death without being able to do a thing about it.

“José, it's even worse than I thought. I've found sick *Chlorella* too, and

they're found in fresh water as well as salt."

"So you can also sell it to people with fresh water aquariums," he said, trying the same joke again, since the first one had gone well.

"Yeah, right. No, it means that the origin of the problem could be on land as well as in the ocean. Instead of finding answers, I'm just finding bigger questions."

"Well, that's research for you," he said. "That's why I stay away from it."

She shook her head as they hoisted their packs of supplies and went toward the boat dock on the west side of the building.

"I don't understand why people aren't more worried." She knew she wasn't being entirely fair to José, since he at least listened. Nobody else even wanted to hear about it. "Algae don't die of old age. There has to be a cause, and there isn't one. This is like twenty year-olds dying in the street without a mark on them."

They climbed into the big, ten-meter inboard research boat and stowed their supplies. The skipper steered toward the open sea, and Corinna returned to her subject, interrupting José in a description of a particularly nice new night club he'd found.

"Something really weird is going on. Genome work is the only way to find out what the problem is and that'll take thousands of dollars."

He rolled his eyes.

"Good luck, if you want to try that through Fisheries. The last time I had to order more glassware, about fifty pathetic hard-currency-dollars' worth of slides and petri dishes, it took three weeks and an act of God." He inclined his head toward their boss, who sat in the bow, filling in the logbook.

Corinna grinned in sympathy.

"Well, at least he did it. When I mentioned genome work to him on Friday, he said, 'The big pants want us to count species. So count species. If they wanted answers, they'd ask for them.'"

"He's a smart fish, that one," said José admiringly.

"How come it doesn't occur to anyone that answers might not be optional? What if this is the beginning of something that's going to get too big to handle?"

José gave a noncommittal shrug as he looked out to sea.

"We'll worry about it then, I guess. Can't worry about everything."

Which was an excuse not to worry about anything.

"Hmf. It occurs to me that he's a captive audience just now. I think I'll go bug him some more."

"Oy, is that a good idea?" José asked as she stood up. He obviously preferred conversation to his own thoughts.

"Sure it is." Unless he wanted to help her scare up genome money, he was going to have to amuse himself.

Corinna was glad to see the boss was just finishing the log as she climbed onto the deck of the bow. During the past week, her first impression of his

quiet intelligence had been confirmed, and she'd also found out he had a ready laugh and a lively sense of humor. She felt comfortable around him, which was a strange way to feel about a boss.

"Señor Guzmán, I wanted to let you know that those samples I'm growing are still dying back for no reason, and to tell you a bit more about why I think we really ought to push hard to do some genome work on the diatoms."

"I'm always glad to listen," he made a sweeping gesture, inviting her to sit down wherever she liked on the bow's deck, "but I'll warn you that parrots will get pregnant before Fisheries chokes out enough money for something like that."

"But you can see why it would be a good idea?"

"Yes, I can see why it would be a good idea," he said, looking way out to the horizon, as if there was something interesting there. "I'm not totally stupid, Doctora Mansur."

Corinna gulped and sat very still. To deny any intention of implying such a thing would only make matters worse.

"But people really don't want answers. Once you have the answer, you have to do something about it."

She continued to keep her big mouth shut, without a clue how to restart her end of the dialogue.

"So the really smart ones," he continued with a one-sided grin at the horizon, "don't even want to hear the questions, because that only starts the whole process rolling." He looked over at her, one-sided grin still in place.

He did not seem to be taking it personally.

"Um, I really did not mean ... it's just that ... we New Yorkers never really know when to stop pushing."

"Yes," he gave the smallest of nods. "That's why you run the world."

To have a boss with a sense of the ridiculous was an entirely new experience for her.

"London runs the world," she contradicted. "We North Americans just tell them they're doing it all wrong."

He laughed.

"Which is true, of course," she added, pretending to be serious. "In any case. If we can't get the money out of Fisheries, is there something else we could try? I don't know enough about the system here to have a clue."

"The government hands out some research grants, but this is Venezuela." He looked apologetic. "Realistically, if you're not the husband's sister's cousin, you'd be wasting your time applying, and I'd just as soon not have my staff wasting their time."

"Makes sense," mumbled Corinna.

"But, actually, now that I think about, maybe there is something. I've never had an *estadounidense* to try it with. Your government has an aid program which pays for projects in the local currency. Venezuela is one of the countries involved. The idea is that we pay back our foreign debt and the United

States provides aid and neither side loses money converting worthless currencies into dollars.”

“Twenty bolivars to the dollar isn’t worthless,” said Corinna.

“It’s getting a bit better. When the program started, years ago, it was more like eight hundred to the dollar. They usually have more money to give away than people to give it to, but the catch is that it has to be submitted together with a US citizen.”

“Are you sure? About the more money than they know what to do with?” Corinna boggled. A country with so much money they couldn’t figure out how to give it away. She’d only been here a couple of weeks, and it looked outrageous. How did it look to everyone else?

“Well, that might be an exaggeration, but the chances are a lot better than with any Venezuelan funds.”

“So what’s the procedure?”

“I don’t actually know. I met somebody at a meeting who works on reefs and environmental tourism. He got one of those things together with somebody from Coral Conservation.”

Corinna was on familiar territory here. She had submitted at least seven funding applications in which she did all the research and all the work and the boss of the lab had his name on it as principal investigator. Perhaps she could get a better deal here. Grant funding was slower than ideal, but at least it was funding, and it would also be another useful line on her CV.

“What do you think of the following idea?” she began. “I could find out about it and write it up, if you don’t mind me spending the time on it, and then you add or subtract whatever suggests itself to you, and we submit it as Co-PIs.”

Her boss looked surprised and questioning.

“Forgive me, but I do not understand. You are known, certainly in scientific circles, after that Mars business. If you’re here temporarily, I can see that you might need temporary work.” He included the boat in an apologetic glance. “But this sounds like you’re making a career out of algae. Are you planning on settling here now?”

“It’s not really the career or the settling that’s the issue. I think understanding what’s happening to the algae is vitally important. My former prof at Columbia University already said I was welcome to use his equipment if I could come up with money for the consumables. I can’t get a normal grant because I don’t currently have the right sort of job. You have the job, I have the citizenship, and even if I’m not in Caracas, that doesn’t mean we can’t collaborate on this project.”

The questions and the surprise faded from his expression to be replaced by a pleased and calculating smile. He leaned over to shake her hand.

“*Trato hecho*,” he said. “Go for it, as you *norteamericanos* say. And if you get José back there to do his own work, that by itself will probably give you enough time to get the thing written.” A sardonic edge appeared on his smile.

She glanced at him, startled, and then laughed in embarrassment as she climbed back down the steps from the bow. To say, "I can get it done faster if I don't wait for José," would not exactly help the poor guy's case. Having a boss who knew what she did was another strange experience for her. Why couldn't any of the bosses in her "real" jobs have been like that?

In another half hour, they reached the sampling transect, and life revolved around sample bottles, depth gauges, and labels. Corinna was starting to think she could tell by the color of the sea and the smell of the air when they were in one of the gray bands, with high concentrations of dead algae, versus bluer water with more normal ones. But it could also be her imagination, since it was much harder to see the color differences at the surface than from ten kilometers up in the air. The wind mixed the smells on the breeze so that they weren't any help either. By dint of working as fast as she could, she managed to make time to collect samples for herself, too. She was relaxing into the slower mode of having only one set of sampling to do, when the boat made a U-turn. The loudspeaker blatted with a nasal version of Guzman's voice.

"A message has just come in saying that there is a big problem with the server back at the labs. We have to cut our trip short and come back out tomorrow to complete the sampling for this date. Everyone should follow the standard emergency procedures for computer failures in your lab." There was the briefest pause. "For those of you who would normally look that up on your computer, the receptionist has printouts of the steps to follow."

"Eh?" exclaimed José next to Corinna. "What does he mean, pick up a *print-out*? The computers couldn't possibly all be down."

When the boat finally docked, she found out that the computers weren't all down. Not literally. Many of them still worked as single-user machines, all alone in the world. They were one step up from paperweights in that condition. What was worse, not only had the server crashed, it couldn't be brought back up. Its redundant arrays had been destroyed somehow, too. The archived operating system backups had apparently been vaporized, too. While the sysops searched madly for a disk or memory chip that would let them do something, anything, everybody else ran around in tight circles looking for backups of everything from reports due yesterday to payroll spreadsheets.

Corinna didn't even notice her wristpad vibrating until she found herself rubbing her wrist for some reason. Then she saw the message from Alaska that had been left three hours ago. She didn't know anyone in Alaska.

Jammed into the tiny wristpad screen, the message said that a biotech company in Alaska wanted her to come out for an interview. She'd never heard of the place before she applied a few days ago, but if they had a job for her, she didn't care. Jobs were too hard to find to be fussy. And judging by their ad, which said they wanted a researcher in limbic neurotransmitters, you couldn't get much closer to her field without saying "this job is for Corinna Mansur." The company wanted to hear from her to set up an interview. They must be wondering whether she ever answered her messages.

By the time she disconnected, part of her was stunned and the other part was in a fever of impatience to get home and tell Oziel about it. Nothing like this had ever happened to her before. They didn't merely want her out for an interview, they seemed to think she was the cat's whiskers, and not only that, but they sounded like the perfect place to work. Perhaps her luck had finally turned.

Oziel was sitting on the couch when she came in, the only one there because six in the evening was several hours too early for dinner in his family. He'd probably taken a break because she was due back around now.

"I finally have someone who wants me out for an interview," she said, trying not to sound excited. She hadn't been hired yet. There was nothing to be excited about.

"Ah?" he said, absently. Then he visibly tried to show interest. "Well, that's good."

"I'll say, it's good," said Corinna, setting her bag down and starting to make herself some tea. "You want something? Coffee?"

"Coffee would be nice. Thanks."

"It's a job in industry," she continued. "A biotech startup called AnchorGene. The pay would probably be pretty good, if I got the job. And it's right in my field. I wouldn't be cleaning out rabbit cages or diluting sugar solutions. It's in Anchorage. ... Alaska," she clarified, when the town's name didn't seem to mean anything to him.

That finally got his attention.

"*Alaska!* That's at the North Pole."

"Well, by definition, it's south of the North Pole, but, yes, by and large, you're right."

However, he didn't say anything further and she started feeling annoyed. Granted, there was nothing to be excited about yet, but it would be nicer if she was the one telling him that, instead of vice versa.

"So anyway, I reached a senior researcher first, and she seemed to know all about me. From what she said, it sounded like everyone in the whole company knows all about me and can't wait to meet me. You'd think I was in line for a Lasker prize, or something."

Now that she was done making coffee and turned around, she saw that he'd leaned his head against the back of the couch and closed his eyes. Apparently, her momentous news had done nothing but put him to sleep. This was not at all the reaction she'd been looking for. A certain amount of leaping about and whooping were called for. She could feel a frown forming, but he was having his gentle little doze and couldn't see it. She persevered.

"Then the president of the company himself, Dr. Bradley, came on the line, and it turns out the job itself is just amazing." His eyes stayed closed, and she knew her frown was turning into a scowl. "Their usual business is all kinds of genetic engineering for farmed salmon and trout and such. Microbial symbionts, improved weight gain, that sort of thing. Nothing to do with neuro-

transmitters. So I got suspicious because, at least in universities, people often hire a nobody to build up a new program and then fire the poor schmuck in favor of a big name. So I asked where the funding was coming from. He said it's up to the financial officer to raise funds. I wouldn't even have to do that! And it would be up to me to hire a couple more postdocs, I'd be the most senior scientist in the lab, and I could shape the direction of the whole unit. It's incredible! I made an appointment for the interview on October 28th and 29th, flying out of Newark."

After some time, it seemed to occur to him that she'd stopped talking and he said,

"That's nice, Corita."

He sounded like he hadn't listened to a word.

"Nice, huh?" she said.

He opened his eyes then, but only to look faintly puzzled at a spot on the ceiling.

"Isn't it?"

She looked at him with angry amazement.

"Goddammit, this is *important*. Good jobs in my field come along about once a year. If I miss this one, I may be busing tables." She stopped abruptly. Silvia had bused tables for years, until her talents finally earned her a promotion to short-order cook.

The look on his face said *yeah, big tragedy*, but then, as he finally saw her expression, his self-control dropped visibly back into place. He passed a hand over his face, which she now noticed was terribly tired, and then even that vestige of exasperation disappeared and in the space of a moment he was his usual self again, strong, able to take care of it, whatever it might be.

"I'm sorry, Corita. I know, you've worked your whole life for this. It sounds like a very good opportunity."

It came to her then – she didn't understand why it had taken so long – that on a fundamental level, he took care of her too. He was never grumpy, never had fits of pique, was always there for her. She'd seen his mother realigning people's moods the same way. But in that case, what did it say about her own place in his world? She was a responsibility first, and a companion second.

It bothered her more than she could say.

"Yeah," she said. Then she added abruptly, "I'm your lover, Zio. Not your daughter."

He gave her one of his sudden glances, reading answers from the back of her mind.

"Yes?" was all he said.

The rising inflection implied a subtext of "You don't say."

She'd never seen him like this. He must be goaded beyond endurance about something, yet she hadn't even noticed anything wrong, at first. There were disadvantages to that superhuman self-control of his. And, she supposed, if she wanted to consider herself his equal, she had to match his self-control.

She wasn't even close.

"Hey," she said, "I'm trainable. And I bet you didn't learn all at once either, did you?"

He leaned back, rested his head on the couch again, and closed his eyes. The tiredness seeped back into his face when he did nothing to stop it.

"No. ... No, it took years."

She carried their two cups over and sat near him on the couch, not sure what to do next.

"So, what's got you down?"

"*Ey, mi cielo,*" he said without opening his eyes, and then, louder, "Everything's got me down. The main thing was finding a photograph of Ilona's family and a rosary and some girl's clothes in a plastic bag at her parents' place."

He stopped, as if that was all he was going to say, and Corinna was on the verge of deciding it must have been something about the photograph, when he continued.

"I was putting in the flooring at her parent's *rancho* and the bag fell out when I moved some bedding. Nobody but Ilona's mother would be packing souvenirs and her little girl's clothes in a bag. I went to find her, and talked to her till she admitted she'd been planning to take Ilona and go back to their home in Amuay."

"Jee-sus. That makes no sense. How would she live? How would Ilona get care and medicine? The last thing she needs is travel. What about her—"

"Her mother wasn't going back to live. She wanted to go home to die. In peace, as she said."

"Oh, Jesus," Corinna whispered.

"Yes," he said. "Jesus."

"So now what?" she finally asked.

"I talked her out of it, talked to her about her children, about Ilona's brother and sister, about how her husband had just found a job, about how things would get better. I've been talking her away from the edge for two hours ... and if Ilona doesn't live, it will all be lies." He rubbed his face again.

Two hours he'd spent, two solid hours, pushing against eternity. And it was far from over. Anyone who'd seen the endless black emptiness of Ilona's mother's eyes knew that.

"Ilona will live," said Corinna, trying to convince herself as much as him. "She just has to."

"No, *mí Corita*, she doesn't." He looked so tired, with his head back and his eyes closed, Corinna could see where the age lines would appear when he was old. "Her endocarditis turns out to be bacterial."

"Oh, God, no. Even with the dromomycin she's taking for the typhoid?"

"Yes," he said, eyes still closed. "Even with the dromomycin. It must be resistant to absolutely everything."

"But ... if the tests confirm it's resistant, won't they have to quarantine her? Or are the laws different here?"

“Yes, they will. And no they aren’t. Once the government sent us the hospital bill, it would bankrupt the whole family.” After a long silence, he added, “Unless Ilona died first.”

Corinna choked on her tea. It was a miracle anyone retained a shred of humanity, faced with choices like hoping a little girl would die so a dozen people didn’t have to beg and steal.

“It was either that, or bankrupt ourselves up front, paying for phages.”

The tailor-made viruses could parasitize specific strains of bacteria and wipe out even resistant ones in days. They were expensive, though, and Corinna knew that nobody in the barrio bothered with the money-for-nothing insurance that pretended to be a medical safety net in Venezuela.

“But —” she began.

“But,” he said, catching her word before she could continue, “Miguel said we had enough money to give her phages, so that’s what he did, and the tests should be negative in a couple of days.” He opened his eyes and gave Corinna a long look, and took her hand in his.

She’d tried to put her pay in the family fund without drawing any sort of attention to it, but everybody kept mentioning all the nice things cash accomplished, while they seemed to take everyone else’s efforts for granted. Even Oziel seemed more impressed by a few dollars than by his own contribution of spending time on Ilona, carrying her around, taking care of her brother and sister, helping her parents, doing what it took to save her life, and now her mother’s life. It embarrassed Corinna more every time anyone mentioned her money. Sooner or later, the discrepancy was bound to end badly.

“Zio, the stupid money means nothing. So, do you think her mother will pull through?”

He stared at the ceiling, still holding Corinna’s hand.

“I don’t know. I just don’t know. I should probably tell her husband, so he can watch out for her, but he’s dealing with too much as it is, and he’s already upset with her for making it more. It might be better to pretend it never happened and hope for the best.”

“Well,” said Corinna hesitantly, “if it was me, I’d ask your mother.”

His face relaxed for the first time into the beginning of a smile, and he shot her another one of his direct looks.

“As you would say, ‘hah.’ My mother thinks men should be able to stand as much as women.”

“I’d back her up, except I guess I’m hardly the one to talk.”

His smile widened.

“I don’t know about that. I like listening to you talk.”

She started smiling too, and they sat for a while in silence, she sipping tea, he suddenly remembering his coffee and draining the whole cup in one extended megagulp.

“End of October, you said.” He must have been replaying her conversation in his mind. “I guess you’ve decided we’ll be in New York by then.”

“Well, I can always change it if I have to.”

“Won’t these Nobel prize winners of yours get upset with you, if you do that?”

“To tell you the truth, I’d never heard of this place before last week. They haven’t done anything at all in neurobiology, because otherwise I’d recognize their name, so they may work out of a rented garage, for all I know. “

“It’s a big planet, Corita. There are bound to be a few things you haven’t heard of.”

“Yeah, true, but the academic universe might as well be a village. I bet if you searched, fewer than a thousand neurobiologists would show up. And I’d know the individual names of many of them.”

“Really?” he said. “That sounds strange.” He looked suspicious.

“Why? I know my own field. Of course I’d know their names. Try –”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I meant that if it’s like a village, it would be like the barrio, for instance. If somebody here told me a new – say, a new clinic opened that I’d never heard of, I would assume it was a front for something.”

“A front! For what? You have to spend tens of thousands of dollars a day just on supplies to make a biotech company look plausible. And you certainly don’t get paid in cash. The front would cost more than anything you could get out of it.”

“If you say so,” he said, still sounding dubious.

Chapter 4

The second sampling trip started out even better than the first. The day was clear and still, the boat rode smoothly through a sea of glass, and the glow on the water felt like the promise of a good life in the best of all possible worlds. However, the sampling seemed like harder work this time. Corinna was tired before they even broke for lunch, and when they did, she didn't have the energy to feel hungry. It probably had something to do with a totally unnecessary headache she was developing that pressed on her eyes and deadened her mind. It was lucky the wind didn't pick up, because even the slight motions of the boat made her queasy.

It was also lucky Oziel was going to come out and meet her to take her home. She'd resented the idea she needed a bodyguard just because she was coming home later than usual, but some strange creatures did seem to crawl out by lamplight. Given how she was dragging by the time the boat docked back at Fisheries, he might have to carry her as well as defend her.

She'd given Oziel a wristpad so they could reach each other once she started work, and he called her to let her know he was outside the front door. She and José were just finishing up, stowing the samples.

She unlocked the front door to let him in and he hugged her as if he hadn't seen her in weeks. She knew just how he felt.

Instead of letting her go, he held her shoulders and studied her face.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

So much for trying to fool him into thinking she was fine.

"I'm just tired. The boat trip was real hard work this time. It didn't help that I felt sea sick and got a nasty headache."

"Sea sick? I thought you didn't get sea sick."

"I never have before, but I did today."

He studied her again.

"What?" she said.

"Corita, you look like you're ready to fall down. And the things you mentioned can be symptoms of poisoning."

"Poisoning! Who'd —? Oh."

There were some rather nasty people who probably knew about her.

"Doesn't that seem a bit far-fetched? I don't even know anything yet. What would killing me accomplish, except to draw attention to them?"

"I don't know, but I'm calling a doctor." And he started tapping away at his wristpad, then and there.

"Hey. Wait. I'm not a European, you know. Do you have any idea how much hassle my US insurance will make for an out-of-network, foreign claim?"

He thought for a second, and started tapping again.

"Okay. I'll call Miguel."

"Oh, come on. Don't do that. I'm feeling better, and I'll look like a complete putz, going to the doctor for a silly headache."

Oziel ignored her and hooked the ear piece over his ear.

"Ah," he said, looking satisfied after talking to someone for a while. "Good. We'll wait for her in front of the Fisheries building." He listened for a moment, then turned to Corinna. "How can she find us?"

"Who? What? Where?" said Corinna.

"Leira Dicastillo is on her way to Sanderas's clinic and will stop by to pick us up. What's the best way for her to find us from her flutter?"

"Oh for—." Corinna was too exhausted to give him hell, but that was the only thing that saved him. "It's just a headache. You can't have the Chairman of the Board of a multinational company making special trips to ferry me to doctors for a headache. What's she doing at Miguel's, anyway?"

He didn't respond. He waited for her to answer his question.

"Look—." But then she gave up. "Leira can zero in on my wristpad signal. Or yours." Corinna was beginning to see why everyone did what he said. Anything else was just too difficult.

He made the arrangements and disconnected.

"She'll be here in fifteen minutes or so. You need to stay nice and quiet, so why don't we go sit in your lab until she arrives."

"I'm not an invalid," she muttered, but it did feel nice to have his arm around her waist to lean on.

They passed the large fish labs, with sharks and barracudas, sport-fish and table fish, swimming slowly in huge tanks. Oziel stopped to look at them, but to the promenading fish he meant nothing. The lab full of reef fish also made him stop. Four hundred- and one thousand-liter tanks lined the walls, filled with corals every color of the rainbow. In amongst the bits of reef swam parrotfish, looking improbable in bright green, magenta, turquoise and yellow. There were cobalt blue tang, big, dull groupers, schools of young yellowjack, and furtive red squirrelfish hiding in the hollows.

They met her boss in the hallway, leaving for the day. Corinna introduced the two men to each other, and Oziel let go of her to shake hands.

"He came all the way out to ride home with me," Corinna said.

"And where is home?" asked her boss in a friendly way.

"Petare," said Oziel shortly and, it seemed to Corinna, defensively.

"Eh, then you have a long ride ahead of you," said her boss. "And are you the reason we have this excellent worker here?" he asked with an approving smile, although he must have known the answer as soon as he'd seen Oziel's

arm around her.

"I didn't tell her to go work. I just can't get her to sit still."

Corinna's lip curled in exasperation that Oziel should feel the need to apologize for the fact that she was working, but nobody noticed and she said nothing. There were times when cultural baggage was best ignored.

"Eh, you and everyone else. In my case, of course, I wouldn't have it any other way. A pleasure meeting you, Señor García."

"And you, Señor Guzmán."

"An improvement over your last boss," was Oziel's comment once he was gone.

"You can say that again."

They reached her lab, and José was still there, in the process of packing his bag to leave.

"Ah, Corinna, I thought maybe you'd left already. I took the flasks and petri dishes out of the autoclave, and put them in the laminar flow hood," he pointed, "just so you know where they are in case you get here earlier than me tomorrow."

In case, indeed. Corinna suppressed a smirk.

He swung his bag on his shoulder and with a cheerful smile said, "See you tomorrow, then, *chica*."

"I'd like you to meet Oziel García," she said. "José Diaz, my fellow tech here."

Oziel nodded a reserved greeting and put his arm back around Corinna's shoulders.

Her coworker became somewhat subdued, and went his way after a polite greeting.

"He likes you," said Oziel after the man's footsteps faded down the corridor.

"Yeah, he's okay. Easy to work with."

"No, Corinna, I mean he's interested in you."

Her eyebrows went up.

"*Him?* He's a rabbit, for Christ's sake."

And, come to think of it, he'd been the only one willing to listen to her about the algal problem

Viewed through the lens Oziel gave her, suddenly lots of little things made sense. She frowned. In that case, the man was a rabbit who had now mortally annoyed her by pretending to be interested in what she had to say.

Oziel, meanwhile, looked at her with a funny, affectionate smile on his face. Nobody would mistake him for a rabbit.

"Did they find out what happened to the server?" he asked, as she climbed to a seat on one of the high lab chairs and wondered if there really was something wrong with her. She'd often worked eighteen hour days, for heaven's sake. Why should one little boat trip knock her out?

"If they did, they haven't told me. Although they started locking the server room for a change." Fisheries was decidedly lax about security. And why not? Few people wanted to steal pages of fish census data. It was all public do-

main, anyway.

Oziel sat down at her terminal in the lab and started tapping at the keyboard.

“Be careful,” she said. “If they started locking the room, they’ll have all sorts of trackers on access.”

He gave her an insulted glance, and went on tapping. It didn’t take long before he closed all the command line windows and leaned back.

“That’s just what I was afraid of when you said all the redundant arrays were killed too. That doesn’t happen by accident. It’s designed not to happen by accident. And if you know where to look, there are spider tracks all over the place.”

“I was kind of hoping it was maybe just an unrelated accident,” she said glumly.

“No.”

“Just ‘no,’ huh?”

“I’m guessing, of course. It would take a lot more work to be sure, but I’d say the spider came back for its second try, and when it found my trap, programming kicked in to destroy the whole server. Which means the people behind this are really dangerous. If you were caught blowing up the occasional file, you might get a month or two, but trashing servers is a serious crime. You could get five years for that here. In one of *our* jails. These people must be willing to do anything.”

“Whoever they are, they may be crude, but they’re certainly effective. Nobody’s working on sea scum if everyone is frantically running around recovering data. And it sure is a final solution to the problem of being prevented from deleting individual files.” After contemplating “these people” for a while, she added, “The part I don’t understand is what’s in it for them. Why kill diatoms? Given what’s happening, the death penalty will be reinstated specifically for them, but it’s not like killing diatoms benefits one single solitary soul.”

“Maybe it’s a trial run for a deadly weapon, or something.”

“Jee-sus,” she muttered. “It would be pretty damn effective.” She nodded toward her three small aquariums holding apparently nothing but water or pea soup, as the case might be.

“You’re not going to terrify anyone with that,” he said.

“Mmf,” she agreed. “But it could mean the end of the world. Literally.”

“I was always taught that the end of the world would be announced with much more noise. Trumpets and drums and things.”

“This is a low-budget production,” she said.

“But, really, think about it,” she continued. “Some diatoms can double their numbers in about a day. If it takes us, meaning us people on this planet, even six months to figure out what’s happening and to start doing something about it, that’s one hundred and eighty generations. That’s like four thousand years for humans. A lot can happen in four thousand years.”

“Biology is sneaky,” he said, gazing dubiously at the insignificant aquariums.

“And that doesn’t begin to address the issue of other algae acquiring the same problem as these diatoms. That’s just a matter of time too, and it’s not going to take the algal equivalent of four thousand years. It looks like it’s already moved into *Chlorella* ... or moved from *Chlorella* to diatoms, who knows.”

“If it’s this bad, why isn’t anyone studying it? Why are all the big professors asleep at the switch? Are you sure it’s not a disease these things get?”

“What do you mean, ‘why isn’t anyone studying it’? *I’m* studying it.”

“You must be feeling better,” he said with a slight smile answering her grin.

“Seriously though, I don’t know why nobody’s studying it. I know it’s not a disease, because that’s the first thing I looked up. And big professors only study things if someone gives them extra money to do it. It’s called grant funds.”

“Rich people,” muttered Oziel. “You have to pay them for everything.”

“I’ve also tried to get my old friend Cholly Nymans of the London Times, interested in doing something on it, on the assumption that if there was more publicity, somebody would wake up and deal with the problem. He was apologetic, but he said algae just aren’t that exciting, and without a proven connection to a disaster, there’s no story. Then he started trying to convince me to sell our whole saga on Mars again.” She made a tired face, thinking back to the tabloids, desperate for the luridly romantic angle on the “story” between her and Oziel.

“Well, it would be a way to get the money you need for this, wouldn’t it? And since these server-trashers already know who you are, it doesn’t make much difference if you draw attention to yourself, so long as you stick to Mars and don’t talk about this project.”

She thought about it for a moment and then shook her head. She couldn’t do it, not even to prevent the end of the world.

“Zio, if a bunch of net-based dirtmuckers like Dnevnie Novosti got hold of us, I’d *want* the world to end.”

“But you’re not talking about them. You’re talking about Nymans.”

She studied him for a while. The two of them would obviously split any money that came from selling their story, and yet he’d never pushed her to do it, which, now that she’d seen the barrio and knew what money meant there, boggled her mind. Then it occurred to her that he’d had lots of practice not grabbing the money, merely because it was the right thing to do. He could have been taking tens of thousands at any time using his splicing skills, yet he never had. And his point that Nymans was not the same as some greaseball from Novosti was also right. She tapped out a message telling Nymans to go for it. It would be interesting to see what he came up with.

“It’ll be ironic if Cholly does drop money on us, because yesterday I finally managed to make a step toward getting money the usual way. I drew the boss in to apply for a grant with me for a genome study.”

“The same boss I just met? Guzmán?”

She nodded.

“It’s lucky he’s got a sense of humor. As you say, he’s a real improvement, because I probably would have been fired by the other bosses I’ve had. I’d just finished kind of implying he was stupid.”

Oziel looked at her in blank amazement.

“Well, it was by accident,” she said, and told him how the conversation had gone.

His expression became inscrutable.

“Sounds very patient. Are you sure he’s not interested in you too?”

“*Him!*” she exclaimed again, her eyebrows at the very top of their range. “Zio, he’s a million years old. Hell, he’s practically old enough to be my father.”

Oziel’s expression implied it was not as impossible as she seemed to think.

“No,” she shook her head. “Now you’re just being paranoid. You have a point with twerpy José, but not with the boss. You’re not starting to go all weird on me, are you? Getting jealous of every guy within fifty meters?”

He put his arms around her as she sat on the lab chair.

“‘All weird,’ hmm? You wouldn’t like that, I suppose?”

She shook her head very definitely.

“I get so worried you’ll disappear back into this world,” he said, “I think I could be jealous of the ‘petri dishes’ with just a little bit more effort.”

She chuckled at the image. She loved how he laughed at himself.

“Zio, you seem to be forgetting that I’m crazy about you. Anyone else has about as much chance as the petri dishes.”

He didn’t answer except to breathe out a wordless *Oh* and start kissing her.

After a while, she found herself wishing for a horizontal surface that was not a lab table, and thinking they had miles to go before they could get to the closest useful one.

“They have security cameras here, don’t they?” he murmured. “I guess we should slow down.” And after some more time he said, “But how?”

“I could start a lecture on the genetics of Chrysophyta,” she murmured back.

“That wouldn’t work, Corita. Long scientific words about the end of the world would *really* make me want to stop wasting time.”

- + -

Once she was climbing into Leira’s flitter, Corinna returned to feeling embarrassed about all the unnecessary bother.

“I’m delighted to see you again, Corinna,” said the heiress in her musical voice, sounding like she meant it. She had no diamonds in her obsidian hair,

nor any eye shadow accenting her glacier-blue eyes, and her white silk jogging suit was obviously the simplest piece of clothing she owned. It made no difference. She exuded wealthy perfection, and as soon as she had the barrio for a backdrop, she'd be as noticeable as a peacock in a salvage yard.

The flitter lifted at a word from her, and she waved Corinna's apologies down.

"It's nothing. I'm very glad to see you again, too, Señor García." She inclined her head gracefully toward the back seat.

"Likewise, Señora. What brings you to the clinic?" asked Oziel.

"I volunteer there. Just a few hours a week, but it has opened a new world for me."

That, Corinna could easily believe. Four months ago, Leira had seemed like nothing more than a good socialite, hosting her father's office party, but now, with both him and her brother in jail, she was the head of Clipper Transport Services. Corinna wouldn't have guessed, in those early days, that Leira had it in her to make a go of it, nor that she would be volunteering in a poor clinic because Sanderas helped her when her world fell apart. Corinna very much hoped Leira's sudden rise wouldn't end badly. She could just see the headline: "Heiress loses billions. Teaches ballroom dancing."

"Mainly, I've been helping with fund-raising," Leira continued. "Everything from filing to calling people." She said the last with a calculating smile, and Corinna imagined the extraordinarily effective calls she could make if she wanted to.

"And how are things going for you, Corinna? The adjustments to a new life are always so difficult." She spoke with feeling, whether she was cushioned by her billions or not. "You seem to be doing very well. Your Spanish already sounds like a native's."

Corinna felt the smile of pride from Oziel, but she demurred.

"Oh, I don't know about that. It took me days just to get used to the gravity again, after Mars, but even so, most of the time I don't know whether I'm on my head or my heels. Everything's up in the air."

Although not, she had to admit, as up in the air as it was for the folks from Amuay. Life in the barrio definitely broadened your bandwidth.

Leira shook her head in amused agreement.

"I know it's not the same, but, let me tell you, I feel that way too, with this enormous company and the executives behaving like Petey."

Corinna smiled back. Petey was her decidedly hyperactive, most people would say spoiled, son. She hoped Leira handled the executives better than her boy.

"How is Petey doing?" Oziel asked her. "Better than the bosses, I hope?"

"He's starting at the Montessori school in January, and I'm hoping that playing with the other kids will take some of the extra energy out of him."

Corinna suspected the other kids would take some of the extra brattiness out of him, using their own forceful methods. Either that or he would become

even more impossible.

"It'll be a big adjustment for him," said Oziel. "It helps some children to have counseling to get over any rough spots."

Leira seemed struck by the idea.

"That is something to consider. Of course, what he really needs is a good father figure. It made a big difference for him when you were taking care of him. You wouldn't happen to have the time to do that again, would you?" She turned her head to look hopefully at Oziel.

He smiled his most charming smile.

"I'll be going with Corinna to New York once my visa comes through, so I'm afraid not."

Corinna would have rather picked bubble gum off her shoes than taken care of Petey, but if Oziel felt the same way, no hint of his feelings showed through.

"New York!" exclaimed Leira. "Do you have a job there?"

"I'll be looking for one," said Oziel.

"In that case you must contact Melanie Smithers. I lived there during the Season several years –"

Corinna could hear the capital letter and the high level charity balls and theatre parties it implied.

"– and she runs the finest facility for children in the whole city. All the best people enroll their children there. If you would like, I'll let her know you'll call her and that she shouldn't let you get away."

"That is very kind of you, Señora," said Oziel in pleased surprise.

Corinna could see him thinking about the likely wages at a place frequented by the "best" people.

"And you?" Leira turned to Corinna. "It must be a good job that is drawing you both away?"

Well ... , no. If it came right down to it, she was uprooting Oziel because she was more comfortable with her own country than with his. But, even so, he couldn't spend the rest of his life doing the same menial job, regardless whether barrio residents thought that was accomplishment enough. The important thing was that the prospects were much better there than here.

"I have a very good opportunity there," she said, as if it was a settled thing. "It's in industry, for a change, so I may even make real money." The words were out of her mouth before she considered what they implied about Oziel.

However, his expression didn't change in any way.

Leira said smoothly, "The opportunities in a larger country are much better. It is one of the reasons I keep nagging Presidente Gaspar to restart the talks for the *Americas Unidas del Sud*. We have one of the bigger economies, and historically it is entirely appropriate for the Republica Bolivariana to take a leadership role."

Corinna often developed sudden vertigo talking to Leira. If it wasn't an off-hand comment about airlifting ripe peaches from Turkey, it was something

like this: discussing geopolitics over coffee with the head of government, whom she jokingly referred to by his first name. Everyone else called him Presidente Zuloaga.

“And it would make life simpler for CTS by reducing cross-border paperwork.” Corinna smiled at her knowingly.

“Of course,” agreed Leira with an impish tinge to her gracious smile.

Leira was going to do just fine running CTS, Corinna decided. How Petey would turn out was an open question, but CTS would be fine.

The sleek, silver flitter landed in a walled area behind the clinic, and Dr. Miguel Sanderas came out to meet them. He looked at Corinna carefully, and asked,

“Are you still feeling nauseated?” Oziel had given him the full list of symptoms.

“No,” said Corinna. “I’m fine. Really. I just have a headache at this point.”

“Well, let me see that Señora Dicastillo has everything she needs, and then we’ll take a look at you.”

Corinna joked that with Leira’s help, Miguel would soon be opening branches all over town.

“Don’t get me started,” Leira said, with restrained exasperation. “My help can do only so much, if I can’t get the good doctor to spend money on anything except medicine. If I could show prospective donors a nice building, it would make things much easier.”

Miguel just smiled good-naturedly, as one who’d heard the same thing many times, and Corinna realized the peeling paint advertised many things besides a mere lack of recognition.

“The solution seems simple, Señora,” said Oziel. “You show them the plans for a nice building, and take contributions for what people actually need. A nice building in this neighborhood would just collect graffiti.”

Leira briefly looked surprised.

“I suppose that’s true. I never thought of that.”

Miguel seemed struck by the idea, too.

“That’s good thinking. I could get Colmenar to draw up some nice 3D graphics—”

“You have to watch out for him, Señora,” Oziel interrupted with a smile. “Even when we were kids, he was good at getting everybody else to paint the fence for him. I’d always find myself somehow doing the heavy lifting.”

“And see how good it was for you?” murmured Miguel. “All that exercise makes you keep growing.”

Once Leira was comfortable in his office, Miguel showed Corinna and Oziel to a small room, and examined her like a doctor out of a storybook. He tested her reflexes, shone a light in her eyes, and actually used the stethoscope that hung around his neck, something she’d never seen done before. No laser physiometrics here.

“No,” he said, when she asked. “The handheld scanners are so small and ex-

pensive, they walk out of here, and then my insurance goes up, and it's just not worth it. Besides, the diseases in Petare are mostly simple. Curing them with no money is the complicated part. I have one of the old desktop versions, though, and in this case, we'll have to use it. There's nothing obvious wrong."

"I *told* him there was nothing wrong," said Corinna, with a pointed glance toward Oziel.

"I didn't say there was nothing wrong," Miguel said absently, while going through the many steps required to set up the antique scanner. "I said nothing obvious. Your symptoms do sound suspiciously like poisoning. That's why I'd like to test blood and tissue."

"Men," muttered Corinna, trying to make a joke of it, because it scared her that the doctor took the poisoning theory seriously. "You always stick together."

Oziel kept a carefully neutral expression.

Miguel grinned.

"Yes. But you have to admit, he has an annoying habit of being right, doesn't he?"

So, thought Corinna, the whole town had noticed, not just Oziel's family.

"It's more than the symptoms of poisoning, Corita," Oziel added. "*Somebody* is trashing all those computers, strange jobs appear —"

"Now wait just a minute. You're not going to seriously suggest that some little biotech company in Alaska is a worldwide criminal organization poisoning people in South America? That's just plain paranoid."

It was one thing, having far-fetched theories, but she was damned if she was going to have him dragging her one real job prospect into the mix.

He shot her a look that made Corinna understand why Marco insisted that Oziel could be a real gorilla when he got mad.

"And what happened the last time you thought I was paranoid?" he asked too quietly.

She rolled her eyes.

"Jee-sus. You know the old joke about Mr. Right? Except his first name is Always? You just be careful, wise guy. One of these days you'll be wrong, and notions about an Alaskan mafia make this a damn good candidate to be one of them."

She noticed Miguel looking at the two of them with amusement.

"Don't stop on my account. He's been asking for it for years. It does my heart good to see it."

"*Valgamé Dios*," muttered Oziel. "What happened to us sticking together, you little street rat?"

"Well, the equipment is ready," said Miguel to Corinna. She stretched her arm out, he positioned it inside the huge laser scanner, and began the process of taking readings.

"The other problem with the poisoning scenario is that all the Garcías

should be sick. I hardly eat anywhere else, and I pack a lunch.”

“We buy things from the street vendors sometimes,” said Oziel.

That was true. And she had bought snacks from the vending machine at work. However, that implied shadowy figures following her around, injecting God-knew-what into her personal bar of ChocoNutz. If the vending machine at work was tainted, then everyone there ought to have –

“Jesus. Everyone on the boat was dragging. Not everybody was sea sick, though.”

“Toxins tend to take different people differently. Maybe it was something in the water on the boat. Try taking your own water bottle, and see if that makes a difference. And let me know immediately if any of the symptoms recur, all right? None of this ‘it’s just a headache’ business.” He looked at her as directly as Oziel would have done, waiting for her to promise.

“Mm,” she grumbled. “Right. Will do.”

Numbers started scrolling up the scanner’s display.

“That’s strange,” he said.

“What?”

“Everything looks normal. The usual historical environmental pollutants in fatty tissue, but all within normal parameters. Some degree of hypoxia, but that’s not unusual in that tissue, either. I guess your diagnosis was the right one, and Zielo here –”

“Wait a sec.” She suddenly felt cold. “Hypoxia? Low oxygen levels in fat tissue? How about my blood?”

“Entirely normal.”

“But blood would reoxygenate in minutes.”

“Yes.”

“And what are the symptoms of oxygen deprivation?”

“They vary, but fatigue, nausea, and headache are all possible.”

“That’s it, then. For once, both Oziel and I are right. My symptoms weren’t normal, but they weren’t poisoning, either. There was almost no wind, the boat must have run into a plume of hypoxic air, and its course happened to keep it in that plume.”

What was going to happen next? Were birds going to start falling out of the air?

Miguel wanted to know what she was talking about.

“Ah,” he said when she’d finished. “Well, the good news is that there’s nothing wrong with you that a brisk walk won’t cure.” With a wry smile, he added, “The bad news, as usual, doesn’t bear thinking about. By the way, can you give Ilona her next dose of phages? That’ll save her parents a trip out here.”

“*Ya vas*,” said Oziel, taking the inhaler with its attached, precious ampule.

“How’s she doing?” asked Corinna. “She seems a bit livelier to me, so I’ve been hoping”

“The phages are destroying the bacteria, but her heart is still very weak. She

is alive and fighting, though. That's the important thing."

Corinna desperately wanted to hear that she was all right, that a complete cure was just a matter of time, that everything was okay. Instead, she had a despairing sense that Ilona was slipping from their grasp like water, together with the nagging, irrational feeling that Ilona's fate would be a signpost for all the world. If she made it, the diatom problem would be solved. If she didn't ...

Corinna and Oziel headed back to his mother's, walking in silence. She assumed he was also worrying about Ilona, but suddenly he said,

"I'd have to be an idiot not to know that your work will always pay more than mine."

Where had that come from? Then she realized this was the first moment alone for the two of them since her careless comment to Leira. It had obviously bothered him at least as much as she'd feared.

"Well, Zio, you're not an idiot, so it must also be obvious that the pay isn't the point."

"No. The point is not to make a point of it." His fixed look shaded into obvious anger.

Corinna looked down quickly, lips pressed together.

"Look. I'm sorry. I knew it was a stupid thing to say as soon as I said it. That happens to me a lot," she added after a moment.

"Mm," he gave a mumbled acknowledgment of her apology, but he didn't give her any of the encouraging signs that everything was okay now, like he usually did after their arguments. He just walked, and looked at the grubby track.

So, now what? There was obviously something else. They paced the length of a row of shacks, and she finally asked,

"That's not all, is it?"

They went another few hundred meters before he answered.

"It doesn't feel right, you giving us your salary. ...You're going to need it yourself. And ... I wanted your visit here to be my gift. Instead, I ask you to visit my home, and then you spend mountains of money on us More than any of us could ever give you, if we worked ourselves to the bone."

"What's this 'us' and 'you' business?"

He gave her a quick glance, and blinked his eyes closed against the understanding of what he'd said.

"I didn't mean you're not one of us, *mí Corita*. You're more one of us than some of us."

That, she thought, as she warmed from the inside out, was a really nice thing to say. However, it didn't answer the question.

"So, if I'm one of us, why should it bother you if my contribution is doing an easy job that keeps me from getting bored? You do more every day, whether it's building houses or taking the long way around bureaucrats."

She supposed it was hardly surprising he finally got upset about her money. The surprising thing was that it hadn't happened days ago.

"You don't get A's for effort in this world. It's the results that matter, not how hard you work to get them."

"It's still nonsense," she insisted. "The money is meaningless. If it wasn't used well, it would be worthless. Or worse."

He stared at the distance in a way that annoyed her because it was over her head.

"You say I'm smart. Well, then trust me on this. The money makes an enormous difference. If you wanted to, you could just about be running my family."

Instead of him, she supposed. She was trying to *help*, damn it. She'd thought he, of all people, would understand how impossible it was for her to do it any other way.

"I'm not going to keep repeating myself. The money is not important. This is not about money. It is not about you. And it is definitely not about your imaginary inadequacies." She stared straight ahead with, no doubt, some anger in her own expression too.

He said nothing, so she looked at him. He tensed as if she'd slapped him, and turned away.

They passed another long row of small houses and a corner. The way from Miguel's clinic to Yoana's house seemed much longer than it ever had before.

Finally he said,

"Corinna, it's hard to always be number two. I'm sorry, but I just can't get over that yet."

Jesus bleeding Christ. Talk about the wrong thing to say. She glared at him and didn't even care that he flinched.

"For the last time. This is not about money. Get it? Not about money. Money is not important."

He bent his head, staring down at the packed dirt, breathing out an endless sigh.

"Not important. ... It must be nice."

It was her turn to stare at the dirt, stung. When she glanced at him, his face was too still, too far away. For a moment, he looked just like Marco.

She supposed it was difficult to have someone who'd never seen anyone starve to death talk to you about money. But he was still missing the point.

"Oziel," she said more gently. "That's not exactly what I mean. Money buys things. I know it even buys life. I'm not saying it doesn't. What I'm saying is that life is important, not the money that buys it. If I want to do something for your folks, that's maybe interesting, but the money itself is meaningless."

His mother's house came into view down the next street, and he took Corinna's hand and headed up the hill to the open spot where they liked to talk. Except she'd said all she had to say, and he was thinking. Instead of talk, the air was filled with the unearthly whine of an orbital shuttle coming in to land at the other end of the long valley.

He sat down, and pulled her close to him when she sat down. He had a way

of not responding to anger that made fighting with him more like learning to dance than feuding. They might step on each other's toes, but it was by accident. It was very disorienting.

"You're right, Corinna. You're absolutely right."

That was it? He was simply going to get it because she'd explained it?

"You're ... you get it?"

A slight smile appeared on his face.

"I said something like it to Quintón once, when he was being stupid about all the stuff he wanted to have. I guess I didn't understand my own lecture."

"Well, while I'm at it, are you ready for another lecture?"

He looked apprehensive, but he nodded.

"It's related. Thinking in terms of number one or number two is equally ... stupid – I'm sorry, there's no other word – to hanging up on money. You're not number two by any measure worth using. Nor am I. This isn't a race. So get that bullshit right out of your head at the same time."

He exhaled for a while again.

"Well, I guess I'm better than you at being stupid."

"Just this once, maybe. For all of about two minutes."

He leaned over to kiss the top of her head, then to bury his face in her hair. She wondered whether, maybe, he was always right because he wasted so little time being wrong.

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Two weeks jogged by before Cholly Nymans called again. Corinna was starting to feel that she always had and always would live in the barrio. Oziel had rented a room for them, which was cheaper than the hotel, and Guzman was trying to convince her to apply for a permanent job that had become available at Fisheries. She could live in the barrio and be a tech forever. If the Anchorage job didn't pan out, there might be no alternative.

She'd hoped the first interview was an omen that all kinds of offers would be knocking on her door, but nothing of the sort had happened. However, she lectured herself, the important thing was to look on the bright side. The Anchorage job looked very likely to pan out, judging by the fact that Bradley, the company president himself, had messaged her a couple of times, adding information about aspects of the job he wanted her to know about. It made it sound like they wanted to be sure she didn't lose interest or go elsewhere, and that in itself was highly unusual. Now, if only she could get Oziel to see how special that was, it would be great. Instead, he was polite about it.

There had been, for instance, the last call, when Bradley informed her that an important grant had been funded, and there was now an extra hundred thousand dollars that would be available to the new hire for lab supplies.

Oziel hadn't been impressed. He'd been dubious, if anything.

"Corita, don't get me wrong," he'd said hesitantly. "It's obvious to me you're smart enough for any institute in the world to hire you, if they knew what was good for them."

"But ...?" Her bubbling sense of exultation started shrinking into resentment.

"I've been watching you apply to these places for months. Most of them don't even send an acknowledgment. They all seem to say, 'Don't call us, we'll call you.' And now suddenly an obscure place you never heard of is rolling out a red carpet. It makes me suspicious."

It was only about the fifteenth comment he'd made along those lines.

"Suspicious of what? If they inveigle me out there for a job, what's going to happen? They'll have to pay me, which is not exactly the worst fate in the world."

"I don't know, Corita. It doesn't feel right to me."

"Oh, come on. You're just making things up because you don't want to go to Alaska."

He became very still and stared down at the scuffed and cracked vinyl floor of his mother's house without saying anything. For the second time, she could have sworn she felt his stab of pain as her own, and she could have kicked herself. When had he ever done anything against her? When had he ever done less than everything for her?

"I'm sorry," she said.

He looked up, a faint smile appearing on his face, and ruffled her hair. Eventually, he said,

"Maybe they have to give people a good deal to attract anyone to the North Pole."

That was probably it, thought Corinna eagerly. Then she felt taken aback at how much she wanted to believe it.

Cholly's message came through when she and Oziel were riding home together on the metro after another late return for Corinna from an ocean sampling trip. She felt her wristpad buzz against her arm, she opened the message, and then she just stared at it.

She felt Oziel put one finger under her chin to push her jaw closed.

"This is the tropics. You'll trap flies if you go around like that."

She closed her mouth, but she still just stared at him.

"You want to tell me what it's about?"

She handed him her wristpad and pointed at the screen.

The message said it was too bad she'd waited so long to give the go-ahead. They could have got more money two months ago. However, a few networks were still interested, including one that would put her and Oziel's share at seventy thousand dollars. Seventy thousand dollars. Not only was there no moss on Cholly, there weren't even any active plants within striking distance of him. Oziel was no better than she was after he'd read the message.

When he began to speak again, all he said was, "Seventy thousand!" Sometimes he converted it to bolivars and muttered in millions. He re-read the message.

"Oy, did you read to the end?" he asked in a different tone of voice.

"No. What?"

"He says here he already has 'some good publicity lined up' to point out that you're not sitting still. You're currently working on an algal die-off with potential global implications." He handed her wristpad back after he finished quoting so she could read it for herself.

"Oh, Jesus. Well, so much for the idea of keeping that out of the public eye. ... Anyway, they seem to know all about me without any help, so it probably doesn't make things any worse."

"Things can always get worse," he muttered. Then, obviously deciding to concentrate on more cheerful topics, he asked, "So what does this mean? What are you going to do with all that money?"

"Spend a bunch on my genome work, of course, but this is ours, not mine, you know."

He said nothing until they reached the next station.

"How much ours?" he asked. "What, for instance, would you do to me if I spent it all?"

"Hah, Touché." After some puzzling, she added, "*Would* you spend it all? On what?"

"Have you counted how many relatives I have?"

"You'd give it all away to your relatives?"

"You wouldn't?"

"To tell you the truth, it wouldn't occur to me, under normal circumstances. I only have mom and dad and my older brother, David, and they've never asked for anything from me, really." Certainly nothing that would show up on the sort of scale Oziel used. Her family exchanged Christmas presents. That was about it.

"Well," he said, almost to himself, "it is very hard to refuse your family when it can be the difference between life and death for them."

"Would it make that much of a difference? If you spread thirty five thousand around, would it be enough to get them all out of the barrio and into some kind of financial stability?"

"Some might. I don't know how much money that would take. It's never been an option."

"If the money doesn't result in a lasting solution, it seems kind of silly to just piss it away, doesn't it?"

He shrugged.

"Silly? To put a roof over your cousins' heads and food on their tables? No, I can't say that it feels silly."

Corinna stopped breathing for several heartbeats. She felt as if he'd slapped her. Yet, upon reflection, she had to admit that what he said was nothing but

the truth. Everybody with money hung on to it while people died of starvation, exposure, and disease. In her case, those people had been strangers once, which had made them easier to ignore. But looking at what he would call the rich through his eyes, they seemed heartless, mindless, and blind.

“What do you have planned for the money?” he asked again after a while.

She had thought it would be fun to take him on trip to see the States, but she couldn't bring herself to mention something so frivolous now.

“I think I just sort of assumed we'd save the rest until we've found an investment that can keep on making money for us.”

“An investment,” he repeated. “And that is sensible?”

Corinna glanced at him and looked away at the sightless dark of the metro tunnel reflecting the interior of their car.

“After what you said, I'm not so sure any more. It's what any money manager would advise, but I guess they ignore their cousins to the best of their ability.”

He touched her back in a caress and she turned to see a sad smile on his face.

“It's strange. All my life, I've been set on leaving the barrio, but I never thought about leaving people behind.” He sat in silence, his arm around her, his hand absentmindedly stroking her shoulder. Finally, he muttered, barely audible above the noise of the rushing train,

“I don't know if I can.”

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He'd called to let his family know about “winning the lottery,” as he put it, so dinner was a boisterous affair as news of the seventy thousand circulated. The other thing the money meant was that now she and Oziel had a firm date to leave, after the two weeks notice she had to give Fisheries.

Suddenly, Corinna found herself ambivalent. She couldn't deny that being some place where diarrhea was less of an issue would be nice. On the other hand, she was going to miss these swirling masses of friendly people and Yoana bringing dessert out to her on the steps, saying, “*Mija*, you have to try this. I think you'll like it.”

By now, the crowd had melted away to a large extent, and Oziel had gone back to working on the flooring he'd replaced for his mother that day. At eleven at night, he was working on flooring. Corinna wondered what was going to happen when he found out that she didn't have the same kind of energy.

“When will you be leaving, Ozielito?” Yoana asked him very quietly.

“In two weeks, on Saturday, Mamí,” he answered as quietly.

There was a silence. Corinna could hear him tapping at the vinyl covering.

“When you’re gone, everyone misses you,” came his mother’s voice again.

“I miss them too, Mamí. At times, more than I could tell you.” His tone changed subtly. “This time, of course, it’ll be easier for me. I’ll try to be better about calling, so it’s easier for you as well.”

There was another silence.

Corinna could feel the large Oziel-shaped hole she would leave behind when she took him away with her. Nobody, however, by so much as the twitch of an eyelash, implied that he should be doing anything else. Now, if this were *her* mother, she’d be saying something like, “There’s plenty of good jobs here for anyone who’s willing to look for them.”

“Ey, Ozielito” said his mother so quietly, Corinna almost couldn’t hear her. “It’ll be easier just knowing there’s someone to take care of you this time.”

Take care of him? Corinna had never pictured herself taking care of confident, competent Oziel. With a sense of gravity flipping on a spacecraft, she saw him through his mother’s eyes, and felt a responsibility that she hadn’t known she was carrying till that moment.

Her wristpad vibrated to let her know a message had arrived. Slowly and sleepily, she connected and heard Miguel Sanderas’s voice ask for Oziel. He was apologizing, for some reason.

“I’m sorry to have to bother you, but could you get Zielo to turn on his wristpad? I need to talk to him.”

“Of course. No problem at all, Miguel.” She called to Oziel, and heard the muffled sound of him starting to talk.

A few minutes later, he was standing next to her. He looked grim.

“Ilona died,” he said.

Corinna gasped and couldn’t relax the sudden tightness in her throat. Now? *Why?* Ilona had been getting better, for God’s sake. It couldn’t be. Corinna felt she could barely breathe. *Mija*, she thought the endearment she’d called the little girl, and bit down hard on her tongue to suppress the cry rising in her chest. People didn’t cry here. There was so much to cry about that if you started, you might never stop.

She’d never see the smile like clear sky again.

“I have to go find her father,” he said.

They walked over to Ilona’s parents together, she with her fingers threaded so tightly through his that her bones hurt. Yoana came too, and then left with the father to go to the clinic. Corinna could picture Ilona’s mother all too clearly, keeping her stony vigil beside the tiny, cold body. Oziel and Corinna stayed with Ilona’s sleeping sister and brother.

“The funeral will be on Tuesday,” Oziel said very quietly to Corinna in the silence between them. “There won’t be much of a Dia de la Raza for us this year.”

The whole barrio had been getting ready for what promised to be a city-wide block party the next day. Corinna had been looking forward to this local equivalent of Columbus Day, but not anymore. Now it just felt awful.

After another long pause, he added,

"I don't know what's going to happen to her mother. I've seen people just give up. And then they die."

"What finally did it?" Corinna managed to ask. She couldn't bring herself to say, "*What finally killed Ilona?*"

"The endocarditis, Miguel said. In her condition, it was too much and her heart just stopped." He shook his head. "I've never seen a child as weak as her make it in the barrio. I was afraid of this for weeks. All I did was make the nightmare drag on." He stared bleakly down at the floor of the new shack, the floor he'd put in himself.

"Oh, Zio," Corinna whispered. Then, louder, "That's nonsense. You saved her life and it would have stayed saved in any place that's easier on people than here." It occurred to her that the primal urge to get away from the unpleasant smell in the streets was more than snobbery. It was plain self-preservation.

He squeezed her hand and said,

"*Verdad*. I couldn't have left her lying there, burning up with fever. But it's like you said long ago. Children shouldn't die."

They shouldn't, thought Corinna, but how many more were going to? Miners quit digging when their canaries keeled over. But other people didn't seem to have the simple self-interest to pay attention, even if they cared nothing for small living things.

Chapter 5

They were on a clipper this time, not a suborbital shuttle, coming in to land, and Corinna spent the whole descent examining the sea. She couldn't help feeling relieved that it looked ordinary from the air, even though that didn't prove anything.

In late October, there were none of the usual symptoms of flying standby, except that the seats were not sized for people like Oziel. Next week, when Corinna was flying to Alaska in business class at AnchorGene's expense, the seats would be large enough to sleep in, but he wouldn't be there.

It was just as well. He'd be bound to spend the whole flight not repeating his suspicions about the company. And when he said nothing, it could be so loud it was hard to hear anything else.

Listening to the president talk about the job was much more of an ego boost. He, the president himself, had called three days ago to give her more information. That had to mean they were more than eager. They were in hot pursuit. That only happened to other people in Corinna's previous experience. The thought that her chances were really good made her whole homecoming rosier, right down to answering what was bound to be her mother's first question: *Have you found a job yet, Rinna?* Now she could say, *Almost, mom.*

She would be saying it in another few minutes. They were on the very last leg of her journey home, the ten-minute walk from the ferry dock to her parents' house. She looked up at the steep hill and knew that if this had been her first stop after Mars, someone would have had to carry her. Oziel went into a florist's before they left the shops and imposing government buildings clustered near the ferry terminal. He took care in choosing a demure bunch of pink carnations and white daisies, while she looked on with surprise. He'd never seemed a flower-buying kind of guy to her.

They climbed the hill, past storefronts that had seen better days and brick apartment houses, and reached the old, leafy streets with large houses and well-kept gardens. Oziel, hunched against the biting north wind, stretched his head up enough to stare around in increasing bewilderment. This spacious neighborhood within a ferry ride of lower Manhattan was one of New York's best kept secrets, but it turned out that he was worried about more than the unexpectedness of it.

"How much do these places *cost?*" he finally asked.

“At current market rates? Oh, I don’t know. A million or thereabouts. My mom inherited the house from her parents. They could never have afforded a place here even forty years ago.”

Oziel stopped dead at the mention of millions and stared at Corinna instead of the neighborhood.

“God help me. I told you where I came from. You never told me you were a millionaire.” His tone was accusing.

“You make it sound like you wouldn’t have touched me with a ten-foot pole.”

“Pura verdad.”

“Well, in that case, I’m glad. It’s too late now, isn’t it?” She grinned at him.

They started walking again, slowly, but he still looked shocked.

“Listen,” she said, “seriously, you’ve got it all wrong. Having a house isn’t the same as being a millionaire. A house isn’t money, it’s just a house. Unless you sell it, of course. I just have the same tiny savings account that I had when we met.”

Looking at his unbelieving expression, she found herself hearing her words through his ears. In a world where an undamaged refrigerator box was a real asset, she was saying that a million dollars somehow didn’t count, by definition. It had always been just a house to her. Before.

They reached her parents’ place, a two-story Victorian with an attic tucked under a many-gabled roof and one conical cap over the corner tower with rounded bay windows. The weathered brown-gray shingles were still just the same.

She saw him take a deep breath and square his shoulders. He hadn’t been worried about meeting her parents. It was all that talk of millions. Money was the only thing she’d seen that could worry him.

Once she introduced Oziel to her mother, she found out what the flowers were for. On hearing “Vivian Mansur,” he handed them to her with a flourish.

“Señora,” he said, formal and warm, both at once. “It is a great pleasure to meet you.”

Her mother was visibly bowled over.

“Well! How – how very nice of you, uh –”

“Oziel, Mom.” She could just see her mother deciding to address him as Mr. García.

“Oziel. I’ve thought it’s a beautiful name since Rinna first mentioned you.”

This from the woman whose first words to Corinna’s former lover, Nat, had been, “When are you going to use all that schooling of yours to find something better than a teaching assistantship?” Corinna put her fingers to her lips in an attempt to hide her amusement. Oziel was not merely smarter than other guys. He left them in the dirt.

She introduced her father, “Daniel Mansur,” and he greeted him, equally formal, equally warm. Her father smiled and responded with two sentences instead of his customary “Hi.”

“Come on in. Delighted to have you here.”

Under Oziel’s influence, her mother didn’t get around to asking about jobs till they were sitting down to dinner. It gave Corinna vast satisfaction to dwell on how senior a position it was, how much scope it gave her to do cutting-edge research, and how the probable pay scale would give both her and Oziel opportunities they wouldn’t otherwise have.

She noticed that he was very quiet while she talked. She didn’t want to mention his doubts to her parents, or to have a chorus of people telling her it was too good to be true. It was the only thing she had going. It just had to work.

Her mom said, “Well, that sounds very nice, Rinna, but don’t get your hopes up. The best deals always go to the other guy.”

Her father said, “Mm.”

“Jeez, Dad. It’s worth more than an ‘umm,’ I think!”

Her father looked up, same unexcitable expression as always.

“That was the best I could do, pumpkin.”

She saw a grin flash on Oziel’s face at the term.

Her dad continued,

“It sounds kinda too good to be true to me. I’d be careful, if I was you.”

Damn, she thought. Even worse than a chorus was many independent voices saying the same thing. Why couldn’t the truth be good, now and again? Unfortunately, being an engineer, her father had a better idea than her mother about whether a research job in industry was a good deal.

“And what do you suggest?” she asked.

“Just look them over real carefully. Watch the money and the resources. If there’s anything fishy, that’s where the first symptoms usually show.”

“Sheesh. Men. You’re always sticking together.” She wasn’t entirely joking. “He,” she indicated Oziel, “wants me to scrutinize them too, and my sneaking suspicion is that he doesn’t like the cold.”

Her dad gave Oziel another one of his rare, slight smiles. Two in one evening had to be some kind of record.

“Well, ask Linda about it in a couple of days’ time,” said her dad. “She’s coming to dinner while we’re off at that school do of Viv’s, right?”

Corinna nodded.

“She can give you an opinion untainted by Y chromosomes.”

Corinna saw another grin flash on Oziel’s face, although he was looking down, trying to be inconspicuous.

During dinner, Oziel continued smuggling the benevolence of his family into hers. He took every subtle opportunity to tell her parents what a brilliant daughter they had. They simply basked. He emanated enough charm to make her school-principal mom laugh like one of her own teenage students.

Corinna sat with her dad after dinner in the living room, listening to Oziel’s baritone, saying something to her mother as he helped clear the last of the dinner dishes away. She smiled slyly at her father and asked,

“You sure you don’t need to worry?” with a nod of her head toward the kitchen.

He shook his head in disbelieving agreement.

“Knows what he’s doing. He treat you that way too?”

“No.”

“Smart boy,” was her father’s comment. “You’d probably give anyone who tried to wind you around his little finger a tourniquet.”

It occurred to Corinna that her dad might be distant, but that didn’t stop him from being far-sighted.

Her mother called from the kitchen. “Dan, where’d you put the mocha java?” Her father went off to help look for it, as Oziel came into the room.

He sat on the floor, leaning against Corinna’s legs. She reached out to rest a hand on his shoulder and looked down until the glow from his touch subsided.

“Zio,” she said quietly, “it’s splendid of you to be so nice to my parents, but this is above and beyond the call of duty. Why are you going to so much trouble?”

He turned and looked up at her with a quizzical grin.

“This from the woman who went to work so she could help my family. Sometimes, Corinna, I think you must be fuzzy inside your head as well as outside.”

“Hey, I thought Latinos didn’t insult people inside their own homes.”

“Oh, I’ll make an exception for you, *mí Corita*” he said, his grin widening. Then his smile faded to seriousness. “It’s obvious. Here you are, fearless, yet you fear your mother.” She realized with a shock that it was true. She did. “You’ve told me stories several times of how she turns people inside out, and, judging by her daughter, I thought she might be quite good at it. I don’t want you to hear comments like, ‘Rinna, he’s only looking for you to get him into the country. He’ll run off with the first billionaire he sees.’”

Corinna glanced involuntarily toward the kitchen to see whether there was a chance anyone had heard him. Without changing his baritone, he imitated her mother’s intonation so perfectly it could have been her, talking through a voice synthesizer. And, unfortunately, he hit her mindset perfectly, too. She leaned back, feeling cold.

“If you can see her as clearly as that, how can you stand to speak to her?” she asked in a small voice.

“She just says the first thing in her mind, and she thinks such things only because she worries for her daughter. It would come out bad, but she doesn’t really mean it that way.”

She leaned toward him, passed her hand over his silky hair, and traced the lines of his ear. He leaned into her touch. What was that expression of his? *You are more one of us than some of us.* Her mother was family to him, so he was scooting over and making room, giving her the benefit of a generosity she didn’t even suspect.

“It’s been interesting to meet your parents,” he was saying softly. “You have your father’s brains and your mother’s fight.” A grin spread on his face. “It just shows, *querida*, what I suspected ever since you took me. You know how to choose the best.”

Before she could locate a cushion close enough to swat him with, her parents came back carrying after-dinner coffee in small cups. The rest of the evening went on as it had begun, enveloped in warmth that blunted the edges even of the nasty past, as she told them about how she had been framed and then fired on Mars. She found herself just talking, as if she was among friends. She had never felt that comfortable with her parents before.

When they went upstairs to her room for the night, Oziel muttered.

“How many rooms are there in this place?”

So she showed him around the house, starting with the basement and ending with the attic.

“It’s the size of a *huevo* palace. Who lives here besides your parents?”

“Nobody.”

“*Dios santo!* A house this big, and only ghosts live in most of it. Doesn’t that bother you?”

She smiled and put her arms around his waist.

“Not with you in it, Zio.”

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The next day, everything started to go wrong. The first problem was that Oziel found a job.

“Melanie’s Minders.” He made a face at the name.

“So you went for the day care after all?” Corinna asked, putting away the groceries she’d bought. “None of the emergency medic jobs panned out?” She wasn’t quite sure why she was disappointed. They paid EMTs more, didn’t they? And then, of course, there were his outrageous computer skills. In a just world, he’d be making six figures, but as he himself had pointed out long ago, the security-conscious software industry was not about to hire someone out of a slum with a mere high school degree. Taking care of kids, yes, but computers, no.

“Whichever worked out first. Day care is better. Less heavy lifting, and usually nobody dies.”

She smiled faintly. He was right of course, as far as it went, but she kept wishing he’d do more with all the smarts he had.

“It’s just that... I don’t know... I don’t think it’s good to just coast. You should be doing something with your abilities.”

She also had to admit she was a bit jealous. Here he was, all set in two days, whereas it could take her two years to find a job. A real job, that is.

He came up close to her and put his arms around her.

“Ey, looking after kids takes a lot of hard work and resourcefulness. If you don’t believe me, we’ll get our implants removed and have some and you’ll see.”

Yeah, she supposed, but she found herself thinking that her own job better pan out because she had no other leads. It would be ... humiliating to be jobless with a Ph. D. on her home turf while Oziel effortlessly took care of himself and half his family. And her. She was the one who had said this was not a race, but that became harder to remember the more she felt like number two.

A day went by, and another one, and she couldn’t talk herself past it. She worked on the algae and tried to ignore herself, and then was brought up short by finding she was annoyed when Oziel paid for the groceries for the dinner with Linda. She’d just been so certain that she’d be showing him the ropes here.

Then Linda arrived, looking just as Corinna remembered her: same tawny brown hair, green eyes, and pleased anticipation in her face, as if she’d set up an elaborate practical joke and was now waiting for the result. Corinna felt herself break into a wide answering grin as she hugged her friend and forgot her troubles.

Linda looked around at the old house with its high ceilings.

“Takes me right back,” she said, walking through a polished wooden arch between two rooms and into the big, homey kitchen. “I remember sitting right there,” she pointed through another arch at the table loaded with dinner dishes in front of a bay window, “while we talked half the night about that mistake of yours.”

Linda had never liked Nat. “Looks like a snake,” had been her verdict, referring to intangibles as well as tangibles. “And when he gets old, he’s going to look like a snake who swallowed a basketball.”

She didn’t usually cut people a lot of slack. She hadn’t changed a bit, thought Corinna, feeling reassured.

“Help yourself to whatever you’d like to drink,” said Corinna to Linda, indicating the beers and juices arrayed on the table. “Speaking of mistakes,” she went on, “guess whose employer has a collaboration going with McClintock.”

“Whose?”

“Nat’s. He’s working for Farida Hamid on signal transduction, remember? Well, she and McClintock have a big grant going to study quantum effects during signalling.”

“Oh crap. So Nat pops through McClintock’s lab every couple days?”

“Well, he’s been there every day so far. Sometimes twice in one day.”

“Ey, Corinna, you never mentioned this,” said Oziel, looking concerned.

She shrugged.

“I don’t think about him if I don’t have to.”

He still looked concerned.

“Well, just don’t let him know what you’re working on this time. Then he

can't steal it."

"Yeah," said Linda emphatically.

"No worries. I barely said hello. I might have been there purely for the social life, for all he knows."

"You mentioned you're there for something to do with algae. Going from the human brain to the lowest form of pond scum seems like a bit of a shift." Linda's smirk said she was doing her best to get a rise out of her friend, so Corinna just growled at her.

"Jee-sus, don't you remember your basic bio well enough to know that diatoms are highly evolved?"

"Little crowns of creation in their own right, huh?"

"They're not called golden algae for nothing."

Corinna began explaining the curious die-off and the implications all the way up to oxygen depletion, when Linda interrupted.

"How do you know it's not just some diatom disease? They must have diseases."

"But you've never heard of any, right? Well, neither had I. And guess what came up positive today. Sal-two probes registered all over the place."

"No shit," muttered Linda. "Well, that answers that question."

Corinna could feel Oziel thinking *scientists!* before she even looked at him. She explained before he had to ask.

"Sal-two is something genetic engineers use to cut DNA to insert the genes they're engineering, and usually there are some bits of it that stay behind when they're done. So it proves that it's not a disease and that the dying algae have some kind of engineered gene gone wild. Now all I have to do is find out what. And whose."

"It would be ironic," said Linda thoughtfully, "if it turned out to be the same company that has the job you were talking about. Since they engineer transgenics for salmonids, that's one way artificial DNA could enter a marine ecosystem."

"You'd expect the problem to show up in the Pacific Northwest, then. Not the Gulf."

"True. What's the trouble with them? You said there were some things you might want to ask me about, even though it was a really good deal."

"The problem is that it's a really good deal," Corinna said glumly. Now that she was talking about it to Linda, she knew that even her friend's freedom from Y chromosomes wouldn't be enough to make the job sound plausible. "They want to give the new hire labs with all the equipment, a budget to hire more people, and no requirements to raise funds."

Linda stared and let out a slow whistle.

"I guess they figure you're going to patent the cure for old age, huh?"

"Nobody said anything about patentable products either."

Linda stared again.

"Rinna, I don't want to rain on your parade, but that really is strange."

“Yeah,” said Corinna under her breath. “My dad thought so too.” She wished she could talk to Linda without Oziel there, so that if the answers came back unpalatable, she had time to work on them before he heard them. She wanted to be sure he’d keep an open mind about going, if she did get the job.

And then, with a brief, brilliant illumination like lightning, she imagined her own feelings if he tried sweet-talking her with half-truths. Somehow, in her eagerness to make the job work, she’d forgotten to think about that.

Oziel spoke up.

“Corinna checked what she could find about this company on the net. There didn’t seem to be anything obvious wrong with them.”

“What was their name again?”

“AnchorGene,” said Corinna. “They do microbial symbionts as well as engineering salmon, char, and trout directly.”

“And now neurotransmitters?” Linda’s expression grew sceptical. “What are you supposed to do? Hardwire the slimy critters to love nets?”

Corinna shook her head ruefully, and Oziel smiled. She wondered how long it would take before he said *I told you so* once Linda was gone.

Linda tapped away at her wrist pad.

“Are they publicly traded?”

“Yes, registered at the Seattle exchange, not New York.”

“Well, they are a startup. It takes a while to climb out of the penny stock pool.” She’d stopped tapping and was now scrolling the wristpad’s tiny screen. “They still have to have 10K filings with the Exchange.” She stopped scrolling. “No red flags attached to their Exchange files.”

Oziel stood up and pulled Corinna’s laptop out of her bag, his eyebrows raised in a question.

“Of course,” said Corinna, setting it up for Linda. “This’ll be much better than trying to do that on a wristpad.”

As a publicly traded company, AnchorGene had open statements on file with the IRS as well as the Exchange. Linda scanned the results.

“Nothing there. Though they’re not so wildly profitable that throwing money at experimental projects makes sense. Let’s try something else.”

She entered a search for “transgenic” and “salmon” and “microbe.”

“I seem to remember something about salmon and microbes being in the news about a year ago. Maybe two. Let’s see what comes up.”

What came up was a company named SalmoGene. The Genetic Protection Agency had caught them falsifying safety data for transgenic microbes in salmon. After pleading no contest and paying penalties, the company had changed its name to AnchorGene.

There was silence around the table.

“Jee-sus,” said Corinna at last. “*That’s* not good. But that makes even less sense than before. I mean, these guys have to have checked my background pretty thoroughly. You’d think a whistleblower is the last person they want.”

“It does seem weird,” agreed Linda.

Oziel looked observantly from Corinna to her friend and back. He was on track to be right. Again. It did not become less annoying with time.

“So much,” she said after another silence, “for my pet theory that they want me because I’m the best person for the job.”

“Corita, what other people do says nothing about you.”

“He’s got that right!” Linda agreed.

It was kind of them to say so, but it would be nice not to have to carry the whole burden of knowing you were good by yourself. It would be nice to have confirmation from someone with a job to offer.

“In any case, it’s better to know now rather than after you move out there,” said Linda, trying another tack to cheer her up. “Besides, just because they had one problem, doesn’t mean they’re totally bogus. It might have been one sleazy worker.”

That was true, thought Corinna, brightening.

Then Linda tactfully changed the subject by turning to Oziel and saying,

“Rinna told me when she called that you found a job your first day here. The INS sure wasted a lot of paper worrying about guarantees of support for you.”

“I had help,” he said, waving his accomplishment away. “I had a good recommendation from a friend of the owner, and they’re also pretty desperate for day care workers around here.”

“Desperate doesn’t begin to describe it.”

“It’s very different from other places where I’ve worked,” he added. “The clients are mostly high-powered business people. It’s a place on West 72nd St., near Central Park.”

“Oh, wow,” said Linda, rolling her eyes. “That’s the absolute ritziest part of New York. It’s wall-to-wall billionaires and movie stars. Although,” she added as an afterthought, “as far as that goes you’ll fit right in, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

Oziel smiled in embarrassment and Corinna laughed. So it was possible to embarrass him. You just had to go about it the right way.

“Yeah, his whole family looks like movie stars. I think they think it’s normal.”

“Not Quintón,” muttered Oziel, staring at the back garden with its fiery red-orange maples at the peak of their late October splendor. “He uses it like a *puto*.”

Linda’s eyes widened a bit, like someone who knew perfectly well that meant pimp, but she did ask,

“Who’s Quintón?”

“My youngest brother. In jail right now for dealing spike.”

“Wow. I guess you guys aren’t a matched set, huh?”

“I hope not,” he said.

The oven timer chose that moment to let them know it was done, and Oziel waved Corinna to sit back down.

"I'll get it."

He disappeared around the corner into the kitchen, and Linda said,

"He seems special. You must be pretty crazy about him."

"Yes," said Corinna, so quietly she could have been speaking to herself, "pretty crazy." Then she added in a more normal tone, "It's funny how things work though. I thought I'd be powering on ahead and pulling him with me. You know, that he'd wind up going back to school, getting a degree in something interesting, and we'd be out on Long Island somewhere. Instead, I haven't found anything in two months of job searching, and, in a lot of ways, I wish we were back in Caracas." She looked down at her plate. "No old dreams to measure myself against there."

"Boy, I don't know," said Linda, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Oziel returned, carefully carrying a steaming casserole. He turned to help Linda to some dinner.

"You'll have to be patient with us. Corinna said you know all about her cooking, and I'm pretty sure I need practice boiling water."

"You're giving me water for dinner?" Linda demanded.

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After dinner, which was simple, but not so simple as to consist entirely of water, there were dishes to do. Corinna loaded the dishwasher as Oziel brought plates in from the dining alcove, and every time he came in she waited for him to say she'd be nuts to take the job. He didn't. He talked about what a delightful person Linda was and said complimentary things about birds of a feather flocking together.

They were curled up in bed, and still he hadn't said anything. Finally, she couldn't stand it any more and asked,

"So, when are you going to say I told you so?" The faint, reflected illumination of an enormous city at night lit the room like moonlight, but with less tranquillity.

"I'm not, Corita.... I'm not.... You want this so bad, it makes my heart hurt to see you, but you would have told me the whole story sooner or later, even without Linda to talk to."

She stopped breathing for a second, in the shock of having her mind read so calmly. Once she was past that, she hoped what he said was true. Her mother might not be the only person who needed his generosity.

"So, what do you think?" she asked, bracing for his answer. "About the job."

"I wish I could say something different, *mí cielo*. I really do. I think the same as before, only more so. I'm really worried about you going out there."

"My flight's in a couple of days. I'd look ridiculous backing out now, even if I wanted to." If he thought a two-day trip was too much, what did this mean

about his willingness to go there for years?

“Better to look ridiculous than ... than something else.”

“It’s an *interview*,” she exclaimed, glad to have something to argue about besides the job. “I’m not travelling to snoop around in the den of the Secret Nine, or something. They couldn’t even bury the body because of the permafrost.”

He didn’t respond to her attempted joke any more than a stone pyramid would have. He continued as if she hadn’t spoken.

“Whoever is behind those diatoms is willing to destroy servers. They’re willing to destroy the *world*, since they’re trying to cover it up. Who knows what they’re capable of? Who knows who they know?”

Well, if the whole idea wasn’t absurd ... her mind veered away from the thought.

“AnchorGene is a *business*, Oziel. They’ve been around for over ten years. They get research grants. They have labs. Their tax statements don’t look profitable enough for a sideline in murder-for-hire.”

“Corita,” he said, sounding slow and patient, “do you think they’d put that down as a source of income? No,” he interrupted her before she could start. “I don’t know what worries me more: everything showing something is wrong, or how much you want to ignore it.”

“I’m ignoring it because it’s paranoid!”

This time he gave her a one-sided smile, although she hadn’t been joking.

“Well, you know, just because you’re paranoid, doesn’t mean they’re not after you.”

If he was willing to be funny, maybe he was willing to listen to reason.

“Look, Zio, this is an incredible opportunity. With an industry-level salary, we could buy our own flitter, or get Estevan his own fish shop just with the money we couldn’t spend in the first month. You wouldn’t have to work at all. You could take some classes, in computers, for instance, get certification, and move onward and upward.”

If he was fired up about the opportunities, it didn’t feel like it. He shifted to sit and lean against the headboard with his arm around her shoulders as she sat up too.

“Did I say I wanted to take classes?” he asked.

No, he was definitely not fired up.

“You could make serious money in software. I thought you were the one who said money makes a difference.”

“I thought you were the one who said it didn’t.”

“Well,” she said, since she didn’t seem to be getting anywhere, “if there does turn out to be something wrong with the job, or a couple of months go by and you really can’t stand the place, I can always quit.” There. What more could she say?

He answered slowly.

“Have you thought at all for me in this?”

“For you?” she echoed. What else had she been trying to do? “What do you mean?”

“You keep telling me things. You haven’t asked me anything.”

“Like what? I thought it was obvious that I don’t have a lot of choice except to go where the job is.”

“You’re still doing it. What about my job? I’m supposed to give one month’s notice at Melanie’s. Did you think about that?”

“Jeez, no, I guess I didn’t. But it doesn’t really matter, does it? The Alaskans are hardly going to object if it takes us a month to wrap things up here.”

“And then, when we’re there, I’m supposed to find yet another job, and then, if you don’t like it, dump that and find another one back here, I guess.”

He made it sound as if she was pulling him around like a dog on a leash. That was hardly fair.

“It’s a lot easier for you to find jobs than it is for me.”

He looked at her with that careful neutrality she was coming to recognize as the beginnings of anger in him. He was, she supposed, too big to express anger like an ordinary person, unless he wanted everyone within range to cower in fear.

“You realize, that’s only because I have one of these simple jobs that doesn’t need any ambition,” he stated.

She could no longer restrain the frown that had been building all through this discussion.

“Look, this is just a transition period. I still don’t think it’s good to simply coast.”

“I noticed,” he responded. “So lack of ambition is good when it’s useful and then it’s supposed to go away and become the opposite.”

He sounded downright sarcastic.

“What’s your point?” she asked, her frown deepening.

“Corita, my point is that you could say, ‘yes, it’s really nice to have someone who takes things easy.’ Or you could say, ‘I realize there are things you need to do, so we’ll take them into account.’ You don’t like to be pushed. I don’t like it either. I definitely don’t like to be pushed in two different directions, so I want you to make up your mind. You can have easy, or you can have ambitious, but not both.”

“Well, for Christ’s sake, you can’t just teach nursery school for the rest of your life.”

“Why not?” he said, sitting up straighter and taking his arm off her shoulders. “This job pays forty thousand dollars a year. That’s not good enough?”

She sat up too. Distant streetlamps threw a crazy quilt of light and shadow on them both.

“It’s not the money, Oziel!” How many times was she going to have to say this? “It’s about using your abilities. It’s about making something of yourself.”

“Making something of myself,” he repeated, looking straight at her with no particular expression in his eyes.

His solidity, when unaccompanied by his usual sense of protection, was anything but reassuring. She suddenly had a vivid memory of him on Mars, throwing beefy security guards across a room, which, given all the lead weights people wore, was no easier there than on Earth.

And yet, it felt wrong even to think about it. Even when he was angry, he was never threatening, not by so much as a glare or a tensed jaw. That had to take enormous effort. It felt ... mean to mistrust him anyway.

He did have some reason to be angry. It was rather insulting to tell him, of all people, to make something of himself. But, dammit, just because the smallest things took superhuman effort where he came from, didn't mean expectations had to stay low once his world opened out. However, she wasn't sure how to put it without adding another insult, and she was afraid that might make the mixture too rich.

"You know what I mean," she said instead.

"No, Corinna, I don't." He still looked at her fixedly. "Listen to me. I do what I can. It is all anyone can do."

That sounded like "get used to it" to her. She could feel it making her mad.

"Are you telling me to drop it?"

"Yes."

As if he ever dropped anything just because someone told him to. It made her madder. But she didn't know how to express it and so said nothing.

His wristpad let out a single beep on the wooden floor, somewhere near his side of the mattress, announcing that a message was waiting.

He started pushing buttons and reading the message. It was amazing how long it took another person to read a message when you were waiting for him to finish it.

"It's from Marco," he finally said in a sad, tired voice. "Time-delayed, so he could take advantage of the night rates."

Oh, hell. News from the barrio often wasn't good.

"Now what?" she asked.

He gave her another look and said,

"*Nada.*"

Then he slid down in the bed and rolled over, as if to go to sleep.

Oh, hell, she thought again. For all she knew, someone had died. She needed to remember to be more careful. She counted to ten, took a deep breath, and said,

"I'm just upset about all this job stuff. I didn't mean to sound like that. So, tell me, what happened?"

He rolled onto his back, gave her a very different look, and reached for her to pull her toward him. She lay alongside him in the crook of his arm, one leg resting on him, one arm around his chest. For some reason, she wanted to weep.

"It's nothing too bad. Yet," he said. "Venezuela and Colombia are arguing over maritime rights, fishing boats in the wrong places have been fired on, the

whole thing is getting hairy, and reserves have been called up.”

It sounded like a bulletin of world news. Given the direct and personal nature of tragedy in the barrio, this was good.

“So Tío Rafael is now on active duty.”

It was going rapidly from world news to personal. Not good.

“And both countries are setting up for a draft, just to show the other guys they’re serious.” He made a disgusted face. “The real problem is that Tío Rafael has been put in a home guard unit and one of their jobs is going to be rounding up draft dodgers. They’ve been told to start making lists. He says no way will he turn in his neighbors. So if they do start a draft, he may get arrested. And then he’d be fired, and he has the biggest paycheck in his family.”

Oh, hell, thought Corinna.

“Next thing we know,” he said at last, “I’ll be called up.”

God help them, thought Corinna with a shock. That could happen. It felt like a body blow, like the last time someone else’s catastrophes had reached out and struck her, only much worse.

Before she could stop it, the image flashed through her mind of his magnificent chest blown into a bloody mess and his eyes open, staring sightless at the sky.

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The next day, neither Corinna nor Oziel returned to the topics of the previous night. They set off early for the ferry, each freighted with a box of books she needed at the lab. Computers couldn’t display five legible pages at once and move down the lab bench with you, unafraid of chemicals. Nobody had yet come up with a practical way of doing without weighty tomes. Oziel stood up for his station, about half way to Corinna’s stop at Columbia at the northern tip of Manhattan. He was going to come up after work, visit the lab and drop off the second box.

“You want to come see my building full of billionaires before you go on?” he asked.

“Carrying all this?” she said, before she remembered that he was schlepping even more for her sake. “Some other time would probably be better.” Besides, she wasn’t sure what there was to see, except billionaires, and they didn’t interest her much.

She felt her arms were about to fall off by the time she could finally plunk her box down on her assigned lab space. She either had a ways to go before readjusting to Earth’s gravity, or hanging around with Oziel was giving her new standards of what it meant to be a putz.

McClintock came by her station soon after she arrived.

“Those AnchorGene people seem to want you in the worst way,” said her

old prof, with one eyebrow skeptically raised. "Now they're calling me up, asking me what I think you'd particularly like to hear."

Sheesh, thought Corinna, those guys really were in hot pursuit. Even she wasn't sure she was that desirable a scientist.

"What I'd like to hear," she grouched, "is that Hamid wants to make me a senior researcher with all the trimmings on that big grant you guys have."

All the new hires were associated with Farida Hamid's lab, since McClintock kept talking about early retirement. He was on the other side of ninety, stout and bald, with a strip of white hair below his domed pate, like a cleancut Santa Claus.

"Did you apply?"

"Of course I applied. I've applied *everywhere*. I wouldn't leave out one of the best labs there is."

"Well, then I'll be sure to tell Farida you said that," grinned McClintock.

"Hey, whatever works," Corinna joked back. "So, what did you tell AnchorGene?"

"I was actually curious what they think they're doing with neurotransmitters. I must say, they didn't seem to know."

"No," she agreed. "They do give that impression." Yet another independent voice saying the same thing, she thought glumly, and this time it was one of the bigger experts in the field.

"I was rather taken aback by the, how should I put it?, flimflam feel they gave me. I told them it would take a good research lab to make the best use of your talents."

The implication being that AnchorGene missed by a mile. She smiled at the compliment.

"Did that go over well?"

He raised one eyebrow again, like Santa Claus reading an implausible request for Christmas gifts.

"Well, I suggested they could try to compensate by giving you pots of money and resources, so maybe all is not lost. Then they started asking what you needed. They didn't even know." He changed the subject by moving on to the actual purpose of coming out to find her, and handed her several receipts for supplies she'd ordered.

She settled down to looking at her latest algal data and felt her frustration mount. Sequencing the DNA near a selection of sal-two probe sites had given her a smorgasbord of bits, including five different genes and lots of introns, spacers, and other irrelevancies. Clearly, the sal-two sites themselves had skipped around the chromosomes and no longer marked the original gene that had brought them in. She had to look at the whole damn genome, all three thousand dollars' worth, to find what she was looking for. Why was the answer never cheap or easy?

Meanwhile, she kept trying not to replay McClintock's remarks about AnchorGene in her mind. If he said they were flimflam She kept trying to con-

vince herself that the company's interest in her was based on the fact that an embryonic program couldn't attract an established scientist and had to go for merit without the embellishments.

In the afternoon, when she met Oziel outside the building to show him through the maze of hallways to her lab, she found him looking around at the grimy canyons of concrete on all sides.

"You had a nicer lab in Caracas."

"Yeah," she agreed. "Lots of stuff was nicer there. The weather, for starters."

He dropped off the big box for her and then she took him to Dr. McClintock's office, introduced him, and obtained permission to show him around.

As he was helping her unpack the box, she heard someone say, "Hi, Corinna," from across the lab.

She glanced over and saw Nat, headed in her direction. She'd managed to keep him from trying to talk to her so far, but now it looked like he could no longer resist benchmarking his progress against hers. Oziel's presence as an audience must have tipped the balance.

"Hi," he said again, obviously expecting an introduction when all she wanted to do was get rid of him.

"Nathaniel Janssen. Oziel García," she said reluctantly. What was it about social conventions that made them so difficult to flout in cold blood?

Oziel stood up from his crouch over the box, and shook hands.

Nat looked intimidated. Men, even the most educated men, seemed hard-wired to calculate physical dominance.

There was a bit of a lull. Was he never going to take the hint and leave?

"So, you're back to being a postdoc for your old prof?"

"No."

"Yeah, it's real hard to find anything if you have any kind of trouble at a job. I helped get a big grant that was just funded at Farida's lab, so she's going to be hiring some postdocs soon. I'll be glad to put in a word for you."

Corinna swallowed carefully and wondered how she could have spent three years with this mean-spirited piece of junk and not noticed what he was. Why was he doing this? What, exactly, had she ever done to him that he needed to pay her back for?

Oziel spoke unexpectedly.

"You must not realize that there are people who need what she knows about the endorphin problem. Consulting is nice work, if you can get it. I'm sure she'll put in a word for you, if you ever decide you want to make real money."

Oziel's defense of her gave Corinna a warm glow, but she tried to maintain her stony expression to encourage Nat to get lost.

"Nat, I'd rather not discuss my work with you." She turned away and looked through the microscope, determined to keep doing that till he gave up and left.

The tension spiked higher at her implied accusation, but Nat came back al-

most immediately.

“Don’t tell me you’re working on the top-secret killer tomato here.”

She didn’t have to look up to know he had a disingenuous little grin on his face. Ironically, he wasn’t that far off. Instead of tomatoes, she was studying killer pond scum.

“So what’s interesting about some chlorophyte?” he persisted.

Nat, unfortunately, was and always had been very good at putting two and two together, if somebody gave him the numbers. A couple of flasks of green algae stood in her work area.

She said nothing and stared through her microscope, so he talked at Oziel, who was still facing him.

“I guess discussing her work isn’t something you need to worry about. You do day care or something, don’t you?”

Corinna felt herself boil with the urge to beat him to a pulp. Unfortunately, she couldn’t scream and start raking her fingernails over a jerk in someone else’s lab, and she was too furious to have any better ideas. She would have bet money that was precisely the effect he was trying to achieve, which made her even madder, if that was possible.

Oziel, meanwhile, waited a heartbeat and said quietly,

“Yes. I do. It has made me very good at dealing with small, immature people.”

She could see him out of the corner of her eye, looming over Nat, centimeters taller and even more centimeters broader, at least at the shoulders.

“Tell me, Nat,” the way he flung the name down, he made it an insult, “do you speak Spanish?”

Nat sounded disoriented by the turn of the conversation.

“Some. I understand it better than I speak it.”

“*Bueno, conchudo*, all you need to do is understand,” Oziel went on in Spanish. “If you don’t piss off, and if you ever bug her again, I’ll make jerky out of you.”

Nat muttered something about gangsters, and fled.

“*Chorro de mierda*,” growled Oziel at his retreating back.

Well, thought Corinna, that got rid of Nat, but not because she’d managed it. Somehow, that just added to her cauldron of fury.

“Ey, mí Corita,” Oziel said in his gentlest voice. “He was a long time ago. It’s not your fault he’s afraid of muscles and he’s too stupid to understand English. Whatever works, hm?”

Jee-sus, was there anything he didn’t see? Was she just an open book he could read whenever he wanted? What else was he reading from her back pages?

There was, for instance, the screaming feeling that if he’d had enough gumption to be moving toward something better than stupid babysitting, damn Nat wouldn’t have had that particular chain to pull on. The most hurtful things were the ones that were true.

Oziel kept trying to make her feel better, but it had the perverse effect of

reminding her that she felt terrible, and twisted her up even worse.

"*Mí cielo,*" he murmured, giving her a hesitant hug. She knew he had un-American notions about decorum at work. "He hurts you. I'll beat him to a pulp. ... And then I'll get in trouble. It was that jab about day care, wasn't it?"

Suddenly, she boiled over.

"Yes," she bit out. "And the problem is that he's right, isn't he?"

There was a silence like after a gunshot.

Oziel straightened up. His aura of kindly comfort vanished, as if he'd switched off a light inside him.

"Is he," he said.

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They made intermittent conversation during the ride home. Oziel asked some questions about whether she'd found any more indications of whose engineering was causing the problem. Corinna couldn't have cared less. Somehow, the world's oxygen no longer mattered. To hell with the world's oxygen, she thought. They talked a bit about how he would try to track down spiders roaming the net to destroy computers holding diatom files. Dinner was one of those "could you pass the salt?" affairs, without even her mother to comment on their lack of conversation. Her parents were eating out.

Half of Corinna wanted to weep, the other half to scream. Ever since she'd fallen into his arms, they'd run together like two drops of water, but now there was a layer of crud and cold between them and no easy way to melt. It didn't help at all to know that she had put that layer there.

But she was right, and she was not going to pretend she wasn't, and him acting like they could just forget it was no solution. She would have no use for a boring old fellow in a T-shirt, no matter whether he'd saved her life or not. Or whether he was defending her from spies on the net, as he was doing now on her ancient high school computer that was still in her room.

She looked over his shoulder to see what progress he was making. Everything he did was for her; it didn't feel right to be mad at him. And yet, as he turned to put his arm around her waist and pull her closer, she felt stiff. She was tired of him pretending the problem would go away.

He looked up at her, but she kept her eyes on the computer, and he took his arm away again. Some kind of gibberish filled the screen to which he gave his attention. He entered another interminable search command. It trundled around and around in cyberspace.

"So, are you finding anything?" she asked.

"Sort of. A server associated with AnchorGene pops up repeatedly, for some reason, but I don't have anything definite."

"AnchorGene! What the —. How do you know? Is it labelled? 'This is an An-

chorGene machine'?"

He said nothing. He stared at the screen with an odd expression on his face, mouth creased downward in regret and his eyes full of... fear? She'd never seen him afraid of anything. Maybe that was why he looked so strange.

"Bring a chair over, Corita," he said. He sounded terribly tired.

She sat down next to him, even though she didn't see the point of them both staring at hieroglyphics.

"Corita, please believe me," he said, speaking slowly. "I'm doing it *for* you, not against you."

"What?"

"After Linda's information about AnchorGene, I thought it would be a good idea to know more about them, so I've been trying to look at their server. But I'm behind on the latest firewalls, so I haven't gotten anywhere. Anyway, that's how I know. I recognized their numerical address."

"Jeeesus," she muttered through closed teeth. "I'm trying to get a job with these people, you know. If they find someone from my address all over their server, that's going to be just great."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. If she had to bet, she'd say he was counting to ten.

"Corinna, will you stop worrying about me leaving traces? I might as well tell you to – I don't know – not put any salt in the DNA you're studying. I'm not an idiot. I know what I'm doing."

"Yeah," she muttered. "Okay."

"I haven't found the really damaging spider, but I did find the one deleting individual files. It seems to come mainly from a satellite that uplinks Texas and that area. I can't trace it back from there. But it's also, as I said, apparently associated with the AnchorGene computer. Given that they were caught once faking data, there may really be something wrong with them. You need to let yourself think about that, no matter how much you want the job."

She stared at the computer resentfully, resisting his warnings with everything she had. Could he be fabricating this in an oblique bid to scupper the job?

No, she decided, before the thought had finished flitting through her mind. If he didn't like Alaska to that extent, he'd say so. He wouldn't hide behind elaborate lies.

But she couldn't force her mind to see her one good prospect as some kind of trap. Why would anyone bother trapping her? She needed an answer to that first, before it made any sense to invent fanciful scenarios.

"Why would anyone go to all the trouble of trying to hire someone, just to say, 'Ha ha. Fooled you. There's no job here.' It makes no sense."

"I don't know, but I don't think that's the right question. The question is: why does someone want you to go to Alaska? That's the only thing that we know for sure this process will achieve."

Why, indeed. If, for the sake of argument, this job really was some kind of

elaborate plot, then in four months of applications, she hadn't received so much as one real response. Maybe, she thought in the blackest possible humor, she should take Nat up on his offer to put in a word for her.

The silence grew.

"*Mí vida,*" Oziel said, almost in a whisper, "I can't stand to see you like this, but I can't do anything about it. Will it help anything if I say I'll get a real job, like you want me to?"

She snapped her head to the side and stared at him instead of the display for the first time since she'd sat down. What in God's name ...? He wasn't supposed to do it for her. He was supposed to do it for himself. But even so It would be a start, it would be

But why did he look heartbroken? He wasn't supposed to look heartbroken. The idea was for him to be fired up about new challenges, not to be crushed.

"It's not supposed to be depressing, Oziel. Why are you looking like that?"

For a moment his eyes could have been pools of black tar for all the expression in them. He felt remote and strange.

"You really don't know?"

She could see him read the ignorance in her eyes and slowly look back at the screen, without really seeing it. He took an impossibly long breath, and she felt herself breathe again too.

Finally, he asked,

"How do you think it feels not to be good enough?"

"No!" she protested. "I never said that!"

"No? I have this bad dream that one day you'll find out I'm from the barrio and I never got past high school."

"No," she said again, but it made no difference. He still looked like everyone he loved was lost.

She certainly did not want this. It wasn't as if she didn't have plenty of trouble herself with all these damn jobs telling her she was worthless. She didn't want to pass it on.

She just wanted him to do something more than a menial job all his life. She wasn't asking him to be a postdoc. Putting it another way, she supposed she wanted him to have a real job.

Shades of her mother flitted through her mind talking about "real jobs." She cringed. It was always something like doctor, lawyer, or CPA, something with no need to choose between high pay and high status. That was not what she meant.

Was it?

"I don't know. I don't know what I want. Definitely not you thinking you're not good enough."

If her thoughts had insulted him so badly, maybe it was time to realign her thinking.

What, exactly, was wrong with day care? The pay was low. It had no status. But he brought home a paycheck that was carrying both of them right now. It

hurt nobody.

However, it was weird mentioning it to her friends.

He said something again after a long time, mired in slow motion.

“What you want is someone you can be proud of.”

Well, yes, that was a politer way of saying she didn't want to feel weird mentioning it to her friends. Or to idiots like Nat. As if he mattered.

Oziel had glowed with pride about her when they visited his family. It made her feel damn good. How would she have felt if he'd been apologetic instead? After all, he'd brought home an ignorant gringa, with almost no skills of any use in his world.

Anyone could be measured against something they weren't and then come up short.

Anyone.

She bent her head down as she sat next to him. Even if he stopped looking at the computer, he would see only a mass of messy brown hair.

“I'm sorry, Zio,” she said in a small voice.

“Hmm?” he asked absently, sunk in his own thoughts.

What the hell did she have not to be proud of? He was solid gold in any crisis. He was loyal beyond belief. He just did not do “men's” work. Talk about cultural baggage. Small wonder he was slow from sadness.

“Oh, Jesus,” she said and leaned her head on her hands, elbows propped on her knees.

“What?” he asked, sounding worried.

“I'm sorry, Zio. I'm sorry. Forget it.”

“Forget what? Being proud?”

“No.” She felt a faint smile appearing and looked up. “The business about jobs and making something of yourself and all the rest of the BS.”

“You don't care if I have a real job?”

“You do have a real job, love. I'm being stupid beyond words. Worrying about what people think. And, worse, about what they might think. I'm —” she took a deep breath, “The real problem is it's what *I* think. But I hope I just understood what bullshit it is. Forget the whole thing.”

He moved toward her, no longer slow.

“You mean it?” He reached to brush his fingers over her cheek.

She nodded. Everything was in sharper focus and brighter colors, as if seeing one truth had unlocked the deeper meaning of everything around her.

He wrapped his arms around her in a hug as big as he was, and lifted her right off her chair and onto his lap. Warmth spread through her all the way to her toes and the top of her head. He murmured every endearment in the Spanish language into her ear.

“And the next time I come up with something braindead, will you tell me to go soak my head?” she said, interrupting him.

“Remember?” he said, his breath tickling her ear. “I tried.”

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Later, they sat munching companionably on an evening snack since dinner hadn't done much for either of them. She remarked,

"You know, you're right that the Alaska job has too many strange little things all at once. I mean, any one of them, by itself, I could discount. Even the spider could have been planted on their server without their knowledge. But all together ... it really is weird. I've been trying hard not to see it."

"*Ey, bueno*. I mean, it's good that you see it, not that there's something strange." Then he added quickly, "Remember, it's no reflection on you."

"It no longer feels like it is, for some reason. Somehow, it doesn't matter so much anymore whether I get a good job or not. I've been screwing myself up, worrying about it, but, really, I can go out and find a tech job in an hour. So what's to worry about?"

Oziel just shook his head.

"It always looked to me like there was nothing to worry about, *mí cielo*. So you'll cancel the trip?"

"Oh, I can't do that," she protested. "But I really will look them over carefully, and I'll be sure to avoid situations that look the least bit iffy."

He shook his head again and said nothing at all.

Chapter 6

Corinna had never been to Anchorage and as she stepped outside the terminal building, she began thinking that maybe she should have left it that way. At five pm it was dark and damp, with a sinus-swelling cold that hurt enough to take her mind right off trying to make a good impression on the tall woman who had come out to meet her.

The tall woman's manner was cold, but her words were friendly.

"Believe me, the secret is long underwear. If you've got your long johns on, you're okay, if you don't, you're like that." She nodded toward Corinna as a prime specimen of long-john-less humanity.

Dr. Susannah Medlar took the elevator to the roof of the parking garage and they stepped back out into the freezing, driving fog. Corinna had always thought of fogs as soft, gentle things. A flitter beeped at Medlar's remote, and two gull-wing doors opened on a sleek machine.

"I guess with the distances here," said Corinna, "the company has to have a flitter, but that's quite an impressive model."

"That's not the company's. That's mine. Something tells me you're going to like the pay scales in industry."

Corinna relaxed, grateful for the heat coming out of the vents, and wondered how long it would take to get used to having real money. One day? Maybe two. Of course, with Oziel and his family in the picture, a lot of the money would wind up in Venezuela rather than at the flitter dealer's. Even nicer than a flitter might be visiting Caracas and seeing them all gradually migrating to real houses in good neighborhoods.

However, none of that was going to happen if she didn't do well enough in the interview to be offered the job. Nor if the company itself looked like a front once she saw it up close.

She didn't sleep much that night, at first because she forced herself to stay awake despite jet lag to review her interview materials. Then, after a mere four hours of sleep, when it would have been morning in New York, she woke up to a strange glow in the room. The street must be on fire. She leaped out of bed, partly awake and entirely bewildered ... and then stayed transfixed at the window till six in the morning. The skies had cleared of clouds and filled with dancing green, yellow, and red northern lights. She even opened the window, oblivious now to the cold, and could have sworn she heard an unearthly

whispering sound.

Like the barrio, the north was easier to appreciate from a sheltered environment.

The senior scientist who came to pick her up in the morning seemed entirely normal, except that he too had a personal flutter. He flew straight and soberly to the AnchorGene building. The company itself looked exactly like any other biotech startup she'd seen: one harried receptionist, numerous techs, and a series of scientists trying to make sure you didn't know more than they did. Whatever was going on here, it wasn't a Mafia front. Corinna felt herself start to relax.

The interview proceeded as these things always do, with everyone being improbably polite and complimentary, especially Corinna. She gave a presentation on signal transduction in hypothalamic dendrites, obviously losing most of her audience before she was five minutes into it. This was not necessarily a bad thing, since the essence of a priesthood, scientific or otherwise, was to hint at comprehension but not to provide it.

Apparently, it was a good thing, because everyone seemed to be very impressed with her. If she had to guess, they'd already decided they wanted her for this job and it didn't matter what she said at this point. Her impression was confirmed when she asked the company's president, Dr. Bradley, how many people were being interviewed for the position and he hesitated before saying that they had several candidates, but that it was company policy to start with the first choice and end the process when a new hire had been identified. It sounded like he'd invented the policy on the spot and the concept of interviewing more than one candidate was new to him. Maybe that was the way they did things in industry, but she doubted it.

She talked with a genteel mob of her potential colleagues over lunch and found that everyone, to a man or woman, worked on issues related to salmon or their associated bacteria. Linda, with her background in microbial ecology, would have been a much closer fit for the company, if not the job. However, although Corinna would be working in isolation until she'd hired a few colleagues, everybody seemed quite happy with the new direction she would represent. Well, if a company did expand its scope, she supposed they had to start somewhere. Junior scientists weren't usually where they started, though.

After lunch, the president of the company himself showed her around the lab space allotted to the neurotransmitter work. There were two large rooms with the hastily cleared, freshly painted look of a stage set in the process of a scene change. There was certainly enough space to build quite an empire: to hire another upper level scientist, a flock of postdocs, and a raft of techs. She could easily imagine projects to set them to work on. And the president said the company was going to provide enough of a budget to do that.

The labs were well equipped with things that could be rolled in on castors: ultracold freezers, ultracentrifuges, DNA readers – all the big expensive things you normally had to sell your soul and both kidneys to get. However, built-in

equipment, like an essential laminar flow hood, was oddly lacking. Corinna wondered how the older hands felt about all the best equipment being given to someone else.

“Did this equipment come from other labs in the company?” she asked.

“Yes, but most of it is still under warranty,” he hastened to assure her, “because it’s still so new. There won’t be any problems with it.”

“That’s good to know,” she said, “but it’s not my main concern. Does this affect the equipment needs of the rest of the scientific staff?”

“Equipment needs? Oh, no, I don’t think so.” It seemed to be a completely new concept for Dr. Bradley.

Maybe they planned on rolling all the nice machines back to their rightful owners once the new hire was stuck here.

In the second lab room, a technician was putting away bags of pipette tips and making labels for cabinet doors. Now there, thought Corinna, would be an interesting person to talk to about what was going on here. She wondered if there was any way she could shake off her presidential chaperone long enough to do it.

As she followed him into the lab, around an island of cabinets and workspaces, she slid her slim laptop bag down beside one of the cabinets.

“Oh, dear,” she exclaimed. “I seem to have left my laptop in the conference room.” She looked carefully among the other two cases she carried, as if she could have misplaced it on her shoulder. “I’m not sure I could find my way back there.”

“I’ll page someone,” said Bradley, apparently reluctant to let Corinna out of his sight.

However, everyone else was in other parts of the building at that point, and Bradley must have felt it would look funny if he didn’t simply go and get it.

“I’ll be right back,” he said.

“Hi,” said Corinna to the tech with a smile. The woman seemed surprised to be spoken to. “So, how long has this new neurotransmitter program been in the works at the company?”

The tech looked around at the fresh paint with a meaningful glance, and Corinna’s smile acquired an extra glint as she decided she liked the woman’s attitude.

“Obviously,” said the tech, “I don’t know what goes on in the back rooms, but about a month ago Bradley shows up saying, ‘clear the decks, we’re starting a new lab.’ My personal theory is one of the bosses saw something on a talk show and decided there was money in it.”

This tech was decidedly astute.

“What was being done in these labs before?”

“Mostly microbial symbionts of salmon, intestinal and external. They had a bunch of folks working on transgenic microbes that would live around the gills and prevent gill parasites in farmed fish, others that improved the gut flora, and so on.”

“That sounds like pretty important work, in terms of the company’s main business. What happened to it?”

“Well, Marlene quit, Robin was quartered on Susie Medlar, and Joey got shoved into a closet on the third floor. You know how it is.”

Corinna knew, except that she had always been the shovee, never the shover. And it made no sense that the company would be interfering with its main business in order to start a new project in which it had no experience. However, she thought she better return to neutral topics before Bradley came back, so she didn’t pursue it.

“Is the weather always this beastly here?” she asked.

“Beastly?” said the tech. “This is a fine day in Anchorage.”

Night had fallen by early afternoon, and she went out to dinner with Dr. Medlar and her husband in the dark. When that was over, Corinna could go off parade at last and retreat to her hotel room. Tomorrow would be the only fun part of the interview: a field trip had been scheduled to show her the sights. The other big moment, of course, would be the discussion of salary and whether she was taking the job.

She called New York, and although it was the middle of the night there, Oziel answered on the first beep. She felt herself go all warm at the sound of him, and wished, with an ache in her chest, that there was more of him with her than just his voice. She could have turned on the tiny image on the wrist-pad, but then he would have felt even further away. When had he become so important to her that she missed him after barely a day?

“So, how does it look?” he asked, before the feeling of the distance between them became all too clear.

“Except for the fact that it’s not at a recognized lab, the job is perfect. Except for the fact that the equipment was taken from someone else, who probably wants it back, everybody’s very friendly. Except for the fact that, if they hire me, the new senior neuroscientist is as junior as they come, they couldn’t have found a better person for the job. The charitable interpretation would be that they’re in the same position as me, having to start where they can.”

“So what does that mean, *mí Professora*? Are you thinking of taking it?”

“No. I would’ve been bowled over a couple of weeks ago, but now it just seems as fishy as hell. And I’m not saying that because they have salmon in every other lab.”

“Well, I guess you were right that there’s no connection to the *locos* killing the oceans. What do you think they’re up to?”

“They’re a start-up and they’re probably desperate for money most of the time. That’s probably why they were faking data a couple of years ago. They may have floated this job because it gives them a shot at major funding for a new program. Then, once they get the money, the program will evaporate, and me with it, I suspect. And then I’d have another job that didn’t pan out on my CV and really be history.”

“Wouldn’t they get in trouble with the funding agency?” Oziel sounded in-

credulous.

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you. But I’ve seen it time and time again. People put on a dog and pony show, and then make some transparent excuse about why there was no follow-through, and then the next time they apply for money, they get it again.”

He seemed to be speechless, and when he did speak, it was about something else.

“Well, if we’re not leaving here, what do you think about moving to a room? I met a guy on the ferry who rents a room not far from here, and the same house has a big room available that we could afford on my pay.”

A room? In some rooming house? Recommended by some guy on the ferry?

“Zio, is my mom being mean to you?”

She heard his amused, low chuckle that caught her heart.

“No, *mí Corita*. Your mother wouldn’t be surprised to see me walking on water, and your father doesn’t say much, but after work we sit and drink a beer in a very friendly way. That’s not the problem. It’s just that even though it’s fun to visit a palace, life is always easier in your own place.”

“Mm,” she said. She couldn’t argue with that, and it would be a relief not to fend off her mother’s questions about what she was doing with her life and when she was doing it. “My parents will probably get hurt if I move out after I’ve barely arrived.”

There was another low laugh.

“Yes, you don’t have my excuse.”

Now Corinna laughed too, for the first time that day, she realized. She couldn’t even picture herself talking to her mother about making love to Oziel.

“Well, if you’d rather rent the room, that’s fine, I guess. Is this place, you know, *okay*?”

“It’s not full of prostitutes or drug dealers, if that’s what you mean. It’s a bunch of working people.”

It occurred to her that he’d probably recognize the signs of not-okay much better than she would.

“And don’t worry about your parents,” he went on gently. “I’ll tell them it’s because I don’t want to wear my welcome out. That’ll work because it’s the truth.”

She chuckled again, “I have to admit, the truth did work last time.”

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The first order of business on the next day was a field trip to fly by Denali and visit Lake Clark National Park and its 3000 meter volcano. It was the sort of thing people often did at the end of interviews, to show candidates what

an exciting place they could live in, and Corinna had been looking forward to it as a reward for the hard work of trying to impress too many people for a day. After that, there was the discussion about salary, when she'd be telling Bradley she wasn't taking the job. She wasn't looking forward to that at all. It'd be so much easier to do by writing.

"We'll meet again at two to talk," said Dr. Bradley, "which should give us plenty of time to discuss things before you need to leave for your flight at five thirty. It's dark by three thirty in any case, so it's hard to lose track of time."

Corinna smiled, but thought that Oziel definitely had a point about life at the North Pole. She followed Jason Svalman, the company's professional field technician, who was already carrying two snowsuits for them to the waiting flitter.

"Suits and all," she shook her head with a grin. "It makes me feel like I must have teleported back to Mars."

"It's cold," he said, "but it's not too bad."

Jason was a fit-looking thirty year-old and as a professional field worker, there presumably couldn't be a better guide for this trip. However, he seemed to feel that being strong and silent went with the job, and if Corinna's wanted conversation, she could make it herself. Two hours of not knowing what to say might become very long.

He handed her a suit to stow in a pouch behind the seat. Before she gave it any thought, out of sheer Mars-based habit, she started checking the suit as if it was the only thing that would keep her alive out on the surface. There wasn't really anything to check, and when her mind caught up and noticed her pulling at the seams, she started grinning at herself. Just then a ripping sound filled the cabin and the right side panel gave way at the armpit.

"Oops," she said. "I think I, uh, managed to tear the suit. Um. Sorry." Jeez, she was thinking, the whole company was probably going to be laughing for weeks about the New York doofus who couldn't even stow a suit without ruining it.

Jason's stoicism succumbed briefly to a surprised look. He took the thing back from her.

"I'll get you another one. Wait here."

He started talking into his wristpad as he marched over to a room off the main flitter garage. She heard him say, "Oh yeah?" rather loudly.

He must be chewing out whoever maintained the suits. He disappeared into the room, but almost immediately stuck his head back out, and looked at Corinna carefully.

"A women's medium usually fits," she called out to him. He nodded and disappeared again. That was an advantage to being an average height like 177, or five foot nine inches by the old reckoning. Space suits, and now snowsuits, were easy to find. Jason, meanwhile, was having quite a conversation on his wristpad, but when he came out he was more dour than ever.

She took the new suit from him and started to climb into the flitter.

“We’re not taking that one,” he said without explanation. “We’re going in my usual one.”

His tone did not invite questions, and Corinna climbed into a thing covered in mud and dents and scratches. Inside it smelled of fish and old, damp clothes. Behind the two seats it was full of ropes, pickaxes, netting, bags, and formless lumps Corinna decided not to ask about. She began wondering if, maybe, going on the field trip was a mistake. Then she glanced over at Jason Svalman and pulled herself together. He seemed an unlikely murderer, and all of Alaska would know she’d last been seen with him.

Of course, if she was dead, knowing he’d be caught would not be much comfort. However, the flitter had lifted off and it was too late to dither now.

The fog over Anchorage was only a few hundred meters thick and as soon as they lifted above it and the surrounding hills, her eyes grew wide.

“Wow,” she breathed.

White mountains rimmed the northern horizon, with Denali rising above its neighbors even from over two hundred kilometers away. The flitter, for all its dents and smells, was uncommonly fast and closed the distance quickly. The vast, impeccably white mountain filled the world and then Corinna abruptly forgot to admire it as the flitter dove and left her stomach somewhere kilometers behind them.

Was he trying to get them killed?

Oziel had been right, as usual.

Jason pulled out of the dive smoothly, zoomed past a dizzying wall of light blue ice at the end of a glacier, crested the top, and levelled out a few meters above the cracked surface of the glacier itself, going about four hundred kph.

Corinna slowly let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. Was he doing this to see if she would scream? He was calmly studying the terrain and piloting without even looking at the controls. Apparently, this was his normal flying style.

Jee-sus.

The good news was that maybe Oziel had been wrong, after all. She concentrated on the scenery the size of God.

Jason banked away from the mountain and headed back toward the coast and the line of deep, dark green forest where the not-frozen ocean kept the snow at bay. She checked her wristpad. The whole heartstopping flight had taken less than forty minutes.

“You could just about take your lunch breaks on Denali, couldn’t you?”

“Need a fast flitter,” he said. “But sure. You could.”

The volcanoes by the coast were no less breathtaking in their own way than Denali, but Jason’s flying didn’t give her much time to appreciate them. All too soon, he landed the flitter on a glacier between alpine slopes. The view went on forever, with mountains on one side and fog hugging the sea and coast on the other, shrouding the bay and Anchorage itself from view. She’d seen pictures like this before, but even in 3D, nothing came close to capturing

the immensity of the space.

Sunlight glinted blindingly off endless snow, and filtered down into crevasses of the glacier the two of them stood on, turning the ice deepening shades of blue, from pale, perfect turquoise near the surface to a pure, electric cobalt it would be a privilege to drown in.

Figuratively speaking, it would be a privilege. If she was really stuck in a crevasse, the colors might become hard to appreciate.

"I've never seen anything so beautiful," she said, "but even if you stay out of the crevasses, how long would it take an unprotected person to freeze out here?"

"Depends how well they can stand cold."

"So what's the likely range?"

"Somebody big and fat who was acclimatized, maybe an hour. Somebody like you – considering the wind chill – you'd probably lose consciousness in fifteen-twenty minutes, be dead in about an hour."

The prospect didn't seem to affect him any more than anything else did, but neither had he suggested she explore a crevasse or made any moves that were remotely suspicious.

When they returned, Bradley wasn't waiting for Corinna even though it was two o'clock. Jason showed her to the president's office.

Dr. Bradley seemed surprised to see her, as if his thoughts had been miles away. Not only was the company strange, the president was terminally absent-minded.

"Ah. You're back," he said.

"Yes," said Corinna. "We're back."

"Did you enjoy the trip?"

"Immensely. Jason's an excellent pilot."

Dr. Bradley made an incredulous noise at this no doubt atypical assessment.

Once she and the president got down to business, he offered her the position, as she'd expected he would. The salary he offered was, as she had also guessed, enormous. It was four times her highest salary as a postdoc. She couldn't help regretting how nice that would be if it wasn't the bait around some obscure hook.

However, since it had to be bait, she made polite noises about what an impressive setup they had, and said that unfortunately, she would be unable to take advantage of it. She had, she said, other plans.

Dr. Bradley seemed even more distressed than she'd expected at her response. He tried to change her mind. At first he dangled potential inducements before her. When those didn't work, he suggested actual ones. Before she could repeat her refusal, he added,

"We'd all very much hoped you would take it. Please do stay another day, so I and the senior staff have some time to discuss options that might make a difference to you."

Corinna carefully hid her surprise. She'd love to know the inside story of

what was going on here.

“That’s very kind of you, but I really don’t think my decision would change, and I’d be reluctant to waste your time.” And waste mine, she thought.

However, Bradley kept asking until refusing to stay would have looked rude. As soon as she agreed, he changed her flight on his wristpad, right then and there, before she could object. He was starting to give her the same sticky, greaseball feeling that she had from unwanted males.

After that, she decided she’d had enough. She wasn’t taking the job under any circumstances, and there was no reason to put herself through another day of empty formalities. She’d be sending him a refusal in writing after all. Once she was safely back in her hotel, she changed her flight back to the one at 5:30, packed, called a taxi, and left. As it pulled away from the curb, she saw someone jump out of another car and look at hers. Maybe it was someone who’d been waiting for a friend to arrive in a taxi.

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Her clipper landed in Newark after eleven at night, but Oziel was standing at the end of the security concourse, waiting for her. She managed to restrain herself from running past all the sensors and toward him. The airport police just wouldn’t understand.

With their arms around each other, her face pressed to the blue cotton sweatshirt he was wearing, breathing in his wonderful scent, it took her a while to register that he wasn’t murmuring how glad he was to see her.

“Oh, *mí Corita*, thank God,” he was saying.

“Huh?” she said, moving back far enough to look at him. “You sound like you were worried I was going to run off with the field tech and never come back.”

He shook his head with a smile.

“I finally broke into their server a couple of hours ago,” he said quietly in her ear, to avoid being overheard, as they walked toward the train to take them home. “It’s not something I could call you about and discuss over an in-flight connection.”

“So they’re even fishier than they looked?”

“That whole job is a fake. It’s something they invented as a favor to someone.”

“What! That’s totally bizarre. Why did they do it?”

He shook his head to show he didn’t know.

“It couldn’t be anything good, so I started worrying. The airline swore you were on the clipper, but until I saw you,” his grip tightened around her shoulders, “I worried. I’ll show you all the printouts when we get home.”

Home was now a strange rooming house, but it was nice not to have to

worry about waking anyone up when they wandered in some time after midnight. As a matter of fact, half the tenants seemed to be in the kitchen, eating dinner in the small hours. It reminded Corinna of Caracas. When she asked Oziel about it, he said there were about ten different nationalities living there: Mexicans, Dominicans, Colombians and Cubans, Thais, Indians, and Turks, legal and probably otherwise. The house rambled over three floors, and was only ten minutes further away from the ferry than her parents' place, around the base of the same hill instead of near the summit. The house had been modified as a bed and breakfast in the distant past, when the now seedy area had live trees and well-dressed people.

When Oziel opened the door to their second-floor room, her first impression was of pinkness. No doubt, in the long-lost B&B days, this had been one of the romantically-themed suites. Records of more recent tenants were evident in all the holes they'd made in the off-pink walls. The ceiling was wonderfully high and the windows huge. The attached bathroom had yellow water stains under the taps, and the heat pipes knocked and belonged in the Smithsonian. She felt herself relax as soon as she'd hung her clothes in the closet. It was, as Oziel had said, always easier in your own place.

After showering and getting ready to go to sleep, she sat on the mattress that he'd borrowed from her parents and leaned against the wall, waiting for him to finish brushing his teeth. He'd managed to pick up a table and four chairs somewhere, and had a serviceable white sheet as a table cloth. There was an open cardboard box on its side, doubling as a bookshelf for several library books. And a clunky used computer had appeared from somewhere, perhaps from the same thrift store as the table and chairs. He could make himself at home anywhere, using just about anything.

When he came out of the bathroom, they didn't start talking about printouts immediately. They'd missed each other too much for that. The printouts, when they got to them, were screen shots of email messages and budget pages. He'd flagged lines in the emails that showed how the neurotransmitter project sprang into being literally overnight. The president refused to answer questions from senior scientists about it, or about the true extent of company funds diverted from real, paying work.

The strangest thing was the rough draft of a message which had been erased but not overwritten. Among other things, it said, *Will establish position as per your message. You mentioned your familiarity with our business, but of course that goes both ways, so I'm assuming you understand the financial drain this will cause and you will compensate. I want to emphasize that although I'll certainly do everything I can, I cannot guarantee success. It will be very hard to make this plausible if the person involved has any smarts at all.*

Corinna looked at that last sentence a long time. Without a guy who'd barely finished high school, she would have walked right into this job. Luckily, even though she had no smarts, they'd reckoned without his.

"So who's this to?" she asked.

"I don't know. I couldn't find the actual email anywhere. Bradley was logged in when the file was written. It must be a rough draft of a message he was having trouble writing. The email probably used strong encryption, and I haven't had enough time to be sure of finding every encrypted file."

"Sounds like there was some blackmail involved. I mean, isn't he saying, 'You may know all about us, so we have to do this, but we know all about you, too. So you better keep us happy.'"

Oziel nodded, but also shrugged.

"Nothing anywhere that would explain *why*."

"Yeah. If this is the people behind the diatom business, what does it accomplish to strand me in a job at the North Pole that will look bad on my cv?"

"Speaking of a job that looks bad, what's this about?" He leafed through the sheets of printouts, and pulled out one trying to cling electrostatically to a budget page.

It was an official resignation message, digital signature and all, from Jason Svalman which turned up in the search results because it mentioned her name. "After that Mansur business," it said, "I quit. I don't get paid enough for that kind of thing."

She stared at the sheet. The time stamp was 2:30, almost immediately after he left her at the president's office. Mansur business? What Mansur business? She noticed Oziel looking at her while she studied the printout.

"I was wondering what you did to him," he said.

"I didn't do anything to him! He's the guy who took me on that field trip I told you about. One of these strong, silent types. We hardly exchanged fifty words." She added with emphasis, "And all fifty were a model of politeness."

"New York politeness?" he asked with a smile.

What had she done to annoy the fellow so much that he resigned? She'd torn the snowsuit and he'd frowned, but surely nobody chucked a job over bad tailoring. He'd been silent to the point of dourness when they stood on the glacier, the freezing wind whistling around their ears, but she was sure that was just the way he was. That wind would have forced her to stay inside the flitter if she'd had nothing but a bad snowsuit, but she couldn't see why that would annoy him enough to quit.

If there had been no flitter.... Jason's piloting certainly pushed the machine to the limit, and one in less than perfect condition might have....

Her eyes grew wide as she remembered him saying, with that odd abruptness, "we're not taking" the sleek company flitter.

"What?" asked Oziel.

"You were right all along," she whispered. "During the fake interview, I was supposed to get killed."

"*Dios.*"

"The 'Mansur business' must refer to the fact that they didn't care if Jason went down as collateral damage. They were counting on his piloting style to overstress a bad flitter. I can see why he thinks they don't pay him enough."

“What in the name of ...? What happened?”

She explained the little things that had suddenly added up.

“That snowsuit must have made him suspicious. They probably don’t usually fall apart like that. He called somebody about it, and he obviously didn’t like what he heard.... You’d think he would have warned me, though ... except, of course, he had no proof and he doesn’t know me. For all he knew, I’d tell everyone he was nuts.... And when they didn’t get me on the field trip, they were obviously setting up for a second attempt, except I left.”

“*Dios santo*,” Oziel muttered. “He saved your life. I wonder if there’s anything he needs that a street rat could give him.” After a pause, he added, “So they’ve moved on from murdering computers to murdering people. What’s next?”

Chapter 7

Corinna rode the subway toward West 72nd, clutching her laptop bag with the eight little nylon membranes tucked into a pocket, and gloated. Although she never said such things out loud, she couldn't help feeling she was brilliant. How many other people would have done so many things so right, one after the other, and found the answer, first crack out of the box? Unfortunately, it was an ominous answer, and it meant she had to go to the Gulf coast as soon as possible to collect samples.

However, first she was stopping off where Oziel worked on her way home. She'd never done that before, even though it was on the way, and she realized she'd avoided the place without even admitting it to herself. It was amazing how stupid you could be when you tried.

Once he got off work, they'd ride home together and she'd tell him all about the diatoms. He might not get the fine points, but he'd get the big picture better and faster than anybody.

Of course, when he saw what was happening, he was going to tell her to wash her hands of it and give the whole thing to the Genetic Protection Agency. They were the ones who should have been after it to begin with. That was precisely the problem. The data she gave them would ferment on some bureaucrat's desk until catastrophe forced frantic activity which would be useless at that point. Meanwhile, They, whoever they were, would continue trying to silence her. Their first murder attempt had looked so innocent, it had fooled even her, and she'd been the target. The police would laugh at her if she took the string of coincidences and tried to say they were evidence of her need for protection. However, if she found a perfect match to, say, a Xenogen product, she could present the authorities with a neat package and they would have to look into it.

Oziel was almost ready to leave when she arrived, and there were a couple of parents there picking kids up or dropping them off, Corinna wasn't sure which. She knew Melanie's sometimes had evening shifts to accommodate parents with important functions to attend. There was no other kind at their level.

One of these parents was a striking, flawlessly dressed woman in a sweeping, broad-brimmed black hat and ermine scarf.

"Wow," Corinna muttered to Oziel. She knelt next to him on the floor

where he was rendering all due assistance to a young girl and her Lego set.

"Mmm," he murmured back.

"Are they all like that here?"

"Many. That's why Señora Smithers pays Mars rates."

Changing the subject, she showed him a postcard.

"Here. I thought you might want to sign this before I send it."

It was addressed to Quintón. Oziel turned it over, looked at her, looked back at it.

"Well," she explained, "we never called to say goodbye or anything, and then we just disappeared. And life in prison has got to be pretty depressing."

"*Mí cielo*, I think Quintón might be happier if I keep out of it. Send it as it is." He returned the card and gave her hand a small caress with large meaning.

"He's not your fault, you know," she said very quietly, although she had the impression the Lego girl was listening avidly to this genuine grown-up talk while she snapped blue blocks to white blocks.

"Quintón? Oh, he's my fault, for certain. He started hanging around crooks when he was seven."

Corinna thought a second.

"And you were seventeen? You mean he was following in big brother's footsteps?"

Oziel nodded.

"Well, he didn't keep following. If all it took was a single push, I don't think you were the only person to give him one. The barrio isn't a sheltered environment."

He smiled crookedly, and without much conviction said,

"I suppose."

"Hello-o, Oziel." It was the lady with the hat, advancing on him. "So nice to see you again. Where've you been?"

"I've been here, ma'am, when it's my shift."

She called her son over. "Come on, Gerry. Mommy hasn't got all day." Then, speaking to Oziel again, "When is your shift?"

"It varies, ma'am."

Two little boys went racing past, one chasing the other. Oziel reached out one long arm, snagged the chaser while barely looking, and brought him to an elegant stop in front of the lady with the hat.

"When your mother calls you, Gerry," he said in a serious voice, as if this was an important point, "you answer. Now, give it a try."

Such was the force of Oziel's personality that the little boy didn't race off again immediately, although neither did he say anything polite to his mom.

"You know, Gerry really needs tutoring in those wonderful manners. I have a nice little place in the Finger Lakes – Oooh, hi dear!" The hat lady spotted someone significant across the room and exchanged talk that was small in all but volume. The whole room got to hear how well her business was doing.

We should all be so lucky, said the man she was talking to, obviously unwilling to take her boasting without fighting back. Didn't her main competitor have that bad fire and drop out of the running? Luck, she said, turning up the volume, had nothing to do with it.

"Jeez," Corinna teased Oziel in a whisper. "There you are worrying about me and fleabag postdocs, while you've got gorgeous billionaires festooned all over you."

He made a wry face, but said nothing.

"So, anyway, as I was saying," the hat lady turned back to Oziel, "I know he'd benefit from more one-on-one." She appeared to become aware of Corinna's existence for the first time, probably because Corinna didn't seem to be taking the hint and disappearing.

"Oh, hi, dear. You new here?"

"Mr. García! The blue one won't fit!"

Oziel turned to help the child with the recalcitrant piece, young Gerry used the opportunity to race away, and Corinna sat back on her heels and remembered just in time that smart remarks on her part would not help Oziel.

"New in the sense that this is the first time I've visited," she said mildly. "I don't work here."

"Oh? You're signing up your child here?" She looked dubiously at the cut of Corinna's jumpsuit. If Minders began accepting the sartorially challenged, her look said, she would be reconsidering her options for Hat Jr.

Corinna was not sure why the lady was grilling her and how far she had to go to humor her. Oziel rescued Corinna.

"She is visiting me, Ms. Bloom. Dr. Corinna Mansur, Ms. Myra Bloom."

Corinna was pretty sure she knew why he insisted on the "Doctor." There was something about the woman's shoes, black with white piping to match the perfect skirt, that had that effect.

"Oh." This iteration of the woman's favorite word suggested that Corinna was a puzzle. "And what do you do?" *If anything*, seemed to be the subtext.

Corinna wondered whether the lady disliked her, specifically, for some reason, or if she disliked all other women within striking distance of Oziel.

"I'm currently unemployed, but my field is molecular biology. How about you?" It was time for the questions to become bi-directional.

"I run BPPD."

The well-dressed woman did not explain. It probably wasn't Bamboozled Pedestrians Ponder Delinquency. Perhaps it was Bodmin Palpates Parrots Deftly. She was obviously going to insist on an admission of ignorance concerning this household acronym.

"And that means?" Corinna asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry. People are usually familiar with the name. It's one of the largest advertising and public relations agencies in the US. In the world, really. Bloom, Purvis, Piloux, and Droitwich."

What did you say to a statement like that? "How nice"? Happily, Corinna

did not have to figure it out because Ms. Bloom, having begun to hold forth on her favorite topic, was glad to continue.

"We have over three hundred accounts. Ooh, hi Fernie! Over here!" The impeccable Bloom waved to someone she could see through a door. "We just expanded our campaign for Lioxx on the benefits of biotechnology."

"And what," asked Corinna stoically, "is liox?" Lithium oxygen could be used as a rocket fuel, she thought, and she was pretty sure there was an old battery technology that used it. What that had to do with biotech wasn't clear, but maybe this woman felt that science was science.

"Oh, you don't know about them? You're in molecular biology, didn't you say? They're one of the most up-and-coming startups in biotech. They're giving Xenogen a run for their money."

"How nice," said Corinna, beginning to lose more patience than she had. Did Oziel have to put up with this rot every day? "I guess as a startup they have to do lots of publicity because nobody knows who they are."

"Oh, no. They're a big name in a lot of crops."

No wonder she'd never heard of it. Her specialty was limbic neurotransmitters, not farm products.

"Rice, wheat, potatoes, you name it," the woman was continuing. "Lots of really important food crops. But they primarily do cutting edge research. Lots of other companies, even Xenogen, license their genes. They're internationally significant, too, with their pest-resistance and vitamin-production gene families. And they help U. S. companies protect their patents overseas."

She sounded like she was working on her next ad blurb. But ... rice? Which grows in flooded paddies. And protecting patents? Protection meant terminators, which destroyed unauthorized copies ... or any other organism the terminator genes jumped to.

Then the woman addressed as "Fernie" came in and it became clear why The Hat Lady had lectured on Lioxx.

"Dr. Fernalda Pope is CEO of Lioxx," said Bloom importantly.

Corinna felt as though the point being made was that she might have a useless diploma in a drawer, but Myra Bloom had connections.

And such connections. Fernalda Pope exuded wealth, from her priceless dove-grey cashmere wrap to her spotless white, silk-covered shoes. Her big dark eyes, her smooth café au lait skin, her beautiful, sculptured features, all expressed pleasure, but what, exactly, gave her pleasure was not clear. Corinna tried to hope she'd stumbled into a networking opportunity in the very last place she would have expected it.

"Ms. Bloom has been telling me good things about your company," said Corinna.

"Has she," said Dr. Pope, as if she, too, was making conversation. Yet it wasn't a question, and she radiated about as much warmth as a waxwork.

If Corinna had to guess, it sounded like Pope planned to ask Bloom why she was wasting her time with insignificant squirts.

"I was wondering what the connection was between biotech and rocket fuel," Corinna persevered.

"Excuse me?" said Pope, a faint smudge of real bewilderment appearing in her polished manner.

"Lithium oxides just seem unusual in that context."

"What—? Oh, I see. No, the name doesn't mean anything specific. It's computer-generated."

"It's spelled L-i-o-x-x," added Myra Bloom, apparently trying to make sure Corinna grasped the concept.

Corinna decided to show the woman that she had, especially since nothing about Pope suggested she planned on begging Corinna to join her company.

"Computer generated," said Corinna, sounding interested. "By your firm?"

"Yes," said Ms. Bloom. "BPPD has a very exclusive naming service."

"I can imagine. Just as there aren't many places that can produce truly random numbers."

Bloom, PR maven, must not have understood this. However, Fernalda Pope, scientist, caught the implication, judging by the way her polished surface briefly suggested the potential of plastic explosive.

"The absence of meaning," said Pope, "isn't the point."

"It just helps, is that it?" said Corinna pleasantly. "Well, I'm sure BPPD has enough experience in that field to do whatever is necessary."

Ms. Bloom seemed to have realized at last that she was being insulted, although her preoccupied look said she hadn't worked out how yet.

"Well, Fernie, Dr. Mansur may not need to work, but we do. If we miss our appointment, it could take weeks to set up another one, because Jim's not an easy man to reach. And then our next contract may be a lot less lucky than we'd like." She glanced around and looked through Corinna. "Come on, Gerry." This time, Gerry came on. "Nana's going to be waiting to take you to your interview. And tuck in your shirt. What have I told you about looking sharp?"

As they moved toward the door, Corinna said,

"Nice meeting you, Ms. Bloom," following the standard protocol in the teeth of the facts. "And you, Dr. Pope," she nodded to her.

"Likewise, Dr. Mansur," answered the CEO of Lioxx.

As Corinna watched the two superbly dressed women leave the room, she remembered that she hadn't introduced herself. Why did Lioxx's CEO have her memorized? Then she remembered that Myra Bloom had mentioned her name. That must have been it. Corinna wasn't sure why she found the thought of being recognized by Fernalda Pope unsettling.

Corinna noticed Oziel observing her from where he sat on the floor.

"Was that New York politeness?" he asked too quietly for anyone else to hear.

She sat down next to him.

"Well, it was New York. Maybe not so polite. Have I made trouble for you?"

"I doubt it. The biotech woman doesn't have any kids here, and the other

one is, as you say, festooned all over me, so she probably won't complain about me for what you say."

The little girl came back to put away her last armload of Legos, and Corinna and Oziel were soon out in the sunny street.

"What did Ms. BPPD mean about an interview?" Corinna asked, as she thought back on her unpleasant conversation. "That kid's barely out of diapers."

"The parents *apply* to get their kids into that nursery school. Then they apply for kindergarten. Those people are crazy." He threaded his fingers through hers and smiled at her.

"Sheesh. Do you have to deal with people like The Hat Lady a lot?"

"More here than elsewhere. Sometimes I miss those scientists on Mars who seemed to forget they even had kids half the time."

"You don't have to do this, you know. No, no, wait," she held up her free hand to stall him when she saw his brows draw down. "I'm not starting again. Really I'm not." He stopped frowning. "I'm not trying to tell you to do something or not do something. I'm just saying you don't have to put up with loud-mouthed bitches if you don't want to. Just make sure that whatever you're doing for money is also something you'd do for love."

They reached the entrance to the subway and he stopped before they descended. After a silence, he said,

"You mean don't start from what's possible? Dream about anything?"

She nodded.

He thought some more.

"We don't really look at it that way. It's a waste of time thinking of things you can never have. But with tens of thousands of dollars, I guess life has changed." His eyes were fixed on something so far away, it might take light years to follow. "It would be ... different ... to imagine doing what I want instead of what I can, *mí cielo*."

The subway train finally arrived, and, since rush hour had yet to start, they found seats.

"Okay," she said with suppressed excitement, pulling the little membranes out of her black bag and laying them on top of it. "This is what you've got to see."

He had just opened his mouth to say something, but he closed it again and smiled at her excitement.

Each membrane was about the size of her hand and displayed rashes of blue dots on a white background.

"Each of these is a grid of over 5000 gene probes. If a gene is active in the sample, it shows up as a blue dot and the brighter the dot, the more active it is."

"So you could tell if something was active when it shouldn't be?"

"Yes, exactly. And the really amazing thing is, the answer was so obvious on these you could see it with the naked eye. Look at this. This row of four mem-

branes is from the sick diatoms and *Chlorella* and these four are from a control group of healthy ones. Anything strike you about it?"

He looked at the membranes dubiously.

"Um, Corinna, it all just looks like modern art to me."

The train had been filling up, and a straphanger next to them eyed the membranes curiously. Corinna wasn't sure whether to proceed or not, but the curious woman left at the next stop.

"Look," Corinna continued. "For instance, this whole mass of dots is pretty much the same in both samples. Those are various genes associated with metabolism. But look at this bright little group in the lower left corner of all the sick ones which is totally absent in the healthy ones."

"Hm. Yes, you're right." He seemed surprised that meaning could emerge from something that looked like a blue disease.

She put the little membranes away.

"Once the computer was done analyzing, I didn't have to spend hours figuring out what the differences were. I tried that little group of dots first and, bingo. Turned out they were all associated with regulating salt intake into the cell. Well, that's interesting because if too much salt enters the cell, too much water follows it, and the cell bursts. That explained why the cells die, but, and this is the point, it can't be a natural process."

"Why not?" Then he said something that was lost in the tremendous rattling and squealing the train always did at this point, as it went around a steep, old-fashioned curve and a set of badly aligned rail junctions.

"Why not what?" she shouted

The train quieted down to its usual clanking.

"Why can't it be natural? Death seems like a pretty natural process to me."

"Yes, but not immediately. You have to live first, and have time to make lots more little algae to pass the trait on to. The problem with this is that it would kill the cell immediately and so it could never spread all over the ocean naturally. I searched for information on the DNA sequence itself, and it turns out that this type of thing is used as terminators by some seed companies."

"Did a search?" he repeated. "Was that a good idea? They're probably tracking searches like that."

She waved it away.

"Yeah, well, I had to find out what it meant, and I transferred the data to my laptop immediately, so I was only on for less than a minute during the search itself."

He still didn't look happy, but said nothing.

"Okay. The point is, the terminators are set to go off if the plant or animal produces eggs or sperm, that way the farmer can't propagate them and the companies' patents are protected. So what must have happened is that somebody's terminator has escaped into the environment. It can be passed on perfectly well during asexual reproduction, when the cell is simply dividing and producing exact copies of itself, but as soon as sexual reproduction is trig-

gered, the cells die.”

Oziel brow furrowed.

“I’m not sure I get it. At least judging by people, things are doing sex all the time, so how come they don’t just all die, like you said?”

“These algae aren’t like us. They can go through hundreds and thousands of cycles of asexual divisions. They’re usually only triggered to produce the equivalent of eggs and sperm by environmental stress of some kind. For instance, around now, the water gets colder in the Caribbean, which may be what caused some of the mass die-offs.”

The train pulled into the station at the foot of Manhattan, and they exited, climbed escalators, and found the ferry before Corinna continued.

She pulled out a printout and hung on to it as it flapped and rattled in the ocean breeze where they stood out on the deck. She propped it against the railing, and nearly lost it when the ferry let out its usual blast to let everyone know it was leaving.

“This is the real kicker.” She held the printout as flat as she could to show the map of the Gulf of Mexico with black dots all around it. “This is the distribution of reports of algal die-offs. This swath here is the usual Gulf dead zone, but most of these others are dead diatoms. It has to be a gene that escaped from something being grown somewhere in the north Gulf. It probably got into fresh water *Chlorella* first, moved to marine *Chlorella*, then transferred to diatoms, and God knows what else by now.”

“Transferred?” he said. “Like a disease?”

She folded the map up and stuffed it into a pocket.

“Yeah. DNA can hop from organism to organism in all sorts of ways. Usually, it’s viruses carrying little bits along as they move from host to host. There are ways to make it less transferable, but this particular terminator really does seem to move around like a disease.”

He looked appalled.

“This doesn’t make sense, Corita. People have been doing this stuff for years. Generations. You mean these bits of DNA are hopping everywhere, and we’re just lucky life hasn’t been wiped out so far? Don’t you scientists take care of these things?”

“There is a common misconception,” she said sourly, “that scientists know what they’re doing. In the early days, it really was just luck. These days it’s mostly luck, with a little bit of help from the Genetic Protection Agency. Engineered genes all have to have an off switch, in case they get out of hand, as in this case. There are rules about how they can’t spread further than one hundred kilometers from where they’re applied, or the company involved has to start neutralizing them, which is expensive.”

“How expensive?”

“Very expensive. You could probably buy several small countries for the price of a really major clean-up like the one for this terminator.”

“That’s probably why they’re trying so hard to cover it up.”

She nodded.

“Especially because most engineered genes fail in a decade or two by themselves. They’re probably hoping this terminator will disappear by itself, which is idiotic with a gene this vigorous. Their chief scientist must be a high-order doofus.”

“So, do you have some idea who ‘they’ are, based on everything you’ve found out?”

She shook her head.

“That’s the sixty-four billion dollar question. Besides the big one, Xenogen, there are about a hundred other possibilities. The next step is to go to the Gulf and get agricultural samples of patented aquatic crops, like rice or crayfish or catfish. Then I sequence the terminators in them until I find a match with a specific company.”

“Is the DNA somehow labelled with a company’s name?” He looked surprised, as well he might. He was probably envisioning it as little tiny type, but, in fact, environmentalists had been trying for decades to achieve something similar using the DNA code itself, while companies tried to pretend a unique identifying sequence was too hard to include.

“No. By law, the farmers have to post signs if they’re using modified crops, so I’d know whose it was when I collected the sample. Unfortunately, consumers don’t get the same treatment, so I can’t just go to the Fulton Fish Market and buy crayfish, for instance.”

“*Díos*. Didn’t you say there are hundreds of companies? How long is this going to take?”

“Yeah. It could take forever. However, after meeting The Hat Lady, I’m putting Lioxx near the top of the list. And then, once I have a match, I’ll have the bastards.”

“They probably know that,” was Oziel’s dubious response. “And with all that searching, they must know how close behind them you are.”

“Speaking of Lioxx, let’s see what information is out there about them.” She began tapping at her wristpad and, after a few minutes, burst into giggles. “Listen to this. This is their so-called ‘Mission Statement’ on their home page. ‘The Lioxx mission is to leverage the benefits of genetic engineering into deeper and broader levels of community structure. We apply positive paradigms to the interface between human factors and biotechnology.’ And just seven weeks ago, I see on the Genetic Protection Agency site, these positive interfacers were cited for a late filing on one of their wheat genes.”

“Is that unusual?”

“Not really, I suspect. It’s the leveraging paradigms that get me.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“Neither do they, Zio. Neither do they.”

The ferry docked and they walked up the hill to her parents’ house. After dinner there that evening, Corinna read the best bits from Lioxx’s mission statement for her mother’s enjoyment, who was laughing and offering extrav-

agant embellishments. As a stalwart in the Plain Language movement since receiving her Ph. D. in English Literature, she'd seen more of that stuff than anyone in the room.

"I don't know, Viv," said Corinna's father, although even he was smiling, "sounds just like our marketing department to me."

The large screen phone on the kitchen table beeped once, letting them know a message had arrived, and he reached over to push a button on it.

"The sender field is blank, and it's to Dr. Mansur." He raised one eyebrow a few millimeters. "They obviously don't realize they have their choice of Dr. Daniel Mansur, Dr. Vivian Mansur, or Dr. Corinna Mansur."

Corinna saw Oziel grinning to himself.

Her father had opened the message and begun reading. Corinna knew that her mom felt it was part of being a principal to be available to that segment of the public who had kids in the school, which meant that her parents dealt with more than their share of the public who were under the illusion that strangers wanted to talk to them.

"Looks like it's for you, pumpkin. It's all about a biotech company."

"For me?" But when she thought about it, she supposed it made sense. Her own wristpad address was a "do not call," McClintock's lab phones were all on "do not call" lists of varying severity, so her parents' big deskphone was the only one accessible to an outsider.

Her eyes widened as she looked at the message. It was from a technician who feared reprisals, and it gave her pages of data about an escaped rice terminator gene belonging to Xenogen. Someone had seen Cholly's publicity on her current work and hoped that she would use her visibility to make sure this problem received the attention it deserved.

"Jee-sus," Corinna muttered. "Actually, I'd rather go back to being invisible, but talk about a godsend. This is going to simplify my trip to the Gulf by an order of magnitude."

Oziel shifted position in his chair, and somehow, although she couldn't tell how, she felt him thinking so loudly, there might have been an actual rumble in the air. She turned to him. Sure enough, he looked at her and then the phone with fixed intentness. She raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"Let me try something," he muttered.

She gestured him toward the machine. He called up the most detailed version of the path the message had followed to reach her parents' machine. He read the gibberish of addresses of servers and routers.

"Pues... the message came via some servers in Russia, which is the long way around for a US company."

Corinna saw her father looking at Oziel thoughtfully, like a man wondering about the computer skills he'd expected in a non-engineer.

"You figure they're tryin to misdirect."

Oziel nodded.

"So the godsend is a fake, I guess?" she asked.

“It smells to me of a piece of cheese,” said Oziel.

“For the mouse, huh?” said her dad.

Oziel nodded again.

“It’s just too perfect. You need information about what’s going on and you get information about what’s going on.”

“Well, I’ll take it all with a grain of salt,” said Corinna, “but it does give me somewhere to start.” She made a face. “Unfortunately, the place is Houston.”

Chapter 8

It was Thursday, almost the end of another week, and still no nibbles on any of her “real” job applications. She sat on the subway, headed home after one more day in the lab, planning her trip to the Gulf. She wasn’t particularly looking forward to it. Oziel hadn’t been working long enough to take time off from his job, and a trip without him would be a pale shadow of life in a rooming house with him. Still, she had to get those samples, and a collecting trip was the only way to do it.

Walking home from the ferry, she gradually let her mind float free of calculations and noticed how hungry she was. The thought of dinner, and, more specifically, the thought of dinner with Zio, made her walk faster. With a small, private smile, she remembered the day she’d opened the door to find him sitting on the mattress, reading. His reading included amazing variety, everything from articles on child psychology to nineteenth century Russian novelists, but she was used to that by now. What brought her up short was that he had dinner all laid out and he had not a stitch of clothes on. She’d said something intelligent like, “huh?” It’s a scientific experiment he said. To see what you start with.

Hah, she’d said. Scientific. So what’s the control?

I was sort of hoping there wouldn’t be any, he’d said.

She turned the key in the door to their room, still in a private glow, opened it, and looked around, and then looked around again, as if she could have somehow missed someone his size in one room with a mattress, a table, four chairs, and a bookshelf in it. He wasn’t there.

It was unusual for him to be that late. It was seven PM and today was one of his three thirty days. Up to now, he’d always called to let her know if something came up. She called his wristpad. It just signalled. No one answered, and it wasn’t set to take any messages. That was strange.

She looked up the contact for Melanie’s Minders, but it connected to a frustratingly polite machine which informed her the place was closed. Obviously. She hit the disconnect button rather too hard.

Now what? Ms. Melanie Smithers must have a private line. Yes, she did, but the info directory said it was level five unlisted. There was no way to get it without a court order.

She tried Oziel again. No answer.

She'd look pretty silly calling the police if, say, there'd been some emergency and he'd had to take a child to a hospital. But he would have let her know.

Discontentedly, she made herself a tasteless sandwich. What should she do? There were steps in the hallway, but after a brief flare of hope, she didn't think they sounded like his, and when they went past her room, she knew they weren't.

Maybe the doorman of the nursery school building could tell her something. But finding a way to call him from outside that establishment proved as difficult as finding Ms. Smithers.

And still no Oziel. It was past eight. Had he been mugged on the way home? Was he in a hospital somewhere? Or in the morgue?

She became unable to stand the maddeningly helpless process of waiting for information to percolate up into her wristpad. She slammed the door behind her and walked fast to the ferry. She'd go to West 72nd and collar the doorman herself. He had to have contact information for Smithers, in case of emergency.

The doorman on duty was an elderly Italian man, as sympathetic as if she was his distraught granddaughter. He sat her down, gave her some coffee from his private coffee pot, and called Ms. Smithers for her.

"I can't give out the contact info, *bella*, but don't you worry. We'll have her in a minute."

Corinna had just started to feel calmer from the sympathy and the warm drink when Ms. Smithers came on the line.

"Oziel? No, he left at three thirty, as usual. I'm pretty sure he left with Myra Bloom."

Jeez, she thought, the poor guy, if the emergency had left him stuck with her for hours.

"Well, we have to call her and ask what happened to him. He hasn't been in touch, which is totally unlike him."

There was silence.

"Ms. Smithers?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm still here. I don't know exactly how to say this, but it's possible he might not want to be reached."

Corinna's mind went blank with incomprehension. Why wouldn't he want to be reached? What was she saying?

The doorman, who could hear the far end of the conversation over the speaker, became very busy with the coffee pot.

And suddenly what the woman was saying hit Corinna like a truck. Oziel? Run off with The Hat? Was she crazy?

"Ms. Smithers," Corinna finally said, "if that's the case, I need to know about it before I waste the police's time with a missing person report. Please give me the information to call Ms. Bloom."

Melanie Smithers wasn't about to.

“Well, could you call her yourself and ask for me?”

She was willing to do that, although she was starting to sound decidedly patient.

The doorman silently pressed another cup of coffee into Corinna’s hands. He obviously wished he could help and there was nothing else he could do.

Smithers called back to say that apparently Myra Bloom was on vacation. She said it significantly. The implication was that Oziel and the Bloom were romping on a Caribbean island.

“I’m afraid,” she was continuing, “that this will, of course, have unfortunate repercussions on his employment. Minders cannot have staff who –”

“I’m calling the police,” Corinna interrupted. “They’ll need to hear from you about who he left with.”

Ms. Smithers tried to dissuade her. When she couldn’t, she said she’d come over. She didn’t live that far away, apparently.

Once she arrived, Corinna followed her to the Minders office. She thanked the doorman as kindly as she could for the coffee. It wasn’t really the coffee, but she didn’t know how to say that.

A police officer appeared on the large screen business phone, took down the information in an efficient manner, and asked whether there were pictures available to assist the search. Smithers had both Oziel and Myra Bloom on file.

The policeman looked at the strapping, handsome Hispanic and at the attractive, obviously wealthy Bloom.

“Ma’am,” he said, “are you sure *he* thinks he’s missing?”

“Yes,” Corinna bit out.

“Mm,” said the policeman. He politely and efficiently told her he’d post notification of the missing person to the relevant enforcement databases, and said goodbye.

Corinna could just see where he’d post his report. In the round file. If not literally, then certainly in the round file of the mind. It meant nothing that she knew Oziel was truth itself, and that she knew something was wrong. He was tall, dark, and handsome. Bloom was rich and beautiful. End of story.

She went home feeling much worse than when she left. She had no idea how to find him without any help.

It was nearly midnight. She wanted to talk to somebody, anybody, to not be alone. Linda? She’d listen, but what could she do? And her poor friend did have to work in the morning. Her parents? They’d panic at the chirp of a call at that hour of the night. And they couldn’t do much either. She wandered disconsolate to the kitchen to find something warm to drink.

One of the Dominicans or Puerto Ricans, or whatever he was, was there. Juan Reyes, that was his name.

She sat down at the kitchen table with her cup.

“Ey, Señora,” said the man with a smile, “you having a fight with the big fellow?”

He was obviously kidding her about drinking – what was this stuff? – tea,

she supposed – by herself at midnight. She wasn't up to any kind of joking. No, she shook her head. And then she started telling him about it. She had to tell somebody.

"He's gone. He's just disappeared. He's supposed to have left with a woman I know he doesn't like. It's ridiculous. And the police won't even look for him. Oh, they say they will. But they won't. You know what I mean." She could feel her face going all skewed from trying not to cry.

"Ey. Señora." He didn't seem to know what to say.

He was middle-aged and he worked as a janitor, if she remembered right. If he said one word about how men did things like that, she would murder him.

Instead he said,

"Señora, I've seen him washing dishes for you. Man like that doesn't run away."

Then she did burst into tears. Damn straight he didn't. Although he wasn't washing dishes *for* her. They took turns. But she let it pass. Reyes had the right idea.

"Listen," she heard him say, "I'll call Marta. She can come over. You wait here."

No, no, no, she shook her head.

"It's okay. I'll check with the cops in the morning, and talk to my parents, and, and, and I'll call his mother, and somebody'll think of something." She was still sobbing. She knew Juan Reyes wouldn't so much as pat her back in a million years. He'd call Marta, whoever she was. He addressed her as "Señora." It made her feel as if she was back in Caracas, which made her start crying again. If she was in Caracas, there'd be fifteen people to hold her hand. If she was there, Oziel never would have been kidnapped to begin with.

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After a few fitful hours of sleep, she tried the missing persons bureau. Yes, they'd posted the news about him to the National Missing Persons database. Police offices, airports, border crossings, all had access to it. Was he in the country legally?

"Yes."

"Well, that's all right, then. We'll call you if any information comes in."

Yeah, right. She should have said he was illegal. Then they would have looked for him.

She went to her parents' house even though it was barely six thirty on a Friday morning. They'd probably be up.

Her mother opened the door in her bathrobe and said,

"What's wrong, sweetie?" before she had even stepped over the threshold.

Corinna almost started crying again.

It was harder, not easier, to explain all over again what had happened. It didn't help that her mom was getting That Look on her face: the slight thinning of the lips, the slight narrowing of the eyes, a drawing back, as if she'd been given a dead dog but was too polite to say anything. Her dad, as usual, was sitting there looking stuffed, glancing every once in a while at her mom as if waiting for instructions. Corinna began wondering what had possessed her to think there was any point coming here for ideas, to say nothing of comfort.

"Rinna, sweetie,—" said her mom hesitantly.

Here it comes, thought Corinna. She's going to say men do things like that and I'm going to murder her.

"—I know you're convinced he didn't leave of his own accord, but, well, it's important to consider it from all the angles. I mean, if you look back on things, is it possible you could have misinterpreted what he meant sometimes?"

How could you misinterpret someone who told his own mother he wasn't staying at home because he wanted to make love to his girl? She'd never seen him lie about anything, large or small. Of course, this peculiar disappearance wasn't exactly a lie, although if it was voluntary it certainly involved some kind of breaking of faith. So, was it possible he'd fallen for The Hat and she'd just missed all the signs? She replayed the scene at the day care center in her mind and couldn't see anything, even in hindsight, that looked like suppressed enthusiasm on his part. Although, to be fair, he had never actually said that he found the woman repellent. She was the one who had called her a bitch, and she was the one who'd been sure he felt the same way.

"Mom, look, I don't know how to explain it, but I just *know* he wouldn't do something like that."

She knew the bare assertion was not proof and it would mean little to her mother. The proof was in how he listened when she talked, and then said things like, "I could be jealous of the petri dishes if I tried a little harder." But you had to have been there to understand.

"Sweetie, you know, someone can seem really nice, but be a very different person once you get to know him. You've only known him a few months and, think about it, Nat seemed fine for almost three years. Given this guy's background, honey, from the standpoint of a neutral third party, it's not real hard to understand why he might find a billionaire attractive. I mean, men can be like that. It's just a fact."

"Oh yeah?" said Corinna. "So is dad like that?"

There was one of those silences that are sometimes called "pregnant." Corinna wasn't sure she wanted to meet the thing due at term, although the objective part of her mind was curious to see how her mother dealt with it.

"Your dad is different," her mom finally said. "I mean, Oziel was a real charmer."

Corinna's eyes widened in astonishment and she even felt a small, humor-

less laugh bubble to the surface.

“Dad, I assume you got that? Next time she’s cross because you’re a no-vital-signs engineer, you just tell her that at least you’re not a charmer.”

She saw her dad actually smirk.

But as for the real point, how could she even begin to explain that Oziel charmed her mom only because he could see right through her? It would be like trying to explain air to a fish.

“Sweetie, I’m just trying to say that it can be better to face facts, in the long run.”

“I don’t know, Viv” her dad suddenly said. “He seemed like a nice boy to me.”

Well, that was two votes for Oziel, besides her own. Reyes and her dad. Against ... the rest of the whole world.

Her dad continued, “He’s Venezuelan, so it might be possible to get their consulate to take an interest. Get someone to light a fire under the missing persons outfit.”

Corinna sat up straighter. Now that was a thought.

He went on, “It might be a good idea to get one of his immediate relatives involved. Lend more weight to it.”

“I was going to call his mother as soon as I got home. The consulate’s an excellent idea, dad. I’ll do that.”

“Well, call from here, sweetie,” said her mom. “You don’t want to go racking up those kind of bills when you don’t even have a job.”

What was it Oziel had said? It would come out bad, but she doesn’t mean it that way. Even her mom cared, in her own funny way.

“Thanks, mom. I’ll do that.”

Her parents had to leave for work, and she parked herself at the kitchen table with the large screen phone to look up country codes and city codes. Her wristpad beeped to remind her to fly to Houston, according to the plans she’d made in another lifetime. She certainly wasn’t going anywhere now. She cancelled that trip, and then keyed in the interminable address for Marco’s phone. Unlike most people in the barrio, who kept their phones off so they couldn’t be tracked, his was usually on because he’d jimmied the chips to spoof all the data. She knew he also let neighbors call on it, like a pay phone, when they needed privacy.

It rang and rang. She hoped he was just having trouble extracting it from his pocket. She couldn’t stand it if he wasn’t there.

“Aló,” said a distant, static-y voice.

“Marco? It’s me. Corinna.”

While he expressed surprise and asked how things were, she realized she had no clue how to begin. He even said hello again when there was too much silence from her end. He couldn’t see her dithering. He had the video off to save bandwidth of course.

“Marco, listen. I have bad news.” And then finally the whole thing came

tumbling out. He just listened, making little “hm” noises now and again so she would know he was still there. He sounded so much like his brother, it was all Corinna could do not to start crying again.

“Oy, wait a minute,” he said, and she heard him yelling at someone in the street to bring Yoana and Rafael García.

She could hear him telling whoever it was to hurry and try to catch them before they went to work. As she listened, she could just picture the packed dirt, the occasional wandering chicken, the kids, the warmth. And the smell, of course. It made her chest ache.

“If they’re gone, *mija*, don’t worry,” he said. “I have their addresses at work. I can call them there, and then we can set up a conference call. That’s a good idea, to call the consulate.”

He never, not by one single “hm” seemed to think there was any possibility Oziel had truly run off. As Corinna talked to him, as they both waited for Yoana and Rafael to arrive, she felt more comforted than she had since this whole dreadful business began. Marco knew his brother, and unless he was just being nice, his vote counted more than that of millions of ignorant idiots.

“Marco,” she interrupted him, “I’ve got to know. Are you just being nice? I mean, could he have actually run off with someone else?”

There was a momentary pause, and then he hemmed and hawed. He was having major difficulty saying something and Corinna’s heart sank. Better to know than not to know.

“Spit it out or shut up,” she said.

Marco could make allowances, it seemed, because he answered mildly.

“Has he told you anything about when he was much younger?”

“You mean all the screwing around? Yeah, so what?” Unfortunately, Marco was too far away to murder if he said, “He was always like that, he’s just reverting to type.” But what else could he be about to say?

“Well, even then, he never dropped one of those girls without telling her. He’d complain about the excitable ones. ‘Carla’s going to go radioactive when I tell her about Darla.’ And so on and on until I got tired of listening to him and pointed out that he could quit screwing around if it bothered him so much.”

Corinna let out a sound that was between a sob and a laugh, or was both. She could see it. That was the Zio she knew. Somebody who ran off with Myra Bloom without leaving so much as a message was not.

“And, I swear to you, he cares more about you than all those girls combined.”

Well, yes, she’d sort of had that impression too, but it was hard to remember when everyone around you was convinced you couldn’t possibly be competition for a hat.

She spent the whole rest of the morning on the phone. Her first contact with the consulate started badly.

“Oziel García y Vasquez?” said the pleasant-voiced, well-groomed woman at

the other end. "He comes up in our files as not yet registered for the draft. What is his current address?"

Corinna had had enough shocks without this. Maybe he was better missing than dead. She clenched her jaw and tried desperately to speak politely.

"Ma'am. I'm not sure you got the point of what I was saying. He's missing. The essence of being missing is that I don't know his current whereabouts. If you folks can help find him, then we can start seeing if we can get him killed in some war." Politeness was obviously beyond her. She hoped she could keep from screaming.

"Señora," said the woman gently, "I know this is a bad time. Just give me his last known address. Then the system will let me process further requests."

Corinna took a deep breath. Apparently, soothing the distraught was a Venezuelan cultural trait.

"Yeah, okay, sorry."

She gave her address, and, in a calmer spirit, made the rest of the arrangements for a five-way discussion between her, the consular official, Marco, and phones where Yoana and Rafael worked. Once everyone was finally on line, the official listened to everyone, especially the older generation, and said she would pursue the matter.

"Unfortunately, Dr. Mansur," she said before saying goodbye, "we see a somewhat cavalier treatment of our nationals too often. The fact that there is a US citizen in this case will help us. Please feel free to call our direct line any time during our business hours. Information that comes in will, of course, be automatically forwarded to you."

That, thought Corinna, as she stared at the finally silent phone, was more like the tone she wanted to hear. But, even more, she wanted to continue hearing the voices of Oziel's family. Marco, Yoana, Rafael, all of them, had controlled their own worry and done everything they could reassure her. Now the sudden silence, the return of the vast distance separating them, felt like stepping out of an airplane door in flight. Now she was falling and the ground was a long way away and she could only hope she had a parachute and it would open. Soon.

Chapter 9

Corinna painted the walls. She had gone to the hardware store ten blocks away, and bought two gallons of cream-colored paint. She hauled the two cans home, feeling like her arms would fall off before she was halfway. She was getting thoroughly spoiled. Oziel carried the heavy groceries. He would have carried the cans like a pair of marshmallows. She walked faster and tried not to think about that. She borrowed a ladder from one of the fellows on the first floor and began to paint. The rest of Friday stretched before her like a temporal Sahara, her mind listened for wristpad chirps and well-remembered footsteps, and she painted.

She called BPPD every half hour or so, gradually working her way up a chain of executives. She pointed out that it was a police matter and that she better be put in touch with Ms. Bloom or there would be subpoenas coming.

Three hours later, she was done painting, but Friday still wasn't over. She took the protective masking tape off from around the big window and the door frames. Some paint had wicked in, like it wasn't supposed to, but she didn't care. At least the room wasn't pink anymore. Now what?

Myra Bloom answered a call unexpectedly on what must have been Corinna's twentieth try to reach her. It took Corinna a moment to bring her mind back from the brink of phone stasis, where it usually went to wait out inane voicemail messages.

"Ms. Smithers tells me that Oziel left with you, but, unless you know his whereabouts, he is currently missing."

"I don't believe so, dear." Ms. Bloom sounded as if she might purr any moment. "I'm sure he knows perfectly well where he is."

"My name, " said Corinna, " is Dr. Mansur, not 'dear.' The police have posted a missing person notification for him. His family vouches for the fact that it is entirely uncharacteristic for him to leave without any sort of communication. If it turns out that you are withholding material information from the police, I trust you realize you will be charged for the costs of the search for him, at the very least."

"Well, my word, you are taking this on the chin a bit, aren't you. I'm sure it's tedious for both of us to go into lengthy explanations. Let's just say that he's taking a new direction, and may not be eager to stay in touch with his old life."

“So are you saying you plan on marrying him?”

There was a momentary silence, and Corinna wondered how long it had been since the last time Bloom was shocked to speechlessness.

“Well, of course not. He’s —”

Corinna wasn’t about to listen to what Myra Bloom thought he was.

“Then you’re saying he dumped a good job for a one night stand, or to start a new career in prostitution. Do you have the remotest idea how out of character that would be for him?”

“You’d be surprised at what money can do, Dr. Mansur.” The purr was there again. She obviously thought she had an unanswerable point.

“You’re judging by yourself, Ms. Bloom,” Corinna snapped back. “I bet you don’t even know what he’d spend money on, if he had it.” As she thought about it herself, her heart sank. He had dozens upon dozens of reasons to want money, each of them with a face and name and a different, desperate need. Just because he stayed on the right side of the law, didn’t mean he’d refuse God-knows-how-much money if this bitch laid it on him.

“Well, I must admit, we didn’t spend a lot of time talking, if you know what I mean. He’s rather good at what he does —”

The voice was at its silkiest and Corinna felt she’d been shot through the heart. Oziel was indeed “rather good,” when not downright extraordinary. Surely that was just a lucky guess. Surely he and this woman hadn’t —

“— so I wasn’t really thinking much about how he’d spend it.”

Struggling against a sense of suffocation, Corinna refused to give Bloom the satisfaction of thinking anyone could believe her.

“You’re talking about someone who wouldn’t come to New York if I paid for his ticket. You’re either going to have to invent better lies, or start telling the truth.”

“Oh, heavens, yes, I can just see it. He’s a real gentleman. I’m sure he wouldn’t take a penny from anyone, if he thought he might be depriving her of something she needed herself. It’s a bit different with me, of course.”

The words echoed in Corinna’s mind like a scream. She was back on the packed dirt track, in the warm sun, while Oziel said *You’re going to need it yourself. It doesn’t feel right.*

This woman had to be lying. She made a living inventing plausible lies. Until Corinna saw Oziel with his arms wrapped around someone else, she wasn’t going to believe it. But, oh, dear God, it would make it so much easier if the lies didn’t sound right. They couldn’t all be lucky guesses. Could they?

“Where and when did you see him last?” she asked woodenly.

“I’m sure you want to know where he is now, not where he was last night, and that, I’m afraid, I don’t know. No doubt he’ll get in touch in good time.”

Suddenly, Corinna couldn’t stand to speak to her for another second.

“All right. I’ll let the police know the gist of this conversation and suggest they may want to contact you for clarification. Goodbye.”

She pushed the disconnect without waiting for a response. She was shaking

noticeably from a witches' brew of emotions, but uppermost was the desire to rip Myra Bloom's well-dressed hat to shreds and make her eat it.

She couldn't bear being indoors, so she walked to the ferry and decided to go up to the lab anyway. An hour later, she putzed around uselessly with some printouts. People said "hi" and she said "hi." She didn't know how to tell anyone what had happened. What were you supposed to say when someone said "How are ya?" They weren't really asking for the saga of your life, but to say "Fine" was impossible under the circumstances.

Her automated alert about information on oxygen levels served up an article. Satellite data showed huge zones in the Caribbean with reduced oxygen. The zones shifted as winds mixed them with normal air. The avalanche was starting in slow motion, like these biological things usually did, but nobody seemed to know, aside from the isolated scientific article. She supposed it was always like this. AIDS had been around for ten or fifteen years before even a noticeable minority of people understood it was a disaster. Global warming had been sneaking up for decades and the response had been "What, me, worry?" Still, it was massively frustrating to see the rocks starting to fall, to be standing underneath them, and to be unable to wake anyone up to the urgency of it all.

Gradually, as she read and pondered, she became aware of an extraordinary smell. At first it was just a new vile chemical smell, such as wafted through the lab with some regularity, but then it became stronger and stronger. Right when it occurred to her to connect the smell with burning plastic, the fire alarm went off. Institutional fire alarms seemed to be designed to force people out of the building by sound alone. People emptied out of the lab in a rush, but Corinna winced against the noise and tried to collect her data before racing out. All her data was in here.

Smoke began billowing out from under a lab bench. *Hell*. The fire was right here. No time. She grabbed her bag and coat and ran.

She barely had time to mill around in the street outside when there was a dull *thwoomp* inside the building and all the windows blew out in the lab she had just left. Glass tinkled to the street and the fire roared. Everybody standing outside packed further back, but then drifted forward again in horrified fascination.

That was the *fastest* goddamn fire she had ever —.

Fire engines thundered around the corner, sirens wailing. They honked like outraged dinosaurs for the pedestrians to clear out from in front of the building. Corinna and everyone near her scattered away. The huge trucks, engines still growling as if the dinosaurs were far from satisfied, ground to a halt, while the firemen who jumped off were already working on the hydrants.

Corinna ran up to one of the workers, a firewoman as it happened, and said,

"I smelled burning plastic. It was in the wall. There must be electrical wires burning. And there's tons of solvents up there."

The firewoman nodded and spoke into her throat mike.

They began spraying foam rather than water from the main truck.

The flames drew back like live things being hurt.

Corinna stared at the broken windows of the room where all her data had been and could not come to grips with what had happened. She had copies of her results on her laptop, and there were probably server backups too, but all her specimens, all her physical proof of what she'd found, it was all gone. She had nearly been all gone. too.

She couldn't help wondering if that wasn't the whole point of the fire. It had been right near her station and it had been awfully fast. Suddenly, as if she was standing in the daycare center again, she heard the man telling Bloom she'd been lucky her competitors had been distracted by a fire, and Bloom saying luck didn't enter into it.

Maybe it didn't.

If they were capable of organizing arson, why stop there? Oziel really could have been kidnapped. For about two seconds, she felt relieved, and then the implications sank in. There was nothing in her horribly plausible guesses that said they would stop at kidnapping. He could be dead already.

With a physical effort, she forced herself away from the thought. That idea was even more paralyzing than Myra's version of events.

She wondered instead about what McClintock would say the next time she saw him if it turned out his lab had been burned to a cinder because he'd let her work there.

The flames had disappeared, but the fire crews were still working fast, as if the emergency was far from over. It looked like this was going to take forever, and nobody could answer her questions right now anyway. She decided to head home.

The subway rattled through its interminable stations. Restless didn't begin to describe her. The disasters just kept accumulating. Oziel was gone. Her work was gone. He'd worried about watching her back, but she was the only one who kept escaping. Unless the next attempt got her.

She called the friendly consular official, but no news had come in yet.

She went home via her parents' house, trying to delay her arrival at her empty room. They were home and she stayed for dinner. They listened aghast to her story about the fire. They listened sympathetically to her worries about Oziel. Her mom brought out a bottle of Corinna's favorite German dessert wine and said, "He'll turn up, Rinna. He'll realize sooner or later it's a mistake."

Finally, she went home. It wasn't pink, but it was permeated with paint fumes. She opened the window to the chill, damp November air. She called Linda, who listened and scoffed at the notion that a man who knew he needed practice boiling water could run off like a gigolo. Corinna called Marco again, who didn't seem to need to be told why she called. He listened to anything she wanted to say, listened to the whole story of the fire, reassured her,

tried to take her mind off things by talking about general subjects, such as what his baby son had done that day. Before saying goodbye, he added,

“Don’t worry, *mija*. Zielo always lands on his feet. He’ll get out of this, whatever it is, and be fine.”

“Marco,” she said, “has anyone ever told you that you’re the kindest human being on earth?”

The next morning the police called her. Initially she was delighted. They must have some news. However, it appeared they were calling to get information, not to provide any. When exactly had she arrived at the lab? What had she done there? How long was she there? Gradually it came to Corinna that she was being grilled as an arson suspect. She asked them,

“Are you indicating that I’m suspected of deliberately burning McClintock’s lab? With all my data in it?”

The police apparently did not understand the significance of the last question. The concept of a scientist burning a lab with his or her own data in it was about as improbable as a repeal of the law of gravity.

“We’re pursuing a number of inquiries, ma’am. It was a suspicious fire. Please provide me with contact information where you can be reached in case we have further questions.”

“The address you used is generally the best. I can give you my parents’ account, too.”

Then she sat back and stared at her wristpad as if it was an alien artefact. Somebody was getting smarter. Whoever did not like her work on algae – Xenogen, apparently – must have realized that while attempted murder could fail or be investigated, tying her up in the long arms of the law would be the end of it.

She wondered why they didn’t realize that Oziel’s disappearance would have been plenty to keep her distracted forever. By overdoing it with arson accusations, she was becoming convinced that it was more than wishful thinking to suspect kidnapping. And if it was all connected, then the fastest way to find him was to nail the whole diatom and *Chlorella* question. She wondered briefly how long it would take before McClintock had his lab running again and she could actually work on any samples she might collect. Then she put it out of her mind. It was yet one more thing she couldn’t do anything about.

If she went to Houston, she would be doing something and she wouldn’t have to stare at the empty walls through another night. She tapped at her wristpad, found a flight in a few hours, reserved a seat, and began to pack.

She felt the vibration for an incoming call and the ID said Myra Bloom. What the hell?

She answered.

“Hello, Dr. Mansur. I realize you are under the impression I’m not very forthcoming, but that really is not the case. I merely believe in privacy.”

“Did you have something to say, Ms. Bloom? If not, I’m rather busy just

now.”

“Yes, I just thought I’d let you know the same thing I told the police. Oziel said something about staying on Padre Island for a few days, until I had another day or two free.”

Why was the wretched woman telling her this now? Because Corinna would hear about it from the police anyway? But knowing the Bloom, she would have been perfectly happy to let Corinna continue stewing in worry and ignorance. Why was Bloom suddenly being all informative? In any case, Padre Island was also south Texas and the same general direction as Houston.

A little while later, Corinna was in a taxi and headed out. She felt relieved to be distracted from her worries by action. Then a call on her wristpad suggested it was the wrong action.

The automated message forwarder from the Venezuelan consulate said that the citizen of the Republica Bolivariana de Venezuela named Oziel García y Vasquez had been noted by airport scanners at MSY*, Friday at 15:23 Central Standard Time. The asterisk linked to an explanation that MSY stood for the New Orleans airport. There was nothing further except a suggestion to call during business hours for more information.

That was different from Houston. It was also yesterday.

Had he been catching a connecting flight to Houston? Then why yesterday? And why hadn’t the Houston scanners noticed him by now? Either there was some complicated explanation for his appearance in New Orleans or Myra Bloom was lying through her teeth.

In Corinna’s good moments, she had always been sure that however Ms. Myra had inveigled Oziel into disappearing, she’d lied to him. In Corinna’s bad moments, doubts circled her like whining mosquitoes. How could she think she was such a prize that Oziel would throw away a chance at billions of dollars for her? Money, hummed the worst of the mosquitoes, was the one thing that stung him.

However, good or bad, she’d always assumed that Bloom, PR maven and pillar of society, could not be participating in an actual felony.

The airport camera, however, could not be lying, which meant Myra Bloom was. And if she was, then she really had kidnapped Oziel, which was a very strange thing for an owner of BPPD to do. It was so strange that Corinna had trouble deciding whether it was more improbable for a respected billionaire to commit a felony, or for Oziel, whom she’d never seen lie about anything, to act like a gigolo.

She would have bet her life on Oziel. She *had* bet her life on Oziel, several times.

God only knew what Ms. BPPD might be up to.

As he himself would probably say, if you assumed an innocent billionaire, you had a bunch of random facts with no explanation. So try assuming otherwise and see what you get.

One thing you got was Oziel in New Orleans, not Padre Island and not

Houston.

Besides, he was the one who was always right, and he had suspected the whole Xenogen-Houston setup. If that was another elaborate piece of misdirection, then that was not the place to start.

She changed her booking to New Orleans before she even arrived at the airport. She caught the last flight out to MSY. As she sat on the clipper, she became painfully aware of the fact that she had no idea what to do once she arrived.

Chapter 10

Feeling foolish, Corinna headed toward the offices of the New Orleans airport security to see if she could get them to show her the image of Oziel their camera had caught. If she'd thought of it, she could have asked for the image to be piped to New York, but she didn't think of it. She'd been too distracted and, if she was honest, she was still far from levelheaded. It was only when she passed through the security cone herself that she realized examining the image was one obvious thing to do.

Initially, the guard on duty was intent on steering her through "channels," but she politely planted herself in front of his desk and talked at him. The message was clear: the-only-way-to-get-rid-of-me-is-to-give-me-what-I-want.

"I can understand that it's a higher priority for the police to look for missing children than adult men, but I'm his wife" – it felt very strange to say that, but wives had more pull than girlfriends – "and I'm terribly concerned, and if I could just look at the images on file here, it would be so helpful. Getting them through the NYPD could take over a week, and God only knows what could happen to him in a week."

She rattled on and on until he paged someone in a back room. A reedy young fellow in black-rimmed glasses emerged, which made him look like something out of a history book. He must be one of the unlucky few who couldn't have vision-correction surgery. He fit every stereotype of the boy born with a computer wrapped around his head. He seemed pleased to take the time to show her security pictures. With the image ID from the consulate message, he went straight to a view that showed Oziel in a pack of people, standing above most of them by centimeters.

Corinna's heart skipped a beat to see him suddenly, like that. He wasn't with Myra Bloom. A little fellow walked next to him. Oziel looked strange, unlike himself somehow. His face was normally alive with thought, but here he seemed disoriented, vacuous. Even when he was asleep, he looked more aware than this.

"Can you zoom in on his face?" she asked.

"Sure thing."

There was definitely something wrong with him.

"Could you give me the maximum possible magnification on his eyes?"

The picture became grainy as his eyes filled the screen, but she could now

distinguish between his black pupils and his dark brown irises. The irises were just a thin rim around hugely dilated pupils. He was severely drugged.

Which meant he really and truly had been kidnapped. Drugged and kidnapped. Corinna had no trouble imagining why. Eventually, she was bound to get a note saying *lay off, or this guy gets it*. This version made horrible, perfect sense, unlike the Myra Bloom version, which never had, except to her own small, sad fears.

She noticed then that the little fellow seemed to be holding Oziel's arm and steering him through the crush of people.

The computer operator fiddled further with image enhancement, oblivious to her shock.

"This," she said when she found her voice, "is very serious. See the size of his pupils? He's been drugged. Which means this was definitely a kidnapping. We have to send this information to the NYPD and the Venezuelan consulate immediately. And give me a printout of that." If anyone needed proof that his eyes were pathologically dilated, she wanted to be able to show it to them.

Now what? she thought, as the fellow pushed his glasses toward the bridge of his nose and obligingly did as she requested.

"The New Orleans Police Department too?" he asked. "FBI?"

She nodded. Where had they taken Oziel from here?

"Can you search for him on subsequent security camera images? See if he shows up anywhere else? Or if there's some indication where they took him?"

"Sure don't think so, ma'am. Not without running it through facial image analysis software that I don't have access to." He seemed unhappy about his exclusion from the more rarefied software.

"Well, we have more to go on than just his face. Can you search for any images showing people over one meter ninety centimeters and with black hair?"

The computer operator stared into space and thought.

"Yeah, hang on a second, let me try"

He tapped away at the keyboard.

It was astonishing how many tall men with black hair went through a busy airport in a twenty-four-hour period. Some fifty images were returned, and Corinna began worrying that the nice fellow with the glasses would lose patience before she looked through them all. But he didn't. At around image forty, she sat up suddenly.

"That's him too! From the back, but I recognize him. See, he's wearing the same denim clothes and the same little fellow is with him. So where is that?"

"It's hours later, for starters. Time stamp on that is 23:07 on Friday. The camera is located in corridor B27, that's, let me see," he pulled up a schematic and made finger marks on the monitor as he traced a path, "that's either headed toward the private vertical takeoff and landing pads or, maybe, the cargo section of the airport."

"Could you catch a connecting flight to Houston from that area of the airport?"

“Houston?” The young man peered at her through his glasses, as if trying to make sure she was all there. “No, ma’am. Houston’s a big city. Connecting flights to Houston are in the main airport, not in the cargo section.”

“Those areas have to have security cameras too, right?”

“Yes, ma’am, but those sections are kinda closed down on the weekend. They’ll have somebody monitoring, but they wouldn’t know much about searching the image database. And it’s not open to the public, so you’d have to arrange something ahead of time before you could go there.”

“And tomorrow’s Sunday. Hell.” After a pause, she added, “Send this information on to all the same people too, marked urgent or whatever you can do. I’ll go get someone from the police department. There’s no question of waiting till Monday.”

She took the fellow’s name and went off, dispirited, to try to get action from the police officer at the airport station. He took her information, he said a detective from headquarters would get in touch, he said the officer would call her. No, I’ll wait, she insisted. He shrugged. Fine, he implied, if you want to waste your time.

No call came. No detective showed up. Corinna bugged the bored officer on duty as often as she could.

“Look,” she said, “this is interstate kidnapping. That’s Federal jurisdiction. The NOPD doesn’t need to do anything except refer it up. Could you at least get someone to do that?”

The officer felt this was the detective’s job, “once he has all the facts of the case.”

“I just gave you all the facts. There aren’t any more. We need to get the FBI started on this.”

The detective, he said, would have to get all the facts of the case.

“For Christ’s sake!” she exclaimed at last. “There’s a man drugged and kidnapped. He could be being murdered. What’s it going to look like if he’s dead and I tell the media the detective was too busy eating donuts to prevent it?”

The bored officer did not like that. His boredom acquired that stodgy, solid texture of the bureaucrat who will now do nothing at all. Since he had done nothing so far, Corinna wasn’t sure how much worse that would make things.

“Ma’am,” he said, “the NOPD has got every single officer out on calls right now, and has had as long as you’ve been waiting. It’s Saturday night. I told you. The first available officer will call. We’re short-staffed.”

“Short-staffed,” snorted Corinna. “Seems to me like you guys have been cut off well above the knees.”

She left her contact info in a rage of frustration and went to rent a car and book a hotel room. Before she left the bank of consoles in the rental area, she tried calling the FBI herself. After being passed from person to person, like a clumsily handled bucket moving toward a fire, she finally reached someone who took the information she gave him. Somebody would be in touch, he said. When? she asked. As soon as they had the facts of the case from the local

police department, said the polite person at the other end. Corinna disconnected rather abruptly.

A young man whom she'd noticed waiting for someone stepped up to her as she marched off toward the rental car lot. She stopped.

"Dr. Mansur?"

Now what?

"I saw something about your work on a news clip a couple of days ago. I work for Xenogen. Louis Destaing."

He extended a hand, so she shook it. She didn't know this guy from Adam.

"I'm really glad I bumped into you like this. I sent a fax to Columbia yesterday, but I was afraid it might never reach you, and, of course, everyone's phones are 'do not call.' What I wanted to know was have you received anything from any Lioxx people?"

"Why do you ask?" She tried to look encouraging.

"They're trying to dish dirt on us. But it's not true. I can give you the real story, but I have to get to Baton Rouge in another," he checked his wristpad, "another ten minutes. Damn. Is there any way you could meet me up there tomorrow? I realize that's Sunday, but I can't get back to New Orleans till Wednesday because I'm booked to talk to all sorts of State people on Monday and Tuesday."

"How long a drive is it?" she asked.

"About an hour."

It wasn't like she had any other leads to follow. And it would give her something to do besides wait.

"Where should I find you?"

"I'm going up for a wedding on Sunday so I'm staying way out in the suburbs. Would the Xenogen branch office downtown be okay with you?"

Everything the fellow said made sense. She already suspected the information about Xenogen was misdirection. She could see that if Xenogen got wind of it, they might want to get their own spin on things quickly. And yet, all she could think of was Oziel's calculating look, saying, "It smells to me of a piece of cheese."

It was the second time in four days that free information tumbled out of the sky, and someone who was always right hadn't thought much of the first time. Both a suburb and an office after hours were deserted places.

"Actually," she said, "neither of those will work that well for me. I do have friends staying at the downtown Regency" – she hoped there was a downtown Regency – "so why don't we meet in the lobby there?"

"Oh," he said. Then he agreed, somewhat reluctantly it seemed to Corinna. "Okay. The wedding's at eleven. Would some time in the afternoon be okay for you?"

"Let's say eight p.m." That should give her plenty of time to talk to detectives, assuming any ever showed up, and to find her way to a strange hotel in a strange city.

She watched him hurry off to his flight and wished she was sufficiently familiar with the airport to know whether he was going in the right direction for local flights. She headed on towards the car and the hotel.

Nobody called during the night, even though she set her wristpad to the loudest possible signal as soon as she took it off. She kept waking up out of pseudo-dreams in a state that was not sleep because she hallucinated the chiming of her wristpad.

The next morning at eight o'clock, no doubt with the arrival of the day shift, someone finally showed up at the airport to look into the kidnapping. Corinna wondered if the crimes committed in New Orleans were so serious that abduction paled by comparison, and then decided she didn't want to know.

The detective was almost as bored as the officer on weekend night duty had been, but looked a bit more intelligent. Corinna hoped for the best. He wanted to hear what the motive could have been, so she took a deep breath and began explaining. She obviously lost him around the third time she said "oxygen," but he did grasp the concept of a cover-up. He seemed to feel the whole idea of a fit, adult male being kidnapped for abstruse reasons was far-fetched, although he was clearly determined to be polite about it.

"Okay, let's head out to the cargo terminal and the VTOL pad. If any of the companies you mentioned had a shipment out of there, that might give us something to go on."

After a few hours in cavernous freight halls, where they did not find Oziel stored in a box, and a few minutes at the VTOL pad, getting a list of departures and their flight plans, they had reached a dead end.

"The thing to do," said Corinna, "is see whether there's a connection between any of the names on the VTOL list and any agricultural biotech companies."

"You trying to teach me my job, ma'am?" asked the detective.

He still looked serious.

Corinna couldn't see the use of denying it, no matter how offended he was, after she'd waited all night for the local police to get their act together.

"Um. Yes," she said.

A faint smile actually flitted across what had been, up till now, a stolidly humorless face.

"I'll let you know what turns up, ma'am."

Corinna was again faced with the prospect of filling up hours, eight hours to be exact, until she was due in Baton Rouge. She had never realized how much time had to be spent waiting when solving a mystery. It was not like that on the video shows where things happened, bing, bing, bing.

She bought and downloaded a heads-up map she could use while driving, did some searching at a terminal to find out where the rice, crayfish, and catfish farms were, and set out to go sampling while she waited.

Chapter 11

At every stop when Corinna pulled over to sample fields, she called the FBI, and sometimes the NOPD for updates. It was a waste of time, except for the one bit of information that a Lioxx-owned flitter had taken off from the New Orleans airport VTOL pad.

“Where was it going?” she asked.

“Baton Rouge, according to the flight plan.”

“And when did it arrive there?” At least she was headed in the right direction.

“I don’t know, ma’am. We just have the flight plan. Baton Rouge would have that information.”

She was about to start chewing out this flunky for the gormlessness of the NOPD in not following up such an obvious lead, when she abruptly shut up. There was no point. She’d go take someone apart at the Baton Rouge airport when she got there.

She stopped at a fast food place for coffee, and then didn’t drink it. She sampled rice on three more farms. As a private citizen, she really should have been getting permission from the farmers before sampling, but she felt so edgy, she didn’t think she was capable of the necessary, even if minimal, interpersonal skills. She kept using up her entire stock of patience talking on the phone.

The sun sank toward the horizon, getting in her eyes while she drove on manual down little country roads. She needed to speed up her progress toward Baton Rouge. She found the interstate, and switched the driving over to the highway traffic system. At first, she was relieved to be done with the incredible tedium of manual driving, but it had occupied her mind to some extent. Now she had to find something else to do.

She tried to concentrate on checking over her samples, while the raised road went through endless vistas of swamp. The setting sun slanted through huge bald cypress trees in fall color, the whole forest glowed copper in the red light, and the black, rain-soaked trunks looked even blacker. Grey spanish moss hung straight down on this windless autumn evening. The Atchafalaya was the largest swamp on the North American continent, her map told her, and it took a car on the interstate about half an hour to cross it. She caught sight of an occasional channel between the trees, but otherwise it was a

wilderness of cypress knees and the occasional pickerel weed. Fish or birds could travel through there, but nothing else. Certainly not something as big as a boat.

She checked all her samples a second time, and debated whether to call the FBI yet again. It was useless, but it was something to do. She had half an hour to kill before reaching Baton Rouge.

Her wristpad beeped. The display said it was a collect call from a public phone, and was requesting permission to accept it. Who in – where was it? – Pierre Part – knew her address? Could a town really be called Pierre Part?

She accepted the charges. Talking to strangers would be something to do.

“Corita?”

Shock mushroomed in her chest like an explosion, and she cried,

“Zio?”

“Corita.” He sounded inexpressibly relieved. “Corita, we managed to get away, but just with the clothes on our backs.”

“From who? Who did all this? Are you okay? How did they –”

“Corita, *mí cielo*, listen, they’re looking for us. Explanations have to wait.”

“Who’s looking for you?”

“Lioxx people. The cops. Just about everybody, it feels like.”

“Jee-sus Christ! What –”

“Corita, explanations have to wait. We need to get out of here fast. But they took the wristpad you gave me, and everything else I had. I’m calling from a public comm outside the post office. So you need to send a taxi or a flitter out for us. Now.”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

“I have the Lioxx chief scientist with me.”

“What! How –? No. Explanations have to wait. I’m not far from Baton Rouge,” she checked the heads-up map, “and Pierre Part is about forty kilometers away, but some of the roads look really small. I could be there in about half an hour. Can you hang on that long?”

“I thought you were in New York! Baton Rouge!” It was his turn to be shocked. “What are you doing there? No, don’t explain. Just get here. We’ll be trying to be quiet behind the post office. Just get here, *mí cielo*.”

She told the navigation software to optimize for time and to ignore all other factors. It mapped out a route with mostly manual driving, and took the car off the freeway at the next exit. She drummed her fingers. She gripped the steering wheel even before she needed to start using it. She cursed the safety software.

Finally, she couldn’t stand it anymore, flipped the switch to 100% manual, and pressed the accelerator to the floor. The heads-up display of the map superimposed statistics showing the frequency of accidents on empty country roads at night. She slowed down a few kph, but far from enough to avoid speeding tickets once the satellite transponder had processed her registration codes. She didn’t care. She concentrated on reminding herself that she had to

watch the road, not the dot representing the car, creeping along on the display. Nobody but her was driving this thing.

Oziel hadn't said a word about Xenogen. It was all Lioxx. So it had to be a Lioxx terminator, and crooks in the pay of the company who had pulled all the other shenanigans. Why was the Chief Scientist escaping with Oziel? She didn't see how her lover, resourceful as he was, could have forced this crucial person to come with him, but somehow, he must have.

Her headlights picked out a small animal ambling leisurely across the road ahead of her. If it didn't hurry up —. She jammed her foot onto the brake and heard the tires screech. When the car came to a jolting stop about five meters away, she saw that it was an armadillo. It stopped too, turned its pointed snout toward the sudden light, and blinked at the beast of a car in a near-sighted, friendly fashion. Then it faced the side of the road again, sniffed thoughtfully a couple of times, and resumed its amble in the same direction at the same pace.

Corinna shook her head with a disbelieving smile and floored the accelerator. Somehow, though, the image of the fuddy-duddy little philosopher safely crossing the road removed the edge from her fear.

The rectangular sign, black lettering on white, saying "Pierre Part" loomed up out of the darkness. In smaller type below, it announced that 5,241 people lived there. The exact numbers always tickled Corinna as one of the more harmless examples of perfect precision being perfectly false. The road she was on turned into the one main street of the town. So far, so good. There was a flag flying, so that was probably the post office. No, that was a veterans' hall. Where was the damn post office? She supposed she could ask someone, except there wasn't a soul on the street.

There was the sound of a siren in the distance.

She hoped to God that when she finally found the post office, Oziel would still be there.

She spotted a much smaller flag, and a little building with a veranda and a zip code above the door. So this was it, but there was nobody there. She stopped the car, got out, looked up and down the street, and had no idea what to do next.

There was a hole-in-the-wall catfish restaurant across the street. Maybe they were waiting there. But no, they couldn't be, because Oziel had said they didn't have a cent between them.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a movement in the shadow of the building, turned, and saw Oziel break into a run toward her. She flew toward him, leaped onto him when they would have crashed, and he caught her and swung her around. She wound her arms and her legs around him, as if she was riding piggyback except that she was facing him, buried her face in the curve of his neck, moved back to kiss him, buried her face again, and then started kissing him again. She had no idea how long it took before time became a factor. It felt like a second, it could have been hours.

He set her down as if she was made of spun glass.

"Oh, Zio, are you all right?" she said. "I was so worried. What happen—?"

"Come meet Teague, Corita, and then let's get out of here. We'll talk in the car."

He held her hand and led her over to a person she hadn't noticed in the shadow of the building, a stolid, heavy-set black man in what had once been a white shirt and expensive-looking dark trousers now considerably the worse for wear. Oziel's denim, she noticed, also seemed to have mud and smudges from half the swamp on it.

"Dr. Teague Willett," he said. "Dr. Corinna Mansur."

The expressionless face briefly looked like someone had thrown ice water on him, before he recovered a second later.

There was exactly one thing she wanted to know from this person.

"So, is that your terminator all over the oceans?"

Again, he had that brief, dumbfounded look, but instead of answering, he looked at Oziel, as if he was the one who could answer the question or help in some way.

"Yes, Corita. It's his."

The man was just standing there. His invention could kill the planet, and he was just standing there.

"What were you thinking?" she demanded.

She stared at him, as if that would help her figure him out, and saw him become even more expressionless.

She turned on her heel and walked back to the car. Oziel had said they should get out of there, so that's what they would do, but Dr. Teague Willett was going to answer her question before she was done with him.

As they approached the car, there was a whole raft of questions she wanted answered. Where had Oziel found him? Why had he come along? Where were they taking him? Why were they taking him there? Was it even safe to have him in the car? If the terminator was his, they had to be considered enemies.

"His next stop should be the police station," she pointed out to Oziel. "Why are we getting him all comfortable in the car?" She saw the black man stand very still and look warily from her to Oziel.

"*Mí cielo*, they would refuse to arrest him because he hasn't been charged with anything yet. And if they did take him, it would only be to please Fernie, who we should really be getting away from. Now."

"Fernie as in Fernalda Pope, CEO of Lioxx?"

"That's the one," Dr. Teague Willett put in.

There was no way to avoid asking her next question, even though the man was there.

"How do we know it's safe having him in the car? Even with you to watch him?"

"Corita," Oziel said in his gentlest voice, "he told me he was going to try to help stop that terminator as soon as he found out, but his Fernie wouldn't let

him. I believe him. Once he decided to come with me, he's been okay. He could have murdered me ten times over in the swamp. He could have run off and stranded me. He didn't. So let him turn himself in, in his own way."

Corinna did not feel happy, but she conceded the logic. The cleanup would happen much faster and better if the world had Willett's real cooperation. And there had to be bigger culprits behind the scientist, since there was little he could have done by himself. If he was willing to turn state's evidence, they could be put away properly.

A siren sounded up the street somewhere.

"Go," commanded Oziel in a voice that had her limbs obeying before her brain worked out what had happened.

She was behind the wheel, Oziel sat in the passenger seat, and Willett was in back where she couldn't see him. She didn't like that.

The siren was coming closer as she pulled out into the street.

"Maybe you two should get down far enough so that it looks like there's only one person in the car," suggested Corinna.

The Lioxx scientist lay down on the back seat, and Oziel managed to sit on the floor by worming into the space between the front seat and the dashboard. He had to be a lot more uncomfortable than Willett, which annoyed her.

She saw the flashing lights of the police car in her rear view mirror, and in moments it was right behind her. With her heart banging in her chest, she pulled over like a normal, cooperative car, anxious to let the cops go by.

They shot past.

It took a conscious effort not to lean her head on the wheel in relief. She hoped there might be another car she could let by, to buffer her from the police car, but the street was too quiet. She continued to drive out of town, as slowly as she could, because the flashing lights up ahead seemed to be moving at least as slowly.

Cursing and muttering once she was outside the town limits, she saw that a whole string of cars had accumulated behind an odd piece of agricultural machinery that looked like something on stilts with wheels at the bottom. The yowling police car was the last in line, and she had no choice but to join the queue right behind it.

Gripping the wheel so hard her fingernails dug into her palms, she followed along. Another car rolled up behind her, the reflection of its lights in her mirrors blinded her until the automatic shading kicked in. People had a colony on Titan these days, but nobody had solved the problem of sudden headlights.

The cops must have felt much like Corinna about the crawling traffic, because the siren changed to an impatient whooping, and then, when that achieved nothing, the police car pulled out into the oncoming lane, which luckily lacked cars, passed the whole line of cars shrieking like a demon, and disappeared down the road.

"Whew. I think I would have busted a blood vessel if that had lasted much

longer.”

“I should probably tell you,” came Dr. Willett’s hesitant voice from the back seat, “that I seem to have sat on some bags back here. What would you —”

“Oh, I forgot all about that. Those are samples. Just shove them out of the way or onto the floor.”

“The other thing,” Willett continued, “is tune to 1616. That’s where they post traffic advisories.”

“We sure want to avoid any *more* traffic jams,” grumbled Corinna, as she fiddled with the unfamiliar buttons while trying to make sure she didn’t rear-end the car ahead. Luckily, the traffic station was one of the presets, so she found it after only a few false starts into some lively accordion music, opera, and a discussion that sounded set to run to the end of time about a police jury, whatever that was.

“— backed up to the six-ten split. Stay alert for slowdowns and stops on all area roads. Police are spot-checking all traffic at selected locations for driver impairment, so be prepared to stop. Traffic is moving well on the Highrise after a breakdown was cleared from —.”

“What’s the business about stopping all traffic?” asked Corinna, not liking the sound of that at all.

“They’ve been trying, in a half-assed way,” said Willett, “to eliminate drunk driving around New Orleans for the past century. This is the weekend, so they’re pretending to make a big effort. But I bet what it really is,” he concluded slowly, “is roadblocks for our benefit.”

“Roadblocks! Oh shit. We better stick to tiny country roads.”

“There are no tiny roads. The interstate is the only thing that crosses the swamp.”

One glance at her map display was enough to show that he was right.

“Oh Christ. So what do we do?”

“Drive and hope for the best.”

“Great,” she said. “Just great. And we’re stuck behind a piece of junk.”

“Don’t knock it,” said Willett. “We’re nobody in this line of cars.”

That was true. Going twenty kph anonymously was better than two hundred at the head of a chase ... or zero at a roadblock. Maybe she better just trundle quietly along with this line of cars, even if it did make her want to jump out of her skin.

“So what the hell did you two do?” she asked. “The cops are supposed to be rescuing you,” she was talking to Oziel, “not chasing you into swamps.”

“We broke La Señora Fernie’s boathouse and her house and stole all the food out of her kitchen,” said Oziel, looking up with a grin from his cramped position. He seemed to have enjoyed the process. It was so good to see him again, Corinna just smiled at him, smiling at her, and realized what he was enjoying was seeing her again. Then she abruptly remembered that she, not autopilot, was driving the car, and narrowly escaped rear-ending the people ahead of her.

“And I’m supposed to have stolen all kinds of data and done Fernie-knows-what-else,” said Willett quietly from the back seat. “But the real thing is that Fernie is good buddies with the Chief of the NOPD. She would have found some way of siccing them on us, regardless.”

“Good friends with the Chief ... So if, hypothetically, someone at the airport is raising a stink about a missing man named Oziel García, and makes sure it’s reported to the police, Ms. Pope might hear about it.”

The Lioxx scientist seemed to think it was highly likely.

“I’ll bet lobsters,” said Corinna, “that’s how come that guy suddenly showed up, supposedly from Xenogen. She sent him to lead me into some sort of trap in Baton Rouge. I just kept thinking, when he was talking to me, of what you said,” she looked toward Oziel, “about it smelling like a piece of cheese.”

He looked questioning, and she explained the chain of events. Oziel’s verdict came in one word.

“Limburger.”

She didn’t know he even knew about things like Limburger.

“So what’s the next step?” she asked. “Where are we going, where Dr. Willett can start working through his issues in his own way?”

“Head toward New Orleans,” said the flat voice from the back. “Follow all this traffic, and then take the interstate east.”

Corinna looked to Oziel for confirmation. He nodded, shifting with difficulty in his cramped space.

“You’re going to be permanently crippled if you don’t unkind yourself,” she said. “Since Dr. Willett seems pretty comfortable back there, maybe he should continue to keep his head down a while longer.”

“Dr. Willett’, hmm?” said Oziel as he stretched out into the passenger seat with a relieved sigh, although staying as slouched down as he could. “Cut him some slack, Corita. He doesn’t lack courage.”

Perhaps not, she thought. Just any kind of sense or fellow feeling. She looked in the rearview mirror, but he was keeping his head down as per instructions and she couldn’t see him. She pitched her voice to carry to the back.

“So what made you decide to quit doing this á la Pope?”

“You got a persuasive young man there, Dr. Mansur. He and I had a discussion.”

“Hmf,” was Corinna’s opinion of it. “A discussion, huh? And was that,” she glanced at Oziel and indicated the scientist with her head, “when he didn’t lack courage?”

Oziel answered with a feral grin.

“I don’t get it, Zio. Are you telling me he decided that following you through a swamp was better than being a rich guest of Fernie’s because you told him so?”

“I wasn’t exactly a guest,” said Willett.

“Well, begin at the beginning. It looks like we’re going to spend the rest of

our natural lives following the Stilt Monster up there, so we have plenty of time for it.”

“There’s not much to tell. I’ve been with Lioxx for nearly ten years, right from the beginning, almost. The company went from nothing to being a real player, but we didn’t do it by being nice guys. Our biggest sellers are useful genes, like starch deposition enhancers for potatoes, that just happen to defeat Xenogen’s terminators.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake!” Corinna’s eyes widened in reluctant admiration. “So you’re breaking other people’s patents, meanwhile, presumably, you make sure nobody can break yours.”

“You got that right.”

“Sheesh. You need top-notch reverse engineering to decode their products, then to hide the defeat code, and then to make sure nobody can touch your stuff. You must be pretty good at this.”

“Mm,” said Willett, while another *you got that right* hung unspoken in the air. “Too good, I guess, judging by what happened. Inventing is a lot more fun, as well as being more profitable, than fulfilling the legal requirements for environmental scans. If we hadn’t had a gung-ho postdoc ... he not only slogged through hundreds of rice samples to make sure nothing escaped past the 100 kilometer limit, he also checked the algae in some of the paddies. Without that, I’d never have even known the terminator had jumped across species. And, of course, by then it was all over the place.”

“So why didn’t you folks start aerial spraying the off switch?”

“You got no idea.” The voice from the back seat sounded subdued, not to say depressed. “It was all over the Gulf by the time I saw what was happening. Lioxx would have gone from being a start-up to being an end-up in one fell swoop.”

“Yeah, well, this way the whole world may be an end-up instead.”

“I know. I made that point to Fernie.” His voice sounded even more flat and tense. “I think she figured since we’d never been caught before, she didn’t have to listen to me. She said the gene would just die out on its own. I told her it wouldn’t. She said all we needed to do was keep it out of the public eye for a while.”

“And you went along with this?” Corinna was incredulous. He seemed too smart to be doing something so stupid.

“Look, I didn’t get where I was by being a nice guy, either. If Lioxx wanted to hang me out to dry, I’d have had a rap sheet as long as a tax form. Plus, Fernie really set me up with the whole terminator situation. She made it out to be something I’d worked on without company backing. She could have made it look like it was all my personal fault. She still could. I had to go along.”

“Such a hero,” Corinna bit out, before she could stop herself. Alienating him was not the way to make sure he cooperated with the police.

“You’re a pair, the two of you,” Willett finally said. “That’s what your young

man said, too.”

Corinna glanced over at Oziel, who was looking out the window, smiling to himself.

“Hell!” she exclaimed. Why did traffic always do something the second you weren’t looking? She stood on the brakes and managed to stop with everyone else while the Stilt Monster blinked its turn signal and slowed to a near standstill. At least the damn thing was getting off the road. Now maybe they could start moving.

“None of this explains what you’re doing here,” she pointed out. “You sell the world down the river to save your ass, and now you’re here, covered in swamp.”

There was a silence from the back seat, and when Willett spoke again, it was with such sarcasm that Corinna almost turned all the way around in her seat to look at him.

“Yeah. Saving my ass has always been a pretty high priority. I grew up in Desire. You know what that means?”

“No,” said Corinna. Grew up in desire? It sure sounded strange. The traffic was finally moving at a good clip and required real attention. A police flitter went by overhead, flashing blue and red running lights, but it disappeared west and Corinna let herself hope it would stay that way.

“It’s one of the big housing projects in New Orleans. If you don’t make saving your ass a priority, you lose it pretty damn fast.

“Once Fernie started the cover-up, I thought I better make sure I saved enough data so that when we were nailed to the wall – I always knew it was a question of when, not if – I had enough evidence to show she was the ring-leader and I was just following orders.”

“Just following orders” echoed Corinna, with enough sarcasm to match his.

“Yeah. Well, she caught me at it. She invited me out to her place in the Atchafalaya for a super-high-level meeting, and I ran straight into it like a dog hoping for a bone.”

“Oh. So that’s why you weren’t a guest.” Up ahead was a highway sign. They were approaching civilization. “You got drawn in over your head. But why the wambling attitude when Fernie’s intentions were obvious? Or was she carrying a gun?”

“She had two goons with her. Officially, they were a butler and a boatman, but those weren’t their main jobs, so I gave her my wallet and wristpad and all the data when she demanded it. Then she removed every power pack in every electronic device in the whole place, and left me there, where she could keep an eye on me, as she put it, while she decided what to do with me. I’m pretty sure she planned on putting me out of the way permanently, once she had the logistics worked out. It’s not in Lioxx’s normal line of business. At least, I assume it wasn’t.”

“Oh,” said Corinna again. Now his willingness to follow Oziel made sense. And, judging by her one brief conversation with Dr. Pope, his guess about her

intentions also made all too much sense.

Unfortunately the highway coming up was not the interstate, but at least it was big enough to have satellite navigation.

“Finally. Now if it just stays free of blue fuzz for a while ... Will we be more conspicuous using satellite navigation or manual?”

“Manual, probably. Everybody uses the automated system, and the transponder codes only get processed for tickets, so it’s not like they can track us without some major bureaucratic acrobatics.”

She switched to satellite navigation with relief, and leaned back at last. It was amazingly tiring, keeping one’s eyes glued to the road every second.

But as the car approached the highway, Teague said in the sharp voice of real fear,

“Go back to manual. Stay off the highway.”

She did as he said, turned down a side street of the messy little hamlet clustered around the meeting of the roads, and then turned down a yet smaller street ... and found out she was stuck. The street went down to black water, glistening in a lone streetlight, and ended. Cursing and muttering, she started turning the car around, but Teague said,

“There’s no point. We can’t get to New Orleans the easy way.”

“And why is that?” asked Corinna.

“Did you see that glow off to the left along the highway? The way we would have had to go?”

“I was too busy staring at the asphalt.”

“There aren’t any towns right there. But when they’re making the traffic on a busy highway stop for a roadblock, first they send out a flutter with bright lights and a huge sign saying to stop. Once it’s safe, they set the actual police flutter down.”

“Oh.” Nothing like local knowledge, thought Corinna. “So you think we would have driven straight into a roadblock.”

“The only way to be absolutely sure,” said the scientist, “is to drive into it, but I’d say the chances were well over 95%.”

“Significant at the point oh five level is good enough for me,” Corinna answered, equally scientific, while Oziel looked at the two of them. “So what’s the next step?”

“Well,” said Teague, “this goes right down to the water, so it’s a boat launch. Maybe we should see if there are any small ones tied up down there. Some of those don’t need a key to start.”

“And steal a boat? Are you crazy?”

Nobody said anything, and Corinna remembered that boat-stealing would barely show up on the background of the crimes they were dealing with.

She parked the car, stored its GPS coordinates on her wristpad so she could give the rental company the impression she knew where she’d left it, and got out. Teague was already headed down to the water. Oziel put his arm around her shoulders as they followed him, and suddenly, briefly, it felt as if they

were out for an evening boating trip.

If only. The feeling evaporated as quickly as it came when she stared down at the black water, covered in a film of oily lubricant making iridescent patterns by the dim, sad light of the street lamp. Teague was untying a small, flat-bottomed boat that looked about big enough for a teddy bear. She saw him press a lever, and after a piezoelectric click, a tiny outboard motor started making a gentle put-putting noise, like something out of an old movie.

“Runs on methane, not batteries” said Teague when he saw her expression. He pointed at a compressed gas tank near the back that was heavy enough to make that end ride lower in the water. “That way, they can make their own fuel.” His expression didn’t change when he said it, but something about the way he looked for her reaction reminded her that composting outhouses were common far in the back woods.

“You sit up front,” he continued to Corinna, “and Garcia a bit to the rear of the middle ... excellent.”

The boat rode so low in the water, a vigorously paddling turtle might be a problem, but Teague floated off to the middle of the channel and eastward as if nothing was wrong. The lights of the tiny town soon gave way to black, moonless night. By using peripheral vision, Corinna could make out vague mounds and shapes that indicated the banks. A pale, fuzzy blob on her right resolved itself into a boat tied up at the side.

“We need to find whatever they were using for running lights, so we don’t get pulled over by the first police boat using infrared. Look around, García, but don’t move to do it.”

Corinna realized that she’d just heard Teague make a joke.

She gingerly poked at the junk near her own feet while she tried not to shift her weight in the tiniest degree. They finally found a light, hooked it on the bow, and Teague seemed to feel that would be plenty to make them appear legal. In the meager glow, she noticed Oziel looking at her with an amused glint.

“What?”

“Us water rats think this is luxury, don’t we Teague?” He turned toward the scientist, who had his hand on the tiller as if he’d never done anything but steer boats in the dark.

“Absolutely. You should have seen our previous vessel.”

“You’re going to tell me you set out to sea in a spoon.”

“Almost. I smashed up La Fernie’s boathouse and made a raft. Once I got on, it wasn’t necessarily above the surface of the water.”

“Jee-sus. You made a raft What happened, exactly?”

“Well, the first I remember was waking up, lying on a really hard board in a very wet boat house, and –”

“What did they drug you with?”

“I don’t know. That dressed up garbage at Minders gave me a *tamarindo* which she said she bought special for me, and the next thing I knew, I was

waking up in a rotten boat house.”

“Dilated pupils, and you could walk, and you don’t remember anything. Those had to have been benzodiazepines,” muttered Corinna. “That was Thursday night, and this is Sunday. Way too much time for any to be left in your system.”

“Why would I want any to be left in my system?”

“It would be proof of what they’d done. However, that’s neither here nor there at this point. So you woke up in the boat house. Then what?”

“It was so quiet, I couldn’t understand where I was, and when I went to open the door to find out, it was locked. It didn’t seem like a good idea to wait for the same people who put me in there to come let me out again, so I kicked down a wall, saw a big house through the trees, and thought I could find help, or at least a phone, there.”

“And instead you found Dr. Willett.”

“I wouldn’t say ‘instead,’ *mi cielo*. If I’d had to pole that raft I bundled together out of rotten wood and rope, I’d still be going in circles around Fernie’s nice house. And I never would have taken enough water. I’d have had to start drinking that stuff.” He nodded toward the black liquid glistening in the boat’s meager light.

She shook her head.

“So you walk into this strange house, having risen out of the swamp like a ghost, and make friends. How do —”

There was a snort from the back of the boat, and Corinna wondered if she’d just heard Teague laugh.

“That wasn’t exactly how it happened,” she heard him say.

“Oh?”

“You’re right that he showed up out of nowhere. He took one look at me, and started slamming me against the wall because I didn’t answer his questions fast enough. It was like being back in Desire all of a sudden.”

Yet they seemed to get along. How did Oziel manage to make friends even with people he’d beat up? By the faint light of the lamp hanging off the bow, she could see him looking inscrutable.

“You ever seen your young man in a really bad mood?” asked Teague.

Corinna glanced at Oziel again. He had a set expression, as if he wasn’t going to like what he heard.

“Not at me, Teague. I hope I can avoid doing anything stupid enough to make him that mad.”

She could see Oziel’s whole posture relax and felt a wave of warmth from him that might have had him covering her with kisses if Teague hadn’t been around. Too bad that Teague was around. And too bad that it would swamp the boat if he wasn’t.

There was another snort and Corinna wished she could see well enough to know whether that was really a laugh or not.

“Yeah, prevention is the only way to go. So we did things his way, even

though I told him that people, *with boats*, who get lost in the Atchafalaya wind up dead. He just told me to start filling pillowcases with food and that we were walking out. *Walking.*"

"I saw parts of the swamp when I was driving to Baton Rouge. Nobody could walk through that. Not even you, Zio."

"Sure you can," he said. "For a few hundred meters. That was enough to reach the boathouse I told you about."

"Sheesh. So you poled on out. How'd you manage to escape the dragnet? At least, so far. I'd think you'd show up on the first infrared scan anyone tried. Just like we will." She looked up at the wonderfully empty, black, starlit sky.

"It took them a while to realize we were missing. And we did what we could. When we had to stop for the night, we made a sort of hut out of branches and wet leaves, so we wouldn't just be two human-shaped blobs if someone flew by overhead. We heard the flitters start searching the next day – I guess that's today, this morning. *Dios santo* They were looking in the wrong place because they thought we'd be near the house. Then we came across a Cajun fisherman who took us on board. What a character. Teague had to translate. I could hardly understand a word he said."

"And he dropped you off at Pierre Part? How come he didn't just turn you guys in?"

"Well," said Teague, "when he heard all the flitters he didn't seem to like that the rich folks were having a big party without ordering their fish from him. And then, after your master-fisherman there spent a few hours helping him haul up and fix crawfish traps, his verdict was, 'You all right.' So he dropped us off in Pierre Part, told García where to find the post office, and didn't even want to take all the food we thought we didn't need anymore."

"I didn't know you knew anything about crawfishing," she said to Oziel.

"I didn't. You learn something new every day."

She'd seen before how fast he learned, and started to get the picture. Like Marco said, Zielo lands on his feet, but it wasn't by accident.

"Well," said Teague, "it's just a matter of time before I bump into something, steering in the dark. I think we're far enough away from everywhere to be as invisible as we're going to be. I'm going to pull over to the side, and we'll tie up to something."

There wasn't any cover in the flat, marshy land. There wasn't anything to tie up to, either. Teague wedged the bow into the muddy bank, and Corinna prepared herself for a severely uncomfortable few hours of sitting and waiting for daylight. The mosquitoes found them mere minutes after the boat stopped.

Oziel had other ideas, however.

"We'll split up. Then if anyone flies over with infrared, at least we won't be three in a boat."

He had Teague get out and began spreading a tarp that had been wadded up in the bottom of the boat, so that it covered the greasy ropes, boathooks,

cans, and poles that were also down there.

She had a suspicion she knew what he was doing.

“Zio, I’ll be okay curled up in the bow. I can wedge my feet against that stuff. You take the tarp. You’re going to need something.” It was a warm night, but the ground was going to be cold and wet. She didn’t even try to argue with him about being the one staying in the relatively dry boat.

Teague, she noticed, didn’t try to argue either.

When they were done arranging themselves, Teague was wandering off with the tarp in one direction along the bank, and Oziel went the other way, after saying to Corinna,

“I won’t be far. You yell if you need anything or anything happens. *Sí?*”

“Okay, Zio. I hope you get some sleep.”

“I can sleep anywhere, *mi cielo.*”

What with the mosquitoes and the vicious lumps in the boat, she wasn’t so sure about herself, until she found herself waking up in the first grey light of dawn. The night-biting bugs were gone, the day shift hadn’t started yet, and she had no worse damage than a deep impression of rope on her thigh and a wet foot where she’d stretched out into the muck at the bottom of the boat. She sat up cautiously and looked around. The world had opened out from a small murky sphere of vague shapes at arm’s reach to an immense bowl of sky meeting the empty horizon. Grey trunks of dead trees clustered in scattered groups. She could have been the last person on earth.

Then she saw that she wasn’t. There was the roof of a small house or shed some distance away on the other side of the channel. The banks of the channel must be built up somewhat, or the roof had very low eaves. Or both. The question was who lived there and what were they going to do. The three of them should quietly drift away before anyone else woke up.

She stood up carefully, but the boat was solidly wedged and she stepped up on the bank. In daylight, the tarp was a rather pretty shade of blue and Teague showed up nicely, wrapped up in it a couple of hundred meters further along the bank. She set off the other way and wondered where Oziel was. She nearly tripped over him before she saw him. He was in a patch of tall reeds, some of which he’d flattened to sleep on. Even his feet weren’t wet.

“Ey, Zio,” she said softly. He continued sleeping peacefully. “Zio,” more loudly.

He opened his eyes, smiled his incandescent smile, and scooted off his platform, getting his feet wet in the process after all. He hugged her as if they had nothing else to do all day.

“The best way to wake up. Where is—? Ah. Well, we won’t lose him in a hurry, will we?”

“No,” she snickered.

It didn’t take long before they were all back in the boat with Teague steering them along the middle of the channel again, and complaining about having given away every last one of their cans of food. Then he caught Oziel’s eye

and fell silent.

The channel ended in a broad river flowing south. Another small channel could be seen on the opposite bank.

"We want to head east, not south," said Teague. "I vote we take that one and see where it goes."

"Hey," said Corinna, "don't look at us. We have no idea at all."

So they chugged across the brown expanse of water, flowing surprisingly strongly toward the middle, and struggled up the opposite bank toward the channel. The current had carried them well past it. They could see a shrimp boat far along the same broad river, sticking out above the marsh, its long booms holding up veils of nets ready for the day's work. A large white heron flew in and landed on the bank to start foraging, and then flew off with an indignant *grawk* when it noticed the interlopers.

It was hard to know whether to call this land or water. There were about equal proportions of both, and to increase the confusion, the water carried plenty of silt and the land would have dripped if squeezed.

"Is this land or water on a map?" she asked Teague.

"Land, officially. There's a tradition of defining everything they can as land, because the exact location of the coast used to be a big issue before the oil economy collapsed. Damn," he added, staring at Corinna's wristpad on his arm. "GPS coordinates are great, but they don't tell me anything about which of these curly channels actually goes to New Orleans. We may have to go all the way back again."

Somewhere, it was hard to tell how far away, the sound of a put-putting motor like theirs made itself heard. All three of them listened. But, although the marsh seemed as flat as water, there was nothing to see. The raised banks of the channels were deceptive, and the beds of reeds dotted about could have hidden an elephant as it sank into the ooze.

"What did oil have to do with it?" asked Corinna, while she told herself that the cops were hardly likely to be using an old gas boat.

"Yeah, that was kind of funny," said Teague, also obviously listening for the other boat. "The state got federal money for offshore oil leases, but only within state waters. So the official coast had to be as far out as possible. But because all the levees made sure the Mississippi didn't flood the land with new silt, the sea took over huge chunks of land during storms. The coastal erosion meant those weren't going to be Louisiana oil rigs anymore, and the politicians were suddenly on the same side as the environmentalists, doing everything to hold back the erosion. It really got difficult when the sea level rise accelerated. But then oil stopped being so important, and chunks of the state slid into the ocean, and nobody cared."

"Except the environmentalists."

"And the people who lived there. You should talk to one of my old professors about it. Mullin at UNO. It's impressive."

The silence was again underlined by the sound of the other motor, louder

and closer.

“Judging by the last time,” said Oziel quietly, “they’re not far away.”

“Last time?” asked Corinna as quietly.

“The fisherman we met. He had one of these gas engines too.”

Suddenly, they saw the boat appear, in an entirely unexpected direction from a side channel that had been invisible. It was a small flat-bottomed boat like theirs, piled with a few crayfish traps. Over the top of them came the beady-eyed stare of an obviously suspicious fisherman.

Now what? thought Corinna. The three of them had “Not From Around Here” stamped on them in glowing letters.

He turned his boat toward them and pulled alongside, still staring, still saying nothing.

“Whatchoo doin’ wit’ Gaston’s pirogue?” he suddenly wanted to know.

Oh, shit. It stood to reason that all the fishermen knew each other. And that they knew their boats at least as well as their own children.

Nobody said anything.

“You makin’ a rodee wit’ Gaston’s pirogue?” he asked, even more suspicious.

Corinna had no idea what a rodee might be, but it was obviously something you didn’t want to make.

“You turn dat ting right ‘roun’ and head back to Painscour’ville.”

That suggestion did not fit with their plans at all.

The fisherman pulled out an antique-looking handgun, aimed it steadily at the most dangerous member of their group, which was Oziel, and repeated,

“I said, you turn dat ting ‘roun’.”

Corinna’s heart sank. Oziel sat quietly, looking at the fisherman. Teague began turning the boat around.

The moment the fisherman’s eyes moved to see how Teague was doing, Corinna sensed Oziel tense for a leap. In the same split second, she knew he’d swamp the boat and prepared to throw herself at the fisherman’s pirogue to make sure he fared no better.

The fisherman’s eyes flicked back to Oziel, not even startled.

“I ain’t tellin’ you again, boy. You sit still or you be lyin’ still.”

Oziel subsided.

“Um,” Corinna piped up. “He said we could borrow it.”

“Gaston say dat?”

She looked frantically from Oziel to Teague, willing them to come up with the name of their friendly fisherman. Or should she say, “Yes,” quickly, before it became obvious she had no idea who had supposedly lent her the boat.

“T. Sam,” said Teague, who was obviously clever in more ways than just the scientific ones.

“’Ti Sam? Which ‘ti Sam? Sammy Hebert? Sam Boudreaux? You don’ even know.”

“He has a cousin named André,” said Teague.

“Who has fobies,” Oziel added helpfully.

“Ooh. Crazy André. Mais ouais. I know who you mean now. Easy ‘nuff to call.” And he reached for a phone such as Noah might have used when trying to find out when the rain would end.

Well, so much for that idea. They’d be heading back to wherever-it-was in front of a gun in moments. He was damn good with that gun, unfortunately. She could see Oziel tracking it, but the aim didn’t falter once, even when the fisherman pressed buttons on the ancient phone with one hand.

It took him a while to find T. Sam, and when he did, his language turned to such gibberish, Corinna couldn’t pick out more than the occasional word. Strangely enough, he lowered the gun after a while.

Then he lowered the phone and put it away.

“He sez you all right. He sez you bring da pirogue back, he garontee.” The fisherman looked more incredulous than suspicious.

Rightfully so. They had no way on earth to get the boat back where it belonged. It was one thing to steal a faceless boat. It was something else entirely to steal one when T. Sam was guaranteeing you’d bring it back. The three of them looked unhappily at each other.

“Uh,” said Corinna, “we can’t actually get the boat back to Gaston. He was, uh, going to come to New Orleans to pick it back up.”

“All de way to N’Awlins! Gaston?!” The fisherman’s surprise pushed his voice into a soprano register. Then the calculating look came back and he asked, “You headed to N’Awlins?”

The way he asked the question, it sounded like admitting to trying for the moon.

“Yeah,” said Teague. What else could he say?

The fisherman cackled like this was the best joke in a long time.

“Dere ain’t no way to N’Awlins tru here, cher. I garontee. Da’s a million bayous full of crawfish, not people. Dey all be dead ends. You need to go down near to Thibodeaux, cut to Lafourche —.”

He went on for a while, and Corinna realized they’d been hopelessly lost without even knowing it. The fisherman obviously realized it too, seeing their blank looks.

“I tell you what, cher,” he was talking to Teague, “you pay me for my gas an’ my time an’ de crawfish I don’ catch, an’ I’ll take you dere. Den I pull de pirogue back for Gaston.”

Corinna looked in her waistpack. Luckily, she’d stocked up on cash for Baton Rouge, otherwise there’d have been nothing in there. However, what was left was hardly likely to be enough for a whole day’s work plus all the costs.

“All we’ve got is fifty,” she said.

The fisherman looked at her, then at Oziel, and finally at Teague. He cackled, once, and shook his head at Oziel.

“Why you give her da porte monnaie when she da big spender? Twenty be plenty, cher.”

He spent the rest of the day with them, chugging through channels, along

rivers, across what could have been lakes, and through narrow openings between bald cypress trees, which shed their copper-colored branchlets on them as they passed. Sometimes turtles slid smoothly into the water ahead of them. Once, they startled a whole flock of querulous white ibis. Rarely, a flitter would pass by overhead, but they all seemed to be on their own business and took no interest in the two little pirogues down below.

The fisherman never asked them what they were doing, lost in the middle of nowhere, thinking they were going to New Orleans.

At one point he slowed his pirogue down to where it was barely moving in the water, and Teague slowed down behind him. The fisherman didn't say what the problem was, and nobody wanted to be the first to ask. He extracted a grubby bag from the nether depths of his boat and then pulled out the last thing Corinna would have expected: a large, white, cylindrical marshmallow. He didn't eat it, which was good, considering the condition of the bag. Instead, he eyed the water as intently as he'd eyed Oziel earlier, let out an eerie, high-pitched call, and threw the marshmallow overboard. Corinna almost shrieked when a torpedo came boiling out of the depths, gulped the marshmallow into huge alligator jaws, and submerged.

"Hee hee," chuckled the fisherman. "Gotta keep 'im trained. Gotta keep 'im trained."

The three of them were still trying to catch their breaths when he calmly turned the speed back up and moved on.

"Hey!" Corinna shouted across the intervening water. "What was all that?"

It turned out that they weren't the only strangers he took through the swamp. He regularly guided tourists on swamp tours, and "Caimon Coon" was a big favorite because the alligator would come when called. Marshmallows were apparently his favorite food.

Twice, they had to stop and refill the tanks on their boat and his. The refill gas was propane, not funky methane with secondary compounds, but the engines didn't seem to be fussy. Toward afternoon, the houses along the sides of the channels grew thicker, until finally there was nothing but houses. Then they passed the high levee that surrounded the city and protected it from the encroaching sea in these globally warmed days. Huge steel barricades stood ready to roll closed and block off the channel, one of ten, the fisherman told them, that led to the city. Teague conferred with him about where to set them down, and the fisherman said he knew just the place.

Corinna wondered what the fisherman's opinion of her must be, because "just the place" was a decidedly seedy catfish joint on a disreputable corner. She called a taxi to come get them while they munched on unexpectedly excellent fried catfish.

"Now where?" she muttered, as the taxi rolled up.

"The best place'll be my sister's in Desire. She'll put us up for a night or two. Tell him to stop at the corner of Florida and Louisa."

"Florida and Louisa. Right."

The cabbie demanded a twenty dollar surcharge when he heard the address. Corinna was set to protest when Teague said,

“Just say yes.”

She did, and the three of them climbed into the back behind the bulletproof partition protecting the driver, while Corinna muttered under her breath about cabbies.

Then she asked,

“How come your sister’s still in Desire? Didn’t they pay you at Lioxx?”

Oziel sat in the middle with his arm around her shoulders, and she saw his sideways glance at her. Somewhere along the line, she’d absorbed the idea that you took care of your cousins.

Teague said nothing as the taxi sped up on the broader streets near an airport. The airport where she’d arrived yesterday, she suddenly realized. Or was it the day before?

“I mean,” Corinna continued, not dropping the subject, “if the owner of this bolthole is terminally pissed off with you, it might not be so good.”

There was silence from the other side of Oziel. Dr. Teague Willett was one of the most unreadable people she’d ever met.

“It’ll be okay,” she finally heard him rumble. “She’s my sister.”

“When did you find out Fernie was capable of mayhem and murder?” Corinna asked. If his sister threw them out, maybe they could go back to Oziel’s good friend T. Sam and ask for a few more favors.

Teague didn’t answer immediately.

“How should I put this? Fernie shafted me enough times so that I knew she was a thug, but I must admit, I just sort of assumed a well-dressed, rich woman like that had to be a white-collar thug.”

“She tried to get me killed. She and her good buddy in New York got someone to burn my old professor’s lab down to the ground. Then she goes and kidnaps Oziel. Thug is right. The only part I don’t understand is why she picked on him, since I’m presumably the one she’s after.”

There was another long silence from Teague, and the taxi was suddenly on an unexpected freeway headed for the bright lights of downtown.

“I don’t understand why she picked on either of you. Stupidest effin way to draw attention I could possibly think of. You could have knocked me over with a toothpick when he introduced you.”

“You didn’t know it was going to be me?”

“García didn’t exactly tell me a lot about himself,” said Teague dryly. “He didn’t even tell me his first name. However, now that I’ve had some time to think about what my old boss could have been thinking, I suspect I know.”

He stopped at that point.

“Well?” said Corinna.

“I don’t want to be rude,” he said, “but you’re a white woman with, I’d bet, parents and all the fixins. You disappear, people will come looking. Him, nobody will bother. And I bet you didn’t get a lot of work done when he was

gone.”

No, she thought, I didn't. And the sinister Fernie was also exactly right about how many people would look for Oziel.

“Only the last of many things La Señora Fernie got wrong. Instead, *mí Corita* came looking,” Oziel stroked her cheek once, “and now Fernie is really in trouble.”

“The Venezuelan consulate helped a lot,” she said, but she knew the glow on her face gave away how much she liked the compliment. “And speaking of Venezuela, we should give your family an update.” She tapped in the address as she spoke, and Marco answered before the first beep had faded away. He was obviously at Yoana's for dinner, late as it was, because Corinna could hear the shouts of excited relatives in the background.

“I just wanted to let you know that we're safely out of the swamp—”

Oziel pulled her wrist and the wristpad closer to himself and interrupted.

“‘Safe’ doesn't describe it, *'mano*. Don't believe a word she says. We're just less unsafe than we have been, that's all.”

It was true, admittedly, but Marco only said,

“Hmf. I liked her version better. Listen,” he went on, “I hate to worry you with more stuff when you have enough, and maybe it's nothing, but I think you should know.”

“Give us a hint, *'manito*. We'll never guess like this.”

Marco said “Hmf,” again. “If you'd stop hogging the phone, Zielote, I could get two words in.” Oziel leaned back with a smile. “I called Quintón after Corinna's first call to let him know you'd been found, and he said to tell you—actually, he said to tell Corinna—that according to Alva, a gringo has been asking about you, Zielo.”

“Quintón's girlfriend?” said Corinna. “What for? Why not just ask you?”

Oziel leaned forward again. “Asking what?”

“*Si*,” said Marco, as if he was agreeing with something. “Alva said it took her half an hour to get rid of him, because he wanted the story of your life. He bugged some of the brothers too. Of course, nobody's going to tell some gringo anything, but if there's a line you'd like us to feed him, let me know.”

“Tell him I was a choir boy,” Oziel growled in disgust.

After she'd disconnected, Corinna asked what that was all about. Oziel looked at Teague and didn't answer, but he didn't need to. Teague knew enough Spanish and had the background to guess what it meant.

“Trying to find some dirt on you, huh?” he asked.

Then Corinna realized why the strange guy wasn't asking Oziel's family. He wanted to dig up something criminal. Oziel's one-time gang membership would be enough to keep him from ever getting another job in day care, or anything respectable.

Oziel, meanwhile, said only, “Yeah.”

“Figures,” said Teague. “And I'll bet they were recruiting you from day one, right? So if the guy looks long enough he'll find something.” Oziel's glum si-

lence spelled assent. Teague's expression was even blanker than usual as he looked out at the lights of downtown. "Not like wacked ole Teague. Nobody recruited him."

"What's the point?" Corinna wanted to know. "Bloom is facing a kidnapping charge. Digging something up on Oziel isn't going to change that."

"Lots of people took your word for it did they, that it was kidnapping?" asked Teague with such a flat expression, it couldn't really be called sarcastic.

Suddenly Corinna felt all the pieces click into place. Myra would insist Oziel was just a willing boy toy, and nobody would disbelieve her when it turned out he'd been in a gang and hadn't mentioned it before being hired to take care of kids. Oziel had no evidence and no eyewitnesses.

"Jee-sus," she muttered. "We have got to get these bastards before they destroy his life."

Teague's mouth flattened in his version of a smile. "I wouldn't bet on them stopping with him, if I were you. They'll find something for you too, just to make sure you don't feel left out."

Chapter 12

The taxi driver finally dropped them off on yet another seedy street of a type New Orleans seemed to specialize in. He lost no time in turning around and getting out.

“You stick close,” muttered Teague. “He’ll be okay,” with a nod toward Oziel, “but there ain’t no white folks come here except the sisters, and everybody knows them.”

He must be referring to nuns, Corinna decided. Nor did she bother to note that Oziel had a good bit of “white folk” in him. Perception, not genetics, was what mattered. She noticed that the patterns of Teague’s speech changed subtly. He’d had a New Orleans accent, but now it was more than that.

Oziel gawked at the devastated buildings. Empty, burned-out apartments stared like eye sockets in between other places where people still tried to live. The grass had been beaten to brown dirt almost everywhere. The trees lived the same abused life as the other inhabitants, with the same consequences.

“You’re thinkin’ so loud, you’re givin’ me an earache,” said Teague sardonically to Oziel. “Spit it out.”

“It smells better here,” said Oziel slowly, “but I’m thinking that maybe plastic is better than brick for a barrio. Much of Petare looks like a dump, but this place looks like a war zone.”

“That’s ‘cause it is.”

Corinna wondered, was it a war between black and white? Rich and poor? Criminals and victims?

Did it matter? Being kicked in the teeth hurt, no matter what the excuse behind it.

Teague knocked on a scuffed, second-floor door. Corinna could hear kids shrieking inside. When his sister opened the door and saw who it was, her shriek drowned out the kids completely.

“I cain’t beleeeve it! Hey! Tyrone! It’s ole Puddin’. So, you finally decided to visit the folks, huh? Well, come on in, come on in. Don’ be standin’ on the stoop there.”

It took a while to get things straightened out and to bring up the fact that this was no visit. It didn’t seem to make any difference to her. She ordered what seemed to be about five kids out of their room and gave that to Teague. She began scurrying around finding sheets for Corinna and Oziel, whom she

clearly planned to park in the living room somehow. Tyrone was one of those strong, silent types who expressed himself mainly by chewing gum. Right now he was chewing it at "Ole Puddin'" and expressing disapproval. Given the way Teague's sister, who had the improbable name of Melba, pushed him around, Corinna was pretty sure she must be older.

Corinna saw Teague looking at her and Oziel with the same flat lack of expression he always had. He managed to get a word in edgewise to his sister.

"Sis, hon', I appreciate it. I really do. But, if it's okay with you, let's do this the other way around. I don't really need a room, but I guess those guys do."

His sister smiled broadly.

"Well, sure. Fam'ly come first, dahlin', y' know?" This by way of explanation to Corinna.

Corinna glanced over at Teague to see how this principle struck him. He had no particular expression. But he had given them his room. On second thought, no, he had probably given Oziel his room.

"I wonder if I should let the rental company know where I left their car?" she said. "Or whether that would just alert anyone who might be on our trail."

"Let's give it some more time," suggested Teague. "Besides, aren't you going to want the samples you left in it?"

"No, I don't need those for anything anymore. They were to find out who the terminator belonged to."

Teague looked at her for a long moment and shook his head.

"So you were a couple of days away from nailing Lioxx in any case. And Fernie thought she could cover everything up."

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Corinna looked at Oziel, calmly pulling bread and peanut butter off someone else's kitchen shelves for breakfast, and marvelled at his ability to make himself at home absolutely anywhere – a cave, a nursery, a billionaire's house, or an apartment. He looked more comfortable than Teague, standing next to him. He probably was more comfortable than Teague. The three of them had stayed out of the way while the family whirled around getting themselves off to school and work. With more time to count them, Corinna realized there were three kids, not five. An exhausted calm, like after a battle, blanketed the apartment.

She saw Oziel turn to Teague with a grin on his face that could warm rocks and say quietly, "*Chasgracias, bro'*."

Teague's mouth actually crooked up in a half smile, the first time she had seen any real expression on his face at all.

It was amazing. Here was Oziel, who had probably practically killed the

man, yet he could slide effortlessly into some sort of brotherhood and start thanking him for a room. Thanking him with way too much warmth for it to be about the room. It irked her, with all the power of a sand grain in the eye.

“And how does your better half feel about it?” asked Teague unexpectedly. She hadn’t realized they’d noticed her. “Or did I just create a lot of bother for her?”

Damn the man for forcing her either to answer or to make it seem Oziel must be useless.

“None ... of ... your ... business,” she said.

“Teague,” said Oziel, “don’t annoy her. It’s not healthy. And you, *querida*,” now speaking very gently, “I don’t mean any insult. I don’t think he does either.”

What, besides an insult, as he so delicately phrased it, could they possibly mean? As she looked at the black man, his face as immobile as a jowly lizard’s, she had the impression of barely asked questions. He wanted something from her. Reassurance? Acknowledgement of some kind? She supposed asking for recognition didn’t qualify as an insult.

She took a breath and said more mildly,

“It’s true you didn’t have to do that for us. So, thanks.”

His face acquired a most peculiar, if understated, blend of surprised gratification. He stared from her to Oziel and back again.

She was going to change the subject before the situation grew more embarrassing when her wristpad did it for her. It did it so thoroughly, she was only vaguely aware of Oziel kidding Teague with awful gallows humor that they should form a gang when they were both in jail. He could show him how, he said.

“What about me?” she said slowly, as she snapped the display closed. “Unless we can find a unisex jail.” Oziel stopped in mid-sentence and looked at her, alarmed. “You were right,” she said to Teague. “They didn’t want me to feel left out.”

“*Mierda*. Now what?”

“There’s a message from the police that they want me to come in for some further questions. I wouldn’t have a problem with that, except that there’s also a message from McClintock asking me what, exactly, I was doing in his lab. Apparently the police have been asking him questions. They’re sure now that the fire was arson, and McClintock says the cops have information that illegal reverse engineering had been done in his lab.”

Teague shook his head at the coffee he was pouring into three mugs for them.

“Sure thing. Lioxx probably planted that information wherever it would do the most good.”

Oziel looked more worried than ever.

“If they suspect you of doing something illegal, it looks like you have a motive to set a fire.”

"You got it," muttered Corinna. "And since I've lost all my samples, it's my word against theirs that I wasn't using one of their patented products." The more she thought about it, the worse it looked. "Look on the bright side. Now I won't have to worry about ever getting a job again."

She sat and stared at her coffee without drinking it, sunk in a defeated silence.

"I feel absolutely awful about McClintock. He's been really good to me. Now his lab gets burned and on top of that he's being told I did it."

Oziel reached over to stroke her hand.

"Ey, Corita, don't look at it like that. They don't have anything real against you, so it'll all come right in the end."

Teague's sardonic snort expressed his opinion of this attempted morale-boosting.

"Garcia, never-say-die may work in the real world, but they're trying to drag you into the legal system. That's different."

Corinna managed to bite down her first response, which would have been *Lucky for you, buster*. How dare he say a word against Oziel. In the real world, this man had committed crimes that deserved a new category. In the real world —.

She eyed him narrowly and said in a measured tone very different from her depressed mutter of a moment ago,

"Speaking of the real world, you never answered my first question, and I still want to know. What were you thinking? I mean it. I don't get it."

Teague looked taken aback, and then rubbed his face with both hands. She suddenly saw where the wrinkles on his cheeks and forehead came from.

He looked up again, tired and old.

"I was trying to make money. That's all. It just got out of hand."

That's all. How was it possible for something so minor, so common, so *ordinary*, to be the source of so much badness, not to say evil?

And yet, where else could evil come from? There was so much of it out there, it had to come from something equally pervasive. She had heard that the Tibetans lacked a word for evil. They used the word for ignorance.

"Yeah," she breathed. "I guess it did get out of hand. Didn't that horrify you? I mean, if you didn't care about anyone else, don't you have kids?"

"Sure," he said. "I got kids."

There was something about his flat tone that told Corinna she might have done better not to bring it up.

"I got two kids. I pay my child support. I'm supposed to see them every Saturday, but they usually have better things to do, and I don't insist on it. So, yeah, I've got kids."

There was a silence crowded with awkwardness. She finally said in a small voice,

"I'm sorry to hear that. It sounds really tough."

Teague rubbed his face again.

"I believe you are. And, yes, it is." He said nothing for a while and stared at his coffee, while Corinna wished, not for the first time in her life, that she knew when to keep her big mouth shut.

Oziel began buttering a slice of bread and spreading peanut butter on it.

"Back to the immediate problem: we need to get to New York without running into La Fernie. What's the best way to do that?"

Distraction worked as well on adults as it did on babies, Corinna had to admit. She and Teague started talking at once.

"Maybe I'll just skip the country," she said, not entirely joking.

"Time to call in the lawyers," said Teague.

"That won't work," was Oziel's opinion, but he was talking to Corinna.

She thought lawyers might be Teague's only option, but why should she waste money on them? She was innocent.

"I've been giving it some thought, obviously," Teague went on. "I'm not really in a position to pick and choose, because the first one I call might turn me in, but one of the brothers in my black fraternity at LSU became a lawyer, and he was a good guy back then, fifteen years ago."

"You were a frat boy?" Corinna exclaimed.

"It was an academic honor fraternity," said Teague, a bit stiffly. "Very useful, too. Anyway, you could try him. If he's worthless, you don't need to follow his advice."

"It's a good idea, Corita," said Oziel quietly when she continued to hesitate.

"Okay," she muttered, and Teague took her wristpad to begin searching for Jeb Walker. It didn't take long. He had a law firm these days.

"In the Pontalba!" Teague said to himself as he keyed in a new address. "Exclusive historic building in the French Quarter," he explained when he noticed Corinna's questioning look. "Must be doing well."

It took him a while, working his way through secretaries, but persistence paid off and Teague finally reached Walker.

Before Teague started bringing her into the discussion, Corinna had worked her way through an entire peanut butter sandwich at Oziel's insistence. She was way too stressed to feel hungry. You were supposed to have everyone rooting for you when you were after the bad guys, she thought sourly. You weren't supposed to need lawyers for your own defense.

Teague seemed almost relaxed when he handed her wristpad back to her, and as Corinna hooked the ear piece on, she started to see why. Walker had one of those deep, warm, comforting voices that radio announcers and politicians would kill for. Lawyers too, for that matter. She could see him convincing juries by sound alone.

He listened to her summary of events without interrupting.

"Sounds like I'll have a shot at being elected District Attorney after this case," he said when she was done.

He didn't sound like he was joking.

"What you need," he continued, "is police protection as fast as possible,

since Pope seems to have tentacles all over the place. If you fly to New York, you could be vulnerable every step of the way. I suggest you go to the New Orleans Police Department —. Now wait a second,” he said when Corinna tried to interrupt. “It’ll make sense in a minute. They’re not all crookeder than a dog’s back leg. The essence of successful corruption is to have a few good folks to trot out into the public eye. I have some contacts. I’ve been looking to nail the SOBs since I started practicing law.” She simmered down. “You go to the NOPD after I’ve set it up with one of the officers I trust there, and they can coordinate with New York to pursue their inquiries right here. That way you run fewer risks and they get their information.”

“At this point,” she objected, “they don’t think I’m the one who needs protection. They think Lioxx needs it.”

“That, Dr. Mansur, is what lawyers are for. They won’t argue after I’m done with them. Now, you folks sit tight and stay safe right where you are. I’ll let you know as soon as I have both Teague’s situation and yours ready to go, which will probably be tomorrow, and then we can get rolling.”

That was the agreement when she ended the call, but Teague seemed to have fallen back into a funk. He stared at the cold coffee in his mug and grumbled that they should just start over. However, he made no move to do it, and Corinna wasn’t sure whether he was referring to the coffee or life in general. She stood up to make a new brew, since a different life in a different place was not an option. She was surprised when Oziel approved of the stuff. Most New York coffee had met with polite silence from him.

“This is N’Awlins, García,” Teague pointed out. “It’s the only place in this country where the coffee’s worth drinkin.”

Oziel had a meditative look as he studied him.

“You’re older, you’re heavier, and you don’t look anything like my brother, and yet you do look like him. When he’s on the run from the bluebottles, he’s just the same.”

Teague looked offended and Oziel added,

“Of course, he’s never had the sense to do the right thing and turn himself in.”

Teague stood up, walked over to the kitchen window, and looked out, his back to them.

“That’s what bothers me,” he finally said. “I actually wanted to do the right thing the day I first understood the scope of the problem, but nobody’s ever going to believe that now.”

“Well?” Corinna wanted to know, “Why didn’t you?”

He didn’t turn around, just kept talking at the window.

“When that postdoc turned up the first symptoms, for a second I imagined grabbing my money and disappearing somewhere. But only for a second, and more like wishing it was an option instead of a dream. I went to Fernie with the whole mess, she came up with her bright idea of blaming the mad scientist for everything, and I folded. I knew it wouldn’t solve anything, but that

didn't do much good until I had some help from your better half here."

He turned to glance at Oziel with either his usual lack of expression, or with so many expressions that none of them could reach the surface. He looked back out the window.

"I'd like to hope that opening your eyes late is better than never, but I'll still be the guy going to Angola till hell freezes over. It's where everyone from here ends up, so I don't know why I'm surprised."

Corinna could almost see a sign on him as if he was a portrait: Life in Ruins with Money.

"Why would anyone send you to Africa?" asked Oziel in complete bafflement.

Teague turned toward them and shook his head in bemusement.

"You gotta come visit me in jail, big guy. You're one in a million. Angola is the big, mean prison around here. I'm not talkin' about Africa. I wouldn't mind one bit if they sent me to Africa."

"Ah," said Oziel. "Well, I don't want to sound hard, bro', but prison with your eyes open is still better than a dead world with your eyes closed."

"You'd have to be about as determined as Fernie, to keep them closed at this point," said Teague to himself.

"I think you're forgetting something in all this," said Corinna. "I'm not convinced you don't deserve to go to jail, but normally in environmental cases nobody goes to jail. Everybody just says they're terribly sorry, they're shocked – shocked! – this could have happened, and they'll clean it right up. Something this big, I guess Lioxx would go bankrupt, and if the law was mad enough, they might go after personal funds. But where does jail come into it?"

"The crucial phrase in all that is 'good faith.' 'Clean up in good faith.' 'Restoration in good faith.' There isn't any good faith. There's been a cover-up that reaches all the way into the State Department of Environmental Quality."

"But you didn't do that. This Fernie character did."

"You're out of a job, right?"

"Well, yes, but what's that got to do with it?"

"Oh, just a lucky guess based on the fact that you don't seem to know about the concept of asking 'how high?' when the boss says 'jump.'"

"You mean you did do it?"

"Oh yeah. Destroyed evidence in the lab and on the computers."

Corinna exchanged glances with Oziel.

"Shit," she said.

"Shit is right," agreed Teague.

They sat around and glumly sipped coffee for a while.

"Are you good enough at the computer side of things to be sure you totally wiped all the evidence?" she asked.

"No. Nobody could because there's samples and files all over the place. That's why I always thought Fernie's schemes were doomed. But I've done enough to doom me as well."

“Then when you turn yourself in you can tell the cops where to look for the evidence that’s still lying around and that’ll show your good faith.”

“You got no idea. Jeb may know a good officer or two, but Fernie would definitely get wind of a search warrant. Lioxx would be cleaner than a kids’ cartoon by the time they arrived. And if it wasn’t, she has friends in the media and the DEQ, as well as the police department. All the old families here know each other. Hell, they’re all married to each other.”

“But the information is still somewhere on those computers now?” asked Oziel.

“I expect so. I didn’t overwrite the files I erased because I wanted to leave my options open. You never know.”

“In that case, it’ll be like a slide downhill,” said Oziel.

“What’ll be like a slide?”

“Find me a nice, anonymous terminal, and I can probably get those files for you.”

“What? Splice in?”

Oziel nodded.

Teague stayed expressionless yet communicated bafflement as he glanced at Corinna.

“Talented guy.”

“Very,” she agreed.

Teague thought a bit.

“You know, that could work. If you don’t lift anything from the last few days, I could have gotten it legitimately.”

He finished his coffee, deep in thought.

“The Loyola library,” he said. “I went to Loyola as an undergrad. I still know my way around. That’ll be the best place.”

“Is that right here somewhere?” asked Corinna.

“No. Other side of town.”

“Well, isn’t this kind of stupid then? We’re supposed to be staying as safe as we can.”

Teague sat very still for a moment and when he spoke, he hesitated.

“I—I realize this makes it seem like I’m using the problems I created to save myself, but you need to know something. Fernie wanted all copies of the off-switch for the terminator expunged, since having the off-switch is pretty damning evidence that we must have had the on-switch. After she took the data chip I smuggled out, the only remaining copy is somewhere on Lioxx computers.”

“Hell,” Corinna swore, standing up. She kept finding herself inching toward sympathy with this strange man, and then he invariably did something that made her want to hit him with a blunt object.

“*Ey querida*,” said Oziel standing up too, but in his case with a grin, “look on the bright side. With all the evidence, La Fernie really will have a hard time wriggling off the hook.”

Anyone would have thought he didn't mind risking his life to patch up someone else's mistakes. Knowing him, he probably didn't. It was why everyone who knew him followed him like the Pied Piper.

Teague said that they could get only the off-switch and reduce their time outside by not worrying about the rest. She could stay here, where it was safer. "But stay away from the windows," he added, "in case someone starts shooting."

"Yeah, right," she answered with a snort. "We'll go get the evidence. All of it. And if you think it's preferable for me to sit here, not knowing whether Oziel's dead or alive, you're not as smart as I thought you were."

- + -

Libraries were the main, if not the only, places in universities that still retained a connection to academe's monastic roots. The air of calm, undistracted pursuit of knowledge blanketed the studious people dotted about at bookshelves, tables and terminals. The security cones at the entrance seemed misplaced in that atmosphere, and the games some of the students were playing at the more concealed terminals even more so, but the general air was one where mayhem never would and never could intrude.

Teague and Oziel seated themselves at an isolated terminal in a corner, and started perpetrating quiet crimes in keeping with the spirit of the place. Corinna leaned on the back of Oziel's chair. She was still reluctant to let him get more than a meter away from her, so despite some discussion that it was better not to appear in a mob, they had ended up clustered around a screen all together.

Teague's inside knowledge of Lioxx's computers didn't seem to be quite enough for Oziel to gain entry to the server.

He stared at the screen, frowning.

"Too much time in the provinces," he muttered. "This is a kind of firewall I haven't seen before. Let me try a few things"

After enough time to make Corinna pull up a chair and sit down too, Oziel at last stared at a screen full of numbers.

"Give me a unique string for—" he broke off and looked at Corinna.

"For something to do with the off switch," she said.

"Try RL-505," said Teague. "That was the sample number, but most people wouldn't know that, so they wouldn't know to get rid of it."

"*Hecho*," said Oziel a minute later. "Next."

"Well, when Fernie was trying to make it look like a Xenogen terminator, she had her friends at the Department of Environmental Quality substitute a forgery for Lioxx's original filing. The forgery plus the original are pretty damning."

A few minutes later, Oziel said, "Next" again.

And so it went, like bowling pins falling to an exhibition bowler, the files accumulated on Teague's memory card.

"Eh?" said Oziel suddenly. "That's interesting. A hidden file called FP. Let's see what's in there."

Apparently, it was Fernie Pope's more sensitive correspondence. At one glance, Teague recognized names from Lioxx's law firm and "that," he pointed to a spot on the screen, "is the Chief of Police."

Oziel was about to open one of the messages to the Chief when Corinna put her hand on his arm.

"Wait. She'd at least use initials or something. This is too obvious."

He moved back.

"More cheese?"

He tapped out a few commands. Then his eyes widened.

He pulled the memory card out of its slot, handed it to Teague, then hit a few keys and caused an immediate system crash.

"Go," he commanded. "Separately. See you back at Teague's." And with long strides he disappeared around a bank of bookshelves.

Teague, who had apparently learned somewhere that you did as Oziel said, was already halfway back to the main entrance.

Corinna stood up, feeling lost. She wasn't sure how to get back to Desire. The first step was the streetcar, she did remember that. Teague must have been headed there, in which case she should give him a head start or they'd wind up together. She drifted over to the reprint shelves to spend some time seeing if the *Journal of Dendritic Neurochemistry* had anything interesting. The rows upon rows of shelves had varying stacks of reprints laid flat on them, making it easy to look through them into the main hall of the library.

That was how Corinna immediately noticed two unacademic-looking, big, beefy guys walk in and stare around, uncertain of their next move in an unfamiliar environment packed with hiding places.

Should have spent more time in the library, thought Corinna, instead of plagiarizing the internet. She buried herself behind the thick stacks of the *Journal of Neuroendocrinology* and then edged her way toward an even better hiding place behind *Physical Review Letters R*. If the beefy guys had as much brain as brawn, they would know that the first place to search for a scientist would be among the recent journals, but the stupendous improbability of it made her grin at an article titled "Resonant Raman Scattering from Bound Monopoles in Fractional Diaspace." Sure enough, after another bewildered look at the main hall, containing nobody of interest to them, and the obvious realization that they could spend the rest of their lives ducking behind shelves, they backed out. They seemed glad to escape before anyone could pin a "see me" note to them.

Cautiously keeping a lookout for ox-shaped men, Corinna made her way to the streetcar. There was a large group of students and tourists waiting, and

she was glad to blend in with the crowd. The tram finally arrived, after a few rings like a loud bicycle bell at some students leaping across the tracks just in front of it. There were quite a few people on it already, so it must have been the first one in a while. Corinna, with her New York training, went through the other riders like a knife through butter and even found a seat near the back.

When she had time to look around, she wished she'd been less effective.

One of the beefy guys was sitting right opposite her, pretending to be interested in the mansions on his side. Instead of a futile search among the bookshelves, he must have taken the tram one stop further up the line, figuring, correctly, that someone of her naiveté would get on at the obvious stop. Now what? She knew as little about shaking off pursuit as those guys did about using a library.

The streetcar rolled on, packed more tightly with people at every stop, ringing its jaunty bell at cars, pedestrians, and other streetcars coming the opposite way. Corinna had just decided to take her chances, and try to lose the muscle-bound guy by getting off suddenly, when Teague appeared between them. She'd never thought she'd be that glad to see the man. He must have had the smarts to wait at an unobvious stop, but the rarely-running tram had herded them all together anyway. Now the ox-like character had them both.

The streetcar rattled and clanked and breathed out now and again, like a whale exhaling, when it used its brakes.

Standing next to her, hanging on to a post, Teague was about to speak when she looked straight at him and then glanced meaningfully at the muscle-bound guy. Instant understanding crossed Teague's face, and when he spoke, it was quietly, so only she could hear over the clanks and squeals of the streetcar.

"I'm sure he'll try to kill us if he can get us in a quiet place. You stick to me, okay?"

"Right," said Corinna, trying equally hard to be inaudible over the noise of the tram, and looking out the window instead of at him. "What about Oziel?" He hadn't been herded onto this car. Had he gotten away? Or just been gotten? His father, she tried not to remember, had been killed at just the age he was now.

"Well, it's stupid to say 'don't worry,' kiddo," said Teague in a low voice that sounded almost ... kind. "But I'd bet my bottom dollar that boy will land on his feet."

Exactly what his own brother said. Corinna felt a breath of hope, irrational as it had to be.

"He's the guy who walked out of the Atchafalaya," Teague continued, "and I wasn't even allowed to complain that it was wet."

Corinna found herself smiling.

"What did he do? Laugh at you or look at you?"

"Both, I guess. But it was mainly the look."

They rode for a while without speaking. The mansions ceased and the town grew seedier, as it was around the beginning of the line, Corinna remembered.

Teague spoke to her quietly.

“Okay, try to be among the first off. We’re heading straight into the Quarter. Follow me as close as you can.”

Corinna put her New York skills to use again, but neither she nor Teague created much distance between them and their follower. He used the simple expedient of pushing people out of the way, so his size didn’t hold him back. One black woman was calling him names that made Corinna’s ears burn.

Teague dove through traffic to reach the sidewalk of the boulevard, Corinna right behind him. The beefy guy, she saw, was momentarily held up by a herd of passing buses.

They flew down the broad boulevard, turned down a narrow street, and part-ran, part-walked past opulent antique shops. Fernie’s enforcer was gaining on them.

But then he stopped gaining on them. He began to fall back. He disappeared down a side street.

Teague, meanwhile had brought them to a white mansion with a semicircular drive behind a wrought iron fence. It looked incongruous, planted spaciouly among the closely-built, three story townhouses of the Quarter. Two police cars and a flock of motorcycles stood in the drive. Teague strode into the palatial front door. Corinna followed and then caught her breath in amazement. They were in a large hall covered in murals depicting the history of the city, the immigrants’ struggle for a living, and the blacks’ fight for life. It took her a while to notice a counter in the center of the space with a policeman behind it.

They were in the French Quarter police station. No wonder the ox-like guy had thought better of following them. But now what? The Chief here was part of the problem, not the solution.

“Tourists come here all the time to see the murals,” Teague was muttering. “So just act like you’re enjoying them, and we’ll drift out the back way.”

“They’re amazing,” said Corinna in a normal speaking voice.

The policeman in the central island gave her a friendly nod.

Teague walked toward a side hallway as if he had business there, and down it, and before Corinna had fully caught her breath, they were out on the street again. A different street this time.

“Okay, on to the Desire bus. It’s a ways. We have to go as fast as we can because if the goon guesses where we’re headed, he can try to cut us off. You up to another sprint?”

“Hey, he’s been making me exercise. I’m in better shape than when I was a kid.” No need to explain who “he” was.

“Well, call the men in the white coats for me when I keel over. I’ve been sitting for the last ten years. And it feels like all of it was in meetings.”

Half an hour later they were on a bus labelled Arabi, and after a few stops,

Corinna was the only white person left on board. Teague was still trying to breathe normally.

The bus didn't even think of going into the housing project. It disgorged its load of people at the edge.

Corinna kept hoping to spot Oziel, making his way back safe and sound, but there was no Oziel. Teague walked down the street and Corinna followed him. Half the people who got off the bus seemed to know half the people on the street and they said things to each other, for some reason generally at the tops of their voices. The accent was too heavy for Corinna to get most of it, but "dahlin" was a common word.

They walked past several idling groups of toughs who seemed to be waiting for something. Drug deals, probably. They couldn't be waiting for white women to get off the bus because the ratio of predators to prey in that case was too thin. She kept Teague between her and them anyway though.

He walked between two apartment blocks, into the project, along streets and paths, turning corners, and cutting across battered courtyards. How Oziel was supposed to find his way through all this, she couldn't imagine. Of course, he did have an uncanny memory for lists of details. Maybe he had learned the entire route on their way out this morning.

"It occurs to me," she said, "you have the data, but wouldn't it be a good idea to send it somewhere as quickly as possible, so you're not carrying the only copy?"

"I could try the high school about ten blocks away. I can probably talk the school librarian into letting me use the net connection."

"Is that where you went to high school?"

"Hell, no. I went to the magnet school for science. You don't come out of the Desire one knowing anything except how to tell guns apart and how to deal whatever they're dealing that year."

"Those kids would probably make good commodities traders, if they could get a start in the business," said Corinna.

"They might," said Teague. "Except they'd get in trouble for killing the competition."

There had been no Oziel waiting on the doorstep. She wandered over to the window in the hope of seeing him. After she'd stood there a minute or two, Teague said,

"Bad idea, on the whole, to act like a target. Come sit at the kitchen table."

Corinna drew back quickly and sat down.

"Let's give him another two hours," continued Teague. "This is a hard place to get to without a native guide. If he's not here by three, then let's start worrying."

There was the sudden sound of gunfire several blocks away. Corinna winced.

Teague shook his head.

"If you hear an ambulance in the next five, ten minutes, somebody got hit."

Otherwise, probably not.”

“How would you know whether it’s an ambulance or the cops?”

“The cops never show up that fast, and it’s always more than one car, when they come here.”

“Oh,” said Corinna.

After a long silence, during which Teague made coffee, she added, “Shouldn’t you be getting over to that high school?”

“I’d rather go with a bodyguard,” he answered slowly, as if realizing what he was saying as he said it.

Corinna articulated it for him.

“Oziel is not expendable in the cause of you fixing your mistakes,” she bit out, returning briefly to her original feeling toward this strange man.

He was silent for minutes.

No ambulance siren wailed in the distance. Maybe whoever it was, was too dead to need help.

“You’re right,” he finally said. “I’m sorry. He’s just so damn competent and easy to rely on that I’ve kind of fallen into the habit.”

She was going to say she knew how that went, when there was a knock on the door. She looked at Teague with wide eyes, but he had already gone to open all the dead bolts and latches and locks on the door.

“Hola, bro’,” she heard, and rocketed out like a small, jumpsuited explosion.

She didn’t know or care how much later it was when Oziel set her back down again. She couldn’t stop looking at him, convincing herself he was really there. Teague had disappeared into the kitchen.

“*Ey, mi Corita,*” he murmured into her ear. “I’m not that easy to get rid of. You don’t need to worry.”

“The hell I don’t,” she mumbled back. “I’m beginning to think my mom’s right and I should start leading a quiet life.”

He still held her.

“*Si.* Worrying about yourself is nothing compared to worrying about someone you love.”

She looked at him.

“Me and my shenanigans must worry the hell out of you. You want me to quit it?”

“You’d do that for me?”

“I’m beginning to think I’d do anything for you.”

He shook his head and pulled her close to him again before letting her go.

“You can’t try to have a quiet life, *mí cielo*. My father just worked and raised a family, and it didn’t save him. You can only try to do what’s right, and then eventually things become easy, though if you’re unlucky, maybe not for you.”

“We just better be lucky then, huh?” They moved toward the kitchen. “So what happened? Did you have trouble with big, beefy guys?”

“Just one. I wound up on some street without a tram. There was a bus coming, so I ran for a stop, but the driver stopped in the middle of the block for

me. They're nice people here."

Teague poured him a cup of coffee, which he took gratefully as he sat down.

He continued after a few sips.

"Whoever was after me, must have seen the whole thing and had a car. I noticed the same car always behind the bus after a while, but I figured I'd be able to lose him once I got here. He was a very white guy. Blond." Oziel grinned his piratical grin.

"I asked the driver about the buses to take. The blond guy had to ditch his car right in a loading zone in the business district to follow me through some small streets." Another grin. "I found the bus stop before he could catch up, so then he had to take the bus with me. I smiled at him and asked him if he was a tourist, but he didn't seem to like that. We all got out at Desire, and then I saw the guy reaching under his shirt. I dove for the nearest parked car."

"He *shot* at you? That's not what that gunfire was about fifteen minutes ago?"

"No and yes. He didn't shoot at *me*. There were only about two hundred witnesses on the street. I think he was going to point the thing at me from under his shirt to make me go to a quieter place." Oziel did not seem concerned. "But somebody must've jumped him when they saw he had a gun they could steal and he started shooting. I think that just annoyed them. When I looked over the edge of the car's hood, he was already laid out like a fish. Two men were walking away and the bigger one was admiring his new black gun with a barrel like a cannon. I figured somebody else could pick the guy up and dust him off, so I left and found my way here."

Corinna wondered whether Oziel was really that unconcerned or whether he was putting on macho airs. She'd never seen him put on any kind of airs, but the kind of life that prepared you to take attempted murder in stride was beyond her comprehension.

"Well, once he does get dusted off," she said, "and reports back to the boss, she'll know we're somewhere in Desire."

"I could go back and make sure it's a few days before he can talk to his boss," said Oziel as if this might be a good idea, and then broke into a grin as Corinna opened her mouth to protest. "Keep your hair on, Corita. I'm *joking*. Anyway, they hammered him. If he didn't have a concussion, he must have a solid ivory head, and his jaw looked broken. He's going to the hospital, nowhere else."

"Don't be so sure. There weren't any ambulance sirens. I happened to be listening for them."

"The ambulance will take a while if he wasn't bleeding to death," Teague noted, standing up heavily. He looked older and more tired than ever. "I'm going to borrow some normal clothes from Tyrone. Go out" – he waved down Corinna's incipient protest – "Get my sister some groceries. Go to the high school, send my data." He was speaking more and more slowly. "Tomorrow,

we'll talk to the police. They'll get Fernie and Bloom. You'll have nothing more to worry about. And I'll be safe, too." His voice faded as he stumped over to a bedroom. "Real safe. Won't have to worry about potshots, where I'm goin."

Chapter 13

Unlike the taxi driver, Jeb Walker had no hesitation about driving into the streets of Desire, even though his car was one of the new everlastings with a skin of photovoltaics and a pure fuel cell engine that ran on nothing but water and light. It was, of course, a bright, sunny morning instead of dim, dark, evening.

He picked them up, drove through town, and parked at the police station. He walked with them toward the big, gray building, past the police cars in the lot and the people standing around, waiting for things they didn't want. It was nothing like the nice little station in the Quarter.

Corinna wondered why Oziel didn't tease Teague again about looking like Quintón on the run. For that matter, he could have probably teased her about it, but he had too much sense.

Jeb accompanied Teague into the nether levels of the police station, while Corinna and Oziel followed a serious, black policewoman in plain clothes up a broad flight of stairs. Corinna began doubting the wisdom of coming here without a lawyer. Mere truth no longer felt heavy enough to counterbalance the institutional beige walls and the blue uniforms.

The officer led them into a scuffed and shabby office and asked them to take seats. Corinna tried to find a comfortable position on a chair obviously designed for someone whose other furniture was a bed of nails. She could understand that taxpayers did not want to fund ergonomic armchairs and brochure hangings for the Force, but, for God's sake, anybody who had business here was already feeling tense enough without having to notice vicious springs in the utility seating.

"I'm Officer Robinson," she introduced herself and riffled through some papers. "We'll have New York on the phone in a moment." She turned the screen so that everyone could see it, and at the same time the video underwent a brief blizzard before coalescing into the image of another black policewoman sitting at a desk in New York.

"Hi Dora," she nodded to her New Orleans counterpart, then introduced herself to Corinna. "Officer Whittier. I have the Columbia University arson investigation, but the Lioxx aspect of it is being handled by Officer Robinson for the purpose of this meeting, since she is familiar with the company. And this gentleman is ...?"

“Oziel Garcia, my partner,” answered Corinna. She would have thought they’d know that, if they’d studied the background of this case. And what had Lioxx done to be “familiar” to the police without her help?

“You may certainly have legal counsel, but we normally don’t conduct inquiries with third parties present.”

Corinna could feel herself starting to glower.

“I don’t feel I need legal counsel. I haven’t done anything that needs defending. But I do want Oziel here. He’s involved—”

“That’s exactly why—” the policewoman in New York began when the one in New Orleans said,

“Let’s let it go, for now, Julie. The sphyg’s running in any case.”

A sphyg! Corinna felt a wave of anger even as the New Yorker said, “Okay.” A sphygmograph used lasers to measure pulse, blood pressure, peripheral circulation, and she didn’t know what else, letting the police know exactly how uptight you were about whatever you were saying. Iridometers measuring contractions of the pupil and minute facial expressions were probably also trained on her and Oziel, with the readouts in front of Robinson, somewhere on her desk. All this, as if they were already assumed to be lying, as if they had something to hide. She tried to tamp down her anger to give the sphyg less to work with.

The only good thing was that Oziel wouldn’t know what the word meant. But when she glanced toward him, he had his arms crossed on his chest and was looking less than friendly. She’d forgotten that when it came to police and prisons, he was an expert.

Meanwhile, Robinson was speaking, her eyes flicking now and again toward Oziel. The flash of the whites of her eyes began to feel like a strobe light to Corinna.

“We understand that much of the evidence was destroyed in a fire on November eighth. However, files still on the server under your account do include sequences of Lioxx terminators, but not any other terminators. Could you tell me why those sequences were there?”

Corinna pulled herself together and launched into her account.

“This whole business started with me noticing, practically by accident, that there was a problem with some marine algae. I found and sequenced the problem gene, which turned out to be a Lioxx terminator. I did not set out to sequence that particular piece of DNA. I was trying to figure out why algae were dying. It was their terminator causing the problem. If it had been someone else’s, I would have sequenced someone else’s.”

“If you were scanning for an environmental match, why were Lioxx terminators the only ones you looked at?”

“I didn’t even know at the time whose terminator it was. I was going to have to find out, and that’s not easy either, believe me. If I was trying to reverse engineer Lioxx sequences, I’d start with their products, not some marine alga.” The whole thing was such a stupid, transparent attempt to bog her

down in frivolous lawsuits, she couldn't understand why she even had to explain it.

"Okay," the policewoman continued. "Our consultant notes that *Chlorella*, which you were using, is a common model organism. That tends to support Lioxx's charge that you were manipulating genes in it."

The woman was an excellent example of a little knowledge being a dangerous thing. She was right as far as it went, but it only went halfway.

"That's true of *Chlorella* you might order from, say, BioLabs, which is a very specific freshwater strain. I was working with wild-collected, marine *Chlorella*. You couldn't even publish results based on that because it wouldn't be comparable to other people's work using the standard strain."

The officer looked dubious that it was humanly possible to be so hung up on precision.

"Can you show that yours were different?"

"Well, no. They burned along with everything else."

She'd also used standard *Chlorella*, borrowed from a basic biology class, as controls. Being controls, the whole point was that she did *not* do anything with them. However, did she really want to start explaining scientific methodology? She'd taught enough freshman classes to know that untrained people were convinced everything in an experiment was manipulated. She decided to let it go.

The officer from New York entered the discussion.

"That fire destroyed a lot of evidence. You were generally in the lab most of the day, but that day you arrived much later, only about half an hour before the fire started. Do you remember what you did during that half hour?"

"That was the day after Oziel had disappeared and I was more out of it than I can tell you. I remember putzing about with some printouts or something and checking out a few online articles."

"So you were distraught."

Corinna felt her heart rate spike up and looked slowly at the two police officers, trying to remind herself that they were just doing their jobs.

"Officer, I did not go to McClintock's lab and burn it down to make myself feel better. Jesus bleeding Christ. ... Excuse me. The whole idea is just so absurd. I mean, for Christ's sake, my *data* was in that lab. Losing my data is the very last thing that would make me feel better. And besides, how am I supposed to have done it? I can't even start a barbecue without lighter fluid."

"There were many flammable solvents in the lab, of which the Fire Department says you were aware. The fire started near your station in the lab and you were the last one out."

Corinna realized with a shock that things really did not look too good, when you put the facts together that way. She noticed Oziel, leaning back, tense arms crossed on his chest, jaw clamped shut, and a look in his eyes like a gangster whose cocaine deal just went bad. She knew how he felt. But she took another deep breath and tried to continue rationally.

“Of course I was aware of them. If you worked in a lab and did *not* know where the flammables were kept, you wouldn’t, and shouldn’t, be allowed to work there. And I was the last one out because I was desperate to save my data. I assume you realize that the destruction of my data serves Lioxx’s purpose of keeping things quiet, whereas I have no conceivable motive for doing that.”

“That thought had occurred to us. Yes,” said Officer Robinson, with polite neutrality. “Although, if Lioxx is right, you would have a motive for destruction.”

“Look, I’m sorry to be so blunt, but that BS doesn’t stand up to one second’s examination by anyone who knows anything about it. None of what I did makes sense from a reverse-engineering standpoint, all of it makes sense if I’m trying to identify a sequence of DNA. Send this stuff out to as many molecular biology consultants as you want, and they’ll all tell you the same thing. This is just one more attempt by Lioxx to prevent me from following up on what they’re doing.”

“That’s what expert witnesses are for,” said Robinson dispassionately.

That implied they were planning on actually *charging* her with this crap, and trying her, and making her hire expert witnesses. Corinna couldn’t believe it. She really should have come with a lawyer. She’d need one just to explain why the spyg was going offscale.

Officer Whittier was continuing.

“You had a previous hearing for scientific misconduct. You were exonerated, but there were some issues of lab safety that you did not deny. Something like that could be an issue here as well.”

Corinna gave up on trying to breathe slowly and be rational.

“My whole point was that those were things you’d find in any lab, which are simply part of getting work done. They were things like unlaundered lab coats and using recycled peanut butter jars for spent pipette tips. I’m sorry, but even a bureaucracy couldn’t be stupid enough to think that unlaundered lab coats cause fires.”

She knew she had just called the cop stupid. Tough. If the woman couldn’t see that, she was.

“You seem somewhat emotional about it,” said Robinson with aggravating detachment.

“Damn right, I’m emotional. Oziel gets kidnapped and I’m supposed to act totally normal or arson that damages my work is somehow my fault. It’s enough to make anyone emotional.”

“We’ve been in touch with Ms. Bloom,” said Whittier from New York. “She maintains that he went willingly, and we have no evidence otherwise.”

Oziel looked like a thunderstorm, one of the tornadic kind that takes no prisoners. He said nothing.

She hoped he wouldn’t explode then and there. She should have told him before now, but there hadn’t been one moment when they were safe enough for him to go berserk. And now, she had a policewoman waiting for her and it

was less safe than ever.

"Yes," she bit out. "Bloom fed me that crap too in the middle of a whole bunch of other lies about him being on Padre Island."

"I see," said Officer Whittier. She looked from Corinna to Oziel and back again. "The difficulty for an observer is to understand why a person in Ms. Bloom's position would commit a felony kidnapping."

Oziel, thank God, was still just sitting there. It was amazing, the effort he was willing to make for her sake.

Corinna, on the other hand, did not do so well.

"Have you met this woman? Yes? Well, then you know that voluntarily spending an extra five minutes with her is a lot more incomprehensible than her committing a felony. God only knows what she's capable of. Maybe she regularly sweeps the streets for guys to have orgies with. I don't know. Maybe this is just the first time somebody came looking. Which is something *you* folks should have been doing. Not me. And now that we did your work for you, you've got the damn airport photo. You can see he's been drugged."

Whittier maintained a carefully blank expression, while Robinson looked calmly and calculatingly at both of them, and said nothing for the space of several breaths. Unfortunately, thought Corinna, this has gone far beyond anything salvageable by a few deep breaths.

"I realize," said Robinson, still with that offensive calm, "that a lot of these points and questions are painful for you, but I do have to ask them. So I also need to point out that drugs can be self-administered."

"Well, they weren't." Corinna did not know how she managed to say it without shouting.

Oziel suddenly spoke in a low, angry voice. The unexpectedness of it made both Corinna and Officer Robinson flinch.

"She gave me a *tamarindo*."

There was silence.

"It's a Venezuelan drink," he explained to the two officers.

The image of Whittier leaned forward, tense with interest.

"Have you had a blood test?"

"No," was all he said. *What a stupid question* was written on his face.

Both officers leaned back again.

"That's a pity," said Robinson. "It does make it look like you didn't expect positive results."

"Of course," said Corinna, still furious. "It took him over seventy two hours to escape, much of that time under both stress and physical activity, both of which increase metabolism. My Ph. D. is in neurochemistry. I was the one who told him there was no point going for a blood test. His symptoms fit a sophisticated mix of benzodiazepine derivatives that are cleared within twelve hours after symptoms stop."

"I see," said Robinson. She thought for a while. "Well," she looked at Oziel, "why don't you tell me exactly what happened from your perspective."

Yes, thought Corinna. Why not? A thoroughly radical idea, to listen to him instead of just deciding what he'd done after one look at him.

A pulse beat in his temple, and it took him a moment to answer.

"That ... person said she needed help getting her child to the car because she had a lot to carry. When the valet drove up, she said, 'I have something special for you' and she handed me a bottle of *tamarindo*. She opened it as if she expected me to drink it right there, and it seemed only polite after she'd gone to all the trouble, even though I never asked her to. The next thing I knew I was waking up in a very wet boat house."

"What did you do with the bottle?" asked Robinson.

"I threw it away."

"In the street?"

"No, in a waste bin. This is at the entrance to the Dakota building on West 72nd."

"Give me a sec," said Whittier, turning away from the video camera to check something on her computer. "When did this happen?"

Oziel thought it through with a puzzled look on his face. Corinna could imagine. The days must be running together even more for him than for her.

"Last Thursday afternoon."

Whittier went back to tapping on her computer and then leaned back.

"Garbage collection on that street is on Thursday. Do you remember if the bin was full or empty when you threw in the bottle?"

"I heard it hit bottom."

Officer Robinson cracked a big smile at her New York colleague, a smile that made it easy to imagine her far from the police station, having fun with her family.

"It's Wednesday. Whatchoo doin' on your sorry butt, girl? Get out there and find that thing."

Whittier said to herself, "*Awright*," and added more loudly, "What am I looking for?"

Oziel drew an outline like an antique coke bottle, and the officer said she'd get back to them as soon as she had it.

Corinna sat there, stunned. Were the police finally, actually, really going to make themselves useful instead of just taking notes?

Robinson filled the time taking down a detailed description of the last five days for both of them, although neither of them mentioned the side trip to Loyola yesterday. That made it a bit harder to sound convincing when Corinna asked how to ensure their personal safety until Ms. Pope was arrested.

"You escaped," Robinson nodded toward Oziel, "so she'll realize that we're probably watching her. I doubt very much she'll try anything under the circumstances, but just in case, I'll give you both beacons." She pulled two gray straps out of one of her desk drawers and handed them over. "You can wear these around your neck or over your shoulder. If you or anyone else hits any part of it, a screamer circuit is activated here at the station, and someone will

be out to your location immediately.”

“Um,” Corinna interjected hesitantly, “I don’t want to be rude or anything, but the last time I needed help from the NOPD, it took them about twelve hours to get their act together.”

Robinson smiled grimly.

“Yes. That sort of thing is a problem. Has been for decades. This, however, goes through a different channel, so when I say immediately, I mean it. They’ll arrive in a flitter. If the screamer is activated in error, you have two minutes to deactivate it by saying ‘No Emergency.’ We have your voice print and if you sound stressed, the cancellation will be disregarded, so don’t worry about being forced to speak under duress. The bands have embedded imagers, front and back, so anyone who gets near you can smile for the camera. That should be enough to keep you safe.”

Oziel took his as if it made no difference either way, but Corinna remained unconvinced.

“I don’t really see how this will work. A little gray band doesn’t look very formidable. What if someone quietly sticks a gun against my ribs?”

“Nobody will,” said Robinson with quiet confidence. “You’d have to be a severely amateur mugger not to know what those things are. Any professional hitman will recognize them a mile away and not get anywhere near you. The resolution on the embedded cameras is quite good.”

“Well, okay,” said Corinna. “Now, I guess, all we have to do is wait for Teague.”

“You do realize that his situation is rather different from yours?” said the policewoman dubiously.

“I should think so!”

“Well, he’s likely to be here a while yet. And, of course, depending on how high the judge sets the bond, he may or may not be rejoining you.”

Corinna wasn’t sure why she was surprised. She suddenly realized this meant she and Oziel had nowhere to stay, nor did she have a clue what to do next. She looked questioningly at him, but he was staring at the floor.

“I guess we’ll wait somewhere till Mr. Walker comes out and then see what arrangements we should make.”

Whittier called back just as they were standing up to leave.

“Got it,” she said with a gloating smile, holding up a clear plastic evidence bag with a dirty bottle inside. “There’s enough residue in there for a second dose. Shouldn’t take the lab more than a couple of hours to ID.”

Robinson stood up too.

“I’ll just show these folks to the waiting room, Julie, and be right back to get the details for my report.”

The bleak, scuffed, leaden waiting room made Robinson’s office look cheerful. The utility seating was hard plastic, which, contrary to known physical laws, grew harder by the minute. Corinna and Oziel sat in silence. The room stifled talk, as if it contained a dead body.

Oziel shifted position for the umpteenth time.

"I'm going to have to call the Venezuelans soon," he muttered, trying not to offend the funereal air. "The police will have told them I'm not missing anymore."

"Oh," said Corinna, equally quietly. "Yeah."

What the two of them really needed was a couple of days without any life-threatening problems. She wasn't sure she could stand listening to a comfortable bureaucrat insist that Oziel sign his life away.

He seemed to feel the same, because all he did was go on to the next problem.

"And Smithers, of course. One of these days I'm going to have to call Smithers."

"Jeez, yes, that too," said Corinna. "Here, you can use my wristpad."

He looked at it with distaste and didn't take it. He answered her questioning look by saying,

"Could you do it for me, *mí cielo*? If I hear one more person think I was hot to fuck Bloom, I'm going to go radioactive."

She felt her eyebrows climb even higher. She'd never heard him talk like that before.

"Do you know Smithers' address?"

He reeled off a string of letters and numbers, which she tapped in.

It went unexpectedly well. Melanie Smithers apparently thought highly of Oziel and had had her doubts all along about Ms. Bloom. She looked forward to him resuming work as soon as he was back in New York. When Corinna hesitantly mentioned that she didn't know exactly how long the legal processes would take in New Orleans, that was fine with Smithers too, although she did want to be clear that, of course, this was leave without pay.

Corinna and Oziel exchanged sardonic glances.

After the impression she'd received during her last encounter with Smithers, Corinna felt surprised, but also too relieved to ask for any explanations. Smithers was probably worried about a lawsuit over work-related liability of some kind, but, really, she had nothing to fear. Oziel came from Venezuela, not New York, and didn't even know anyone who had ever sued over anything. However, Corinna wasn't about to tell her so.

The phrase about work and being back in New York reminded Corinna that when all this was over, *if* it was over, she would be job-hunting again. Something to look forward to.

Oziel stretched and seemed relieved once she was off the phone.

"Thank God you didn't believe that *mierda plastica* and came to find me." He glanced at her with an affectionate smile, and then studied her more carefully.

"You didn't, did you?"

"Zio, my dad had the right idea, and Linda, and Juan Reyes at home. And your whole family, of course. But everyone else, everyone, took it for granted

that I was dotty to think you wouldn't run off with a billionaire. And even though I refused to admit it to anyone, I couldn't help thinking—"

He turned all the way toward her, took her by the shoulders, and said loudly enough to disturb the invisible corpse in the room,

"You thought *what?*"

"I — it's just that — well, I mean, it's not like I'm some great catch or something. Why shouldn't —"

He put one warm, dry finger on her lips to make her stop speaking.

"*Mí cielo*, listen to me. If you think like that about yourself, then think about me. And if, for whatever reason, you forget what you mean to me, at least don't *insult* me like that."

Thinking that he could follow a clothes horse plus loose change? It was rather insulting, wasn't it?

"I'm sorry, Zio," she mumbled.

"No," he shook his head. He took her by the shoulders again. "No. Listen to me. That's not the point. You were wonderful. You would have found me if I'd done nothing but sit in that shed. But if you're going to have bad dreams, at least don't have completely silly ones."

He put his arm around her and held her. It was easy to see how foolish it was while she had the solidity of his touch to lean on. The trick was to remember when he wasn't there to show her what was real and what was not.

"I'm starving," she said after a while. "I wonder how much longer we'll have to wait for Jeb Walker?"

They ordered a pizza and ate it out on the front steps of the big gray building in a big, gray neighborhood. Eating wasn't allowed in the waiting room, they were told.

"I wonder how many people have starved to death in there, waiting?" Corinna whispered. "Maybe they just shove them behind the far seats to get them out of the way."

And still no Jeb Walker. She was on the verge of suggesting they book a hotel, when both he and Teague walked into the waiting room.

The invisible corpse once again had its rest disturbed, but they lost no time in leaving and silence closed in behind them.

"They let me go on a five hundred thousand dollar bond," said Teague as they walked down the same gray front steps toward Jeb's car.

"Jeez! That's a lot of money."

"Signed over my condo to them if I didn't show. Jeb arranged it. I'd probably be on my way to an asteroid colony without Jeb. I don't want to hear another word against lawyers," he added to Corinna.

"She been bad-talking lawyers?" asked Jeb, pretending to be horrified.

"Me?" said Corinna. "Never!"

"Well, in that case, may I suggest we all go to Casimentos and celebrate? My wife can usually get away from work at five."

"What about you?" asked Corinna. "It's almost five now and you've spent all

day on us. Your other clients are probably fit to be tied.”

“Rescheduled by my good secretary,” said Jeb airily. “After these two cases, I’ll be famous. People will be lined up outside my door. So we’re going to Casimontos.”

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After a bus ride to an unpromising part of town, they arrived outside a tiny, white-tiled place that looked more like a barbar shop. Jeb and Teague had been eloquent on the marvelous oysters here, and Corinna hadn’t had the heart to tell them she didn’t even like oysters. Oziel looked ready to try anything once.

The four of them went into a tiny room that turned out to be the first one of a series that stretched back through three or four more. There was an oyster bar along one wall of the first room, with two black men behind the bar, imperturbably shucking oysters faster than the eye could follow while maintaining a constant stream of banter with each other and the customers there. Those pointed tools the two shuckers were using had to be incredibly sharp, but Corinna didn’t see a single bandage on any of their hands.

She trailed the group as the four of them passed into a second room, where Jeb pounced on the one free table, and they settled down with menus in the midst of a convivial din that echoed off the tiled walls. Jeb’s wife, Latisha, joined them and soon all three New Orleanians were on Corinna’s case that she had to try the oysters. She balked, so Latisha had the waiter bring a few fried ones and ordered Corinna to try one.

They were huge, but at least the breading disguised all the squishy invertebrate bits that always put her off the things. And then, once it was in her mouth, she discovered she’d never eaten oysters before, not real oysters, since that’s what this was.

“Wow,” she said. “I’ll take a dozen.”

Everybody laughed, and Latisha advised her to start with six. “They’re very filling.”

When the food arrived, Corinna concentrated on eating and let the others talk. Unfortunately, what Jeb found to talk about was how badly the media were going to treat Teague unless he hired someone to handle PR. It was true, of course, but that didn’t make it a good dinner topic.

“You’ll get slaughtered, man,” Jeb reiterated. “I’ll do my best, but I promise you, this’ll need an expert. This is too big. For God’s sake, hire somebody. I could recommend about three good people.”

Teague waved the idea away.

“I’ve had enough of PR people to last the rest of my life. And anyway, it’s not the only place where I’m going to be slaughtered. This is a picnic com-

pared to what Angola will be like.”

“Teague,” said Corinna, after swallowing her sixth oyster and trying to convince herself she had room for another half dozen. “I really don’t think Angola is in your future. Ever since —”

“It will be in his future,” Jeb broke in, “if he lets the media make him out to be a combination of Frankenstein and an oil baron.”

Teague waved that away, too.

“Teague, man, you are crazy,” said Jeb. “You hear me? Crazy. How’m I supposed to defend Frankenstein? Huh? I mean what, exactly, are you giving the media right now?”

Teague shrugged.

“I have a nice message on my voicemail, telling them that Dr. Willett is unavailable.”

At that point, Jeb rolled his eyes in exasperation and turned to Corinna.

“Will you talk to him? Will you? Somebody has got to make him see reason.”

She was busy discussing more oysters with a waiter, but once she was done, she pointed out that she wasn’t the one to ask.

“The last time somebody changed his mind for him, it wasn’t me. It was him.” She nodded toward Oziel, working his way through a second plate of oysters.

“Oh, that’s fighting dirty,” muttered Teague.

Corinna could hear him despite the din because he was right next to her.

“What’s fighting dirty?” she asked, loud enough for everyone to hear.

He chewed french fries as if he had no intention of answering, but everyone waited for him.

“So, you gonna ask me to listen to some PR flack too, García? What’s the point of saving someone’s life for that?”

Oziel looked at him steadily.

“You’re the one who said prevention was the only way to go.”

Teague let out a snort.

“Oh, man. So unless I do it, I’ll get the treatment, huh?”

“That,” said Oziel, “is always an option.” After a bit of a pause, he added, “Seriously. Would you hire me as a tech in your lab?”

Teague stared at him in blank incomprehension gradually shading toward embarrassment.

“Relax, bro. I’m not looking for a job. I’m just wondering why you hired yourself to do something you know even less about.”

Teague opened his mouth to retort, but it was obviously just a reflex because he had nothing to say.

Oziel looked at him for a while again, but he still couldn’t find anything to say.

“I take it that’s your way of telling me to find someone who can actually do the job,” said Jeb, and started tapping away at his wristpad before Teague

could object.

Above the din surrounding them, Corinna could hear that the connection at the other end had an equal din.

"Where the hell are you, man?" asked Jeb, although Corinna thought it was a good example of people in tiled restaurants throwing stones.

"Casimentos."

"What?" he exclaimed. "Right here?" and craned around to look at the other customers. "We're in the second room."

"We're in the back. How about we come join you?"

Moments later, she and Oziel were being introduced to Spencer Gray, a distinguished-looking old gentleman with white hair, white sideburns, and a double-breasted suit. He looked like a spokesman the Federal Reserve might use. His equally distinguished wife, Angie, greeted Jeb's wife with a kiss on both cheeks. She didn't kiss Corinna, but she beamed at her. "Delighted to meet you, dahlin'," she said. When people did that kind of thing in New York, it felt silly, but here it made Corinna feel like a friend of the family since her grandparents' days.

The din increased as everyone talked at once, except Oziel, who was working through his third plate of oysters, bread, cole slaw, and home-fried potatoes. He'd never said a word, he'd never cleaned out Teague's sister's kitchen shelves, but he'd obviously been starving.

Spencer Gray, meanwhile, was drawing Teague out. At one point Corinna even caught Teague smiling at something the PR man said about playing different media outlets against each other. An image rose in her mind of the old gent walking through Desire, charming the guns right out of the hooligans pockets. After a while, he and Teague shook hands.

"Life is a hoot, you know that?" Spencer Gray was saying. "To think that after all these years, I should be mixing it up with little Fernie again."

Little Fernie? thought Corinna. This sounded interesting.

"How small was she?"

Spencer's handsome, pleasant face acquired an urbane smile.

"Oh, I knew her when she was in college."

Teague had been speaking the literal truth, Corinna realized, when he'd said that all the old families here knew each other. She noticed his wife start listening when the subject of other women came up, and had the sense that this old gent took a lot of watching.

He wasn't stupid, because he noticed too. He patted his wife's arm, and said,

"Long before I met Angie. Unlike my first wife, you'd have kept me away from someone like Myra, wouldn't you have, precious?"

His wife began to say something, but Corinna was too shocked to pay attention.

"Did you say *Myra*? As in Bloom?"

"Myra was actually the one I knew. Fernie was her roommate at the time."

“Her roommate! They were roommates?”

Teague looked thoughtful.

“Fernie did say once, when the financial officer asked about the low rates Bloom’s company charged to Lioxx, that she and Myra went way back.”

“The implication being that they were old friends?” asked Spencer Gray with a widening smile, as if this was a good joke.

“Yeah,” said Teague.

Gray chuckled comfortably, and shook his snowy head.

“Fifteen years, and she’s still at it. I guess I got off easy.”

“Still at what?” asked Corinna.

“Well, it’s all ancient history now.” He patted his wife’s arm again, and obviously thought he better explain fully, before she made up her mind what the explanation was.

“Myra and I were involved for a while, which caused problems.”

Corinna could guess where this was headed. She had no trouble imagining the man, at least as handsome as he was now, though probably less polished, maintaining a couple of households, fooling around with college girls on the side, doing God-knew-what, until it came to the ears of the wrong people, like his wife or the divorce court.

Then as he talked, she started to listen more closely. She leaned further over to be sure she didn’t lose anything in the restaurant’s hubbub. Oziel, she gradually became aware, had stopped chewing entirely and leaned halfway across the table to hear the white-haired gentleman on the other side. Finally, she said,

“Spencer, this history isn’t nearly as ancient as it should be. Would you consider doing something for us?”

Chapter 14

Two days later, bright and early, Corinna and Oziel accompanied Teague to help shut down Lioxx. They were in a van with five federal agents from three different agencies, two U. N. representatives, and another van full of assorted state troopers and federal marshalls. She'd never heard of bureaucracies moving with such head-turning speed, but perhaps the threat of the end of the world was a lever large enough to move even the law.

The van stopped at the steel and glass highrise that housed Lioxx. There was a group of people outside surrounding someone. A few of them had professional-looking video cameras. As Corinna approached, she could see the initials of news agencies stamped on some of them. Had someone tipped off good old Fernie Pope and all these newshounds? Or was it just some thing, totally unrelated?

It wasn't Fernie Pope. At the center of the gaggle stood Myra Bloom, of all people, perfect in white, with an upswept hat that could have been a futuristic architectural model.

What was she doing here? Why wasn't she in New York?

She was speaking in the clear, carrying tones of an actor making sure that the folks at the back could hear. She acted oblivious to Corinna and Oziel standing on the pavement, well within range.

"Kidnapping? Oh, please," Myra was saying with well-bred disdain. "Do I look like I'd have problems finding interested men? I practically have to hire bodyguards to keep them away. No, this is one more example of the kinds of prejudice women still face. If a companion of mine tries to get more out of me than I already gave him, it's news."

Corinna glanced back at Oziel and wished she hadn't. He was going to kill that woman with his bare hands if someone didn't get him out of here.

"The whole kidnapping accusation," Myra was continuing, "is nothing but sour grapes when I refused to be blackmailed. I guess, really, you have to feel sorry for him, because money was all he could get, since —"

It happened so fast, Corinna never could remember how she knew what was coming. One moment she was standing there, Oziel just behind her. The next, she felt a volcanic surge of anger, knew Oziel was going to kill the woman, and threw herself at him, clamping her arms around him.

Her last thought before she slammed into something moving with the force

of a car accident, was that Teague had been right. She'd never seen her young man really mad.

Yet in the next instant she felt him stop and grab her to make sure she didn't fall after that crash. She loosened up.

He just stood there, breathing heavily, looking at her.

"*Mí Corita*," he said.

She turned toward Teague and the assembled agents who had been distracted by the altercation.

"Go! This has got to be a diversion. Go!"

They went. Some of the newshounds ran after this new story, but were brought up short by the two marshalls who wouldn't let them past the main entrance of what had suddenly become a secured building.

Corinna remembered at the last moment that the beacon band around her neck was probably screaming to the police after that impact. She cancelled it.

"And now – come on, Zio – we're going to get her."

Corinna marched up to Myra Bloom and the assembled reporters.

"The police have found drug residues in the drink you gave Oziel. There was enough in there to KO two people. The only thing I don't understand is what you're doing here instead of in jail. Or are you running from the law?"

There was the briefest flicker in Bloom's contemptuous expression. Corinna wondered whether she'd hit closer to the mark than she'd realized. Bloom waved a dismissive hand.

"Really, dear, you'll have to come up with something better than –."

Corinna interrupted.

"Nobody has tried to blackmail this ... person. She's the blackmailer. She started her whole company on dirty money. You folks need to talk to Spencer Gray. He had a relationship with her many years ago, which she used to steal confidential papers. Then she threatened to publicize them unless he paid her off. He had to pay her hundreds of thousands of dollars before he finally got rid of her. You can also check the books at Lioxx, because the CEO used her knowledge of this blackmail to force cheap prices from Bloom's PR company."

Her words had been caught by a bobbing mass of recorders, and the newshounds were shouting questions at her, at Myra, at Oziel, even at each other, as far as Corinna could see. But she'd seen Myra pushing a button on her wristpad, while she pooh-poohed all the charges. In a moment, a black flitter with smoky windows touched down near the excited group and Bloom moved toward it, trailing the whole crowd of reporters as if they were tied to her. A gull-wing door opened, two troll-sized bodyguards stepped out, fended everyone off as she climbed in, stepped back in themselves, the door closed, and she was gone.

"Shit," muttered Corinna. "I really wanted to see her led away in leg irons. Why is she even here? Why wasn't she arrested in New York? The drug test on that bottle came back positive yesterday. How long does an arrest warrant take?"

Oziel had said nothing since she'd stopped him, but the reporters were now coalescing around the two of them, saying plenty.

"Come on," she said, taking him by the hand. "Let's get inside the building." Then, louder, she said to the seething mass of people. "Come talk to me tomorrow. I'll have even more for you then. My lawyer, Jeb Walker, can arrange it."

He'd been a mere adviser a moment ago, but he was definitely her lawyer now.

The marshalls, as she'd hoped, continued excluding the reporters. Not even the most impassioned pleas made any difference, and Corinna and Oziel found themselves in the blessed peace and silence of the lobby. They waited near the elevator to take them up to the fifteenth floor.

"Thank you, *mí cielo*," said Oziel very quietly. "So much for me being always right. I nearly ruined both our lives back there."

She squeezed his hand and held it as the elevator arrived and they stepped inside. It hummed its way up to the fifteenth floor.

"Even in this case, Zio, you had truth and justice on your side. Only the law would have been against you. That, as Teague says, is different."

She felt the tension uncoiling within him, and a small smile even appeared on his face.

"*Mí cielo*," was all he said.

"I'm sure she was there on purpose. Maybe her attempts to find something on you aren't getting anywhere, so she hoped to discredit you directly. If you'd attacked her, it would have also slowed down the arrival of the cops up here, which makes me wonder what we're going to find. If she knew we were coming, so did good old Fernie."

The elevator doors swooshed open, and the trooper guarding that exit pointed Corinna down the hall. Oziel stayed behind with the trooper, no doubt figuring he might be useful as an unofficial guard.

She could see troopers or marshalls at every exit she passed, as well as at the door to what looked like the server room. People's heads appeared in doorways up and down the hall, and then vanished back into their rooms like startled gophers. Some interesting calls must be starting to fly.

The door to which she'd been sent had Fernalda Pope, CEO on it in gold lettering. It stood open, and she found herself in an outer office where the CEO's secretary lived.

Mixing with an academic crowd as she did, Corinna rarely saw anyone as perfect as the secretary, except on television. Her dress, her hair, her makeup, all were perfect and in the best of taste. Her manners to the invading mob of law enforcement were perfect. She looked pleased to see them all. Considering what their presence meant, Corinna couldn't help wondering whether the secretary was a highly advanced Lioxx product, something in animated plastics perhaps.

The five federal agents and the two from the U. N. marched on toward the

inner office.

The secretary spoke up.

“Ms. Pope is not in right now. Can I help you with anything?”

One of the agents opened the door, but the secretary knew whereof she spoke.

“We have a warrant for Ms. Pope’s arrest. If you know her whereabouts, you are legally obligated to inform us,” intoned the most humorless of all the humorless agents.

The secretary was glad to give him all the contact information in her extensive database. She showed him all the events on Fernie’s schedule. Ms. Pope had just stepped out of the office. The secretary knew nothing beyond what was in her lists, and she had no idea based on talking with Ms. Pope where her boss might be.

If she really was a cyborg, thought Corinna as she watched her, that would be expected. Otherwise, it seemed implausible. However, it was such a daunting task to extract information from her impervious surface that even the battle-hardened agents didn’t attempt it.

Instead, an all-points alert was put out for Pope, including one to the New Orleans Police Department to search the streets. It was their jurisdiction to search the streets. Corinna couldn’t help rolling her eyes at the sheer dunderheadedness of it all. Myra had definitely been trying to buy her fellow reptile time, and at the rate things were going, she’d succeeded.

The agents fanned out through Lioxx, securing computers, informing everyone that they, their work, and the company were under investigation, and that they were to remain available for questioning. The head of the legal department was arrested, as one of several people with direct complicity in the cover-up, and the computer sysop, but the young man who’d accosted Corinna at the airport, whose real name turned out to be Louis Marigny, was nowhere to be found. The Chief Financial Officer, a dried chip of a man in a three-piece suit, had to be involved, but was able to hide behind thickets of numbers for the time being.

Corinna was helping Teague move specimens relevant to the case from scattered freezers into one central one, which would be sealed by the agents. She lifted her head out of a freezer as an approaching woman’s voice made itself heard down the hallway. It was a nasal, penetrating, attention-grabbing voice.

“This is precisely the sort of misunderstanding that can be avoided if facilitators trained in maximizing message content are employed early in the process,” she was saying. “I *begged* Fernie not to overlook the enormous potential of good communication, but the strategic value of quality reiteration of our company’s primary mission was never adequately prioritized.”

A middle-aged woman followed one of the agents into the lab, and for a moment, Corinna just stared at her. Such a juvenile retro look would have been noticeable even in a university, but she didn’t stop at the shaved head

and cheek decal. Her attention to detail went down to the pink bubble of gum she now blew out, which contrasted loudly with her scarlet lipstick.

The bubble popped with the suddenness of small arms fire, and she said, "Hi, Teague," with a smile, as if nothing was happening.

Corinna stuck her head back in the freezer, hoping to avoid being the next target, and heard her follow the agent back out into the hall.

The sounds of, "...targeted facilitation of information providers ... upsizing our message to the public," faded down the hall.

Corinna cautiously lifted her head out of the freezer.

"She isn't the one who wrote the mission statement, by any chance?" she asked Teague in an undertone.

He rolled his eyes.

"Meet Wanda Bowieski. Head of PR."

They worked in silence for some minutes.

"Is she good buddies with Myra Bloom?"

"No," said Teague. "That's Fernie. Although," he added as an afterthought, "Wanda caused you about as much trouble as Bloom. She's the one who noticed your work."

"Her? I assumed it was whoever did the computer spiders for the company."

"It was, but our sysop set that up to be automated. I'd spot-check it now and again, but I never really saw the point. It was just delaying the inevitable. Wanda was always after anything that would make me look bad, so she must have been checking carefully. She made a big deal of it to Fernie as something I'd missed, and the rest, as they say, is history."

"So why hasn't she been arrested?"

"They're probably trying to figure out how *not* to," said Teague, as the faint sounds of her voice penetrated all the way to their room from the other corner of the building.

The woman from the UN, who was the most senior of the authorities scouring Lioxx, appeared at the door to the lab.

"We need to have a meeting," she said without preamble. "There's been a complication. Where is the company's conference room?"

Corinna followed Teague as he rounded up the various agents and shepherded them into a well-appointed room with expensive, padded leather swivel chairs around a long table. The Chief Financial Officer was there, with a state trooper posted behind him. It hadn't taken them long to find something on him. The agents seemed wooden, but were, apparently, effective. Or maybe the lapses were so obvious that even inert agents could find them as soon as they took the trouble to look.

The UN representative began speaking.

"As we were going through the procedures to freeze Lioxx funds, we saw that a large transfer of assets had just been booked to the CFO's terminal. Ms. Pope transferred ninety three percent of the company's liquid assets to an un-

known destination. Law enforcement personnel are on their way to the bank as we speak.”

They needed her next location, thought Corinna, not her last one.

“How much money are we talking about?” asked Teague.

“Over one hundred million dollars,” said the U. N. representative, who seemed to be the accountant among the officials.

Jee-sus, thought Corinna. That would probably make clean-up –.

“Clean-up must,” continued the UN rep, “by law, use company assets before using taxpayer monies. The clean-up will, therefore, be placed on hold until such of Lioxx assets as can be liquefied, have been.”

Corinna sat straight suddenly. That was not an option. Didn’t these people have any idea how much could happen, and how fast? Teague must be thinking the same thing, because she saw him raise his hand a few centimeters to indicate that he had something to say.

The UN rep nodded at him, and kept right on talking. Duly noted, her nod said. We’ll get to you when we get to you. Meanwhile she wandered off into a lecture on the market value of remaining assets.

If Teague didn’t do something to make her listen, Corinna was going to interrupt her, protocol or no protocol.

He sat there, looking thoughtful. Then he looked at her – she knew she was staring at him, forcing herself to wait for him to get on with it – and a smile ghosted across his face.

The next time he raised his hand and received a nod, he took it as permission to speak, although that obviously wasn’t how the UN rep had meant it.

“Two things,” said Teague. “If you sell off Lioxx scientific assets, it’ll take that much longer for me to start synthesizing anti-terminator. Time is of the essence. Both Dr. Mansur,” he nodded toward her, “and I have noted reports coming in from here in Louisiana, as well as Texas, where the contamination has been evident the longest, that the terminator has undergone lateral gene transfer into three new, common species of marine algae. In simple terms, it’s spreading. The rapid, exponential phase of contamination could happen any time. We have no way of knowing when. This is not just a biological problem. The costs of cleanup are rising exponentially. We do not have the option of sitting on our hands.”

About three people tried to interrupt him, but Corinna had to admire how he rolled right over them. It took years of practice in meetings to grow so good at that.

“So what I’d like to propose is this,” he continued. “Keep the scientific infrastructure intact and I will synthesize test quantities of anti-terminator and perform field trials for effectiveness using my own funds. I can’t keep all of Lioxx running, but I probably won’t need more than one tech, and I’ll hire him or her using my own money.”

Corinna realized after a moment that she looked just as flummoxed as everyone else in the room. He was talking about spending a couple of hun-

dred thousand dollars. Nobody tried to say anything, even though he was finished.

“That is very forthcoming of you, Dr. Willett,” said the UN rep at last. “We will factor that into our planning. If Ms. Pope can be found quickly, it may be possible to recover most of those assets. Unfortunately, I just received a message indicating that she was no longer at the bank when law enforcement arrived.”

Surely, they were bound to find her soon, Corinna told herself, given that everybody in the whole world was looking for her. Except, of course, for some important people among the local police. It occurred to her to wonder how much a person could accomplish with the resources of a Chief of Police at her disposal. Corinna had an unpleasant image of running from Fernie-financed goons for the rest of her life, and passing her hundred-foot yacht on the way.

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Unfortunately, although the officials said they wanted to find Pope quickly, they didn't actually do anything about it. She was missing, so it was up to the New Orleans Police Department to find her. Yes, they knew there was a problem with that, but it would take a while to go through the necessary channels to set aside local jurisdiction. Use the damn FBI, Corinna almost said, but she managed to edit out 'damn' just in time. There was no indication Pope had crossed state lines, so it wasn't the FBI's jurisdiction. Yet.

Corinna was eating a late dinner in the cramped quarters of Teague's sister's kitchen. Tyrone was chewing his gum less meaningfully these days, having been somewhat mollified by all the groceries Teague had bought. Melba was off herding the kids to bed, and Corinna was complaining to Teague and Oziel.

“By the time those turkeys find Fernie's tracks, she'll be so far away, she'll be in the jurisdiction of Space Command.”

Corinna knew it was about the fifth time she'd made this point, but both Oziel and Teague were too polite to mention it.

“So hire a dick,” said a voice so unexpected, it made Corinna jump. Tyrone had spoken. It took her a second to realize he didn't mean dick. He meant dick, as in detective.

Why hadn't she thought of that?

“We could, you know. Just because we have the combined police forces of the US as well as the U. N. supposedly working on this, doesn't mean they couldn't use some help, right?”

The next morning, Jeb Walker retained the best detective he knew, but it changed nothing. Fernalda Pope had disappeared from the earth. The millions desperately needed to fix her crimes against life had disappeared with her.

And she had plenty of money to hire as many guns as she wanted.

Chapter 15

Corinna sat on a mattress in the kid's bedroom, and waited for Oziel to be done in the shower. At night, they took two mattresses off the bunk beds and put them on the floor, side by side. She was staring at the opposite wall, and realized she was looking at a lurid poster of something that had, no doubt, started out human but was now definitely a video star. The magenta and black whole-body paint would have been one thing, but combined with the bug glasses, it took her straight into a different and a dreadful world. She tried to stare at some other part of the wall.

This world was bad enough. She was going to have to get pointers from the police about avoiding hitmen. Actually, come to think of it, she probably had an even better expert ready to hand. Oziel probably knew all about it. Ironically, being in a housing project made her feel safer, but in reality, as soon as Fernie hired a gun who could blend in, one more shooting would scarcely register here. And the same went for New York.

She needed to find something less depressing to think about. However, that led only to the prospect of concentrating on job hunting again. God help her. Maybe the last few days hadn't been so bad after all.

With a heavy sigh, she started paging through her wristpad messages, dealing with the latest crop of people she wished she didn't have to hear from. She should have known better. Two more messages had come in, thanking her for her excellent application, complimenting her on her credentials, and saying they'd hired someone else. It was too late after too long a day for that sort of thing. She should have ignored her email till morning.

She should also face facts. For two months on Mars, and now two months on Earth, she'd pelted the world with job applications, and nothing had happened except for one polite note from Hamid about how she'd keep her on file. Given that a research position had recently opened up in that lab, there was nothing to stop a job offer except a lack of desire to give her one. There was no point wasting both her life and Oziel's while she tried to break down brick walls with her head.

Oziel had not objected, by so much as one too-patient look, to having the only paycheck while they were in New York. If anything, he seemed quietly proud of it. However, if she wanted to support herself, the writing was on the wall. She'd be doing a tech job. If she was doing a tech job, she really didn't

have to drag him all over the planet. She had, in effect, hauled him all the way out here, away from everything he knew, for nothing. She could do a tech job just as well in Venezuela.

The door opened and he came in, a towel wrapped around his waist. A moment later, he was wonderfully naked, just as if he'd never left the tropics.

"What do you miss most about Caracas?" Corinna asked him, as he made himself comfortable beside her.

He needed no time to think before answering her question.

"You didn't sleep in clothes there."

Well, they were pyjamas she'd borrowed from Melba, not clothes, but she knew what he meant. She skinned out of them.

"Better?"

"Ohh. Much." He moved closer to her.

She had his full attention, but not the sort where he'd be concentrating on what she had to say. Now that she thought about it, he probably avoided pyjamas because he was doing something subtle, like trying to lead by example.

"All you had to do was say something, for Pete's sake. Why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't think you'd do something so ... like that, unless you'd be uncomfortable otherwise."

"You realize, you've just volunteered to keep me warm whenever I want?"

"Even better," he said, starting to make sure she was warm enough without the tedious formality of a request. She, too, lost interest in talking.

However, after a lapse of time, during which she became downright sweaty, she remembered that her original purpose had been to ask him a question.

"Hey. You interrupted me and got us totally off the subject. Sometimes I think you don't listen to a *word* I say."

"*Mea maxima culpa*," he murmured, putting one closed hand to his chest in an unrepentant salute.

"So, what do you miss about home?"

"My home is where you are, *mí cielo*."

He wasn't hard to love, her Zio. She snuggled closer to him.

"Okay, let me rephrase that. If I was there, what else would you miss about it?"

He took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh.

"Oh. Then? Everything. My family, my friends, the food, the neighbors saying hello, the sun, the colors, everything."

She'd thought as much. If she missed his family, after knowing them one mere month, how must he feel?

"We better go back then, don't you think?"

He turned around, black eyes wide with hope, looking into hers for answers in a way that made her smile.

"You wouldn't mind? You want to go back?"

"When you vanished, my folks were nice about it – nicer than I expected,

actually – but it was your folks who really held my hand. And I had fun working for Guzmán as a tech. More fun than I’ve had in any of my other jobs. If I’ve been homesick for Caracas, I can barely imagine how you must feel.”

He hugged her so tightly, she began to wonder how long she could do without breathing when he remembered to loosen up.

“Corinna, *querida, mí amor*, in that case I’ve been thinking about what I want to do, like you said. It involves going back, though. I didn’t think we wanted to do that. I –”

“Well, come on, spit it out. Just because we have the rest of the night, doesn’t mean we don’t have better things to do with most of it.” She grinned at him and then tried to look encouraging.

“You know, it’s all your fault I don’t listen to a word you say.” Then he leaned back, his arm still around her shoulders. “If I did what I want, I’d stop taking care of rich kids. Their parents are just too fried. But I really do like working with children, and there’s about ten thousand in the barrio who could use some help. I’d like to start a center in my neighborhood, a place where children could go that was safe and interesting. I know the place and I know just how it should be done. We wouldn’t have to *live* in the barrio,” he added quickly, as if she had already started objecting.

“Zio,” she interrupted him before he could get rolling, “quit worrying. That sounds like a great idea. And you could start a cybercafé on the side, they could learn all sorts of skills, we could contract out to Marco to fix everything they broke.”

He smiled, shining.

“Oh, I *like* that.”

“And,” she went on, “I could probably figure out how to write social services grants and get them to drop more money on you.”

He said nothing then for whole minutes, just held her hand, stroking her fingers. He seemed to be speechless for the first time since she’d known him.

“And,” she suddenly added with a wicked smirk, “we could contract out to Quintón and his friends to guard the equipment!”

“Shut up,” he said, and then kissed her to make sure she did it.

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They discussed their plans with Teague the next morning, but without the benefit of the post-battle calm. It was Saturday, cartoons were shrieking and bellowing and crashing in the living room, parents and kids were doing the same in the rest of the apartment, and Teague was muttering about how he knew there’d been a reason why he hadn’t visited in years.

“Hang in there, bro’,” Oziel said encouragingly. “There’s always Angola to look forward to.”

“That’s not funny.”

Oziel grinned at him in a way that suggested he could be even less funny if he wanted to be, and Teague started talking about New York again.

“So you two are going to fly back tonight? Are you going straight to Caracas from there?”

“We’ll be flying out at three thirty. I need to get some samples sorted out at McClintock’s lab. Apparently some of the vials in the freezers survived the fire. And I’d also like to do something to help with the clean-up. Oziel is going to talk to Smithers about the month’s notice he’s supposed to give. If she holds him to it, we’ll go back to Venezuela after that, if not, then sooner. Tickets get expensive toward Christmas, so we’re shooting for the nineteenth of December.”

“That’s nice,” said Teague.

He sounded glum. Actually, it was surprising he wasn’t worse. Oziel had been fizzing with happiness all morning, and Corinna knew she’d been feeling decidedly perky herself. Even the knowledge that Fernie had escaped couldn’t depress her this morning. Meanwhile, Teague had to slog through anti-terminators and the media and the law. She knew she ought to feel more concerned, but she just couldn’t manage it.

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Oziel gave Smithers notice his first day back on the job, and Corinna came down from McClintock’s lab to meet Oziel for lunch in Central Park. They were going to feed the ducks, and make a ceremony out of booking their return tickets to Caracas.

Several of the wilier ducks spotted the bag of bread Oziel was carrying even before the two of them had found a bench, but when they sat down, he didn’t start feeding them or eating his own lunch.

“I guess I should find out exactly what I’m going back to,” he said with a subdued air. “See whether I’ve been called up while I was having a good time in the swamp.”

“Oh. Yeah,” said Corinna. She’d been doing her damndest not to think about it.

She handed him her wristpad. He looped the earpiece on, took a deep breath, and tapped in the address.

Once he reached the relevant official, he said nothing but “*Ey*” and “*Si*” and “*bueno*” for a while. Then he disconnected. Corinna looked at him with raised eyebrows.

“You’ve saved my life again, my scientist.” He gave her a small sardonic smile, and her eyebrows went higher. “The Lioxx terminator hit the news Friday, and now that the governments of Venezuela and Colombia realize the

source of the problem is in the U. S., they've decided to sue this country for lost fishing revenues in the international trade court. They're not going to have a war, and this morning they cancelled the draft."

"Oh, thank God! Oh, Zio! Oh —." She wrapped her arms around him and held him. "Maybe everything will work out in the end. Maybe ... anyway, this is one big thing we don't have to worry about. Where's that bread? Let's make a few ducks happy."

He chuckled, gave her half the bread, and asked how things had gone that morning at Columbia.

"McClintock's being a real trooper about it. It's obvious now that the fire was set to destroy my data, but he said he realized after I wrote to him and he looked at my files that there was no question of me reverse engineering anything. One of the postdocs and a couple of grad students who lost data were squiddy-eyed, but McClintock never said anything about charity cases ruining his life."

"To hell with the stupid postdocs," he said, feeding bread to an importunate duck who was standing on his foot because it was trying to climb onto his lap. It was a big, white one. The ducks in Central Park were very comfortable with life.

"What about your boss?" she asked.

Smithers, he said, had been bowled over that he'd worried about his obligations instead of simply quitting. She wasn't used to this Old World courtesy, apparently.

"She has a niece she's training who's going to take over the business at some point, so she wants me to stay the month, but she said she wouldn't hold me to it if there was an emergency."

And so Corinna booked two tickets to Caracas on December 19th.

It was done. Amazing, how a tiny motion could change the whole course of a life. Two lives. They sat and fed New York ducks — some of whom looked like they were considering lawsuits if the two bread purveyors didn't get on with it.

"So, Corita," he finally asked her, "does it feel good to be going? Are you happy?"

"It feels different, but, yes, it feels good. It's not the life I ever envisioned for myself. Actually," she said, struck by a sudden thought, "I guess going back to the barrio is not the life you envisioned either."

He responded with a one-sided grin and a nod.

"And who knows, maybe we'll actually be better off, if we're beyond the long reach of the Fernie and her hundred million dollars."

"Oh," he said, and became very still.

"What?"

He hesitated, glanced at her, fed a duck or two, and finally answered.

"Is that why you want to go? Because you think we'll be safer?"

"Zio, I only thought of it now, and it struck me as ironic, so I said that

mostly as a joke. In all seriousness – and I don't mean to be insulting – I suspect it would be harder to get away with murder here than in Caracas.”

“Yes,” he agreed gloomily. “You're probably right.”

“Hey,” she poked an elbow into his ribs, “quit it. My motives are pure. You're supposed to be pleased.” He broke into a smile at her. “Everything's new. I feel like a teenager, without a clue what I'm doing next.”

“What I'm doing next,” he said, “is going back to work. They have a very limited understanding of lunch hours in this country. You want to come with me before heading back to the lab? Señora Smithers was saying she hoped to have the chance to see you before we left.”

“Sure. I'd like to say goodbye. And if I can work the conversation around to it, I'd be curious to know what made her come to her senses about you.”

Oziel frowned.

“I didn't ask. I was afraid I'd start breaking things about why she lost her senses to begin with.”

“Yeah,” said Corinna, squeezing his hand as they walked. “There is that.”

As they entered the day care center, there was the unfamiliar noise of an angry man shouting about a “bitch.” There were none of the usual noises of well-bred children demanding their turn on the new bubble machine *now*. They were all listening intently to the new vocabulary.

Oziel marched purposefully toward the inner office from which the yelling came. Corinna followed a few steps behind, and smiled to herself when the shouting died away. Whoever it was had noticed Oziel.

It was a handsome, well-dressed gentleman, wearing the thinnest, most understated analog watch money could buy. The thing had probably cost ten thousand euros and who-knew-what in dollars.

“I am not having that goddamn bitch reneging on the settlement.” He was no longer shouting, but the vocabulary was much the same. “This is the second goddamn time. You can tell her she's facing a suit if she keeps this up, and if you're helping her, your ass is going to get nailed to the wall. To the wall. You hear me?”

“Mr. Mattingly, there is no need –”

“There bloody well is a need. This is the second goddamn time –”

“Ms. Smithers,” came Oziel's quiet voice as he stepped close enough to the gentleman to loom over him, “has he explained what the problem is?”

The expensive gent fell silent.

“No, but I know what it is. And I must say, Mr. Mattingly, if you'd let me get a word in edgewise, that I'm in complete agreement with you. I wouldn't dream of interfering with Gerry Bloom's custody arrangements.”

Gerry Bloom? thought Corinna. Was this the father of Myra Bloom's son? Now what?

“You've come to pick Gerry up?” asked Oziel.

“Damn right, and this is the second goddamn –”

“Yes,” said Oziel. “The second goddamn time something has happened.”

Corinna, keeping to the background, stifled a laugh. He said it so quietly and so neutrally, he managed to make it sound like a statement instead of sarcasm.

The gent had to stare up to try to face Oziel down, which didn't work, of course.

"So what is the problem?" asked Oziel.

Smithers answered. "Gerry's custody arrangement requires Mr. Mattingly to pick him up today for the next three days, but Ms. Bloom didn't bring him here this morning and apparently made no alternate arrangements."

"And this is the second" The gent trailed off as Oziel turned a direct, unsmiling look on him.

Smithers continued to explain. "Yes, the same thing happened when Mr. Mattingly came to pick Gerry up when there was that whole ... business ... the week before last. That was when I realized that Dr. Mansur had to be right since, obviously, if she was simply on vacation, she wouldn't have forgotten that his father would be picking Gerry up that day. I'd take a very dim view of neglecting obligations under visitation agreements in any case, but —"

This had to be incomprehensible to the two men, but Corinna suddenly understood that Gerry's first unexplained disappearance had given Smithers her radical change of heart regarding Oziel.

Once his boss finished her sentence, Oziel asked the well-dressed father, "Have you called Ms. Bloom to find out if there is an explanation?"

"Hell, no. I don't talk to that bitch."

Oziel looked like he sympathized.

"My lawyer talks to that bitch, and I'll be damned if I'm gonna run up two hundred dollars in legal fees just to hear that she's too stupid to check the time."

"Could we call her for him?" Oziel asked his boss.

"Well, sure. Of course. If you'd let me get a word in edgewise, Mr. Mattingly, I would have suggested it ages ago."

Melanie Smithers had the address for Bloom's personal comm pin, the one she had with her at all times.

There was no answer. It was not set to take messages.

Ms. Smithers raised her eyebrows. She worked her way down the list of contacts, until she wound up with Bloom's executive secretary and then her housekeeper.

"She what?" everyone heard Smithers ask.

They didn't hear the answer because Smithers was using her earpiece.

"I see." The boss had a thin, set look around her lips.

"All right. Well, thank you very much."

She removed the earpiece looped over her ear and looked at Mr. Mattingly.

"I have bad news, I'm afraid. Myra Bloom apparently packed and left for the airport four days ago, taking Gerry with her." She paused. "The housekeeper said she also took all her jewelry."

The expensive gent launched into a rant about bitches.

“Four days ago was Thursday. We saw her in New Orleans on Friday,” exclaimed Corinna.

The father seemed to have a low opinion of her relevance. He didn’t care if his ex was in Timbuktu, so long as his son was here. He said so on a continuous loop.

“Was the warrant for her arrest out already?” Corinna asked.

“Arrest!” said the father, suddenly becoming interested. “What’s she done? I’m gonna get her custody revoked. That bitch is history. I’m going to—”

“We need to find your son first,” Oziel pointed out, which stopped the rant in its tracks.

Smithers suggested it was time to bring in the lawyer. The lawyer called the police, and the police checked for Bloom’s ID at airports to find out where she’d gone.

Corinna went to buy some donuts at the rather good corner bakery. She had no desire to return to fire cleanup with all this going on, and the atmosphere seemed to her to be in distinct need of donuts. By the time she returned, a new mystery had developed.

Even though Myra Bloom had been in New Orleans on Friday, neither she nor Gerry Bloom appeared on any scanners, anywhere. They had vanished off the face of the Earth.

Gerry’s expensive dad was rude and loud, but Corinna felt sorry for him as he sat on one of the low kids’ tables, calling people ever more desperately as he realized that his son had been taken away from him. She saw him sit there, deflated, after the last one.

She went and found Oziel in another room.

“Do the kids ever leave stuff here?”

“All the time,” he answered. “We have drawers to keep things sorted, if we know whose it is, till the parents can pick it up.”

“Well, if Gerry left anything behind, his dad probably would rather have it than leave it to be trampled by the other kids.”

“Good thinking,” agreed Oziel. He took the father around all the rooms of the day care center. The man continued muttering about “that bitch,” mainly, it seemed, to comfort himself with a sense of continuity, since he looked more stunned than angry at this point. He found a designer jacket and one of a pair of designer mittens.

“And that,” he cried suddenly, pouncing on a children’s book for toddlers with thick card-stock pages. “I gave him that for his birthday in September and that bitch just lets it get stepped on and forgotten.” He opened it to the inside front cover.

In amongst the happy frogs leaping around lily pads, Corinna could see an inscription: *To my dear son, who read this with his dad on his third birthday.* And then, in the crooked hand of a child’s first letters, the name *Gerry Winters*.

“What’s this Winters bullshit?” cried Mattingly. “If that bitch is trying to get

his name changed to some dork's she's going out with, I'll sue her ass to Antarctica. I couldn't stop her from changing his name to Bloom, but I'll —"

"Could I see that?" asked Oziel. He looked at the writing, frowning. "Are you sure this is Gerry's writing?"

"Of course I'm sure. Do you think I don't know my own son's damn writing? He always made his e's that way, and we were just starting to work on getting his r's to stand up straight."

"If it's all right, I'd like to make a copy of this," said Oziel to the father.

"What the hell for? What the bleeding —"

"Because I think you're right that she's teaching him a new name," answered Oziel, "but it doesn't belong to a dork. It belongs to someone dead."

Corinna's eyes widened. That could only mean one thing. She explained it to the expensive dad as he sputtered toward a rolling boil again.

"Identity theft," she said. "We know Bloom's evading arrest, we know she was in New Orleans, and yet there's no trace of her at any airport. She must have bought Winters' identity, and now, with this information, we may be able to get back on her trail. And find your son," she added, when she didn't seem to be holding Mr. Mattingly's interest.

Oziel meanwhile had printed out a copy in Smithers' office, and was saying, "Now the police. That cop in New York was named Whittier."

Corinna had a direct contact for her, and moments later her serious face was looking at them from Smithers' large screen phone.

"Yes? What can I do for you?"

"You can find my son, is what you can do," Mattingly inserted himself in front of the screen with his usual charm. Whittier became more interested after Oziel told her what they'd found and what they suspected. She asked someone in her office to wait, and immediately began searching airport security data.

"No indication of the name of the adult?" she asked after a while.

"No," said Oziel.

"You're looking for my boy," Mattingly went on. "Not that bitch. She's history. She's" He seemed set to provide background commentary for the foreseeable future.

"There's a few hundred 'Winters' a day going through area airports, and there's several days in question. It's indexed according to the adult passenger. Four Gerrys show up on Friday, for instance, but they're all adults. We have to narrow it down."

"I have Gerry Bloom's iris scans on file," said Smithers, leaning into video range. "Melanie Smithers," she introduced herself after Whittier gave her a look of who-might-you-be? "I run the day care center. I have complete ID data on all the children in case anything happens."

In moments, Gerry's iris data had reached the policewoman, she cross-checked the available Winterses against the physical ID, and said,

"Bingo. The adult is listed as Leslie Winters." Then they could see her shake

her head in amazement as she looked away at her computer screen. “Total identity theft. This is only the third time in my whole career that I’ve seen this. She has to be getting help from a police officer somewhere, because the fake info in our database is totally clean.”

“Fernie Pope is supposed to have a direct line to the New Orleans Police Department,” Corinna pointed out. Whittier nodded.

“But what kind of sense does it make?” Corinna went on. “Bloom may have stolen all Winters’ ID data, but she can’t change her own irises. I thought the scans weren’t fooled by contact lenses.”

“No,” Oziel shook his head. “She has associated her old name with Winters’ iris data, and has her real irises associated with her new name. You just switch the label, so to speak, on the two sets of data. You do that with all the ID methods: face scans, hand scans, DNA, everything. If you’re perfectly consistent, the only way to detect the switch is if some person recognizes you. She, however, forgot about the scan at Smithers’. Or maybe she couldn’t get at it and had to hope nobody would think of it until it was too late.”

Corinna knew that finding out who the real Leslie Winters might have been would take a lot of digging through archived death certificates, possibly going back for decades. The best ID thieves preferred the oldest identities since they were the hardest to trace and the least likely to result in embarrassing meetings with anyone who knew the original person.

“So are you going to talk all day or find my son?” Mattingly wanted to know.

Whittier looked at him briefly, but otherwise ignored him.

“Okay. A search on Leslie Winters, aka Bloom, shows her passing through Newark last Thursday night. The warrant for her arrest came out Friday morning, so she was not, technically, evading arrest, but it sure looks like she knew. The NOPD may not be the only leaky department.”

“Well, get after her,” Mattingly said.

“The fake Winters also opened a New Orleans bank account on Friday with fifty thousand dollars,” Whittier continued. “So that involved one more iris scan. And – oh, here’s something interesting. The database we use for drug interdiction says a Winters with that iris scan rented a seven meter inboard motorboat with a five hundred kilometer range for December first.”

“Planning to skip the country,” said Oziel. “Makes sense. I wonder why she’s waiting a couple of weeks to do it.”

The father paled beneath his expensive tan as the implications sank in.

Whittier pointed out that Bloom might be waiting for the search to cool, or that the rental might be a decoy to draw attention away from the real date.

“So that bitch could be trying to get my boy out of the country even sooner?” shouted Mattingly. “What the hell are you waiting for? Get your butts out there! You think –”

“I take it, Mr. –?”

“Mattingly. Gerome Mattingly.”

"I take it, Mr. Mattingly," said Whittier with glacial calm, "that you wish to join the case against Ms. Bloom."

"Join the case! Whaddya mean, *join* the case?"

"Bloom is being sought on a charge of kidnapping –"

"I should think she's bloody well being sought on –"

"– of Mr. Garcia," Whittier concluded.

The father's jaw dropped and he looked up at Oziel.

"*Him?* You've got to be fucking kidding me. Jesus fucking Christ What the hell was she" And then he obviously decided that he didn't want to discuss what the hell she was thinking, at least not under Oziel's incinerating glare.

"Join the case," the father said. "Right."

The forms for Mattingly's charges were filled out online, he spelled out his lawyer's contact information, and, at long last, Mr. Mattingly, carrying a small jacket, one mitten, and a cheerful book, took himself away.

"Well," came Ms. Smithers' tired voice, "I feel like I ought to give you combat pay, Oziel. Overtime, in any case. It's an hour past your usual time. Take two hours out of tomorrow – unless *he* shows up again."

"So now what?" said Corinna, as she and Oziel walked toward the subway. "I'll bet anything those two, Bloom and Fernie, are in cahoots."

Oziel nodded. "Two identity thefts are almost as easy as one. What I'd really like to do is splice into the New Orleans police computer systems, and see who they have listed under La Fernie's iris scans."

"They have to have her original scans on Lioxx systems," said Corinna, reaching for her wristpad, "and Teague's probably there. He's probably there twenty four hours a day."

He was, but Fernie's iris scan wasn't. All of Pope's physical identifying data had disappeared from the company.

"That proves it," said Oziel. "If you're going to do an ID theft, you want to get rid of the real data. The only difference is, she did a more thorough job than Bloom. Teague, we'll call you back once we're at a nice anonymous terminal at the library. Then I'll find her data on the Lioxx machines."

"García, old buddy, the FBI has the server locked down. You sure you want to mess with that?"

"But you have access, *sí?*"

"Yeah."

"Well, then, you let me in."

"Okay. That should work. Hey, listen. Is Corinna there?"

"Right here, Teague," Corinna leaned toward her wristpad in Oziel's hand.

"Well, put your Dr. Mansur hat on. I've been bringing myself up to speed with the situation here, and I'm worried. I know that terminator of mine, and given the way and the amount it's already spread, I think it could go exponential any day now. I need some really good help and I need it now, so do you know any top notch out-of-work postdocs?"

"Besides me, you mean?" she asked with a grin he couldn't see.

“Not besides you, but I assume you’re unavailable.”

“True. Well, let me give it some thought, and I’ll ask around. McClintock or Hamid is bound to know of someone. I’ll get back to you on it in the next day or two.”

A short while later, Corinna and Oziel were walking up the steps of a branch library, and he knew exactly where to go.

“This is where I did most of my AnchorGene work,” he whispered to her. “Not at your parents’ house.”

Once he was deep in the bowels of the Lioxx server, he searched for recently erased files, and then searched those for data in the format of an iris scan.

“That didn’t take long,” he said, as some gibberish scrolled up. “She obviously didn’t have the time to trash all of it. This file was just sitting there, one level down.”

Teague sounded pleased that they were once again on the track of “Good Old Fernie.”

“Not yet, bro’. We’ll let you know after the next step at the police department.”

Corinna looked over his shoulder as he went through the complicated rigamarole of breaking into what should have been a highly secure server. He was shaking his head.

“They have so many undefended ports on this thing, it can’t be an accident. They must be leaving it open on purpose to make unauthorized use of their own system. *Bueno*. Now what do they have associated with this iris data ... ?”

Screens’ worth of gibberish went by and suddenly he said,

“Barbara Conway. That’s who she is now. Barbara Conway.” And then he leaned back, thinking. “So now what?”

It was a good question. Without letting the police know he was a world-class splicer, how could they pass this information on to them? Nor were the police likely to get it independently, since none of them could splice into other people’s computers.

“Well,” said Corinna slowly, “I know what Tyrone would say: ‘Hire a dick.’ If Pope is in New Orleans, she’s got to be doing something in her Conway persona – taking money out of a bank machine, *something* – so somebody who knows how should be able to find her.”

“We already hired a detective,” countered Oziel. “Señor Walker can tell her we did half her work for her.”

“You know, Zio, between the detective and your special talents and Teague’s need for help, maybe we ought to just head back to New Orleans now, and leave for Caracas from there.”

“But I told Smithers –”

“Oh, screw Smithers.”

He looked surprised at this unbusinesslike attitude.

“Let me rephrase that. *Don’t* screw Smithers. I’d get severely jealous.” He had the funniest expression on his face, which made her laugh. “Seriously, Zio,

tell her you'd like to exercise your option to leave now. It's nothing but the truth."

So she rebooked their tickets and then they continued on their way home, looking forward to a nice, normal, quiet dinner, just the two of them, without any looming disasters.

Instead, what they got was a major stroke of fortune. Corinna's wristpad vibrated and her mother's excited voice came on the line.

"Rinna, you have to swing by here. Something just came up."

"What, Mom?"

"Jeez, don't you want it to be a surprise?"

"No, Mom."

"Rinna, sometimes you have even less sense of humor than your father. It's about an envelope. It came by *mail* today, and it looks official. It's from Dr. Hamid, Medgar Memorial Institute for Neurobiology and Neurophysics."

"Oh," said Corinna. The only legal document Hamid was likely to be sending her was a job offer. "We'll be there as soon as the ferry gets in."

It was hard to know what to talk about, after that. It was useless to speculate on the contents of the letter, and Corinna found it impossible to keep her mind focused on anything else. Oziel talked about neutral topics: his uncle Estevan's new job as fish buyer for a restaurant chain and Sylvia's news that her oldest had been found carrying drugs and what his father had done about it. Corinna settled herself inside the circle of Oziel's arm around her shoulder and was grateful that he knew perfectly well she wasn't capable of more than little attentive noises.

The letter from Hamid lay on the kitchen counter. Corinna opened it. She read it. It was, indeed, an official job offer for the Senior Postdoctoral Researcher position that had recently opened up.

Corinna breathed carefully, as if she had been translated to an alternate universe and any sudden motion might make the bubble pop. She sat down slowly at the kitchen table.

To think that this had come now, when she'd given up all hope of any such thing. It was impossible not to feel that success had arrived *because* she'd given up all hope.

"So, now what, Corita?" she heard Oziel ask near her.

She looked up, surprised to find herself still in the same place.

"Get your jacket," she said. "Let's go look at the garden."

He glanced significantly through the window at the defeated-looking grass and leafless branches, but did as she asked.

"It's freezing out here," he said, pulling up his collar.

"We also don't need to worry about being interrupted. Mom's going to come bubbling back in any minute, having given me my two minutes of privacy, and we should talk before she does."

Dr. Hamid said the position focused on nerve growth factors, which she knew was something of a new direction for Corinna, but if she was interested

in the position, Dr. Hamid would look forward to hearing from her.

Interested didn't begin to describe it.

Of course, Farida Hamid's lab was where old Nat worked. She'd thought of that as a distinct disadvantage, but now she'd be one rung above him. It was a big enough lab that she wouldn't have to see much of him, except to stare at him from a height if he got behind on his turn at the autoclave. Man oh man, talk about poetic justice.

The comfortable house, the back garden in its November stage of decline, all became entirely satisfactory as a backdrop for mental pictures of pleasant revenge. To say nothing of what it would do for her career.

She'd promised Teague – but he could sort himself out. His work would take longer, but, surely, that wouldn't really matter. And Myra and Fernie, well, she and Oziel would just have to find some way of steering the cops toward the two women's current identities. Then those two would be caught, and everything would be fine.

She became conscious of Oziel looking at her and realized she had a gloating grin on her face.

He was subdued.

They'd been planning to fly to Caracas in a month. She'd forgotten about that in the first flush of triumph.

She turned to him, minus the grin.

"It's nice that somebody finally woke up and offered me a job, don't you think?"

"I think if you want to take it, we will stay here."

She came all the way back from her roseate dreams of success and revenge. He looked resigned. He'd be giving up all his plans. She'd kind of, sort of, forgotten that just a little bit.

"You'd do that?" she asked, letting herself remember what she was asking of him. "You'd give everything up? Again?"

He nodded.

"Si, mi cielo."

When he gave his word, it stayed given.

She looked around at the garden, the hedges and the trees that let the neighbors' houses peep through. She felt the comfort that comes from an insulating layer of money between yourself and the rest of the world.

"So, what do you think? Do you want to do it?" he asked.

"You'd rather go back, right?" she asked him instead of answering.

"Corinna, I can't ask more of you than you can give. I know I can go with you and be happy. I don't know if the other way around would be enough for you. You've spent your whole life working for this. I only want to go back if you want to too."

"Oh, Zio." She took his hand and threaded her fingers through his. He wasn't even trying to push her into thinking his way. Instead, he was looking at it through her eyes.

Logically, that meant she should look at it through his.

What if he said he was going back, regardless, and she could come if she wanted? What if he made her choose instead of giving her everything?

You only get one thing, he had said long ago. So if she had to choose, what would she take?

"It's a good job, Zio," she continued, "but there's another factor. It's where Nat works. I'd be senior to him."

"Ah," was Oziel's only comment. He squeezed her hand and let go.

He had said he didn't know whether she could go with him and be happy. At this point it was becoming hard to remember how her life had been before he'd come into it. There had been fewer colors and much less reason to get up in the morning, she remembered that. Her heart had plodded along on its daily business without much leaping. It hadn't seemed terribly unsatisfactory at the time, but could she return to it after this? If he made her choose, there was no way she could go without him and be happy.

She began to realize what she was asking of herself, if she did this. She'd be making her choice, and it wouldn't be him.

Was there any universe where that was what she wanted?

If she was honest with herself, the main attraction of the job was revenge. Not even against Nat, although that would be fun too, but mainly against the whole boiling of academe, telling her she wasn't good enough. It was the biggest neener-neener she could want.

She could buy that by taking away the light in Oziel's eyes when he talked about doing what he wanted to do.

Quite a trade.

And everybody would tell her how eminently sensible she was. It would be excellent for her career. She'd actually get that university professorship she'd spent her whole life working towards. Then she could go to faculty meetings.

Five minutes ago, it had never occurred to her such a choice could be questioned. Now ... now she didn't feel as if gravity had flipped. It was more like realizing she'd been walking on her hands, and suddenly found out what her feet were for.

She was surprised at how little regret she felt as she took the road that now looked obvious. Viewed for what it was, the choice lay between a world of love and laughter or a life underground. Merely because she'd worked for the latter didn't make it better.

Hamid's job wasn't the only interesting one in the world. As she looked at her choices, she found that her heart had set off down one path without looking back, apparently assuming that at some point her laggard mind would wake up and shout *hey, wait for me*.

"I think, Zio, what makes me happy is being with you, not any job. This is a good one, but there are other jobs. I can eventually find a good enough job in Caracas and it will all be the same, but you can't open your neighborhood center without your neighborhood."

He said nothing for a moment. He just looked at her.
“You’d give everything up?” He spoke in a whisper. “For me?”
She shook her head.
“It would only be everything if it included you. Otherwise, it doesn’t even come close.”

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That was how it happened that a few days later, after celebrating an early Thanksgiving with her parents, Corinna and Oziel were shaking hands with Teague at the New Orleans airport.

The detective had combed New Orleans for Conway and Winters, but so far with no results. Corinna and Oziel settled into the guest room at Jeb Walker’s house, and Corinna started working every day and half of most nights, helping Teague synthesize a test batch of anti-terminator. Oziel made them coffee and brought food at regular intervals. Somebody had to do it, he said.

And still there was nothing from the detective. The first of December came and went, but “Winters” never claimed her rented boat.

They discussed “Conway” and her co-conspirator over the pipettes and petri dishes.

“They’ve either already slipped away, or they’re leaving later,” said Teague.

“Or they’re not leaving at all,” grumbled Corinna. “They’re going to live between the walls at Fernie’s house till hell freezes over while the faithful family retainer sneaks out to buy them dog biscuits.”

“We should ask that detective of ours to look for large orders of dog biscuits,” said Oziel, stretched out at full length on a lab table because it was one in the morning.

The detective, it turned out the next morning, had been following a similar line of reasoning, but more effectively.

“This is hurricane season,” she was saying smugly when she called the Walker’s large screen kitchen phone as he and his guests were eating breakfast.

“So Fernie drowns,” said Corinna. “That doesn’t accomplish anything, unless we squeeze the money back out of her first.”

“True, but if she wanted to avoid drowning, she’d hire a skipper. I’ve been asking around. Yesterday I finally hit the jackpot. Two men have been hired to take a private motor yacht out for a multi-day cruise on December ninth. Hired by Barbara Conway.”

Chapter 16

It was one of those pleasant days that come to Louisiana in early December. Balmy breezes blew across a cloudless sky and the sun made diamonds out of every breaking wave at the bow of the boat. The only thing needed to make it perfect was the sight of Fernie in the yacht she had borrowed from one of her wealthy circle of acquaintances. Then they could call the Coast Guard and say they just happened to be in the area. However, so far, she hadn't cooperated.

Teague's old professor and colleague, Herman Mullin, conferred with him over a nautical map by the steering wheel. The ten-meter University of New Orleans research vessel was officially out to test the first batch of anti-terminator. Mullin had just steered their boat around the buoy which told them that the first test site was not far. Four one hundred-liter plastic vats of anti-terminator solution winked at them from the deck between the benches along the sides. Shiny plastic tubing connected the vats to two dispersers extending from the back of the research vessel.

Corinna and Oziel lolled on the padded benches aft. The sea breeze had the now-familiar, dirty dog smell, but Corinna was enjoying the view. The mouth of the Mississippi was a thin dark line on the northern horizon behind them, and the rest of the twinkling sea was interrupted only by two widely separated derelict oil rigs and a couple of ships barely visible on the southern horizon, chugging toward the deepwater port to the west. Oziel was scanning around for boats and examining any he saw with the binoculars.

"I could get used to the rigors of field work," said Corinna, sunning herself with her eyes half-closed.

Herman Mullin, who was an algologist and did field work regularly, expressed his opinion of her view with a snort.

"You gel jocks would droop like wet noodles the first time you got wet to the bone and you didn't have a change of underwear."

Terminology was a funny thing. Gels weren't central to studying DNA any more, and she was not, technically speaking, a jock, but the term had been applied to lab denizens for so long, it no longer mattered what it actually meant.

Oziel took the binoculars away from his eyes and clearly planned on defending her against an unjust charge, but Corinna waved him down. What he didn't know was that this jostling between outdoor and indoor scientists had been going on for centuries, and he'd be letting the side down if he implied

outdoor scientists had skills worth having.

“We,” said Corinna instead, “are smart enough to get in out of the rain.”

Oziel stared at her. Something told her that in his world one did not josh much older, full professors while they were steering the boat you sat in.

“Only because you all are too wimpy to be out in it in the first place,” insisted Mullin, coming right back at her.

“Well, then it’s lucky your field skills are up to arranging this excellent weather for us, or you’d have to spend all your time holding an umbrella over me, like a secret service agent.”

“See, that right there shows how little you know about field work. You bring your own umbrella or you do without. Now, I’m a nice guy, so I brought five gallons of water to share, figuring you all wouldn’t know to bring any.”

“Not so,” came Oziel’s slow voice, without even bothering to lower the binoculars, “some of us were taught how to do field work by Teague. We know all about bringing water.”

Corinna giggled. Man, did he learn fast.

“Teague!” Mullin expostulated. “Teague! I taught that boy basic bio more years ago than I want to mention when I was at LSU, and it was all you could do to get him to go outside to cross the quad between classes.”

Teague’s smile actually reached his eyes.

“I think we’re almost there,” he said, pointing to the GPS locator that showed a moving dot, which was the boat, approaching a stationary target, which was a zone with a high concentration of terminator-infected algae.

It was also an excellent place to keep watch on boats coming out of the Mississippi.

This was when they found out whether her and Teague’s work over the past week would do any good, or whether all the tedious labor had to be done over again, and he had to pay for the boat yet one more time. They dispersed the solution full of anti-terminator in a fine mist. Now all they had to do was float with the algae and sample every hour for six hours. Successful incorporation of the off-switch would show up later as fluorescence, which would be picked up by the box-like instrument holding the samples. Assuming the equipment saw the telltale flashes, they’d take the samples back and grow them up to make sure the anti-terminator really worked. If it did, the only thing left was to produce metric tons of the stuff and fly over the ocean in cropdusters, spreading it. Corinna wondered whether the flight deck sailors on the aircraft carriers would laugh when the tiny, bumbling cropdusters trundled down the runways intended for jets. That’s how it was going to be done though. She’d heard the UN rep talking about it with Teague.

When they started sampling, Mullin expressed surprise that she knew exactly how to handle the plankton net and the other equipment.

“The education of gel jocks has improved, or there’s more to it,” he said.

“I had a job doing this in Venezuela,” she explained. “Even the view was

similar," she said, eyeing a derelict oil rig, listing pathetically, about three kilometers away. "Of course, unlike us, they have coral reefs hidden beneath the decrepit rigs." And, she thought, people who gave you delectable *empanadas* on a special plate, just for you.

A few hours and four rounds of sampling later, Oziel was still assiduously exercising the binoculars. They weren't that far from shore, and convoys of brown pelicans flew by in effortless and stately dignity. The birds were headed to a feeding area where they climbed into the air and then dove for schooling fish. Diving, they lost all their dignity and looked like hapless clowns, their beaks much too huge and their necks much too thin for anything except total disaster when they hit the water. It was amazing to see them bob up after a dive with their necks entirely unbroken and, as often as not, laboriously swallowing something. Oziel was chuckling to himself, watching them.

He put the binoculars down for a while to rest his eyes and said to Corinna as she worked away on the plankton sampling,

"It doesn't look like they're going to swim into our net, does it?"

"Hm?" she said absently, trying to make sure she attached the right GPS coordinate label to the right sample bottle.

"At least we get our first wish, solving the oxygen problem, even if we have to forget about Fernie and that *mierda plastica*."

"We don't know if the oxygen and algae problem is solved yet," Corinna pointed out. "That's what we're doing out here. But it is frustrating that those two slimeballs have gone to ground."

Fernie should have drifted past by now, judging by the hour when the skipper was supposed to have started.

"The only thing she can do now is try to drive out," said Oziel, "but the roads are more closely watched than the sea. But slimeballs do get away. The whole world would be a very different place if they didn't." He raised the binoculars again to examine something on the horizon.

Corinna plugged away at her sampling on one side of the boat, Mullin plugged away on the other side, and Teague steered. Once they were done with this round, there was only one more to go, so this was going to be Mullin's last chance to catch something good. He'd brought about six fishing rods, because, as he said, he didn't see why the pelicans should have all the fun. He was not doing a good job of convincing Corinna that field work was difficult.

"There's a small boat way out there," said Oziel. "Can we get closer, or will that mess up your sampling?"

"We'll just note the GPS," said Mullin, doing so, "and come back once we've had a look."

As they chugged closer, Corinna took a turn with the binoculars. Unrecognizable, ant-sized people were becoming visible at the limit of resolution.

"Whoever it is," she said, "one of them is wearing the mother of all hats."

Everybody on board tensed in anticipation.

It was one of those linen-y, white sun hats with an enormous brim held out in a disc shape by a circle of wire at the edge. Corinna could see the brim bend in the breeze. There must be quite a strain on the chin strap.

Soon it became evident that sitting on the raised bow of that boat, sunning themselves on two deck chairs, were Myra Bloom and Fernie Pope, looking their best.

"It's them," Corinna announced. "I can't believe this. It actually worked! Call the Coast Guard. Call everybody! Tell them to get their butts in gear."

A small locus of activity manifested itself on the aft deck of the distant yacht. Something was frogging around at a great rate. It was little Gerry. He jumped up on the solid part of the railing, barely hanging on to the metal bar running along the top, clearly making some point to the rapidly converging adults. Corinna saw Myra turn around with what looked like a squeal or a scream.

And then – it was inevitable, of course – Gerry fell in the water.

Some fellow instantly dove in after him. The consternation was intense. The fellow was lifting the kid out of the water to another fellow.

Teague, meanwhile found out that the UNO boat was too far from shore to reach anyone on his wristpad.

"Fernie's boat could hear our ship-to-shore radio, if they were tuned to the right frequency," he said, looking at the tiny, dark knot of people on the aft deck crowded around the small kernel of Gerry at the center.

Mullin pulled a vintage satellite phone out of a drawer full of fishing weights and jelly worms. The thing might be elderly, but it did have a transmitter strong enough to dispense with any repeaters. Moments later, he reached the Coast Guard.

Moments after that, it became clear that this did not necessarily mean anything was going to happen, not in real time anyway.

"There are no USCG craft in the immediate area," Corinna could hear a woman's voice saying. "I'll alert the closest vessel and they should be right out. We have your GPS coordinates. It shouldn't take more than a few hours for them to reach you."

"Ma'am," said Mullin in the voice he probably normally reserved for deans and F-grade undergraduates, "that model of boat we're following can generally go as fast as thirty five knots for up to an hour, and has a top sustained speed of twenty five knots. A Coast Guard cutter will do twenty knots sustained, am I right?"

The voice grudgingly allowed that he was right.

"Okay, do you want me to tell you how far that'll take someone in a 'few hours' or can you work it out?"

The woman came back sounding decidedly reserved, not to say glacial.

"We'll request aerial surveillance to track them. You said they were two kilometers east-northeast of your position?"

"Yes, ma'am."

There was a lengthy silence while the woman did whatever it was that told the blimps floating above the Gulf Coast to add one more target to their list.

“Oh,” she said at last.

It was not a promising-sounding “oh.”

“Are you sure you have your coordinates right?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Mullin with thick patience.

“Unfortunately, the surveillance for that sector has blown somewhat off course, so it’s not seeing your area. Can you keep them in view?”

“Depending on how long they can sustain thirty five, maybe, maybe not. We can’t do more than thirty.”

“Keep the boat in view,” ordered the woman sedately, “and update us on their position.”

And with that, she signed off.

“Jeez,” said Corinna, “no wonder they have such a hard time catching dealers. If the guys don’t call ahead and make a date, the law is still tying its shoelaces by the time the dance is over.”

“So now what?” said Oziel, watching the boat.

Mullin shrugged.

“We shadow them, I guess, like the good lady said. What else can we do?”

They drifted after the yacht, trying to be inconspicuous. Mullin used the opportunity to soak more bits of squid for the enjoyment of the local fish. All four of them took turns keeping an eye on the other boat through binoculars, sitting down low and trying not to be obvious about it.

It was Corinna’s turn when she suddenly whipped the binoculars away from her face and turned around.

“Look away from the boat. Somebody over there has noticed us and was just reaching for their own binoculars.”

Corinna, Teague, and Oziel hunkered down so that they were no more than blobs on deck. Mullin, the only person unknown to Pope and Bloom, stood and steered the boat as if he was doing nothing but fishing.

It didn’t work.

“Right,” Mullin growled. “They’ve switched to full speed. Hell.”

Everybody looked at everybody. Mullin put in another call to the Coast Guard. He was given a direct line to the patrol boat in pursuit. They weren’t more than an hour away, an officer on duty informed him. Was the craft in question was now pushing thirty five knots? Well, in that case they’d send out a cutter from the Mobile area to intercept. It should find them in – someone did some figuring – three hours. But, no worries. They’d get ‘em.

Mullin, still with that studious patience, made a suggestion.

“How about sending a flitter, or, hell, even a helicopter, to put them under arrest?”

“Sir, we appreciate your concern,” said the maddeningly polite voice, “There’s nowhere for a VTOL to land, so it can’t make them stop, so it wouldn’t be any use. You see?”

“What I see,” said Mullin, “is that first you couldn’t find these people and now you can’t seem to stop them. Do you *want* all the Earth’s algae to die, young man?”

“Algae,” said the officer. “Right. No, of course not. In any case, we’ll handle it. You can help by keeping them in view if you can. U.S.S. Stuart, out.”

Everybody looked at everybody again, this time significantly. Give the former CEO of Lioxx three hours, and she’d morph into a shrimp fisherman from Delacroix whom nobody would ever find. One thing she would not do, was travel obligingly in a straight line so the Coast Guard could catch her.

“We can’t let good old Fernie get away,” Teague repeated.

Corinna wondered how he’d worked with her for ten years while he hated her so much. But maybe he only really started hating her once she tried to frame him.

“No.” Mullin seemed to be in complete agreement. “Muckin’ about with algae like that,” he added. “It’s criminal.”

Well, obviously it was illegal, but Corinna knew he meant *criminal*.

“The only way to stop them is to ram them,” she said dejectedly, because it showed how hopeless the idea was. She might as well have wished for roof-mounted cannons.

Mullin looked at her approvingly.

“I take it back, about gel jocks being wimps.” He moved to the controls and pushed the lever to top speed. “We’ll follow them till they have to drop down to sustainable speed. Then we’ll catch up, because I bet their sustainable is less than thirty, which is what we can do. And then we’ll just herd the bastards till the big, slow guns arrive.”

“‘Herd’ them?” said Oziel, apparently checking for soundness of mind in their skipper.

“Yes. We can bluff ’em,” Mullin said with quiet satisfaction, “because we have a stronger hull and this is a heavier, more powerful boat. Their skipper will run like hell when we come at him, because we could probably cut him in two. Those pleasure boats are made out of plastic wrap. But make sure your life jackets are on good and snug, just in case.”

Corinna stared. The nice, academic algologist was going to charge at the other boat. He was really and truly, all joking aside, just going to –

“All scientists,” said Oziel quietly beside her, checking the straps on his life vest, “are crazy.”

Nearly two hours later, they were closing the gap to the smaller motor boat with exquisite slowness.

Corinna could see Myra holding on to her hat.

As they drew closer, she could see that Myra was talking, shouting more likely, practically non-stop. She was hanging on to Gerry’s wrist in what looked like a death grip, even from a distance.

Then Corinna spotted Fernie herself, standing quite still, watching them approach. She looked just the same as that time weeks ago: beautiful, composed,

eyes accented with flawless makeup. Except for the fact that the wind was whipping her hair around, she was a picture of well-groomed corporate perfection, even on a boat in the middle of the Gulf escaping from the law. Corinna had thought Teague foolish for not realizing what Fernie was, but now that she was faced with her again, she could understand it.

Corinna now noticed a third man, who looked a lot like the fellow who had introduced himself as Louis Destaing at the New Orleans airport. She wasn't surprised to see him there. He'd apparently been Pope's right hand man in all sorts of shenanigans, including engineering innocent, phony microbes for AnchorGene, judging by the samples Corinna had found at the very back of one of the Lioxx freezers.

The UNO boat was barely twenty meters away, paralleling the other boat and slightly ahead of it, when Mullin swung toward it to begin forcing it to change heading.

The smaller boat shot forward as its skipper gunned it back to top speed. Mullin had apparently thought he might do that, because the research boat shot forward simultaneously.

He was going to cut the other boat in two if they didn't give up *now*.

Myra apparently thought so too. She was shrieking loud enough for everyone to hear, although the wind blew her words away.

"If she," said Oziel through clenched teeth to Corinna, "does not force them to stop, she is worse than garbage. No parent would" He stopped speaking, watching the distance between the two boats rapidly close.

He braced himself in a corner of the boat, hanging on to the railing with his left hand and grabbed Corinna around the waist with his right, cradling her against his body.

At the last instant, the skipper of Fernie's boat swung it around, and there was a brief, free-falling sensation of barging through an open door when no crash happened. Oziel loosened his hold on Corinna and they both stood straighter, breathing hard, still holding on to the railing.

Mullin went wide immediately, before steering back in toward the other boat and forcing it to turn all the way back.

Fernie was issuing curt commands. They were close enough to see her face and she hardly looked fazed.

Myra, on the other hand, was near hysteria. They were so close, some of her words could be understood. "... did what you ... bitch. Blew my own cover for ... said we'd get away ... you goddamn bitch. We're gonna drown. ... get awa-a-ay!"

Fernie's skipper was throwing wild glances back at Mullin, trying to gauge speed and distance and come up with avoidance maneuvers. Myra was screaming in his ear to stop. Fernie was telling him to gun the boat as Mullin bore down again. Money talks, so he did as Fernie said.

They could all hear Myra yell,
"NO!"

She jumped, pulled the key out of the ignition, and jumped again, out of reach of the two fellows.

A stronger gust grabbed her hat and it blew off now that she no longer had a hand free to hold on to it.

The skipper desperately turned his boat away, while he still had some forward momentum. The other fellow leaped toward Myra. She, with a desperate shriek, threw the key away in a glittering arc.

Mullin, not expecting the other boat to suddenly lose power, was headed straight for its midsection. He turned the research boat hard about, so they did no more than bump the sport boat, now dead in the water.

The bump spilled both Myra and her attacker into the ocean.

Mullin went into reverse to maneuver his way around to them and fish them out, but Myra started thrashing around and taking on water at the prospect of being rescued by the enemy, and the man swam deliberately toward his own boat.

Mullin cut his engines, waiting to see if Myra could be rescued by her shipmates. One life preserver with a rope attached was thrown out to her and Louis pulled her in. The man swam in and hoisted himself up the rear ladder without difficulty.

Corinna could see Myra's hat floating peacefully over waves in the distance, like a large white jellyfish of a kind unknown to science, setting off on a new life of its own.

They could hear Fernie telling the skipper to get the boat hot-wired, while Myra climbed back in, her makeup dripping down with the salt water.

Corinna cupped her hands and shouted as loud as she could.

"Give it up! If we could hit you when you were moving, how hard do you think it'll be from a standing start?"

The skipper seemed to be trying to make the same point.

The argument was ultimately resolved because he sat down and folded his arms. His mate did likewise.

Hours later, the Coast Guard arrived, sounding wonderfully powerful with their megawatt public address system telling Fernalda Pope, Myra Bloom, and Louis Marigny, also known as Destaing, that they were under arrest.

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Around midnight, UNO's ocean-going research vessel made it into the Port of New Orleans, in convoy with the Coast Guard cutter towing the dwarfed motorboat. Two people waited to meet the boats: the extremely irate owner of the yacht, and an equally irritated, but impeccably dressed, handsome gentleman. Corinna and Oziel recognized Gerry's father, who must have chartered a jet to have gotten there so fast. Or maybe he owned one. You could say

what you wanted about him, but he was devoted to his son.

There was a dreadful scene with the stony-faced father, and Gerry wailing, and two large, expressionless Coast Guard officers who had been detailed to oversee the handover. Myra seemed to be frozen. Even Oziel looked sorry for her.

“That poor kid,” muttered Corinna. “Do you realize, you’re probably the most rational person who’ll ever take care of him?”

Oziel shook his head.

“Some people are just born without a chance.”

Dead on their feet, they helped Mullin clean out the UNO boat and get it properly berthed. Teague carefully took charge of the samples, and looked at the fluorimeter readout on the side before loading the boxes into the trunk of his car ... then he checked it again ... then he rechecked it. He dug around, found a handheld fluorimeter, and began taking random readings.

“What?” asked Corinna, as a yawn escaped that threatened to dislocate her jaw.

“There is way more fluorescence than I expected. It shouldn’t be off scale like that.”

“It’s all to the good, isn’t it? It means the anti-terminator is incorporating well.”

“Yes. It means it’s incorporating well in a hundred times more cells than I expected.”

“Oh!” said Corinna, suddenly looking concerned. “I see what you mean.”

“Ah, well, that’s good,” said Oziel with tired exasperation. “The scientists all see what they mean.”

“It means the anti-terminator is finding its target in much too many cells,” explained Corinna.

“It means the exponential phase has started. If I hadn’t had this mastermind helping me,” Teague nodded at Corinna, “and the solution had taken more time, maybe only a week or two more, it could have been too late.”

“*Dios santo*,” muttered Oziel. “Biology isn’t just sneaky. It’s *scary*.”

Teague finished loading the samples into the trunk of his car and said to Corinna,

“There’s going to be even more to do tomorrow than we thought.”

“You mean today,” she answered with another dislocating yawn.

One thirty in the morning did not seem like an acceptable time to come ringing the doorbell at Jeb Walker’s house, so they crashed on Teague’s living room floor, which, at that point, could have been uncarpeted and they wouldn’t have noticed.

About two months later, Corinna and Oziel sat on the wiry grass behind the beach at Macuto, in a big circle of aunts and uncles and cousins and nephews and grandchildren. Ilona's mother was there, still silent, but Corinna saw her smile a couple of times. A huge feast was a curious way to celebrate Carnival, but it was the way the Garcías did it, and they did it on such a scale that Corinna was not sure if she would ever move again, to say nothing of eat. It was the first family gathering to include Quintón since his release, but luckily he'd taken himself and his cloud of constraint to a volleyball game on the sand and she didn't have to deal with it right now. She lay against Oziel with her head on his lap while he talked about the building they suddenly owned, as of three days ago. Well, the bank owned most of it, of course, but they got to have their names on it and pay the taxes.

The breeze blew in from the ocean and it smelled of sea, not scum. Corinna smiled.

She'd been busy too. As so often happens with grants, the application she and Guzmán had submitted months ago finally resulted in funds, now that the work was done. She needed to make arrangements with Guzmán on how to alter the focus so that they still had a project to do. She was too close to her academic roots to even consider sending the money back. A recommendation from Guzmán had snagged her a technical consultancy to one of the big sequencer companies. Three days a week she travelled around, sometimes by jump jet, to disgruntled customers who needed tutoring in how to get results on their spiffy new sequencing machines. The other four days she spent in the barrio, helping Oziel, among people who had never heard of DNA and who kept their phones turned off. The repeated readjustment between the two universes was going to make her schizophrenic, she was sure.

As he talked about walls he was going to knock out in their new building and some good, used gym equipment he had his eye on, everyone within hearing hung on his words. The new Oziel, who started neighborhood centers, awed his entire family. A tin roof was a sign of wealth, and here he was, suddenly buying buildings.

"Ey, Zielo." His uncle Rafael's voice was quiet, but Corinna could hear him because he sat next to her. "Anton should see you now."

"And what do you think my father would say?" asked Oziel as quietly. "First gangs, now you're a damn landlord. From bad to worse, *chiquitín*?"

Rafael smiled. "No, and I don't think he'd call you *chiquitín* these days either, Zielote," he said, looking him up and down.

"Sure he would," said Oziel so softly, only Corinna heard him.

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Glossary

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.) =mi 'ija, mija	my dear (among friends, not lovers) (lit. 'my daughter', 'my son')
chico, -a	approximately like "kiddo" between friends
chiquitín	affectionate for a small child, approx. like "little tyke" or "tiny"

Exclamations

Dios santo	holy God
válgame Dios	God protect me, God defend me
pura verdad	pure truth
ey, oy	interjections, like "oh"
touché	fencing term used to acknowledge a point scored by an opponent

Terms of annoyance, anger, denigration

cabrón

	jerk (lit. goat)
conchudo	thick-shelled, insensitive boor (lit. big conch)
huevozada	big and goofy
loco	fool, crazy
mierda, chorro de mierda	shit, squirt of shit
puto	pimp
putonero	john, man who visits whores
qué vaina	what nonsense
General	
bro'	from <i>broder</i> , dialect for brother
chasgracias	from <i>muchas gracias</i> , many thanks
cómplice	accomplice
estadounidense	a US citizen
es hecho	it is done, i.e. "it's a deal," "agreed."
mea maxima culpa	Latin phrase from Catholic church service, accepting blame for one's sins
nada	nothing
norteamericanos	North Americans, used to refer to US citizens, sometimes also to Canadians
-ote	augmentative suffix, added to words to mean "big"
teleferico	cable car
tienes madera	you're the best (lit. you hold wood)
ya vas	certainly, sure
Food	
arepas	similar to filled tortillas

empanada	filled fried food, sweet or savory, made from plantains or other starch.
platanos	plantains
quesillo	a dessert like flan
tamarindo	drink made with tamarind

Acronyms

CTS	Clipper Transport Services, one of the biggest, multinational space services companies, headquartered in Caracas
BPPD	Bloom, Purvis, Piloux and Droitwich, a large, New York-based public relations firm
UNPB	United Nations Planetary Bureau